

Hog's Tooth

"Now if you look... just here" Sergeant Green indicated with the tip of a plastic stylus "you can see where the incoming round splashed off of the coaming and vaporised iridium all over the... ah... well you can see where it hit Franklyn. She didn't stand a chance, of course...".

Lieutenant Arthur Caman looked on puzzled and, simultaneously, scratched at the side of his face where the depilation cream was doing a poor job of controlling his beard growth.

"You know, Terry, ballistics analysis isn't really my area of expertise, to be honest. It's not yours either, if the truth be told. Other than reminding me that I lost a good driver from the platoon or that identifying Franklyn from her dental records was a non-starter, what am I looking at here? What are you actually saying?"

Terrance Green slid down the glaxis of *Honey Chile* and used his boots to lock himself onto the steeper slope of the forward section of the plenum chamber on the 120 tonne tank destroyer. He pointed the stylus down between his legs.

"See that, El-Tee? A full set of strip mines." Green pointed to the 30cm long slabs of plastic, inset with knuckle sized cylinders made from grey tungsten that sat in rails all around the waist of the tank destroyer. The track ran, like a slender metal monorail, just below the main hull and set into the crease, right above the steel plenum skirt. Evidently, all of the blocks that should have been present were accounted for: the rail was full with nose-to-tail plastic rectangles.

"Meaning..." Caman had stopped scratching the red area under his right ear and moved both his hands into his fatigue uniform pockets. With one fluid motion he also managed a two shouldered shrug "...*what*, exactly?" He finished the question with the best quizzical look he could muster, holding Green's gaze with his own, but trumped with a pair of raised eyebrows thrown in to add emphasis. Chow time was fast approaching and Arthur had eaten nothing since a breakfast ration tube. This was a conversation he was keen to draw to a conclusion as rapidly as possible.

"Meaning, boss, that whoever fired at Franklyn was far enough away *not* to trip the defence system, for one".

Honey Chile – like all of the heavy L14 blowers in ben Medhi's Legion – had an automatic defensive system fitted. When activated, the 'booster' – the tank's internal AI system that assisted the vehicle commander – would trigger the explosive strips to destroy incoming buzzbombs and some shoulder launcher missiles when their trajectory was detected by the vehicle's sensor suite. An inbound warhead approached that was deemed dangerous to the vehicle but had a velocity that was under the threshold of hypersonic, gave the ADS enough time to fire and shred the incoming missile with a cloud of tungsten pellets. A secondary – but no less important function – of the ADS was that it also worked effectively against infantry assault: when the combat became close, anyone with the reach to throw a satchel full of plastic explosives or a Molotov was also close enough to trigger the ADS and was promptly turned into chopped meat by the same shotgun on stilts.

"Okay Green, I get it." Caman said wearily. He was becoming annoyed because - as much as anything else - Green obviously couldn't take a hint. "So the firer wasn't at close range firing a powergun at Jenny Franklyn. And we can deduce that because I'm not standing in a puddle of hamburger meat. So who says she wasn't hit by a stray round from a

click away. Hell, from *five* kays away. This is a two centimetre powergun, yeah?" Green nodded an affirmative. "So," Caman continued, "it could have been a stray round from a tribarrel or from an infantry shoulder weapon. Seriously, we're getting nowhere here, Terry: I'm going to grab some lunch before all the good stuff gets eaten and I'm left with more shitty rations..."

Caman turned on his heel in the cold, slushy ground and headed towards a low series of plastic huts, half buried in the snow. To his disappointment, he could see that the line outside of the mess which, five minutes beforehand, had been twenty strong, had now vanished. That meant most – if not all - of the first serving already had their chow on their platters. And that meant all the good stuff *had* gone. He heard the shushing of steps in the snow next to him as Green, having jumped from his perch on the steel skirt, rushed to catch up. Keeping his hands in his coverall pockets, for warmth, Caman strode on towards the mess with a determined step.

"I don't think it's a stray round, El-Tee, I really don't. Nor a shot from a regular grunt..." Although pacing along side Caman, Green paused as if waiting for his commanding officer to ask how he had arrived at that series of conclusions. When Caman simply glanced sideways and carried on walking, Green continued, unabashed, scurrying after him. "Do you remember what happened to Donaldson at that ratfuck outside of Sacred Heart? He took one to the head. Took it clean off..."

"For fucksakes, Terry, I'm walking to the chow hut. Do we have to talk about head shots and brains right now?" Caman carried on, now quickening his pace.

"I think we do, yeah. Do you remember Erickson on the previous day? *Another* head shot. And Trin Gordon... what about her? Bending down to open that service panel in the plenum and she took a round to the top of her head that went through her commo helmet and though the entire length of her body and all that was left was a tube of..."

"Shut up, sergeant. Shut the hell up. That's an order. Do I make by self crystal, fucking clear?" Caman and his non-com had arrived at the metal grid that marked the entrance portal to the mess hut. Caman had turned and faced his sergeant to deliver his instruction. He simultaneously reached inside his coverall and reduced the heat level of his suit whilst stamping the loose snow from his boots on the aluminium mesh floor.

"Terry, I'm going inside here now to try and get some brunch or lunch or... well anything, really." Caman turned and unzipped his coverall as he ducked into the entranceway. He carried on talking over his shoulder as he entered the lobby. "I'm really hoping there's some of that Gark stew left but, if not, I'll take corn bread or... well anything else that isn't a damn ration bar. But my big plan is to eat it and keep it down and not have to think about Trinity and what we found of her."

The pair entered the building together. It was a large, extruded plastic cabin with tables that folded up from the floor with benches that swung out from them to form seating. It was the sort of prefabricated structure that – when the Legion left Tribune – could be flat packed and shipped to their next contract with minimal set-up. It was brightly lit by panels in the roof and was full of troopers eating bowls of something hot and steaming. Caman walked towards the rail that marked the queuing area in front of the servery with Green still at his elbow.

"Sergeant, think on this: I still have to write the damn report to her folks, you know, explaining how it was quick and how she didn't suffer and how we buried her body at the battle ground where there's a nice little cemetery or some such hog wash. I know two outa

three ain't bad but – right now - I don't want to be reminded that what we had left of Trooper Gordon wouldn't fill a bucket. I just wanna eat my bloody lunch.”

Caman reached the servery. The man – undoubtedly a local support worker, judging by his facial tattoos and ear clipping – looked at him in a not unfriendly way but, before the Lieutenant could speak, he volunteered: “Garks'all gone, boss”. Caman's face must have reacted with a tell that, had he been playing poker, would have just lost him the hand. “Awww, see we've got Sufflat, though,” he added with a concerned expression. “And they're juicy – we've cooked 'em with the heads on, see?”

Caman held his hand up to block not only the man's culinary suggestion but the view of the platter that the local had offered him over the counter top. Heads... no heads... it was all too much for him and the sight of grotesque creatures with both fins and what looked like tentacles was not quite the fine dining he'd anticipated. He looked the local in the eye, rather than take the chance of glancing down again at the proffered plate.

“Ya got any cornbread, chief?”

Later that day, Arthur Caman was sitting in his commander's seat in *Juicy Lucy*. Winner, his driver, was laying on her back looking up at him in the wriggle tunnel that ran between her drive chair at the vehicle's bow through to his control area. The tunnel was designed to be used as a means of escape if the driver couldn't exit, for some reason, via the regular hatch, positioned right above their head. In those circumstances, a driver could tip back their seat and worm their way backwards at the best speed they could manage and maybe leave a damaged vehicle by his commander's hatch. Assuming the commander had already vacated his spot. Or wasn't a corpse, still strapped into his chair. The tunnel was not generous – hence the name. *Wriggle* is what you did: the average trooper practiced using the tube in training but the speed of egress was never faster than when the user was incentivised. Like when the driver's compartment was full of flames or burning iridium. Caman had known some heftier drivers that, even in the more spacious L14 Tank destroyers, would forgo body armour - even the lighter tankers rig - just to be able to use the wriggle tunnel in an emergency. A trooper as slight as Penny Winner, however - and even in her clamshell - could negotiate the tube with relative ease.

“Winner, I assume you're not just laying there to admire my equipment?” The trooper did have a view straight at Caman's crotch, should she so desire. Which, from what Arthur had observed of her predilections, she most definitely didn't...

“Yeah, you wish.”

“You wish... *sir*.” Caman snapped back, but with a grin on his face. Winner smiled back, but continued her train of thought.

“I was speaking to Terry Green today. He has this theory, yer know, about...”

“Let me stop you right there, trooper,” said Caman, his face taking on a pained expression and making a sweeping motion with his hand, palm flat, between his own legs where she could clearly see it. Visions of Trinity Gordon's body came immediately to mind, followed by the scaly body of a Sufflat that someone has left on their plate in the canteen having eaten just the head: the *juicy* part... A taste of corn bread and stomach acid fought its way up his oesophagus. “I *know* what you're going to say.”

“What, that Green thinks the Lightnings, or someone, have a sniper operating in the area?” The voice came not from between Caman’s legs but to his left from the command niche. Denise Horsa’s head appeared around the bulkhead, her face framed by her blond stubble, itself hidden, for the most part, under the comms rig that she wore whilst away from the front line and when donning the full helmet became just too uncomfortable or oppressive.

“Yeah, that’s right, a sniper.” Said Caman “That’s Green’s big idea, yeah? Some guy with a two see em a couple of kilometres away. Can we all please bear in mind that – any further away – and the weapon wouldn’t have had the punch to scab off iridium like it did from a blower hull and wipe Franklyn’s face off. Are we all *agreed* on that?” Silent nods came from both Horsa and Winner. “And can we also agree that - any closer and he would undoubtedly have been detected before the fact? Or – after the events – he would have been recorded on the ay-eye logs? And you’ve checked them logs, I’m guessing Denise?”

“Yessir,” replied his comms specialist, “and, before you ask, no: I’ve found no evidence on the booster logs of anyone firing a powergun as a single shot within eight kays of any of those incidents. I reckoned eight thousand metres is about the maximum range to achieve the effect we’ve seen, especially in that last incident, with the vaporising of that hull.”

“But,” chimed in Denise from between Caman’s legs. “In two of the events there are no records of any firing *whatsoever*. So that’s no accidental discharges and no stray rounds from tribarrels. Sure eight kay is *possible* with a trained sniper and some very fancy optics and electronics but there’s... nothing. Technically a hit beyond that, virtually to the horizon, would be possible, but the power isn’t there in a two see em to do that to a hull.”

“Since when did you become Daniel Boone?”

“Who?” said Winner.

“Read some bloody history, Penny.” Arthur Caman sighed and closed the top hatch of his fighting vehicle. “People,” we added, “this is all very interesting and I’m sure that it appeals to the amateur detective in us all, but we have a job to do. In one hour we are due to move out and we are leading the convoy to Guardston. We need to make sure *Lucy* is in top fighting form so... can we put a pin in this and get on with the tasks at hand? Winner, are those nacelles all in balance yet? And Horsa, have we got that route optimised and sent out to the rest of the troop?”

“Working on it.” The two team members said in almost perfect unison, sounding a lot – in their higher registered voices - like choristers, which Caman found disquieting. It’d been a long time since Arthur had been in church. Caman slid sideways out of his seat, ducked his head to clear the low roof and slipped into the area behind his hydraulically lifted chair to check the ammunition and autoloading area. As much as anything else, it effectively ended any further discussion on snipers. He tapped his knuckles on the patch over the hole into the fusion generator compartment that *Juicy Lucy* had suffered in an engagement a standard month ago when she’d been penetrated by a railgun. The patch had been cold welded onto the metal beneath with a chemical bond but the bulkhead would be entirely replaced when the opportunity next presented itself. Assuming *Lucy* didn’t get vaporised in the mean time, along with her crew. *Hopefully that’ll hold as long as it needs to*, he thought.

“Horsa, can you get to the front of the line? I said we’d swap out the lead with O’Patrick twenty minutes ago and I don’t want to leave a pair of bread vans at the head facing Christ knows what. Any minute now I expect to see *Green Colleen* parked up at the

side of the road with Dan sitting on the roof with a grin on his face waiting for us to relieve him.”

“I’m moving it as fast as I can, sir,” replied Caman’s driver over the intercom. He had swapped her with Winner to give the latter a break just two hours before hand. “I’m just terrified of pushing one of the jeeps or the vans into a snow drift as we go past. This ain’t my day job.”

Caman looked at his route display in his helmet visor. He could see the four APCs – the ‘bread vans’ - lumbering up the long but narrow path ahead of him as green dots on the pink path the AI indicated. The faster moving dots that darted between and around them were the smaller and more nimble air cushion jeeps. The vans each had a dozen or so infantry crammed into the rear compartment and, although they had vision ports on both sides of the vehicle, most of the occupants – if they were any paying attention at all – were probably keeping watch remotely via views projected onto their helmet visors. They could be ported down to the legionnaires from the sensors on their own APC or maybe even one of the other vehicles in the unit, depending on what they selected. Always assuming they were actually at the ready and not fast asleep...

Caman’s opinion of the quality of infantry in ben Medhi’s Legion wasn’t as high as it might have been but that almost certainly reflected a bias that stemmed from him being a tanker through and through. In reality, all of the men serving under Hussein ben Medhi – infantry, tankers, officers and even support staff - were all seasoned veterans and none more so than the Colonel himself: ben Medhi had no truck with people that couldn’t hack the job. Anyone that didn’t cut it were issued their papers in double quick time. Always assuming that their own incompetence hadn’t already rendered a formal dismissal from the Legion unnecessary. Warfare in a mercenary company was – after all – an environment that didn’t tend to reward ineptitude, other than with a quick death.

As *Juicy Lucy* passed the APCs, Caman tripped the large activation bar with his right knee and raised himself out of the commander’s hatch. With his cold weather protection pulled up around his face and neck he braced himself against the light snow and piercing wind that swirled around his vehicle to personally check the view, though he kept his helmet visor down. *Any fool can be uncomfortable...* In the low light he could see the occupants of the APCs pressed against the thick, armoured crystal-sapphire viewing ports, three of which were located along the vehicle’s side. Most ports revealed more than one face, staring intently backlit by the red glow of internal lighting. *Oh well: glad they’re at least paying attention*, thought Caman. He made a mental note to try not to be so judgemental of troopers, just because weren’t directly under his command.

The next APC in line even had its rear exit ramp open slightly. A thin line of soft, red light spilled out rearwards from the crack, but it was open just enough to allow a trooper a view out of the rear of the vehicle. Caman could see a helmet and the barrel of a 2cm powergun silhouetted black above the top of the ramp lip. *He must be standing on an ammo box or something to be high enough to see*, he thought, as he noted that the rear roof turret was slowly circling, surveying the landscape and letting its twin powerguns track anything it could get a lock on. *Birds probably. Assuming any can fly in this weather...* Still, it did look like everyone in the APC was at high alert. *I guess rumours of a sniper will get that kind of response from professionals...*

Up ahead, he could see two jeeps, one with a tribarrel and the other with the tube of an automatic mortar sticking up from the rear decking and both were crewed by troopers in full cold weather gear. The lead jeep, looked – from his two metre height and physique - like

corporal Michaels was driving. Along with the Michaels and a gunner in the front seats, they had a passenger on the rear bench. The extra person they'd brought along for the ride was wearing what appeared to be a furry over parker made from some local animal hide – probably a Gark – and it gave an almost comedic look which belied the intensity with which he was applying himself to his job: he was holding a large auxiliary scan-controller by two handles, probably connected to a battery powered drone somewhere above the column, and he – or perhaps she (under all of the layered clothing it was very difficult to tell) – was giving the job their full attention. Green's sniper theory was obviously gaining real traction.

By way of conversation - and with a genuine interest on discovering who would brave the cold unnecessarily to run a scanner – Caman keyed his helmet to project his voice with amplification over the roar of both his own vehicle's ducted fans plus the higher pitched howl of the intakes on the jeeps and the soft skirted APCs.

“Seen anything yet trooper?”

The figure looked up. The face was obscured by a cold weather gear mask and visor and the body shape was lost under a triple layer of heated suit, body armour and fur, but as soon as the reply came –keying the helmet in return – their identity became apparent.

“Just our people in the column, sir, but if we get anything I'll let you know over the command push.” said Sergeant Green. *You're just not going to let this go, are you?* Thought Caman.

At that point, he received two messages almost at once and the AI in his helmet tried to place them in separate ears so that he could listen to both. From inside his vehicle on the intercom, Winner - who was currently occupying Horsa's position in the comms suite, where she had been relaxing, somewhat, after the intense drive at the start of the march – keyed here mike. “I've got something, chief. Looks like an ionisation trail from... ahh, I can't get an exact fix. It's certainly a very long way ahead – it's difficult to see past the ground clutter and the hills... Almost certainly a powergun rather than a laser but it's origin point is way past that next set of peaks you can see. I only really caught it because its busting through the snow that's falling and leaving an obvious ionisation trail. Oh, and El-Tee - it's freezing in here could you shut the...”

The second message was over the push from Green outside in the jeep rather than the internal intercom: “Just lost contact with the drone, boss. Green out.”

Horsa had managed to get *Juicy Lucy* to the front of the column where, although he hadn't parked up as Caman had feared, Sergeant Dan O'Patrick was, like his commander, raised out from the hatch of his vehicle. O'Patrick's tank destroyer was making good speed at the head of the column: the soft skirts of the APCs and jeeps were better suited the frozen powder drifts on Tribune in a way that the solid plenums of *Juicy Lucy* or *Green Colleen* tended to act like snow ploughs, having to use their fusion powered turbines and sheer mass to just push through drifts. O'Patrick's driver Dallas was an experienced trooper and had been making good progress.

“You're relieved Dan shouted Caman using the helmet amplifier. “Get back to fifteenth in line behind the heavy mortars. We've got this one.”

O'Patrick seemed genuinely pleased and his driver pulled off to one side and into the next convenient small clearing – perhaps a passing spot - to the edge of the narrow trail before starting to drop his command seat. Just as the sergeant's head was about to disappear into the hull of his tank, there was a pale cyan flash and an expanding ball of red

and white mist and what had been Dan O'Patrick's head was now spread all over the snow covered glacia of his vehicle.

Caman's retinas had been saved by his automatically adjusting comms helmet visor but – veteran as he was – his shock was superseded by training and muscle memory. He banged the release bar and his seat shot down into the safety of *Lucy's* belly. He keyed the communications on his helmet with his jaw movement as his hands flew over his control box with speed born of experience.

"Team, we've definitely got Green's sniper up ahead somewhere. O'Patrick's bought it. Dallas, wait for the column to pass as far as Davies' ambulance and we'll at least get the rest of his body out of the hatch. Then take over command of *Colleen* until relieved." Caman paused: Dallas didn't have the experience to do that job in this situation – he was a good driver but not a tank commander. Not yet, anyway... "Michaels give up driving your jeep to Griffiths and get back to the *Colleen* and relieve Dallas ay-es-ay-pee. I want you in the command seat of Dan's ride, as soon as they get the body out and let's push on. Green: have you got any more drones?"

"One more. I'll send it up."

"Sir..." it was Michaels "can I at least wait until they hose down O'Patrick's seat? It's gonna be pretty shitty in there..."

"I hear that Brian," replied Caman, "but *no*: we just don't have the time. Do what you can with a wet towel when you're in there but let's move like we have a purpose, people. There's some bastard sniper out there and he's good and I *want* him, and I want him before we lose anyone else. When we clear the next ridge and can get off this path, I want us spread into a broad sweeping formation." Caman indicated the arrangement he needed on his command screen and received electronic confirmation from all of the vehicle commanders in the platoon. "Let's pick up speed, folks. That fucker ain't gonna reveal himself: we're gonna have to go up and dig him out."

The long column of vehicles – over forty strong - forced its way up the long, snow bound path Lieutenant Caman had indicated, spreading into four separate formations before they cleared the ridge above them. Over the flat snowy plains they could now speed up and push their way via slightly differing routes to Guardston, their ultimate destination. *After all, he can't get us all if we're split up. Assuming there's just the one sniper, that is...*

"Colonel, that's affirmative: we've had two more casualties. O'Patrick took a head shot when he was at the front of the column and he was still unbuttoned. Before we could get into position, Francis lost an arm at the shoulder and we couldn't save him: blood loss and shock." Caman was staring into a holographic display that showed an immensely convincing, three-dimensional rendition of Colonel ben Medhi sitting in a command version of an APC. As Caman bent over to pick up the pieces of burnt carbon fibre from the floor in front of him, and, as his viewing angle changed, he looked up briefly and could see the internal roof of the command car at the Colonel's end of the link up. Further into that visualization of a cabin he could clearly discern the head and shoulders of two of his Colonel's communications operatives sitting at screens.

"This is all that remains" said Caman, as he stood back up. "Of Green's second – and last – recce drone. It's not a heavy weight structure but – as you can see - it's obviously been hit by a powergun." He held it up in front of him so that the Colonel could clearly see

the shattered debris, rotating some of the components, showing his commander the vaporised edges and burnt plastic.

“Yeah, I get that Caman. Do you know where the are shots coming from?” ben Medhi had his left leg raised up on the seat in front of him, as he often did, to release some of the pain he suffered in it, but the grim expression on his face had little or nothing to do with his own physical condition. He’d now lost six troopers.

“The best we can determine, sir, is that... well, we can say where they are *not* coming from.”

“Great, only a whole ice planet to search – that shouldn’t take long!”

“Sir, if I may...” Caman looked up and met his commander’s hard, brown eyes. “The weather is actually our friend here, for a change. We’ve worked out from triangulation and using the ionisation trails that the weapon leaves in the snowy conditions, plus what we got from Green’s two drones...” Caman, realising he was still holding the pieces, made a point of dropping the charred remains of the small craft onto the floor and wiping his hands on his coverals. “... well, adding all that up we’ve worked out that the shooter has to be in one of these settlements.” Caman keyed his comms helmet and the map he’d prepared appeared before the Colonel on his map table.

The Colonel studied his display. “Arthur, these are between twelve and eighteen *kays* away. Are you serious? By the prophet, even assuming someone could hit a target at that range, never mind get a head shot, are you telling me a two centimetre has enough power to vaporise iridium, like happened to Franklyn? At that range? Through snow?”

“In on the side sir...” Sergeant Stack Mboko’s deep black face appeared suddenly to Caman’s left in what looked like an extension of the Colonel’s APC but – patently – was from the sergeant’s own vehicle. To Arthur – and just for a moment - the holograph looked as if he was talking with two men sitting side by side in some sort of a double width APC. Within seconds, however, the AI controlling the hologram separated the images so that they now seemed, to all three viewers, that they were individually sitting in three equally spaced capsules, each at 120 degrees apart from the others, all sitting around a map display but with an overlap that the AI attempted to extrapolate. It had some of the feel of three intersecting circles of a venn diagram.

“Sir, that’s just not possible, is it?” said Mboko. “Through this weather? This guys gotta be closer than that, surely. Or maybe he ain’t using a powergun.”

“S...” Caman almost said ‘sergeant’ but pulled himself up short. He knew better than to pull rank on Mboko: the sergeant had been serving with the Colonel right the way back to Beauty and Cecach before either had even joined the Legion, when they were both serving in Fasolini’s Company. Caman knew that Mboko had chosen to stay at three stripes, though he didn’t know why: there was evidently some private deal between Stack and the Colonel that none of the other non-coms and officers wanted to discuss. In the mean time, Mboko carried a weight above his rank, in the Colonel’s eyes at least.

“S...tack,” Caman corrected, “with the best will in the world, I don’t understand it either. But - take my word for it - it’s a powergun. It ain’t a laser, which’d do just as badly in these blizzards anyway. Oh... and it ain’t a main tank gun or we wouldn’t be hosing out the seats in *Green Colleen* because she probably wouldn’t exist. And it isn’t any form of slug thrower. No way. It’s a small calibre, infantry powergun with, I’m guessing, some

phenomenal sights on it, standing off at the visibility horizon and equipped with an application of physics that I just don't understand. I agree, Mboko – it doesn't make sense.”

“Okay – let's take all that as a given.” said ben Medhi. “What's your plan, Lieutenant?”

“Well, first off I've brought my column to a halt under the lee of that ice shelf, there.” Caman made a sweeping motion in mid air, almost like a slow *tai chee* movement but corresponding to a map he had projected into his own visor at twenty percent. An identical line appeared on the terrain map that both he and ben Medhi were looking at and that Mboko could probably see if he wanted to. “I've brought all of the jeeps back under my control and I'm splitting them between those settlements I've just indicated as all but one of them are impossible to get a heavier vehicle up to, so the blowers are out – even the bread vans are. I'll be leading one of the jeep teams myself.”

“Impressive, Arthur, but I'd rather not add you to my casualty list.” Ben Medhi swung his leg down from the seat and stood to pick up something from a cubby-hole above his head. “If you see this list of...”

Ben Medhi's next words were cut short by a huge cyan flash and his image disappeared momentarily from Caman's view. For one moment, Caman thought that his Colonel had been shot, that the sniper had struck again but as he looked up from the ground where he had thrown himself, he could see ben Medhi's holograph still standing and looking down at him with a puzzled expression, with Mboko to one side and – behind them – the smoking remains of the roof feed pipe and pintle mount of the tribarrel on the roof of *Juicy Lucy*.

“What was that, Caman?” said his commanding officer. “Was that *him*?”

“We obviously haven't shut down all of the sight lines for this bastard sniper, sir. But he's not infallible. As you stood up you'd evidently appeared to be tall enough to clear the obstructions and he obviously saw your head – your hologram head, sir – and took the shot, thinking you were actually present. If you'd been talking to me in person, and if you'd been maybe standing in the back of a jeep or something to raise you up high enough, he'd have taken the shot and that would have been you as the seventh name on that list. As it is we were lucky: I just need to replace the tribarrel... again.”

“Thank the prophet for holograms, eh Arthur?” ben Medhi grinned. “Go get him Lieutenant. That's an order. Ben Medhi out.”

“Can you get a move on, Winner?”

“Sir, these are some very rough paths, you know. Fucking Gark tracks... no better than that. Either that or the locals have been using those bloody worm drive trucks on them and they've torn the ground up something rotten. If I push this little hockey puck too hard, we're all gonna wind up at the bottom of that ravine down there.” Penny Winner tipped her head briefly to the left to indicate the almost sheer drop to the valley floor. She was right, of course Caman admitted to himself. *If she loses her concentration, all four of us would hit that huge snowdrift three hundred metres below and I'll bet that – underneath that soft looking snow – there's rocks and boulders the size of a blower. We'd be fucked.*

“Sorry, you're right, Penny. Proceed at the best speed you can but keep that safety margin intact. Ignore me.”

Winner glanced over her shoulder at her Lieutenant sitting on the right in the jeep's back seat. "I certainly will, sir!"

Caman checked his visor display. Sergeant Green was in the jeep behind and between them they had six other Legionaries including his driver. Green's jeep was keeping pace around one-hundred-fifty metres behind and Carmichael, its driver was doing a good job of keeping up with Winner. Although used to heavier vehicles like *Juicy Lucy* and the air cushion APC's she rotated from, Penny Winner was as assertive a driver as her late brother had been. *Assertive as greased weasel piss* thought Caman. *She was certainly as fast.*

At a little over four thousand metres, according to his visor display, Caman waved his right arm from the side of the jeep and tapped Winner on the shoulder with his left hand: the agreed silent signal to stop. Normally, the higher paid - and better equipped - mercenary forces like the Legion wouldn't ever concern themselves that their communications might be intercepted or monitored but - after the incident with the shot at the holoscreen - Caman simply wasn't prepared to take any chances that he didn't have to and had instigated a transmission silence from his team. Two of the settlements from the four had already been thoroughly searched and - except for some very disgruntled Tribune civilians with the odd, slug throwing hunting rifle - nothing of consequence had been discovered, even with metal detectors set for iridium to pick up the barrel of what must surely be a powergun. Caman had been sent messages to confirm this from the other jeep teams but - as agreed - had not acknowledged receipt of the information. He could receive but he wasn't transmitting.

Six troopers leaped over the shallow saucer sides of the jeeps leaving only a gunner in each to grasp the spade grips of the two tribarrels. He noticed, from the corner of his eye, that Winner had slid over from the driver seat to crew the pintel weapon while Connelly - nominally the actual gunner in the jeep - stepped out to form up with the Legionaries on foot. *Not surprising, I guess: Winner has precious few grunt skills, that's for sure. At least not yet, anyway...*

Caman held up two fingers and swept left. He swapped hands and did the same thing, sweeping right. *Primitive stuff*, he thought as he tapped Green on the shoulder to indicate that he should follow his own lead and - with that - Caman began to move forward the one hundred metres between his position and the low cabins set into the permafrost and snow. He moved in short runs, in ten metre dashes from cover to cover, pausing between bursts so that Green could leapfrog past him, one always covering the other: while one moved, the other kept his grey powergun at his shoulder, scanning the bleak, white terrain through its holographic sight but always concentrating his greatest attention on the cabins.

Caman checked the bottom corner of his commo helmet visor. A display counted down numbers - a time signature he had set before they deployed from the jeeps - and, with just seconds to go, he and Green made quickly for the entrance lobby, moving like wraiths in their white speckled coveralls and equipment. As the time displayed on his visor reached 'zero:zero', he kicked open the doorway of the main cabin and held his weapon at chest height while Green kneeled on the opposite corner and did much the same thing an arms length away and below him. At that point, having - in a fraction of a second - he took in the view through the now open door. What he was presented with appeared to be an extended family sitting down around a long plastic table to eat an evening meal. Within a second or so, as the family looked up, the rear door to the cabin flew open and he saw Mawhinney and Croxell in mirror images of the high/low poses he and Green were adopting. Before he'd even had a chance to announce his intentions, the small domed transparent roof-light was shattered, probably by the butt of a powergun, and two more powerguns - one of them Connelly's - were jammed in through the ragged hole.

“Nobody move a bloody muscle, not if you want to live!” Caman shouted.

Sitting across from the table from Arthur Caman were six adults: four men and two women. From their dress and tattoos, all were natives of Tribune and all appeared to be what they claimed: a family unit of Gark herders, eking out a poor existence up on the highland plateaux and earning just enough from the animal by-products and Ambergris – the immensely expensive (and hard to synthesise) fatty deposit secreted by a dark gland buried deep in a Gark’s chest cavity – that they could keep their family, maintain their worm-drive snow trucks and live out some form of a life that they found either desirable or acceptable.

But one of them – at least – was lying. While Connelly had thrown a tarp over the broken roof light, Green had used the metal detector and swept the whole complex four times before he found what they’d all suspected was here. Hidden within one of the two long, screw-threaded, motive units of the worm drive tractor parked outside the second hut and buried in the snow, behind a maintenance hatch, in the helical tube was a flat black case that registered iridium. A *lot* of it.

Green had pulled the case into the cabin and laid it on the table. Before he opened it, Caman asked the people sitting around the table if they knew what was in the box.

“You all have one chance at this...” he said as he met their gazes one at a time.

Silence. Every single person in the ‘family’ group denied knowing the contents. Caman even sent Croxell in to the other room where two teenage girls were minding six smaller children. She pulled both of the teenagers into the main room while simultaneously keeping a careful eye on the smaller offspring in the rear area. By jamming her foot in the door way and wedging it open she could just manage both tasks at once. Although she didn’t directly threaten the two teenagers with her firearm, she had it combat slung across her chest as she stood behind them, a hand placed on each of their shoulders. Even with Croxell’s hard, iridium powergun jammed up against their backs, in tears they denied any knowledge of what was in the hard, plastic case. Caman tipped his chin back and looked past Croxell and she correctly interpreted his order and thrust the two crying girls back into the room, pulled the door to, and slid home a steel bolt so that the door couldn’t be opened from the inside. It also minimised the sound of sobbing.

“Right then, back to the adults. Since none of you are going to relieve me of the suspense and since I’m just itching to know... oh and since the locks don’t respond to any of our thumb-prints – yours or mine – Sergeant Green, here, is going to bust the locks off and we’ll see what we have inside, eh? Who knows...” added Caman with a smile, “perhaps one of you is collecting scrap iridium to take down to market and barter...”

Green pulled a synthetic diamond knife blade from a boot top and positioned the tanto blade tip like a chisel over one of the locks. He then removed his back up pistol – a non-issue flechette weapon he’d picked up on a previous campaign, but not one he overly cared about – stripped out the magazine, cleared the chamber and then used the pistol grip as a makeshift hammer. The diamond edge sliced through the carbon fibre clasps with minimal effort. He might have been able to prise the locks with the blade on it’s own: it was an immensely strong blade but – if synthetic diamond was ever going to break or chip an edge – it was going to be when it was used as a pry-bar. Stabbing and chiselling actions – even assisted by a makeshift hammer - suited the blade type far better than twisting and flexing and – anyway – Green cared far more about his issue knife blade than he did a back up pistol that he’d taken from a dead man. The flechette pistol was expendable.

Both lock clasps succumbed in quick order and Green withdrew and sheathed his knife in his boot after reloading the pistol, which he stuffed back into the cargo pocket he'd taken it from. Caman slung his powergun and then used both hands to open the one metre wide box. He lifted the lid, pulled away a soft cloth and there, in front of him, were three things. One was obviously a piece of highly impressive sighting equipment, complete with a rail mount and a separate head visor for the wearer. Another was what appeared to be a smaller box made of light, clear plastic inside of which he could see what looked like tubes of powergun wafers. But – in the middle of the box – was the biggest powergun shoulder weapon Arthur Caman had ever seen.

Mawhinney reached past Caman and pulled out the plastic ammunition box. He opened the clamshell design, took out a tube and slid out the top wafer.

“Fuck me, what’s the calibre of that, El-Tee?” Mawhinney held up one of the copper matrix plastic disks in his hand, catching the glints from its edge in the light given off by the ceiling panels as a collector - or some assessor in a pawnshop - might do with a valuable coin to check its worth.

Caman pulled the weapon from its foamed plastic cradle within which it had sat, safely, boxed and ready to be turned onto a target. Or, in this case, onto one of his own people. He examined the unusually long – and commensurately heavy – iridium barrel: it was at least twice the length of the stubby barrel on the weapon he himself carried. It was fluted longitudinally for cooling with some sort of shroud on the business end – a flash hider, perhaps. But – by the breech – it had, stamped or engraved into the grey metal: “Heuvelmans”.

“That, ladies and gentlemen...” said Caman, casting his eyes around the room, “is a Heuvelmans three centimetre sniper rifle, all the way from Terra. I’ve been around, here and there, but I’ve never, ever seen one of these in the metal. To be honest, I didn’t even know if such a thing had ever been deployed in the field.”

“Damn, sir,” said one of the other troopers – Denton, possibly, though it wasn’t a face Caman immediately recognised. “No wonder they shot our people at twenty kay: just look at the size of the bloody thing!”

“Okay, you have one *last* chance.” Caman replaced the weapon in its protective cocoon and shut the lid. “Who’s going to tell me about the gun?”

No one moved. No one said anything. One of the two women present began sobbing but the man next to her moved to hug her, putting his heavily tattooed arm across her heaving shoulders. All of the family’s eyes were on Arthur Caman.

“Right, well we’ll do this the hard way, then. Everyone up...” he unslung his own shoulder weapon and raised in his right hand like a huge pistol while pointed with his left hand to the main doorway, “...and everyone file outside. Now.”

The family members stood and walked towards the entrance lobby. The oldest of the group, obviously the head of the family, reached up to the hooks that flanked the doorway where the resident’s cold weather suits were hanging, empty and flaccid like skinned creatures. Mostly the suits were indeed just that: made from tailored Gark fur. But two, at least, were sophisticated, electrically heated suits.

“What are you doing?” said Caman.

"It is twenty below outside... we to venture to the snow we must dress first, yessir?" said the old man, his eyebrows raised. His puzzled expression had helped Caman discern that what the older man had offered was a rhetorical question, which had been hard to glean from speech alone because of his thick accent.

"Nope – no coats, no heaters. Just get outside now. The colder you are the quicker this'll go."

At that direction from his lieutenant, Green backed up the words with action: he raised his weapon to his shoulder and aimed at what appeared to be the youngest of the group, a man of perhaps twenty. "You heard the man: outside now. Chop chop!" he added, with emphatic nodding head movements.

The main door was opened and the six residents filed out, flanked by the six legionnaires. Outside of the cabin, in the snow and half-light, standing in brown and grey mush in their boots and coveralls, Caman and his men looked at their captives shivering in their indoor shirtsleeves and blouses. One of the women was even wearing light slippers. All were – after only twenty seconds – shaking uncontrollably.

"You want to talk yet?" said Caman. He actually used the amplifier on his comm. Helmet to boost his voice, somewhat for effect but also to overcome the sound of chattering teeth and the stiff, whistling wind that swirled the snow flakes around them.

"We haff nothing to say, you know." said the eldest man.

"Yess – Daniel is right: we know nothing about that weapon in zair." said the women who had previously been sobbing as she hugged the man who had shown her attention in the cabin. This time the contact was for both moral support and warmth. "Please juzz let us go inside!"

"People I can stand here all day long – I've got a heated suit – but, frankly, I haven't the time. Green? Walk down the line of these fine people and start taking their shirts and blouses off. Start with the young woman on the end and work your way along to the old boy, Daniel, is it?"

"Righto, sir," said Green. "Okay then mam. Shirt off . Now!" Green pointed to the first of the women with his powergun. She turned, shocked, to the man standing next to her, and looked on in horror.

"You cannot be zerious. I'll die!"

"I am deadly fucking serious," said Green. "Take the shirt off or I'll cut it off." To emphasis his point, Green reached down and, again, removed the wicked looking, terrifyingly sharp diamond bladed knife from his boot and held it in his right hand. The woman's expression changed to one of abject terror as she suddenly visualised her clothing being removed and that blade cutting her skin to shreds. She pulled her light shirt over her head and stood freezing but proud, naked from the waste up except for a wealth of tattoos over her back, stomach and breasts. Her breath exhaled in frozen clouds but she immediately started to cough on her next inhalation.

"Next." said Green, turning to the man adjacent to his first victim. That man began resignedly removing his shirt just as the first woman collapsed to her knees in the snow, shivering uncontrollably. "Next!"

"Any time anyone wants to talk we can stop all of this." interjected Caman.

“You are monzters!” said the woman who had been clutching one of the men. “Monzters to torture uzz like this!” Green sliced through the straps that held her light clothing over her shoulders and – as it was now wet from snow that had melted from what remained of her body heat – it fell quickly around her waist like an apron.

As Green moved in front of him, the middle-aged man standing next to Daniel, the chief – the second to last in line - had removed his light jacket. He held it in one hand and Caman saw that he carried a large hunting knife in a sheath at his belt that had been hidden by the jacket tails. *Nothing wrong with that, as such*, thought Caman. *Mind you Mawhinney shouldn't have missed it earlier when he searched them. If we ever get out of this, I'll make sure I mention it to him...*

“What’s that?” Green was pointing to a disk that the now partially naked man with the hunting knife had on a chain around his neck. It was about two centimetres across and plain, silvery metal.

“Just a good luck charm.” said the man. “Nothing valuable.” It sat on his pale chest, reflecting the slight yellow glow that Green had set the built in light on his commo helmet to emit, to aid him in searching the prisoners in the dusk. Caman noticed that Green had also raised his visor to carry out the search and wondered why, since using light enhancement on the visor was what he himself had selected. *Probably so he can intimidate the poor bastards with that evil grin he's pulling*, he thought. He also noticed that the shirtless man with the knife and the medallion was the only one of the people exposed so far that sported no tattoos save those on his lower arms. “It’s not worth anything. Only sentimental v-value.” He repeated, shivering more obviously.

Green pulled it from the man’s neck, roughly snapping the chain that had held it. As a soldier capable of prying a trophy pistol from a corpse’s blackened and burnt fingers, he wasn’t overly worried about stripping a necklace from an uncooperative prisoner.

“Might be worth something to me, pal.” he said as he rubbed the metal circle between his gloved fingers. To his surprise, the disk popped open, like a locket might. Green looked down at the charm but, to his obvious surprise, it didn’t contain either an image of a loved one or of a saint or martyr. Inside the metal, butterfly hinged case was a plastic disk. Green looked up into the eyes of his shivering captive.

“Why are you carrying a single, two see em powergun round for good luck around your neck, fella?” questioned Green.

At this point, and with quite astonishing speed considering his dress and the ambient temperature, the local man managed to swing the hunting knife, which he had clandestinely extracted from it’s sheath during his interrogation, and swung it straight at Sergeant Green’s throat. Green stumbled back from what would probably be a decapitation blow and – as he fell – managed to get his own knife blade up high enough to try for a parry but – to Green’s astonishment - the diamond shattered when the monocrystal steel of the hunting knife clashed against it. But his reactions and the diamond bayonet had saved his life.

With just two bounds the man was already at the door of the worm drive truck before any of Caman’s legionnaires one could raise a weapon, though where the escapee thought he was heading wasn’t clear, unless he had another weapon stashed. Startled from their complacency, all five troopers other than Green - who was writhing on his back in the snow, his hands to his throat from where he was bleeding profusely - swung their weapons into their bulky, gloved hands. Before they could fire a short spurt – like the sound of tearing burlap – resonated across the snowy tableau.

The old man – Daniel – was laying on top of Green. He held in his hand the flechette pistol he had obviously extracted from the sergeant's cargo pocket and with one, swift action, he had swung the pistol level and emptied the magazine into the back of the fleeing. Target. The old man had walked the rounds up his victim's back and what started off looking like a series of small stitch marks from the rear had – evidently – produced a far more dramatic effect on the far side of his target's body as, suddenly, the side of the truck he had been heading for was bright red and wet rather than the high visibility yellow of the rest of the vehicle. The remains of the man sank to what was left of his knees and collapsed into the snow. As he fell he turned. His entire front – from his calves up to his head - was a churning mass of blood and flesh that looked like it had been ripped open by a chainsaw.

The man dropped the pistol at Caman's knees. "My brother in law said he was his nephew. He has only been here s-six days. I said I'd look after him. Family..." he added as he sank shivering to the ground. "I had no... id..." He passed out.

"Get this lot back inside," said Caman. "No point killing the bloody lot of 'em!"

"He's in the room at the end, Lieutenant." The orderly signalled direction with the pad stylus. He had been looking up information on Sergeant Terrance Green for Arthur Caman for several minutes before locating him. "Sorry about that: he's been moved a couple of times and we're not exactly on a break here. Been a busy week."

"Sure. I can see that you've been snowed under."

The orderly looked up at Caman. "Nice. With the humour. Good one..." His expression suggested that he didn't actually appreciate the levity.

"Well, ya gotta laugh, eh?" Caman said over his shoulder as he set off to walk the 100 metres along the well-lit corridor of the hospital block towards the room the orderly had indicated. He entered without knocking. Green was lying on the bed, apparently asleep. He had a collar around his throat and what appeared to be a metal eye patch.

"How are you doing, Terry?" Caman sat himself down on the end of the bed. His sergeant stirred and opened his uncovered eye.

"Oh, not bad, El-Tee. Sorry – must have dozed off." He sat up carefully. "The eye will be okay now they've got all of the splinters out – tricky things, diamond fragments: hard to find apparently. And this collar..." he tapped the device which, on closer examination, Caman could see was some sort of automated prosthesis "... this is stitching my wounds back together. Not the big stuff: the surgeon and the auto-doc managed that as soon as they got me back. It's the nerve damage they're trying to repair. As you can hear from my voice, they haven't got it all straight yet."

Caman could tell that Green's voice was definitely different: deeper and quieter, certainly. More rasping.

"I should be okay by the end of the week – I'll be back to shouting at the troops in ten days, don't you worry! Still..." he added, "...that's what you get when you try to block a blade like the thing he was carrying with a diamond pig sticker!"

"I'm just impressed you managed to block him at all," said Caman, "he was quick, but you were at least as quick – or quicker. What gave him away? It wasn't just the knife, surely? Or the lack of body art?"

“No, boss, it was the Hog’s Tooth.”

“The what?” asked Caman.

“I did some training as a sniper, back in the day. Wasn’t good enough, to be honest... I didn’t have the right... let’s call it *outlook*. Anyway, what I did learn was some of the mindset. A sniper – as a right of passage – would often take a round from the weapon of the first enemy sniper he’d killed and wear it as a keepsake, a charm, usually around his neck. It was a traditional thing and showed his experience - and bragging rights – to those that knew. I guess if you were using a slug or some similar projectile like they used to... well it looks a bit like a pig’s canine tooth, I guess, so the name’s appropriate, maybe. Anyway, this guy obviously shot an opposing sniper at some point in the past and his target was using a two see em powergun... so that’s what he had hanging around his neck. For good luck.”

“And you spotted all that in a second?” said Caman. “Like I said – fast work.”

“Yeah. Mind you if I’d been faster, I wouldn’t be laying here having my throat sown up. And if I’d been smarter, I’d have spotted the knife before he whipped it out.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, Terry: that last bit was Mawhinney’s detail. Get well and I’ll see you in a few days.” Caman stood up from the bed and turned to leave. “Anyway,” he added, “that charm was good luck. For you, anyway.”

“One other thing, chief.” Added Green as Caman was leaving. “That guy definitely wasn’t a local. He was a hired gun, and I’d love to know who paid him. Probably the Colonel’s new best friend Captain Oliver Haupt of the Lightning Division.”

“Well I’m speaking to the boss this afternoon, Sergeant, and I’ll be putting that very point to him. Who knows,” he added over his shoulder as he exited the room “perhaps the Lightnings haven’t quite surrendered as much as we thought they had. Can’t wait till the Bonding Authority get their heads around that one...”
