

# Tribune

*A Slammer's style story by John Treadaway*

Sergeant Caman wondered what all the noise was about.

“What the hell are you screaming about, Horsa? Have you any idea what the time is? Caman swung his legs from the hammock he had slung beneath the breech mechanism of his tank destroyer and precariously placed his feet – one at a time – onto the cold floor of the vehicle that – in the field – was his home. First with his left and then his right, he slid his toes into the boots that were lying on the metal deck next to his comms helmet. As he did so, he absentmindedly wondered if they were actually his boots... of course they were: Horsa's feet were way smaller than his and Winner's were always on his feet – he said in any bar he and Caman had ever punished their collective livers in that he'd planned to die with his boots on. Caman activated the boot fasteners which auto-tightened on his calves as he fed the bottom of the legs of his fatigues into their synthetic closures. He managed this – after several years of practice - just before they constricted and adjusted to their predetermined tightness.

The metal floor was vibrating. He could feel that even through his boots. Through his earbud comms, he hadn't noticed that the vehicle was live but this vibration confirmed that Winner had started up his command blower for him. That must mean trouble of *some* kind...

“Horsa? Horsa... where the hell are you!”

A small, delicately featured head with a skull -cap of short, blonde stubble appeared from the comms position to Caman's left. “Right here, sarge: we have the colonel on the link – well, not him, as such: I have his command group” she answered. “There's something going on with the snow-men – just give me a second while I stabilise the signal: it's being bounced off of some high ice clouds and it's all over the place...”

Right, thought Arthur Caman: *just my bloody luck when I thought this argument was pretty much over...*

Ben Mehdi's Legion had been fighting a campaign on Tribune 4, a poorly populated, cold, icy world in the Tribune system, a part of the Hackabe Cluster. T4 had no exposed areas of water visible from space although there were obviously areas of free flowing sea beneath the ice sheets. Humanity had spread itself thin over the whiteness and had developed into disparate communities held together – for the most part – by a centralised government. But factionalism is part of the nature of the species: The Tribune Ruling Council wasn't a panacea for all the people's of Tribune. And so the self appointed Federal Government came into being...

The Tribune Federal Government fielded a ragged army, if one could dignify it with that title, of Ice Farmers and Gark Herders: independent types that eked out a desolate existence in the planet's frozen tundra within prefabricated cabins and under-ice complexes, buried deep within the permafrost of the single ice super-continent. They dressed in everything from multiple layers of Gark skins to high tech hot-suits and – moving with their herds or following the best ice on air cushion vehicles, tracked ATVs or worm drive ice-haulers – they were at home in the bitter wastes.

But, instead of the short decisive campaign against the breakaway TFG that the government had contracted for, the Federals – usually called “Snow-men”, for obvious reasons, by their opponents - had hired some mercenary companies to bolster their ad-hoc forces and add some Gark spine to their bargaining position. Sure, it had cost them any profit they might have gleaned from their ice-fields for the next decade but their choice was either fight or carry on working for the small ruling elite that had governed Tribune 4 ever since the colony was set up by merchants from Tribune Prime.

The Tribune Ruling Council had contracted ben Medhi’s Legion to bring the Snow-men back to the negotiating table by force of arms. The TFG had hired The Lightning Division backed up by the local artillery and support specialists, the Firelords. The result, as usual, was the harsh brutality of mercenary, professional conflict followed by certain impoverishment for someone. Probably everyone on T4.

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Caman was now fully dressed and alert. Rather than rely on his coms ear inserts, he slipped on a full communications helmet and used the jaw-activated sensors to begin issuing orders and started to take note of his platoon’s readiness. When he’d completed that, Caman checked his own vehicle.

“Mike – are we up to speed? Denise – have you heard anything more from the top yet?”

“Up and running, boss” Mike Winner shouted from the driver’s compartment at the front of the M12L14 Tank destroyer. His reclined driving position was connected to Caman’s commander chair via a ‘wriggle tunnel’: although Winner had his own entry hatch he could, if required, exit through that tunnel at a push: it was a tight fit for an average sized human but the driver of *Juicy Lucy* had made that journey on more than one occasion. The fact that Winner was still shouting his response at his platoon commander probably meant he hadn’t yet put his driver’s helmet on.

“Mike – put your fucking hat on and get us moving will ya!”

“Where to?”

“I’m going to group us behind that ice cliff we saw yesterday when we parked up. All of Blue Team: *All Blue Team*” Caman added, grinding his teeth to change com channels and touching the screen in front of his command position to indicate a map reference. “I want us all over at this point, formed up in standard defensive outward facing perimeter, beneath that cliff at way point sixteen on your map. Sound off and go”.

Caman could already feel *Juicy Lucy* sliding into position over the hard compacted snow as he buckled himself into his seat.

“Sarge, I’ve got the Colonel’s broadcast now” said Horsa from the communications pod on Caman’s left.

“Okay, let’s see it and get it to the rest of Blue. Confirm”

“Oh-two in position and waiting” came the first of five responses from the rest of the platoon: “Ready sarge, oh three”; “four ready to go”; “six covering the back door” “oh-eight vectored alongside six and waiting comms relay...” said the last of the troop “...Keith out”.

As Corporal Keith Carpenter concluded the position check, Horsa hit the play button and Colonel ben Medhi’s face appeared in front of him. The hologram was extremely

convincing and – unless Caman tilted his head too far, or too quickly - it looked exactly as if the front glacis of his turretless tank destroyer had melted away and had opened up to show the icy waste outside. Ben Medhi stood in his heated cold weather coveralls, his usually tanned skin looking decidedly pale under the dim light and cold wind.

“Troops, we are going to have to attack within the hour. Sorry to drop this on you but if we can move now, we can catch the Firelords on the hop. Their wheeled vehicles are struggling in this snow and our intelligence says that they are moving to dryer and higher ground – see your maps” an orange flashing dot appeared on a scrolling map that automatically activated in his helmet visor. “They are taking their calliopes and launchers, along with the Lightning Division’s tracked mortars to that enclosed plateau. It’ll be a tough climb up the Fortune Pass road and they will have the Lightning’s blowers to protect them while they struggle up the long winding trackway – the pass gets pretty tight in a few spots. But if they push through those constrictions and get to the top they will dominate this end of the continent: I don’t need to tell you the range of those Firelord barrage launchers if they use their assisted range shells. If they gain that high ground, with their calliopes to protect them, we will never take the southern Ice Bases or the space port at Sacred Heart. And that’s our end game.”

“Caman and Stone, I will need your platoons to intercept that long convoy: now – on that pass – now’s our chance. Mboko, old friend, I’ll need you to give Blue and Orange the infantry support they’ll need. Stack... keep your guys in the APCs as long as you can and rotate them in an out of those open jeeps. Even with the warm weather gear, it’s cold for an open jeep if we are going to press on. Good hunting, men. Ben Medhi out”.

“And Allahu-fucking-akbar to you too Colonel” said Caman, insuring the transmit button wasn’t pushed before he cursed out his commanding officer. *Hell, ben Medhi’s not a bad fellow*, thought Arthur: *but this is a shitty duty...* Since Medhi took over the Legion after Broglie’s death, he’d made some good decisions. He’d brought in some good officers, too, like Lieutenant ‘Stack’ Mboko, from his previous outfit and he’d promoted good non-coms to other officer positions within what soon became ben Medhi’s Legion in more than just name. But not Sergeant Arthur Caman: a three stripe he was when ben Medhi arrived and a sergeant he remained. *Who knows?* thought Caman *Perhaps this is my chance to shine, ‘Bout bloody time...*

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Twenty two hours after ben Medhi’s transmission, Caman was in the middle of what Arthur’s diplomatic mother would have described as a ‘slightly difficult’ conversation. But then, when she was alive, Edwina Caman had been a mistress of understatement. And - in all fairness – Caman was already on his second set of stims to keep him alert and Mboko was almost certainly matching – or exceeding – his dosage, so assessing how exactly each was reacting to the other was hard for both men.

“Caman,” said Mboko’s smiling black face in the hologram, flashing a lot of teeth, both natural and titanium replacements. “what I’m *telling* you is that my forward scouts have reported vehicles moving on the road and a screen of emplaced vehicles that we can safely assume are Lightning blowers between our people and the vehicles on the pass. At the moment, that all the gen I have. Over”.

“Stack, I’m not trying to tell you your job. I know that your experience is mostly with infantry and – to your guys – maybe everything looks like a bloody blower. But is there any chance – *any chance at all* – I could get actual eye-dees on any of those before I comit?”

“Sergeant,” emphasised Lieutenant Mboko with slightly less of a smile than previously apparent, “my men don’t think *everything’s* a blower – they ain’t tyros and some of them were with me facing Terran tanks on Cecach: they know their shit. But, same as you, we’ve got no satellite access but – before you ask – yes: we’ve launched all of the microdrones we were carrying. But their use is very limited: there’s only so much you can see in a blizzard and the dark so we are using all the tech we have plus some deduction and experience to create educated guesses. Our best estimates are that the wheeled fuckers slip-sliding up that steep pass are the eight by eights from the Firelords. We’ve recce’d the road behind them and we can see spike cage tracks so they’ve obviously got something fitted to the wheels to help them grip the ice and slush and we can see some track marks as well so we are guessing that – as the colonel suggested – that’s the rocket launchers, the Lightning mortars and hopefully both team’s calliopes...”

“Stack – with the best will in the world – I don’t care about them at the moment. If I can catch them in the side I can rip them up and down from here ‘till the plateau. But I’ve got to get to those sweet targets and to do that I’ve got to get through the screen – whatever it is. Sir, I need to know what’s in the line between us and the road? If it’s their blowers I can take them on, even from the front. These L14s have a 20cm: I can penetrate their older blowers from the front but what I can’t have is them hitting me in the side with railguns. Over.”

“Arthur – I can’t guarantee it” said Mboko, losing all of his remaining humour. With a straight face he added “My best guess is that they are their big blowers. But a guess is only that: a *guess*”

“Yep – thanks Mboko. I just hope they ain’t a feint and when I get there all I see is APCs and light hovers. ‘Coz – if I do – that means the blowers are elsewhere. And that probably means up our backsides... Caman out.”

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Following his plan, Arthur Caman moved his tank destroyers forward. His command tank destroyer was identical to all of the other low, turretless vehicles in his platoon and – save an extra aerial or two – had nothing to mark it out as a target. Internally, though, there was one obvious difference: instead of a storage area to the left of the fighting compartment for extra 20cm and 2cm powergun ammunition disks, there was a communications position unique to a command vehicle. Caman could see comms specialist Denise Horsa leaning over the full holo-dish she used to monitor both the battle space and all their communications. Yes, Caman often regretted having a short load for both his main gun and his tribarrel – though, other than leaving it in air defence mode, Arthur couldn’t remember the last time he actually used the 2cm weapon – but anyway, he’d rather have Denise working away and keeping his plan straight than the extra rounds. If push came to shove and a combat depended on the ammunition load that just *Juicy Lucy* was carrying, they were already in the deep water, so Caman would rather have the extra help at comms with the crew member and the enhanced AI system.

Probably...

“Keith,” Caman keyed his helmet “keep yourself and Martinez up close on the right but not too close. We have no idea what we...”

At that point two things happened: firstly, the mass of snow which his driver was heading *Juicy Lucy* towards and which he had already decided was probably a rock and too small to be an M2A7 Lighting Division blower tank erupted into a torrent of fire. It was too

small for a 175 tonne blower tank. But it was just right for a 30 tonne A14 blower Crew Car or an A16 Calliope... one of the 'little brothers' of the blower tanks was firing everything it had at his tank destroyer and – judging from the lack of effect it was having on *Jucy Lucy's* frontal armour, it was the twin turreted railguns of a Crew Car. *So what*, thought Caman: *as long as they don't hit a sensor I could care less.*

However, the second event was happening even as he took this in and took aim. *Jucy Lucy* rang like a bell as the defensive strip mines activated to stop what was almost certainly an incoming, shoulder launched missile aimed at him and his crew.

"Buzzbomb, sarge" said Horsa, unnecessarily.

"Thanks Denise – never mind that, what's that shit I'm picking up on out left?"

"From its size it's another Crew Car. It's really hard to pick out – it's well dug in at about half a click."

"Let's hope that's all it is – team, we've got APCs dug in to the front and what looks like their infantry..." clang went *Lucy* again as the strip mines fired "... deployed to our front. Stack – can your people do anything about those bastards hiding in the snow? They've got buzzbombs and one of 'em's going to get through eventually!"

"On it. Mboko out."

Caman depressed the firing pedal twice: the first blew away the snow redoubt, the second devastated the APC showering the nearby infantry with steel from its plenum chamber and unused ammunition from its railgun turrets.

"That should fuck up the aim of that guy with the buzzbomb anyway..." said Winner from the driver's seat. Caman's front man was obviously using screens to steer *Lucy* through the blizzard outside, otherwise it was doubtful if he could have seen in detail what just happened two hundred metres in front of him.

Suddenly Caman's command tank destroyer shuddered and a sound like tearing lightning seemed to come from the left hand side of the hull. The blowers? It didn't sound to Arthur like a big railgun hit, too many impacts for that, thought the sergeant.

"Denise, what was that for chrissakes?"

"Sarge, it must be one of their powergun calliopes" said his comms officer "and we've just lost pressure on the port".

"Port? You mean the left Denise..." snarled Winner, "sarge we've taken a puncture to the plenum on the left side and we are losing lift. Not much but I'm compensating by overrunning the two rear fans. Can you nail that fucker if I spin the ship?"

"Ship? Who's all at sea now then! Yep - spin her Mike I'll track and fire as I go".

Winner rotated the tank destroyer through just under ninety degrees to the left and – at somewhere past the seventy degree mark a warning carat appeared on Caman's control screen and he tripped the foot pedal twice. The first shot missed its target hissing by the low blower calliope by less than a man's hand breath igniting items stowed on the vehicles flat bed – tarp rolls and crew belongings – simply by its proximity. But they didn't burn long. The second shot hit the calliope vehicle's cab front and centre. The iridium armour slowed but did not stop the cyan hammer of the 20cm powergun. The fusion bottle, positioned just behind

the driver's cab, was coated in a thin film of what remained of the crewman in charge of the vehicle but only for the microsecond before it ruptured. It wasn't a complete rupture – probably one of the plug safeties had blown and resealed but it was big enough. Less than half a kilometre away, the explosion rocked *Juicy Lucy* - Caman himself lost his grip on the arm rests and realised he hadn't tightened his harness sufficiently – and then engaged the eight barrelled, 3cm powergun calliope in an unstoppable gang-firing of all of the rest of its ready ammunition boxes.

The sky – even through the blizzard – was cut with pale blue, rod-straight ribbons of plasma as almost two thousand rounds were unleashed within four seconds. Those bolts of cyan death clawed at the ice laden clouds until – with a second explosion almost as big as the first – the remaining 3cm powergun ammunition disks exploded, vaporising what little remained of the hull.

“Well, panic over.” said Caman, feeling positive about the action for the first time that day. “Winner, spin us around to the front again lickety-split – I still don't know where the...”

At that point, Sergeant Caman was again interrupted by a loud, shriek accompanied by a definite shove and a ripping sound from the top of the vehicle. And then another huge clang to the rear. And a third.

“Shit sarge, we've got blowers to what was our right of advance and they just hit us up the backside and taken the tribarrel off the roof” shouted Horsa, loud enough that he could hear her without the comms helmet.

“Wondered when those bastards would show up. Winner, for fuck sake spin us right: I want to have my front facing them.”

As *Juicy Lucy* span like a wobbling top on a column of air, Winner fought to control lift with now multiple penetrations – calliope fire to the left skirt and at least one to the rear plenum. Caman activated the external push:

“All of Blue Team – we have blowers to the south west. Orange team keep the target on the road in site and sweep left, Mboko engage the infantry to our front. Blue turn and face”.

As Arthur Caman uttered these words, he realised Winner, having performed a 180 degree turn, had lined *Lucy* up on a large hulking shape to the front. The fixed gun of his tank destroyer had only minimum lateral movement but he pushed the joystick hard right, almost willing his tank to spin faster than the Lightning Division's blower could reload. “Away” he said, almost to himself, as he tripped the firing pedal as fast as he could and the tank destroyers main, 20cm powergun fired round after round in a fan pattern as the vehicle span like a huge, iridium children's toy.

In response to her own fire, *Lucy* took rounds to the front. More than one – two – three - but they glanced off of its sloped glacis. In response, Caman's rounds found three closely grouped targets as Captain Oliver Haupt – commander of the Lightning Division's attack – had failed to persuade his crews to space their blowers far enough apart – the Divisions eagerness to rush in for the kill had made them an easier target for Caman. One of the attacking M2A7 blowers stopped and dug its punctured plenum into a snow drift. Another began billowing smoke from the three crew hatches as they were flung open and the driver tried to exit the burning vehicle. He was the only crewman that got out and – with no tribarrel – Caman let him run off into the blizzard. A third blower - obviously still menacingly functional - turned its turret to face Caman's tank destroyer and fired again.

That round hit *Juicy Lucy* in the very centre of the hull front from less than 800 metres. It passed through the glacis, though Winner's torso and entered Caman's compartment via the wriggle tunnel. It left the commander's area via the rear engine bay bulkhead and – with a deafening series of clanging noises – presumably ricocheted around the engine compartment before losing the rest of its kinetic energy.

Caman was coated in a mixture of blood, other bodily fluids, what was probably highly toxic dust from the penetrator that hit them along with some plastic fibrous composites from the spall lining that was the only thing that had prevented the penetrator from the railgun's discarding sabot round producing deadly, pyretic sparks. He was aware of Denise screaming briefly – she was undoubtedly adorned in a similar fashion with what remained of their driver and the incoming round. But – after that brief shriek - he was aware through the comms helmet that she was telling him that *Juicy Lucy* was effectively dead on the ground. No lift, a stalled engine and a dead driver and that meant the main gun could only fire at a target of opportunity that might foolishly wander in front of its ten degree frontal arc – the limit of the main gun's traverse – and that only on the assumption that the 20cm powergun would still actually function. *And no roof tribarrel*, thought Caman...

"Blue, this is oh-one. We're grounded. I've taken two blowers out to our rear, I think – one certainly – but I still have one bogie behind me. Can anyone cover us? Caman over".

"Caman, this is oh-eight: we just got him" there was another explosion to the rear. *That felt like another fusion bottle*, thought Arthur. *Good...*

"Blue Leader this is Green Team." Mboko's voice came over the audio channel. We have their infantry surrendering in droves: I think it's too cold for them out here after we took out their rides!".

"Martinez cutting in: I've got half of Orange with me and we're messing up the other three Lightning blowers – O'Patrick has taken three of Orange's tee-dees and they are working their way up the pass just ripping up those struggling Firelord eight wheelers."

O'Patrick broadcast on the white channel in clear for all listeners – including enemy forces – to hear "This is master sergeant Dan O'Patrick receiving confirmation of the surrender of the forces on the road – that's the Firelords and the members of the Lightning Division accompanying them who were sensible enough to see what way the wind was blowing. The rest of the Lightnings: what say you?"

After a brief delay, a steely, slightly Germanic accented voice said "This is Haupt. All forces stand down. Repeat, all forces desist. We surrender."

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Caman stood by the side of *Juicy Lucy*. He'd just finished inspecting the damage, both inside and out. He'd changed his coveralls to his spare set taken from the stowage as the ones he'd been wearing had become unbearable: the smell was getting past nose filter plugs and the viscous coating beginning to freeze. At that point, Arthur remembered why this was his back up set of coveralls: the heat pads below the waist were not working properly and so, as he stood in the snow, he was rapidly losing sensation in the legs as a bone deep chill set in.

"Have you cleared your kit out Denise?" he asked of his comms specialist "They've said they are going to drag *Lucy* back and patch and refit, but that means a trip back to Alpha and I don't trust the mechanics not to go through our shit and take what they want."

Astonishingly – to Caman at least – the field mechanics had assessed that, although his vehicle would need a plug weld on the front casting and its stress fractures sealed, it only required patches to the plenum, a new driving module and some engine components to be back in service. And a new driver, of course.

“Yep Arthur, I’ve got everything I need. I’ve left some items in there because, to be honest, there’s only so much of Mike I’m prepared to wipe off of stuff that I really don’t need so much. Poor guy...”

“It was quick, at least. That’s what I’ll be telling his sister, anyway.”

“She knows the score, sarge – we all do. It’s not like she’s a civilian. She’s in Mehdi’s command team, after all.”

“True,” said Caman. He looked up: “Who’s that coming?”

Several figures were walking towards him. One was obviously ben Medhi: Caman could spot his distinctive limp from the injury that encouraged him to leave an infantry company like Waldstejn’s and take over an armoured outfit. With him was an upright man in black overalls and a cap and two of ben Medhi’s staff. One of whom, judging by her build, was a woman.

“Caman – great work.” said his colonel “This is Oliver... umm Captain Oliver Haupt: Lightning Division. Like I said, good work: Oliver’s people were a tough nut to crack. I want to speak to you about your position, sergeant: I think you have the makings of a tanker who can handle more than a platoon. I’ll speak to you later. Anyway,” he turned to the Lightning Division officer “let me introduce you to Stack Mboko – a good man I’ve worked with him for years. It was his ground pounders that took out your crew cars...”.

As ben Medhi led the black clad officer away one of his staffers remained behind and her eyes met Caman’s.

“Arthur. Don’t give me and old nonsense. Mike: was it really quick?”

“Yes Penny, it was instantaneous. Denise’ll back me up on this. He really won’t have known what hit him”.

Horsa moved closer to sergeant Penny Winner and squeezed her hand.

“When I go, I wanna go like your brother, Penny” she said.

“That’s some comfort, I guess” the dark, petite woman replied. She paused for a moment and then - looking straight at Caman - she spoke again.

“Arthur, the colonel’s gonna make you an officer. We lost David in charge of Orange – he’s not dead but he’s going to need a pair of prosthetic legs and that’ll take a while to set up and fit, so you’re the obvious choice. *Juicy Lucy* will be back in the field by the time we get off this cursed snow ball and you will need a driver. I’ve spoken to ben Mehdi and he’s agreed. He’s releasing me from his staff. You’re going to have another Winner in the driving seat”.

“Do you think that’s a good idea, Penny?” Caman looked hard into the small woman’s eyes. “Sitting where your brother... you know... caught it?”.

“Arthur, like we all just agreed, if you’re gonna go it’s best it happens in a heart beat, right?” said Penny. “Anyway, that’s not your real complaint is it? You just don’t want to run *Lucy* with two women on board!”

Lieutenant Arthur Caman was temporarily speechless.

Finally, he mumbled “Well if Haupt and his Lightning division have anything to teach us, a man has to know that when you’re beat you’re beat!”