

Mar Devon, Elbar, 09/12/2776...

"...don't ever do something like that again." Kerensky said quietly.

Tranh Truk Ngo nodded, "Aye aye sir." He said, "I won't do something like that again."

Kerensky finished signing the draft document. "Absalom?" Colonel Truscott stepped up, and signed the witness block.

"This is a declaration of intent-the Star League will NOT tolerate genocide or crimes against civilian populations." Kerensky said, and gestured Ngo over, "Sign it, Colonel."

Tranh Truk Ngo leaned over the desk, and applied his signature with a flourish.

"Make certain a copy of this reaches every unit commander, and that the recording is played back." the Commanding General of the SLDF said, "I want it absolutely clear." He looked at Ngo, "Not that your people are going to get off from your little fit of vigilante 'justice', Colonel."

"Wouldn't dream of it, General sir." Ngo said, "You putting me into custody now, or after the announcement's been made public?"

"Neither. There will be time for reviews and tribunals after the Usurper's been removed." Kerensky said, "Just be aware-there will be charges."

"I understood that months ago, sir."

2nd Patrol, Company B, 1st Battalion 2nd Coast Guard Marines, Landing Zone Aleph, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Terra, 2779...

Gunnery Sgt. Pham Cu'oc ducked behind the corner of a parking garage, and rammed a fresh magazine into his battle-rifle. "*ở đâu sự làm tình của chúng ta là sự hỗ trợ không khí chiến thuật?*" He demanded. The RimJobs in the plaza were dug in like ticks, and the air-support was absent.

"Second of the one-seventy-first is pinned down on the river, Gunny." his RTO told him in English, reminding the Kowloonese NCO that they were supposed to be using that language right now, "Second Squadron's trying to get them some relief."

"Tell them to hurry the fuck up then." Cu'oc snarled.

Nha Tranh, Kowloon...

"Sarah, leave your brother alone." Marjorie Ngo didn't even have to look up from her desk.

"But Mom, he's doing it wrong." Sarah Ngo, eight years old, insisted.

"He's doing what the teacher told him to do, Sarah." Marjorie said, looking up, "Now, don't you have some schoolwork of your own to be doing, young lady?"

There was a knock at the door. "Just answer the door, Sarah."

Sarah went to the front door, and Marjorie went back to what she was doing. Let's see...recruit processing quotas for December are being met, construction of the third regiment of Marines is hitting its targets, but we're still bottlenecked for transport... she flicked over to the annual budget. We can't pay for that.

"MOM!! It's some guy in a uniform!!" Sarah called out, and Marjorie's heart skipped a beat. Oh dear god no...

She got up, the bleak numbness already settling over her. no...not today, no... She walked like it was a dream-the nightmare she'd feared for the last nine years settling over her like a slimy, slimping cold.

"Yes?" she started to say-and stopped.

The man at the door was a tall, blonde gentleman about twenty-six or twenty seven, and his uniform wasn't a Star League uniform, nor was it a Kowloon Free Republic uniform.

It was blue, and displayed the encircled fist of the Lyran Commonwealth.

"Madame Ngo?" he inquired.

"yeah...who are you?" she asked.

"I am GeneralLeutnant Gregor Handlemann-Bitburg, from the Lyran Commonwealth Intelligence Corps, I'm told you're serving as your Husband's Regent?"

"Not exactly-Tranh Truk's term as President some years ago, I was elected to replace him." Marjorie said, "Since he is, after all, currently holding down a military position and can't hold elective office until his military term is over."

"Your last election was uncontested, as was the one before that." the Lyran said, "Anyway, you're the acting head-of-state, and I was told you were the person to contact on this, rather sensitive, matter...may I come in?"

Nanaimo, Terra.

The sky rumbled, and rimjob air-defense guns suddenly went hot with streamers sweeping to the north. "Inbound, Inbound, Everyone take cover and brace!!"

The Kowloonese Marines dropped prone, shouting as hard as they could as they covered their ears...

KCGM ship Barry Burnham

"Passing over the target area now, we've got ground-fire." PO2 Giau Horowitz gripped the twin-sticks of the atmosphere controls with both hands, listening to the Navigation officer's patter and responding with practiced reflexes.

"Dropping rear gate, the ball is now in your court, Loadmaster, velocity Seven Five Oh Knots at One Two two Five meters, winds are west at One Five Kilos." The aerodyne dropship shook, but Giau held her steady.

"Chutes out! Pallets released, closing the barn door." the Loadmaster reported.

Giau hit the gas before her commander, Ensign Niao, actually voiced the order.

Behind the fleeing DropShip, thirty five ton pallets, each suspended on an electronically guided paraglider, converged over MacKenzie Plaza...

Alpha Regiment, 1226th Rim Worlds Guards, McKenzie plaza, Nanaimo...

The DropShip roared past. "What the hell-"

The dropchutes were attached to big, crate-shaped stacks on cargo-pallets. "I don't know-they're doing a Resupply drop?" Captain Edward Hiller was suspicious, but...cargo DropShip, parachuting crates off a fast pass...

He ignored the cargo-drop, stepped out with his Galahad and started laying fire on the retreating shadow of the DropShip. "Send two companies to find out what those boxes are!"

The trick hadn't been used in centuries, so it's not that big a shock that the term "daisy Cutter" wasn't in the modern vernacular.

Each crate was five tons of Blastex C-24 explosive with a millimeter wave radar trigger, wrapped in a jacket of tungsten balls and razor wire, armed to detonate at 30 meters above the street level.

The detonations from the pattern drop overlapped in Mackenzie Square, and the pressure waves would've been enough-the shrapnel, however, helped in dealing with the 'mechs in the Square... but not as much as the shockwaves shattering high-rise buildings near the base- in less than ten seconds, an entire regiment of Rim-worlds troops, their 'mechs, and their vehicles, were either destroyed outright, or buried in up to ten meters of rubble.

As for the Rim-Worlder infantry-and anyone else in the square that lacked an armored personnel life support system, they died nearly instantly.

There were survivors-troops in blast-shadows of heavier structures, but functionally, the RimJob regiment simply didn't exist anymore.

Of course, such methods aren't the cleanest. 25,000 civilians also died, including the human shield hostages around the fortifications in the city center.

Command Post, SLDF Liberation Group, Walla-Walla...

"...what the fuck are you people playing at, using Daisy Cutters in an inhabited City!?" Aleksandr Kerensky was livid.

"You put us on three fronts separated from the rest of the SLDF, General." Tranh Truk Ngo's image flickered on the screen, and Kerensky could hear the rumble of the fighting over the connection. "I told you we wouldn't do anything like Running Deer again. I never promised we'd put the kid-gloves on. As of this morning, we've broken three Amaris divisions in succession using those tactics, and I'm talking to you from just north of Burlington. We're driving for Boeing Everett, and I've got Second Marines moving on Whidbey across Deception Pass right now. if you don't like my tactics getting there, you know what you need to do, Sir."

Unity City, Twelve days after the death of Stephan Amaris...

"...damage to a dozen major areas of the city, thousands of Casualties, many among the civilians..." Aaron DeChevalier might've had a good rep with the 90th, but to Colonel Ngo, he was still Kerensky's hatchet-man.

"Tactical necessity, General." Tranh Truk Ngo said bluntly, "Besides, what we did drew lots of attention from units that would've otherwise been moving to intercept more...ah...prominent units."

"Your people made a mess out of the entire northern tier of the city, Colonel." DeChevalier insisted.

"We didn't use nukes, and we didn't give the Rimjobs the opportunity to use theirs, I'd call that a win in and of itself-hell, we didn't do half the damage the 2000th Infantry Regiment did in Chicago-and you pinned Truscott with a medal."

DeChevalier cocked an eyebrow, "I didn't pin Truscott, and he had the sense not to half-slag a major industrial zone."

Ngo shrugged, "There's still Krupp in Germany, and Boeing's got those facilities in San Diego and Los Angeles, not to mention their Beijing headquarters-which if I recall from the briefings, is where they kept most of the critical info anyway."

"You're not even going to apologize for political reasons, are you?" DeChevalier said.

"Nope. I can prove in any tribunal you want to hold that our conduct in this campaign is in keeping with the standard practices of the Star League Defense Forces when operating in an enemy-held urban area." Ngo said, "Although I can also show that we're more restrained-we didn't call for a single OrBom strike,

not even when we weren't sitting next to a nuclear reactor-the damage was severe, I'll grant you that, but you don't have a new Scar where nothing grows that glows after dark."

Aaron sighed, "You would bring up Dinh Diep..."

"Damn right I would." Ngo asserted with a nod, "We broke three divisions that had our total forces out-massed by a factor of five to one, we did it without making the rubble glow-in-the-dark or dumping long-term contaminants of a Neurologically fatal nature, and we did it on the timetable you gave us to do it in-with casualties well inside the acceptable limits as **Document 265A3/S** outlined it."

DeChevalier started, and his eyes widened, "You're not cleared for that." he said.

"Probably a good thing my Intel people can keep their yaps shut, then, isn't it?" Tranh said calmly, "I wonder how it would play with the rest of the Volunteer brigades if they found out we were all slotted as cannon-fodder to be thrown away ahead of and instead of more valuable SLDF Regular and Royal units?" He tapped the table, "I think the Anduriens and the Dracs might take some issues with that-not to mention those nice fellows from New Avalon and Donegal..."

"That...alters some things." Aaron said after a moment's thought.

"Not really. I read it, I know what the plan is, General. Unless the plan gets a change, you have to know I'm going to have a counter-plan for it, just like I countered the plan to burn my men up in wasteful frontal assaults unsupported as a way to force us to accept, out of necessity, re-inclusion in a Rim Worlds Territorial State." Ngo said- "Which is a condition that my people would find not merely unpleasant, but un-endurable as well." he poured some coffee out of a thermos, "Frankly, I'm a little surprised the old man even thinks things can ever return to status-quo antebellum-even with a Cameron Heir who's competent and capable, the war savaged what was left of the Hegemony's defense nets, and the Volunteer brigades and reserve regiments are going to have to go home eventually...and the quality of your native Terran resistance fighters? Take this from a man with experience as an insurgent, they're dreadful. Can't handle the job."

DeChevalier frowned again, "Okay, what would you suggest?"

"Honor the deal, General-Star League recognition of Kowloon's independence-right now, the SLDF's command staff is the de-facto, if not de-jure Star League, the Terrans would probably go for it anyway, we're nice and distant and they've just had a decade to really learn to hate the Rimjobs, then start a crash program inside the Hegemony to beef up what defenses remain, recruit and train bodies to man those defenses, and put a conveniently sensible puppet on the throne of the Hegemony, and the Star League before the House Lords realize nobody's driving."

"And when the House Lords realize?" he asked.

"By then, the Old man, or you, can play 'kingmaker' and even if the Hegemony no longer leads the Star League, there's a Star League to lead, and combined with any of the Houses, that's a power-bloc that can keep the others in line." Ngo told him, "Which in turn buys you time to pull the Hegemony back up

to a strong enough status that they can be a force on the Council again-maybe even recover the position of pre-eminent power in the Inner Sphere."

"but not You." Aaron said.

"Naturally not me, General. I'm going home-probably fairly soon." Ngo said, "I'd offer you a drink, but the coffees laced with enough Neuroin to kill an elephant. Last night I started getting lingering sensation-felt the stylus for four hours after I put it down."

"Stage Two." DeChevalier said.

"Stage two. And yes, it fucking hurts." Ngo told him, "Doc said I might have a handful of years at this rate of progression, but no more than four or at the outside five-I'd kind of like to meet my daughter before I'm too out of it to recognize her-she's had eleven years without a father, and I missed her birth-that's a lot of birthdays to make up in not very much time."

"You're not going to tell me what your alternate plan is, in case I can't convince Kerensky, are you?" Aaron said.

"Of course not, I'm breaking OPSEC just TELLING you that I have a couple..." Ngo told him, "At any rate, Jimmy Qua's taking over for me with the unit-I've got to be leaving pretty soon, they'll be sticking around until they're released."

After the Change of Command Ceremony, 171st Volunteer Brigade...

"...Brigadier, nice." Commodore Anh Cu'ong noted, as Jimmy closed the door on the CP track.

"Yeah, nice my ass." Qua said, "You know and I know these stars should've been Tranh's-and so do the men."

"He Pinned you." she said.

"Yeah, and he's getting on a ship tonight bound for home." Qua said, "Which is where WE should be."

Side office, Unity City Spaceport, 26 March, 2781, 2030 hours...

"You're retiring." Kerensky said quietly. The room was isolated from the main concourses, and the meeting was...discreet.

"Yes, General, that's what you do when you've finished the job, and you're not healthy enough to take on the next one-you retire and let someone else do it." Ngo said, "I'd stand up, but I had a seizure on the way here, and I'm just...not fit to."

"Colonel, there are experimental treatments-" Kerensky started to say.

"I'll be dead in five years, General. That's the prognosis, anyway, I've got a son who was a toddler when I left, and a daughter who was born while we were chasing RimJobs on Eagle's Nest, plus a wife who-against all odds and sanity, remained my wife in spite of everything-you've got sons, General, you're a father, what would you do?"

Kerensky rolled his eyes, "You and I both know that's not the reason." he said.

Ngo shrugged, "Not a lot of things I'm going to be able to do here, General-I'm sick, I'm tired, I miss my home and I miss my family-I can't fix the sick part, and I'll probably be tired up to the day I die, but I can fix the missing-my-family part."

He tented his hands, "Of course, it would be nice if I wasn't going home to prepare for another invasion." Ngo added quietly, "It'd be REALLY nice to know that all the men and all the years sacrificed on this little adventure were enough to buy some backing for my folks against their enemies-who're still out there...but that's not happening, is it Aleksandr?"

Kerensky sat down. "I can't let it happen, Tranh, you understand that. If we start endorsing separatists, we'll lose the Free Worlds League first, then the rest, and it'll be a thousand and one brush-wars just getting order restored." He sighed, "I'd rather NOT have to fight you, Tranh."

"Who said you'd be fighting me? The mess in the Hegemony alone tells ME that by the time the SLDF gets around to another spate of reunification wars, you'd be facing my successors." Ngo said, "Mind you, now, we've practically written your doctrine on insurgency, and that's not even the really cool parts...and that's assuming the Cameron girl lets you come after us."

"If you join the Territorial state willingly you'll be in a stronger position, Tranh-hell, you've got the biggest non-Steiner force in the area, your world could dictate terms..." Kerensky said.

"I'd have rioting in twenty-four hours, and we're good at rioting, and while even a crucifixion's quicker than what mother nature's got in mind-not to mention more merciful, I'd rather not spread the suffering around to my family and closest friends, nor put my wife and children in a prison of protective custody on the hope that you've got the situation worked out enough that in a few decades things settle down." he shook his head, "We'll find our own way-on our own terms, General, if you can't support us, just stay...out of our way. You've got enough problems with Marik and Steiner, Davion and Kurita, and Liao."

Nha Tranh, Kowloon, 30 March, 2781...

Li Trung Vanh was the representative from the Belter community around Kowloon's gas-giant. "We need the trade." he said, "My folks are just about self-sufficient, but that's like saying subsistence farmer's self-sufficient-the margin's too tight. IF the Lyrans start buying somewhere else..."

"Okay, so that falls into the list of economic reasons-those won't fly with the folks in La Drang or Saigon." Gail Mosovich, the Rep from Vin Drin Lap and the so-called 'Golden Lake' section countered, "I

mean, seriously-President Ngo negotiated Star League support back in seventy-one, maybe we can make a go of a trade deal with the Terrans?"

"That support's evaporated." Marjorie Ngo suddenly announced. "Kerensky's reneged."

There were shocked murmurs around the council chambers. "He wouldn't!" being chief among them.

"Madame President, that's...unlikely? We've got men fighting under his banner right now-ten years of loyal service..." Miranda Vanh, the Iron Hills representative, was shocked, "Would he do that?"

"Look to the screen at the end of the room, folks. Read it and weep." Marjorie said, and tabbed the display to show a copy of the memo retrieved by her sources. "When I was informed of it, I had to make sure it was genuine-and that we weren't taking it out of context." She continued.

"It's confirmed, then-he's going to betray us." Gwen Ngha, from La Drang, asked, "He wants to force us back into the Rim Worlds? Is the man totally insane?"

"I verified its accuracy, and my Husband confirmed the intent using sources inside Kerensky's high command-the Lyrans weren't lying to us, Aleksandr Kerensky wants things back the way they were before the Coup, and he's willing to ignore reality and history to try and accomplish it." Marjorie said, "Now that we know his intent, we're left with some un-palatable options."

"We can't beat them in a fight-even if every man who served in the 171st and the Coast Guard revolted to-morrow." Ngha was a vet, and she'd served in several campaigns before Elbar took her legs.

"True." Marjorie said, "Tranh said the same thing-we can't hope to beat Kerensky alone if he decides to use the SLDF to carry this out. We also can't count on our allies inside the SLDF to be strong or numerous enough to stop him if he decides to act." She swept them with her gaze, "We also can't allow him to try-now, we do have friends among the Terrans, and they'll probably stand with us if we decide to go that route, but they're a small drop in a very, very, big bucket...there's an alternative to that."

"Your message exchange with that Terry person?" Vanh asked.

"No, while Amanda Cameron's likely the next Director-General, she doesn't have the support of the majority of the SLDF, and it's doubtful that the General will take her seriously as either leader, or Liege Lord...but there's someone Kerensky doesn't dare attack, because he really does not have the forces or the political clout to go against them..." Marjorie said, "We already trade with them, raw materials and components for arms currently."

"The Lyrans?" Gwen Ngha asked. "You want to get in bed with the bloody Lyrans?"

Marjorie nodded. "They supported us in the old days-back when we were fighting the Rim Worlds, and it was only because of a war with the Combine that they didn't send help when Kowloon was conquered the first time. They provided covert aid and support to the Dinh Diep uprising, and they provided materiel support when we finally threw the Rimjobs out, plus favorable trade terms for the last eleven years, they've expedited our supply shipments to the 171st and Coast Guard Expeditionary units, and

they're the only Inner Sphere power that's recognized our war of Independence as legitimate..." she paused, "And, Kerensky's relying on them for about forty percent of his materiel support-that's ammunition, equipment, and payroll until the Hegemony's economy is stabilized enough to pay taxes."

"What does Tranh say about that idea?" Li Trung Vanh asked.

"I haven't spoken to my husband about this option yet." Marjorie confessed, "I wanted to float the idea to the Assembly-after all, my Husband is no longer the President, I am, and I think this is the best deal we can make to prevent Kerensky from carrying through his plan."

"I move that a deal with the Lyrans be negotiated, but we withhold the approval until we can consult with Tranh Truk Ngo." Li Trung Vanh announced.

"Seconded." Gwen Ngha announced, "Tranh Truk led the Sixty-Nine Rising, and without him, no deal will hold water with my voters."

"A vote is proposed and seconded, as this impacts a constitutional issue, a roll-call vote is required-the Secretary of the House will collect names and votes now."

Bremerton HAF base, North America...

"You want to show me those supply requests again, Major Cage?" Anh Cu'ong asked casually from the doorway of the Supply depot.

"Who let the Colonial in here?" Major Cage asked the HAF quartermaster.

The QM specialist looked at the Naval officer, and then at the 'MechWarrior. "Sir, Captain Cu'ong is SLDF, like you are-but she's got more rank, Sir." he said in reply, "Colonial or not, and it does seem a little weird that a ground-forces man would be procuring Naval supplies from a Terran Hegemony Depot, sir."

"She isn't SLDF, she's a fuckin' Contractor." Cage countered.

Anh cleared her throat, "Yeah, and the Coast Guard's under contract to the Terran Hegemony as part of Director General Amanda Cameron's rebuilding of their logistical network, Major, while the SLDF is currently in legal limbo without either a sponsoring government, nor legitimate access to the supplies you're holding the requisition forms for."

Cage's hand moved imperceptibly to his sidearm.

"Uh-uh." Cu'ong said, and made a finger gesture.

A "Training shot" round from the rafters slapped into the 'MechWarrior's sidearm. "Next one's real, Major." She said, "You go back to your C.O., now, and you get those requests properly vetted, or you come back with your 'Mech and try to take it, but nobody's stealing from a base that's under temporary

Coast Guard jurisdiction-not even with forged paperwork, got it junior?" Anh smiled again, and like the first one, it did not touch her eyes.

"You'll be hearing about this." Cage huffed.

"Just so long as you understand, Junior, a company of my boys took out a RimJob battalion with knives on Elbar, and I've got two battalions of Marines here on Terra. You bring back proper, Legal requisitions from a Legal military Authority, documents that can clear one of MY checks, and you can have the stuff-you don't, and you'd better hope your *Mongoose* can run faster than a *Sabre*, and that your perimeter guards are better than the Rimjobs, 'cause you won't be safe sleeping if you steal from us."

She then gestured his attention to a sign over the door.

Looters will be Persecuted

SLDF Camp Pendleton, North America...

"...legal position the Coasties have is not that unusual-they're technically mercenaries, they aren't under SLDF jurisdiction." Brigadier Jimmy Qua was saying.

"I thought they worked for you." Aaron DeChevalier, General, SLDF, inquired.

"No, sir. They work for the Assembly on Kowloon, and for whomever President Marjorie Ngo says they work for, in that order, sir." Qua said, "Which, as of May of this year, included a contract to help retrain and rebuild the Hegemony's logistics network, provide search-and-rescue in heavily damaged coastal areas of Terra, and conduct inventories of unclassified stores and supplies at Luna, Titan yards, and other Hegemony installations-mostly working as trainers to help resistance fighters transition back into the THAF's logistics and Naval branches."

"What about your guys?" Aaron asked.

"Oh, if we need the support, they're still going to give it-if they can, but the Assembly felt that as long as the Coasties were here, they needed to stay busy." Qua said. "Pretty routine stuff, actually."

"Routine...Brigadier, you're basically telling me I wasted my time coming to you." DeChevalier said.

"Yes, sir, I am-if you have a beef with Commodore Cu'ong, you need to take it up with her, or with the Hegemony Congress, which I'm told is meeting sometime next week." Qua smiled, "Unlike former President Tranh Truk Ngo, I've got exactly zero involvement in, or authority over, the Coasties' chain of command."

Government House, Tamar 05 April 2781

Margrave Jennifer Steiner leaned back in her plush armchair. The report from her cousin Christina had the young diplomat jumping into the Zubenelgenubi system. That damn fool Robert's scheme for the world had gone nova with the Terrans in a shooting war against not only the Rim Worlds troops plaguing the world but also the 26th Lyran Guards.

Thus I have to waste Christina there instead of on Kowloon, damn you Bobby.

Kowloon made an interesting opportunity. Having a former Rim Worlds system (Even one the Amaris family had conquered.) come over willingly would lend legitimacy to Lyran efforts to control the vast Periphery state. Granted those efforts could put the Commonwealth once again in conflict with the once mighty Terran state, but Jennifer was convinced trade concessions and other enticements could bring the Hegemony around.

Turning to General Leutnant Handlemann-Bitburg's report she was heartened to see Madame Ngo's initial reactions to be favorable. That this would if successful, raise her standing in the Estates-General was not lost on Jennifer either. Robert needed to go down now. Before he ruined everything.

Office of the Director-General, New York City, North America...

"Sarah, did you get the missive from General Kerensky's staff?" Amanda Cameron asked tiredly. Her aide looked up from her computer terminal and nodded.

"The complaint against the Kowloonese? I was surprised he sent it to us instead of Ian." Sarah Davion-Gilmour referred to Ian Sinclair current head of the Hegemony Armed Forces and Amanda's best friend.

Amanda grimaced and gave Sarah a telling look.

"They're having a "spat" I tell you the two of them can be as trying as school boys."

Sarah giggled, but then asked; "What do you want to do?"

The other woman shook her head.

"What I want to do is tell Captain Cu'ong to go to this Major Case's superior officer and tell them they are no longer welcome in the Hegemony." She sighed. "What I can do is send a memo back to General Kerensky asking him to tell his officers not to pull their side arms on representatives of the Hegemony Armed Forces." Sarah chuckled at that. A thought occurred to Amanda then.

"Ohh and do me a favor Sarah?" At the other woman's raised eyebrow she said with a wicked smile; "Draft a personal commendation from this office to Captain Cu'ong for her...restraint in this matter. After all she didn't kill the good major."

Government House, Nha Tranh, Kowloon...

"...discussing the withdrawal of Kowloonese nationals from Star League service, General Kerensky seems quite keen to manage this with as little outward fuss as possible, but there remain some questions as to dispositions of equipment." Tranh Truk Ngo reported to the Assembly.

"General Ngo, what kind of...questions?" Gwen Ngha asked.

"Well, it would appear that the SLDF wants their hardware back, now that they don't need us to pull triggers for them anymore." Tranh said flatly, "We were provided hardware on a lend-lease basis, and with the emergency over, and resupply from Terran sources in something of a state of flux..." he stopped, "Hell with it. Kerensky provided us with cast-off gear he wouldn't give his own reserves, we-meaning Kowloon, aren't dancing his tune, he wants his toys back, obsolete and bound for the scrapper or not. Given that we captured more than enough hardware from RimJob and Collabo forces during the campaigns, I'd say we should give him back everything that's on the books as lend-leased, and not one screw or tappet more than that."

"What's that going to do to our forces when they return home?" Ngha pressed.

"well...for starters, it means we can simplify some of the supply issues-we won't be scavenging for Mackie-parts, or trying to dig up spares meant for the 1H and 2H model Shadowhawk-most of the hand-receipt gear's either BattleMech, or 'Mech related support equipment. The galler in this, is we can't hand it over in the same condition-most of it was reconditioned here on Kowloon before being sent forward...but it means we're essentially a large conventional force, in a human universe where every hostile neighbor we've got has at least a Regiment of BattleMechs inside a single jump's distance."

He frowned, "We do still have a pretty decent Aerospace component, but..."

"Nobody's won a defense using fighters alone in decades." Sam Nghien observed.

"Exactly. It leaves us with a permanent need for CAP on-station, and a reliance on interception and air-support missions."

SLDF/HAF Temporary Captured War Materials Bunker

Somewhere outside of Vancouver, Terra, Terran Hegemony

15 May, 2781

"So why are we here Mr. Case? Not that I mind a quick trip to the ass end of nowhere." Brigadier General Jimmy Qua asked as the two men walked up to one of the huge prefab hangers.

Jon Case chuckled and punched a key pad on the personnel entryway next to the massive hanger door.

"Patience is a virtue General, watch..." He hit a stud on the wall and the lights came on in rows. Standing there were row upon row of monstrous forms. The nearest had the lean predatory lines of a

great raptor from Earth's past. Back canted legs, a narrow torso and hunched shoulders spoke of menace.

It was an all too familiar form, that of a HET-7E-H *Hecatoncheires*. The very symbol of the Rim Worlds Republic.

"Okay, it's a *Heck*, so what?!" Qua thought he knew but he needed to hear Jon say it.

"So there is a brigade's worth of captured RimJob metal men here; never used and only dropped once." Qua gave Jon a grimace as the man went on. "On this site you've also got enough equipment to outfit two more brigades of mechanized infantry, older stuff mostly but on par with anything the House Lords have."

Qua waited silently as Jon rapped his knuckles on the Heck's shin.

"Sadly this entire depot is going to be the victim of a training error, an entire battalion of guns is going to hit it in three months' time. Tragic isn't it?"

"Yeah, Jon tragic." Qua said smiling. *The Coasties' supply chain was still active... Two months should do it. Question is would the folks back home use RimJob shit. Then again we did back in '69...*

As Jimmy Qua thought, Jon lit a cigarette and waited patiently.

We remember our friends here in the Hegemony and what Kerensky doesn't know can't hurt us.

Boeing, Everett, Unity City sector, North America, Terra...

"...showed up with orders to secure the factory and the tooling. We were sent home, and that was a week ago. This morning, I show up to check on the site, and find half the lines were stripped." Gordon Brayner was a Union Steward on the DropShip line, and he was, right now, talking to Chief Petty Officer Moshe Schwartz.

"Did you get names?" Schwartz asked.

"Hell yeah! I've got the orders right here from management. Something's got Doc Miller in a tizzy before today though..." Brayner handed Schwartz a data disc.

Schwartz ran the disc, and frowned. "Military Necessity?" he muttered. "Okay, thanks for calling us in. I have some calls to make, here's my contact number if you can think of anything else."

Bremerton, 2 Hours later...

Anh Cu'ong looked at the security and seizure notices, and traced the lines of authority. It wasn't good. She reached for a phone that could only dial one number. "Hello? Yes, I'd like to be connected to Her

Majesty, this is Commodore Cu'ong, and there's been...I think there's been a theft...no, it's actually Her Majesty's business, who the fuck are you?? LISTEN, someone looted the Boeing Everett production lines, and did it with official Terran Hegemony Paperwork fucking- something in the area of two hundred Billion Star League Dollars' worth of industrial tooling and heavy equipment!"

While she waited for the staffer on the other end of the line to fetch the Director-General (no mean feat at 1930 hours New York time on a night in which Amanda Cameron was holding a diplomatic reception), Cu'ong typed in orders to trace-route the shipping logs and identify the likely destination of the tools taken from the Boeing plant.

In thirty seconds, she found her search blocked by an SLDF "Eyes Only" security firewall.

I was afraid of this...

Bremerton, 6 hours later...

Sonny Cobb yawned wiping sleep from his eyes as the driver pulled up to the main gate. The guard in tiger stripe cammo leaned in towards the car and Sonny handed him his id. The man's Asian features were unreadable but his hand never left the grip of his HK-MP1 subgun.

"Okay Agent Cobb, Captain Cu'ong is waiting for you just follow the markers to the HQ building." The sentry's English was passable if heavily accented. Sonny smiled and took back his id. He hoped his hands weren't shaking.

Thanks Tommy, first you get me involved with the Hegemony government, now I'm smack dab in the middle of the biggest concentration of Loonies on the damn planet.

If any of the marines or Anh Cu'ong's coast guard knew of his past as the Rim Worlds Army's best computer slicer this little visit could get interesting. Tommy Lindon, his counterpart in the 90th Heavy Assault had secured his defection and pardon but he doubted that would mean anything here in this place.

Ah well you always liked to live dangerously Sonny my boy.

The driver pulled up to the squat ugly prefab building and Sonny quickly found himself and the package he carried passed through security and into the base's comm exchange. A slender woman looking the young side of sixty, although with access to Terran medicine you would never know, with the tabs of a naval Captain was waiting, a barely teenage boy with warrant officer's tabs standing nervously next to her.

"Is that the package?" Captain Anh Cu'ong asked. An eyebrow raised at the pink and white flowered slip case Sonny carried.

“This is Sweetie, or rather her Terminal, I’m not carting her half way across the country...”

“Fine, WO Rosencrantz will take it from here.” She interrupted.

Sonny was surprised as anyone when he growled out.

“Like hell he will, ma’am.” Silence greeted him and the door guards placed their hands on their side arms.

WO Rosencrantz looked like a deer caught in the headlights as he stopped dead while reaching for the terminal.

Before the Kowloonese officer could respond Sonny blurted out; “Ma’am you were briefed on Sweetie, right?”

The woman nodded coolly; “Yes Agent Cobb as I was briefed on you.”

So, all our cards are on the table then. Sonny thought grimly, his heart racing into overdrive.

“Whatever,” He made himself say casually, “Then you know what she is then and you know she will only talk to three people in the entire Inner Sphere, Admiral Murakami who programmed her, who by the way is dead, Tommy Lindon and...”

“You,” Captain Cu’ong finished. “Alright Mr. Cobb these facilities are yours, get to work.”

Inwardly breathing a sigh of relief he slipped the glossy black composite remote out of its garish case. The holo display came to life with a soothing blue ocean scene of orcas swimming in the upper waters. Along the bottom of the display the bios notes ran slowly along the edge.

SLN Caspar Defense OS 7.4b.

When it was complete one of the Killer Whales swam to face the humans. A bright perky young girl's voice issued from the speakers.

“Hi Sonny, who are your friends, are they nice, hi I’m Sweetie!”

Anh Cu’ong looked on in disbelief as Sonny waved to the terminal’s built in camera.

“Sweetie, this is my friend Captain Cu’ong, she and Lady Amanda need our help.” He motioned to Anh to come forward.

“Oooh I love Lady Amanda, she plays Go with me. Do you like to play Go; Captain?” The Killer Whale turned to regard her.

Anh was dumbstruck for a minute but at Sonny’s nod she cleared her throat and answered.

“Hello Sweetie, no I don’t have much time to play games, but Sonny said you could help us track down some stolen property.”

“Okay; who, what, where and when?”

A chip port opened on the side of the terminal. Rosencrantz stepped up and placed the thumb drive containing the data collected from Boeing Everett in the port.

“Feed me Seymour.” Sweetie giggled.

As the terminal hummed softly Anh looked at Sonny in askance.

“This was what controlled the Caspers?” She said wondering how they could have been so brutally effective.

“No,” he said shaking his head angrily, “Fat Boy had them crippled, they didn’t want to engage the Defense Force, they just had no choice, later versions of his programming completely altered their personality,” He shuddered and looked at her with haunted eyes.

“He turned them from defenders into demons.” He finished.

God forgive me, if I knew then what was being done...Damn it like you could have stopped it. Sensing his turmoil Captain Cu’ong left the man who’d given the codes for the Amaris nuclear arsenal on Terra to the SLDF alone with his thoughts until...

“Sonny, it’s...Sonny the Bad Man stole your stuff.” The AI sounded like a frightened child. Sonny reached out and laid his hand on the pressure sensitive pad on the terminal.

“S’okay honey, he can’t hurt you here, these folks don’t like him much either.” Anh mouthed the question; “Bad Man?” to him.

Kerensky he mouthed back.

“Okay, Sonny...I’ve got it, data to follow, the Bad Man used the Merchant Marine to ship your stuff, and I’ve got the registries and flight plans. They’re about three days from the nadir jump point.”

WO Rosencrantz looked up wide eyed and somewhat shaken. Cu’ong looked over at him and asked what was wrong.

“Ma’am, it...err; she broke triple cubed SLDF security in the time we’ve been talking...it would of taken us years.”

On the display the Orca hummed and squeaked in pleasure as a little girl’s giggle issued from the speakers.

Out in the black....

"...repeat, training is suspended, all Coast Guard and Hegemony naval units within three days of the Nadir point at one gee burn are to perform interception and boarding operations on the merchant vessels *Tom St. Laurence*, *Mattlov's Pride* and bulk freighter *Jersey City*. There is suspicion of contraband, all manifests are to be seized and reviewed under Customs document 1411.b//3232a, this will probably be a crimp on their scheduling, and the captains are likely to bitch about it. IF what we suspect is on those ships IS on those ships, they're transporting stolen goods that were illegally obtained for questionable purposes. We've already yanked their transit permits, but they may try to make a runner..."

Lt. Commander Denh Chao grimaced and looked at the sensor reads. "They seriously want us to stop an SLDF supply convoy?" he asked.

"What?" Commander Henry Marcos had been a Philippine insurgent during the Amaris occupation, now he was learning how to be a 'space cop'.

"Those ships are under escort-looks like SLS *Prinz Eugen* and SLS *Edmund York*. They're not going to pull over for a DropShip, some small craft, and a squadron of fighters." Chao said, "However, welcome to the black service, nugget, we're going to try to do our job anyway."

SLS Kirov, inbound from Nadir Jump Point...

"Rodger that Alpha One-Four we are inbound on your position and have received orders from Terra our fighter cover will be there when you need it. *Kirov* Actual out." Vasily Khorshikov turned to his First Officer and nodded.

Commander Abraham Stavros' heavy Greek accent gave the order to launch the four *Titan* class fighter carriers attached to the *Aegis*' docking collars. The DropShips could pull 4g's and be on scene well before the big cruiser could. The *Kirov* and her own squadrons would arrive somewhat later launching well within range. Hopefully ninety strike and space superiority fighters would be enough of a deterrent.

What the hell is going on here, the Prinz Eugen is refusing to answer calls from the woman who may be our First Lord someday? For God's sake she's a Cameron, if that isn't enough...

"Comms, hail the *Prinz Eugen*, I want to talk to Commodore Gormley."

"Captain you can't mean to come to blows? This has to be a misunderstanding." Commander Stavros whispered softly.

"We will make nice first Abraham, but I swore an oath to God and the Cameron Family and if the little lady down the grav well asks me to do something then by God and St. Ekatrina I will do it."

And may they all have mercy on our souls.

Range: 1 Day from the Nadir point, Terran System...

The KCGS *Leonstein* wasn't a small vessel-she was a fairly beefy one-for a DropShip. Aboard her, she carried eighteen aerospace fighters, being a Titan class block 1.

The SLS *Edmund York*, on the other hand, is a *Riga* class destroyer-carrier. More fighters, plus heavy weapons.

Ever seen what happens when a Chihuahua picks a fight with a Doberman? Yeah.

"...order of the Director General of the Terran Hegemony, you are directed to heave to and submit to customs inspection under Article 211 of the Terran Hegemony legal code and article 134 of the Star League Uniform Code of Military Justice. We have a warrant to search the vessels SLS *Mattlov's Pride*, Bulk freighter *Jersey City* and Cargo vessel *Tom St. Lawrence* for suspected looted goods."

The reply was nearly instant. "This is Commodore Gormley, *Leonstein*, you're interfering in a Star League operation, and you will be fired upon if you persist-this is your only warning."

"Commodore, Heave to-we have the law on our side in this, and you really don't need problems with-"

Whatever the CO of the *Leonstein* was saying, it never finished. Naval lasers from the *Edmund York*, and Naval Autocannon fire from the *Prinz Eugen* silenced the DropShip most decisively.

The flash was visible twenty minutes later, from the bridge of the SLS/THS *Kirov*.

There would be no survivors. Almost immediately, both SLDF vessels broadcast emergency calls claiming that a weapons malfunction had occurred....

Bremerton, Terra, April 4...

"...Congress won't move on them, and if the Director General did, she'd be minus an army within weeks, and invaded by 'liberators' from the SLDF inside of a month." Anh Cu'ong said, passing the bottle back to her visitor.

"So, you're not going to do anything?" He asked.

Anh smiled. "Officially, no. The Hegemony congress was kind enough to offer wergild for the dead men, and a replacement for the ship as soon as one can be obtained, and they've offered to pro-rate the contract if we decided that we needed to leave."

"You didn't take the offer, or you wouldn't be here." He observed.

"Quite true. No...Like I said, we can't do anything official without civilian oversight and permission...." she said.

"So, Jimmy Qua hasn't been ducking my calls, then." he said, "He's actually been out."

"It isn't Jimmy, and you should know better, Sam. I won't let the Tigers get implicated in this." Anh said, "It's going to be kept...quiet." She sighed, "Suffice to say, they're not going to like their stolen goods much longer."

New Earth...

Captain Bedford's men were on a well-deserved shore leave, and so was he-officially, they were under investigation after the incident at Terra's Nadir point, but everyone knew what the outcome was going to be-what it had to be unless Kerensky suddenly decided he wasn't going to carry out Exodus anyway.

He mused along happily, safe in a town the SLDF controlled in ways that Amaris would have envied.

There was no reason to bring a bodyguard, so he didn't.

"Hi honey, you missed one." a soft feminine voice said, penetrating his near-stuporous drunk.

"Wha?" he turned to look.

"You missed one." she was blonde, short, and dressed like a street whore.

She was too close, and the Alley behind McGintey's was filled with stench and noise from the bars up and down the street.

"Missed one what?" he asked drunkenly.

Her foot snapped across his face, knocking him to the cobbled pavement among the trash.

"You missed one of us." she hissed in his ear, and he felt hot pain in his chest, coming from his back...

Magritte Cohn left the body lying in the mingled trash and shit of the alley, a twenty five centimeter spike of Boren wood-a hardwood oak-equivalent from Elbar, pushed through his heart from behind.

"Partial payment." she muttered, dumping the wig, heels, and glittery skirt in a dumpster before walking out the other end of the alleyway in a bikini.

SLDF storage depot 33478, LaGrange Point, New Earth, April 17

Explosions in space can be interesting; Johnny Cuomo thought, especially when nobody died. The detonation of several thousand tons of stolen Hegemony hardware made some interesting patterns in the sky. While admiring his work, Johnny noticed a massive foundry smelter crashed into mothballed Overlord class DropShip. The combat transport split like a rotten egg.

Whoops. Johnny thought as other bits spiraled out to wreak kinetic mayhem throughout the floating yard.

Jetting his way back to the stealthed shuttle took a couple of hours and Johnny used it to reflect on the target of this particular job.

It was way above his pay grade, but damn it Kerensky needed to remember who he served. Johnny, like the rest of the Blackhearts did.

Her name was *Cameron* after all.

Intercepted message, Department of Communications Archive, Terra

Ed, I have one last thing to say to you. Malfunction my ass, Texas class battleships don't have malfunctions and you damned well know it you Yankee bastard. You snuffed the life out of a bunch of people who were only trying to give the Hegemony a hand. Do you feel brave you nekultorny checklist, one itty bitty dropper and a bunch of fighters. For God's sake man we went to Villnius together, what were you and Kerensky thinking

Thankfully our blessed Director-General enacted HAF-1A so if this shit ever happens again and the Kirov is there you won't survive your mistake.

Vasily Korsakov to Commodore Ed Gormley

Dempsey's on the Sound, sometime after the Tiger's return to Terra.

"Dammit, Aaron I could understand your position more if that dipshit Gormley hadn't wasted those Coasties. So don't come crying to me if the stuff your boss stole went boom!"

Aaron sighed as Bruce took another shot of Patron. Aaron himself was as hammered as the younger man. Problem was as much as he agreed with the younger man, he couldn't say so.

Masking his discomfort he ordered another round from the tall redhead behind the bar.

Scott Mackenzie, one of Bruce's Lieutenants traded glances with Aaron over his commander's shoulder then went back to his conversation with Lizzie Hazen. That at least gave Aaron some hope, Liz seemed genuinely happy when she was around Scott. *Hope ya get out, Mon Cherie, cause god knows I can't.*

"Bruce, to be honest with you, I have no clue, what happened out there." Looking for an escape, drunk Gilmours could be evil Gilmours after all, even Simon never bugged Malcolm when he was in his cups after all...

Thankfully he spotted Christina Steiner and waved her over.

A raised eyebrow and a few pointed remarks were all it took for the petite blonde to get the major into a cab. When she returned she traded hi fives with Scott and turned to Aaron.

"Aaron, what happened, it's bad enough Sarah has him in a bind, what the hell did you do?"

"Nothing Chrissy, he's upset about the *Prinz Eugen* thing. Hell it's more than that, and you know what I mean,"

"Sarah?" Aaron asked surprised.

Christina nodded.

"Herself is pregnant and a bundle of nerves, she seems to think I slept with him!"

Aaron chuckled glad for some mundane matters to occupy his attention.

"Like you didn't try Chrissy, I do know you too well."

The Lyran noblewoman grinned and shrugged. Scott grinned, and Liz raised a disproving eyebrow like the southern belle she was.

"He is dreamy and my type; but he's so in love with the little frog bitch I don't think he noticed." She gave Liz's glare right back at her then turned back to Aaron.

"General, I have a message from my cousin for you." The little blonde's eyes narrowed then and Aaron DeChevalier felt the full force of her glare. In that instant he understood why she was one of the top Lyran diplomats. In a pure icy voice that was the cold glacial voice of a Tharkad winter she snarled;

"Jennifer would remind the General Staff of the SLDF where 40% of their funding is coming from, and Bob the Slob won't be Archon forever."

Aaron wasn't prepared for the steel in the woman's voice and stood stunned. Liz rose in the background, an angry retort on her lips, but Scott placed an arm around her shoulders and shook his head.

"What are you saying Lady Steiner?" Aaron kept his voice cool and pleasant.

"Only that the Commonwealth has found the Hegemony to be an integral part of its economy and should General Kerensky choose to continue his foolishness we will be forced to intervene."

As Aaron wrapped his mind around that Chrissy smiled and said her good nights.

"Kowloon's a long way away, so as much as I love hanging with you guys a girl needs her beauty sleep."

Flipping her hair, Christina Steiner swept out of the bar, drawing most of the male patrons eyes after her.

Liz grumbled and Aaron turned to her with a sad smile.

"Lizzie *mon couer* if that woman were First Lord..."

"What?" Scott asked.

"I think we'd all live long, happy, uneventful lives."

Nha Tranh, Kowloon...

"...wasn't me." Tranh Truk Ngo said with a shrug, "Maybe some people we trained, but it wasn't us." On the screen, Aleksandr Kerensky glared up at him. "Expensive setup, this real-time HPG linking, what with the network mostly still down, General. I assume you called for something more substantial than accusing me of running covert operations three hundred lights away from home in the middle of a recession...not that I could, at any rate-I'm a retired general officer in a largely ceremonial job-Marjie's running the executive side of government, and handling negotiations with the Lyrans for a trade deal. If you've got people getting killed, you might ask who they pissed off that bad, and why."

"The wood used was from Elbar." Kerensky said, "Your folks originated the term 'Elbar Toothpick', you want to maybe revise that denial?"

"Revise it? Hell no, general-first off, an Elbar Toothpick isn't a stake through the heart, it's a colloquialism for Impalement. I assume there wouldn't be time for your man to be propped up at eternal attention with a shaft running anus-through-mouth. Like I said, you pissed someone off locally-they might have been inspired by what we did at Running Deer, or they might have been interested in deflecting blame-but that's six of one, half dozen of the other. Your man blew up one of our ships, but that ship was carrying trainees for the Terrans, a lot of those trainees were resistance fighters against Amaris-those folks, they have friends, you know?" He sighed, "If it had been us, General, your man would have been kidnapped and interrogated to find out who's pulling his strings, and THAT person would have been put up at attention-maybe. More likely it would mean an eight millimeter hole in the forehead, since whoever's responsible for the Leonstein incident at its root probably has more protection than the First Lord did."

"And the bombing?" Kerensky asked.

"Was it a nuke?" Tranh replied, "Nukes are cheap General, we can crank them out by job lots, and they work better for that kind of demo than the conventional explosives your own investigation said were used. Again, if it had been us, we'd have used a nuke, and it wouldn't have just been a storage facility-remember what we did to the *Carl Vinson* at Rigil Kentaurus."

"Right...Nuclear limpet mines..." Kerensky mused.

"You didn't lose any ships that way in the recent incidents, so I'd suggest you're not dealing with my people." Ngo said, "Maybe you should oughta reconsider your desertion plan, General. I think some of

your former folks might be taking a strenuous objection to looting the Hegemony now that they've bled and suffered to get the Tyrant out."