

A DISTANT THUNDER

Beware The Ides of November

Part Two

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“You will find my daughter and bring me back my schwarzer Kasten, or I will have your ship and your ‘Mechs, and you and your crew will spend the rest of your lives in the tithing mines, paying tribute to the false gods of the Nueva Castile.”

Thunder from the storm raging outside the protective and technologically advanced palace gave a dramatic crescendo to the Caliph’s last words as four members of the Langford Wraiths rose to their feet.

“Over my dead body,” Major Honor said. He lowered his hands to his sides, realizing a beat later he no longer had his gun. The dimples along his arms and thighs revealed the chill he felt.

Ria moved her staff, placing it between her hands, fight ready.

Aaron spoke up as he raised his hands in a placating gesture. “Let’s not do anything too hasty.”

“Can—can you go back to the part about gods who shower worlds in flames?” Ben said, looking at each of them. “‘Cause you know—that just seems a bit more scary than mining, don’t you think?”

Dags looked at each of his warriors, and then rested his gaze on the set jaw of the Caliph. She was angry, but he suspected she wasn’t angry with them per se, but at the situation she had been forced into. Her daughter was missing as well as a vital piece of her intelligence core. She has a treaty with these Castilians, and any show of force against them could cause a major tussle. So she’s forced to hire Mercenaries. But this begged an even bigger question for Dags. *Why us?*

He held up his hand and gave each member of his lance a look of caution before turning his attention back to the Caliph. “Ma’am, let’s start over, without any threats or hidden agendas, okay?” He looked around. “So, everyone—sit down.”

His men did as they were told, except for Ria, who remained standing by Dags’ side. But then, Dags wasn’t going to argue with a Clanner. He was too tired and hungry.

When the Caliph had returned to the chair behind her desk, Dags sat down on the edge of his seat. He was damned cold and desperately wanted to find a decent pair of pants. But he wasn't going to let that deter him from getting to heart of the situation. *No matter what her internal problems, she's offering us payment in supplies, and that's what we need most right now.*

As if on cue, the door opened and Dulcé stepped inside, a small, round disk in her hand. The small woman looked even more stern than she had before being dismissed earlier. She handed it to the Caliph and then stood to the side.

"Caliph Burrill, maybe you'd care to explain a little bit more? Like, for starters, why us? You suspect your daughter was kidnapped, and you think the Castilians stole your little box. Have you tried reasoning with them?" Dags lifted his shoulders. "Say—maybe asking them?"

He was surprised when a small smile pulled at the right side of her mouth, dispelling all traces of anger. "Communication between worlds in the Castile isn't as quick or as easy as it is in the Inner Sphere, Major. We have no HPG technology. Messages are at a premium, which is why we rely so heavily on our *Kastens*."

Dags pursed his lips and glanced down at the date on his chronometer. "So I'm guessing the Castilian group that was here is maybe just now getting home?"

The Caliph nodded.

"Given that their JumpShip had a full five days to recharge, as I don't think the star for this system is quite bright enough for a—"

"Aaron," Dags interjected. "Not now."

"Sorry."

With a sigh, Dags looked back to the Caliph. "You don't have any HPGs in the Castile? I mean, with all this technology..." Dags glanced about the room.

"I have no use for anything relating to Blakists—large or small."

Uh oh. Dags kept his gaze from moving to Aaron, but caught the sharp look his tech person gave the Caliph in his peripheral vision. "You don't like the Word of Blake?"

She sneered and sat back in her chair. "Most of my people are aware it was the Blakists who meddled in the affairs between

the Hansa and the Castile—made us aware of the Hansa’s double dipping. They’ve been overly friendly through the years, but they are still an outside agent. I do not trust them. Freaks who worship machines.” She smiled to Aaron. “I hope I haven’t offended you.”

Dags glanced at Aaron, who nodded. “None taken, Caliph. My ties to the Shunners didn’t involve branching out onto other worlds.”

Dulcé’s gaze went from the Caliph to Aaron. She narrowed her eyes. Dags noticed this and his stomach turned. What had Aaron said?

“But if you don’t trust them, why do you have their technology everywhere?”

Thunder rang in the distance as the rain lessened outside, audible against the skylight in the domed ceiling. Caliph Burrill frowned at Aaron. “There is no Blakist technology here,” she gestured with open arms. “What you see around you—especially my holograms—are trades from the Hanseatic League in return for our tithing mines.” She smiled at him in the same manner one would smile at an idiot. “This is *Hansa* technology.”

“So,” Dags interjected before Aaron could open his mouth again. “Since the thieves would just be getting home about now from their little breaking and entering mission here,” he leaned his head toward his right shoulder. “You think it best we suit up, infiltrate them, and get everything back. And you want a mercenary unit to do this so it keeps your name out of things.”

“Very well put, Major,” the Caliph pulled her frowning gaze from Aaron and nodded to Dags. “As of today, there are six other mercenary units on Cordoba and Grenada, including yours. But the Wraiths are a small unit, numbering maybe fifteen? And you’re specialized in intel and retrieval. I believe I’ve chosen wisely.”

Dags smiled. “Yes ma’am, you have.” *Easy money.*

“Okay,” Ben said. “Now can we go back to the part about gods who shower worlds in flames?”

Dags nodded. “I think that’s something we need to know a little bit more about.”

Ben nodded. “Well yeah.”

The Caliph took a deep breath before answering. Dags noticed the change in her expression, from confidence to anger—and something else. Fear? “Years ago my people, the Umayyads, invaded these worlds occupied by the Castilians, and took them by force, but the Castilians fought back, learned the science and uses of BattleMechs, and retook nearly all of their worlds except for Grenada and half of Cordoba. And as I’ve mentioned, the Word of Blake hinted that the Hanseatic League dwelled at the very heart of our conflict, and had been profiting.”

Dags nodded. “Let me guess—they were supplying both sides?” It seemed a natural conclusion, a third party getting rich off the misery of two opposing sides. Old story. But what worried him a little more was the involvement of the Wobbies. Why? Especially out here in the Periphery?

The Caliph nodded. “They sold weapons and supplies to both sides, and at times, added kindling to the fire when hostilities stalled. They made new hostilities.”

“To keep the conflict alive,” Aaron said.

“So we and the Castilian people called a truce and turned our attention on the Hanseatic League. We were a united Castile—for a while.”

“But,” Dags said. “Like all nice truces, it started to unravel, right?”

“Yes. Even before the *Riesiege Götter* came. Border spats, trading disagreements, JumpShip scheduling—all petty stuff—but there was enough of it to foul any possibility of an aligned Castile. When the *Riesiege Götter* attacked the Hanseatic League, several of King Noye’s Principe urged him to contact me via our *Kastens*. They were the first to hear the reports of the *Götter*’s might.”

Ben made a spiraling down motion with the index finger of his right hand. “You mean the whole fire thing on worlds?”

She pursed her lips in consideration before speaking. “Worse. There is no way my words will convince you of the *Götter*’s danger. Early tales of their power did nothing to convince me to fear them as the Hansa declared. Instead, I will *show* you what frightened me.”

Caliph Burrill depressed two buttons on the disk brought to her by Dulcé, and the air a centimeter above the disk shimmered to life with holographic images.

Except for Ria, the rest of the Wraiths leaned forward and watched in morbid fascination as the camera angle brought them planet-side from orbit, hit burn, and then drifted into the atmosphere. Dags assumed the camera was mounted on the side of a DropShip.

But as they drew closer, dropping below the cloud cover, the surface became more distinct. The Wraiths saw a world riddled with holes, immense craters, visible even from hundreds of kilometers up. There was barely a smooth area of surface left.

“Damn...those holes are the size of JumpShips,” Ben said softly. His tone of disbelief reflected what Dags saw in the faces of his warriors.

A voice came through, strained, and with a thick Germanic accent. “This was one of our advance colonies. Five million people, settling a promising new trading outpost, not far from Valencia. When they failed to respond to our missives, we sent a ship—and this is what we found...”

The DropShip continued forward as the thrusters slowed its motion and moved into a slow hover. Dags assumed the dropper was spheroid, as they were best at this sort of survey. As far as the eye could see, the planet’s surface looked more like a large moon, pockmarked and barren, than a planet capable of supporting billions of lives.

The Caliph spoke. “They said the transmission was the last they heard from their scouts before something destroyed them. They suspected pirates, but the scouts would have seen them coming at least and sent a report back, or left word of an attack in process.” She looked at Dags. “They claim they heard nothing, except the voice of the *Riesiege Götter* warning them away.”

The video continued a few more kilometers, showing exposed earth, wasted lakes, and small oceans before the camera angle shook, and the devastating image was replaced by black.

Dags and his people looked at the Caliph. “What happened?”

She reached out and touched the disk’s side. The blank air above it evaporated. “The DropShip *Einsparunganmut* was destroyed while feeding this to its JumpShip. The JumpShip was allowed to leave with this message.” She looked back to Dags. “We believe they wanted the Hansa to see it, and they wanted us to see it as well.”

"By the Blessed Blake," Aaron whispered as he combed his fingers through his dusty hair.

This brought Dulcé's attention up quickly. Dags hadn't particularly cared for her since their arrival, and he found himself liking even less her being back in the room with his people. Especially Aaron and the look she gave him. *If she could shoot lasers with her eyes, Aaron'd be a toasted marshmallow by now.*

He and his crew were accustomed to Aaron's occasional Blake-related outbursts. Ben had a worse habit of using the name of Blake in any varied and unkind fashion he could in order to get under Aaron's skin. Usually no one noticed.

Except Dulcé. And it was best to steer clear once again from unwanted questions. "Caliph," Dags said as he stood and watched the spinning world. "Was this confirmed?" He pointed to the devastation. "Is this real?"

"At first we didn't believe the Hansa; after all, they've lied to us before. But then we lost contact with a trading expedition near Rumor V. When our scouts investigated, we also received a message from these *Götter*, warning us to avoid the Altruis system."

Dags frowned. "Where is that?"

Dulcé answered for the Caliph. "It's a waypoint, a blue giant the Umayyad once used for quick recharges on the way to Hansa trading posts."

The Caliph turned the holo-vid off. "We've not moved our JumpShips back into the dark. We've kept our economy working with mining, mostly for germanium for the Hansa. It was a little over two months ago when we were contacted by messenger—the Castilian *Kasten* was missing. They, of course, accused us of taking it and we denied it." She shrugged. "What would be the point? Without them, we are deaf and blind against the Hansa."

"Were they *both* stolen?" Aaron asked. "The one here, and its sister."

The Caliph arched her eyebrow at him. Dulcé's stare hadn't decreased and now she added a frown to it. Dags turned and shot him a look of *Will you shut up?*

He didn't.

Aaron continued. "Black box technology can't work in a single receiver/sender fashion. You need two of them to work. One sends and the other receives and then they switch out priorities." He looked at each of them. "There are in essence four boxes here."

Dulcé took a step toward Aaron. "You know a great deal about these boxes, Mr. Garrett."

Aaron returned the Amir mi'a's glare with a soft smile. "Lostech is a hobby of mine."

"He's my tech-guy," Dags said and looked at Dulcé. "Aaron's sort of a nut on lostech. He likes the stuff. Helps modify my ship and our 'Mechs from time to time."

"I've been studying lostech most of my life." Aaron made a weak smile when his gaze connected with Dags'. Evidently the precarious nature of his background maybe being a problem finally struck home. *Nitwit*. "I just really assumed there were two..."

"Are there?" Dags said, hoping to draw her attention away from Aaron. He had no real proof that Aaron's background would be a problem, only a gut feeling. The Caliph already knew Aaron was Blakist because Dulcé had even tagged him as a former Wobbie. Dags figured as long as the Caliph got what she paid for, everything should be fine.

Maybe.

But he really didn't want any more complications. *The woman's got my 'Mechs*.

"There were two. Part of their coming here was an invitation I made for them to openly search, and for Dulcé to visit with her friend."

"Friend?" Dags frowned. "She's got friends?"

"Dulcé is my Hansa Liaison. She acts as Amir mi'a, the right hand to Atabeg Trahn. King Noye has his own liaison, Francisco Wheeler. It was he that performed the investigation and agreed that we did not have the Castilian *Kasten*."

"When did they accuse the *Götter*?" Ria said.

"When they finished here." The Caliph rubbed at her neck. "Wheeler was quick to accuse them. In fact, he was very sure. He did not speak highly of the Hansa deals the King had made, though he wouldn't elaborate on what they were, or his suspicions."

“What about the Hansa?” Dags said. “You had considered maybe *they* took it and not the Castilians?”

“Why?” The Caliph said. “The Hansa do not know about our *Kasten*.”

He pursed his lips as he watched her expression, her body language. *Now that I'm not so sure of.* He glanced at Dulcé who was still staring at Aaron, though he got the distinct impression the old broad wasn't missing anything in the room. “But you don't trust them. You haven't really dismissed the possibility.”

“No.” She shook her head and then her expression softened. “Major, I'm more concerned for the well-being of my daughter. I would take her life over the *Kasten* if I had the choice. But we cannot locate her.” She licked her lips. “Nicol didn't trust them, especially Wheeler. She said he made her—nervous.”

“She felt like they were up to something,” Dags said.

“Yes, and she said as much. She warned me to keep a closer eye on them. It was three days later I discovered the *Kasten* was missing. So was Nicol.”

“Three days to notice your daughter was missing?”

“My daughter and I don't often see eye to eye, Major,” the Caliph said and her tone grew harsh. “When she wouldn't change her tone around our guests, I thought it best she simply not be here. I sent her away. When she didn't return, I discovered she'd never arrived in our southern home.”

“And the box was gone,” Aaron said.

“Replaced,” Dulcé interjected.

He turned his gaze to the small gray woman. “The Caliph said it was missing.”

“Replaced *is* missing, Mr. Garrett.” Dulcé glared at him. “Don't you agree?”

Okay. That was enough. “Caliph,” Dags said. “We'll take you on and find your daughter—but I can't guarantee we'll find this *Kasten*.”

“What did Dulcet here mean by replaced?” Ben said, and Dags knew his *Cyclops* pilot had purposefully mispronounced her name.

“The thief left an identical box behind that doesn’t work. We’ve kept the existence of the *Kasten* a secret all these years from the Hansa, so if they took it, how would they know how to replicate it? Or connect it for that matter. No—the thief has to have been Castilian to know where to go, and what to leave behind.”

“A dummy box,” Dags said. “And this *Kasten* was under lock and key?”

“The tightest security we have.”

Dags’ stomach rumbled again, followed closely by Ben’s.

The Caliph stood before gesturing with her arm to her left. “I’m sorry—for keeping you so long. Dinner should be ready, and we can discuss this more over our meal. We have to pass by the main lobby to get to the dining room. Why don’t I show you where it was?”

Everyone glanced at Dags for their cue. He gave a slight nod. What looked like a normal wall with pictures and a bookshelf wavered and an open door appeared.

More holograms.

“Praise be to Blake,” Aaron said under his breath.

Dags moved behind his tech and leaned in close. “Stop that,” he hissed and then gently moved Aaron forward with a nudge against his shoulder as he looked at the new doorway.

Oh great—I’m going to walk into a wall on the way to a bathroom.

Aaron and Ben followed the Caliph through as Ria hung back to walk beside Dags. “Sir—I must speak with you.”

Dags nodded. “Yeah—I know. I’m worried Aaron’s going to get us in a load of hot water if he’s not careful.”

“No sir,” Ria said as they walked through the door. “Aaron’s welfare does not concern me. The Caliph is an intelligent woman. She’s fully aware of Aaron Garrett’s former affiliation with the Shunners. Amir mi’a is the only one who appears to be surprised by this. It is also obvious the Hanseatic League has had contact with the Word.”

Dags glanced back at the door that had been invisible minutes before. “You think? The only question here is as friend or foe?”

"I do not know sir." Ria's voice became more insistent. "But there is something else—more pressing."

"What?" Dags glanced at his second.

"I have had a vision."

Dags nearly stumbled as he walked, but continued to keep up with the others, paying little attention to the hallways they passed through. "Now? You've had a vision now?"

The Nova Cat Clan was known for their mystic visions. Dags had been surprised by several of Ria's since the two had hooked up as major and second. Her visions had been pretty reliable—if not a bit vague here and there in the telling.

"No sir. I had this vision last night, as I stared into the fire in my quarters. I have been thinking about it ever since."

Again he looked at her as their group paused in front of two large steel doors decorated in old scrap and seamed together to create the image of a BattleMech torso. "And you want to tell me about it now?"

"Yes."

"Can it wait?"

She shook her head. "There was a great ship careening through the heavens."

Ahead of them, Caliph Burrell raised her hand. In it she clasped a small silver box. A loud, slow chink filled the hallway and the doors opened outward. The group took a few steps back.

"That's really vaguing it there, Ria." Which seemed to be the standard for Nova Cat mystic visions. It either came all at once or in tiny, fragmented nonsense. He never really knew how anyone could piece a puzzle together out of them.

"It is only the second part of the vision, sir. The first was of a great betrayal. There will be destruction—and a great many lives lost."

Dags gave her a pained expression. He really hoped the betrayal wouldn't come from this Caliph, or that the lives lost were his unit. "That so? Okay...you let me know if anything else a little more cohesive comes to you."

“Yes sir.” And Ria turned to face forward, her own expression stoic.

Dags’ gaze lingered a few seconds more on the exotic face of his second. Ria rarely interrupted him, or anything else, much. For her to abruptly blurt out a vision—the quality of the vision, or the emotion behind it—must’ve bothered her.

And if it bothered Ria, it usually downright upset Dags.

The open doors revealed another circular room. He noticed the absence of rain pounding against the ceiling, and wondered if they’d descended underground. His attention had been too concentrated on Ria to notice. Not good. If there was one thing he’d learned in the forests of Ashio, it was to always be aware of one’s surroundings.

The new room was set up much like a monitoring station, with screens and holovids around the perimeter walls. Dags caught images of different areas of the town, places he’d seen on their drive in before the rain started. All of the images looked fogged, which he assumed was because of the rain. Uniformed Umayyads sat or stood in front of each of these stations, watching carefully.

Watching for what?

Opposite the double doors sat a small platform. Two more burly men swathed in flowing garments stood at attention in front of the platform, their scimitars drawn and held in front of their chests. Their eyes moved above the wraps of clothing covering the lower half of their faces, tracking the new arrivals. At the Caliph’s entrance, everyone stood and saluted with a right fist over the left shoulder and a short bow.

The Caliph returned the gesture and nodded to the men. Dulcé moved to stand in front of the dais, and the men saluted her as well.

Dags pursed his lips. *Interesting.*

“Is that,” Ben pointed up at the small table between the two guards. “It?”

The Caliph nodded. “This is where the *Kasten* is housed, connected to the larger of our networks. The received transmissions are printed out at two stations and transcribed.”

“You have your own code?” Aaron said.

She nodded. “The *Kasten* isn’t capable of encryption, so we have our own cipher. No one has ever cracked it.”

Aaron took a step closer. When the two guards glowered down at him, he gave a weak smile, waved, and then looked at the Caliph. “May I?”

“And me?” Dags smiled sweetly. May none of his men go if he wasn’t allowed.

Dulcé quickly moved to her Caliph’s side and whispered something in her ear. Dags felt the muscles in his shoulders bunch. He really didn’t like that old woman.

The guards relaxed only when the Caliph nodded and Dulcé stepped away from her.

With a light step, Aaron walked up the stairs to the box, with Dags right behind him. Once past the brute squad, he could see that the table where the black box sat was little more than a shelf extending from the wall. It looked to him as if the entire thing would retract with the push of a button, and that it was out and exposed for their convenience.

So that’s it. It didn’t look like much to Dags. It was exactly as Aaron had said. A metallic black box, a third of a meter long and wide. It wasn’t very high, and Dags leaned to the left and right, noting only a number-pad on top and a slot. Well, it wasn’t going to be hard to find—not as easy to steal and hide as jewelry or C-bills.

Dags’ gaze tracked the wires and back again before he knelt and examined the stand beneath the fake box. Aaron knelt beside him. “I don’t see how anyone could have switched them.”

Aaron pursed his lips. “No—not at a glance. But,” he turned and braced himself on one knee as he looked back down at the Caliph. “How does your daughter activate it?”

“Her code is only needed when information is communicated. When a message is detected, Nicol touches the box on the left side.”

Aaron stood, as did Dags, and looked on the box’s left side. There Dags noticed a small raised surface that didn’t look like a part of the original manufacture—not that he was anything like an expert on this gadget. It reminded him of fingerprint pads on noteputers.

“Was she ever left alone with it?” Aaron asked.

The Caliph's expression became dark, but it was Dulcé who stepped forward, her tone sharp. "What exactly are you implying, Mr. Garrett?"

"Nothing," Dags said quickly. "He's just wondering if—" he gave Aaron a glare as he spoke. "—maybe she was alone in here when both of them were snatched."

His answer seemed to placate her. She nodded. "I see your logic. No, Nicol was never left alone with the box. As I said, the guards are always here, and the stations are always manned."

The guard behind Aaron tightened his grip on his weapon. Dags wasn't particularly skilled at reading body language, but in his experience, sentinel guards weren't supposed to move, were they? Show of force and all that?

Aaron moved forward. "Can you trust your guards?"

Again the guard moved, only this time he actually shifted on his feet. Dags almost reached for his hip holster before remembering there wasn't a pistol there. None of them had weapons except Ria.

"Are you suggesting a weakness in my ability to command?"

"No—but do you know them?" Aaron glanced back at the agitated men standing on either side of the dummy *Kasten*. "I mean—how can you tell?"

"He is trouble, Caliph," Dulcé said aloud this time, not whispering in her commander's ear. "He should be detained and questioned."

Aaron put up his hands. "No, no, no—detained?" He pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose and gestured to the guard looming behind him. "It's just that—with their faces covered—how do you know they're really *your* men?"

Both guards fidgeted.

Dags looked at Ria. The Nova Cat was watching the guards as well as the technicians in the room. Several of them had turned to look at the newcomers, but none of them moved in any nervous sort of way.

"I will prove to you, Mr. Garrett, that I know every Umayyad in this building, where they are, and what they do." The Caliph shifted her hardening gaze to the guards.

"My Lady," Dulcé began. "I think you might—"

"Hush, Dulcé." She saluted the guards.

They half-saluted back.

Dags took a single step back against the dais railing. *This isn't looking good.*

"Amiel, Brennen," the Caliph barked. "Reveal your faces to this outsider."

Dags felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. *Yep—I'm thinking these two didn't expect us in here.* He moved to the dais stairs and tried to motion for Aaron to come with him, only the Wobbie was too interested in the guards.

When the two addressed Umayyads did not comply with their leader's orders, the Caliph stepped onto the first stair. "I gave you a direct order. *Remove your cowls.*" She reached into the folds of her own uniform with her right hand and retrieved a pistol.

Dags caught the first movement by the guard directly behind Aaron. He also sensed the guard closest to himself shift and felt the air move as he brandished his own scimitar. Before he could shout a warning to Aaron, to Dags' surprise, the Wobbie ducked and rolled under the shelf where the *Kasten* sat, narrowly avoiding being sliced in half. The resulting miss threw the guard off balance, and Dags nearly laughed out loud when Aaron reached out and grabbed the guard's ankle and yanked, throwing him forward toward the stairs.

But Dags had problems of his own. The second guard tried to cleave him in half and nearly succeeded. Dags turned and ducked, but not before the scimitar's edge grazed his bare left forearm. There wasn't any pain as he reached back and grabbed the railing around the dais, leaning back and lashing a booted kick to the guard's head. The guard staggered back, but didn't drop his scimitar.

Nuts. Dags rolled against the railing to the wall of circuitry on his left and got behind the guard, who had prevented himself from falling down the stairs and now turned toward Dags, pulling up his weapon for another assault and yelling something unintelligible.

Dags stood weaponless against the wall as the guard raised his scimitar. The black box was to Dags' left, the railing was to his right, and a bad guy in front of him.

Why can't these things ever go easy?

"Major!" Ben yelled out.

Dags reacted without thought. He saw the weapon in the air, reached out with his right hand (years of battle training to always watch the peripheral vision) and caught the needler. He managed to get the grip in his hand and held up the barrel as the guard charged forward.

The attacker's eyes crossed as they focused on the needler and he stopped, weapon raised, breathing heavily.

"Might I suggest you lower your weapon? Or do you like the idea of having millions of shaved pieces in your face?" He smiled.

The doors burst open and at least twenty armed Umayyad guards, all with hidden faces, rushed into the room and swarmed the Caliph. Several broke off and rushed up the stairs. They removed the scimitar from the attacker and immediately attempted to place him in restraints.

Dags lowered the needler and looked to his right and down at Ben. He gestured with the weapon, giving his pilot a *Where the hell did this come from?* look.

"I got it off the other guard," Ben said. "Ria whacked him with her stick and I frisked him." The Warrior grinned. "Figured you could use a little help."

One of the new guards took the needler away and Dags stepped back, arms raised. "Hey, hey—I'm not the enemy here."

"Leave the Wraiths," the Caliph said. "Remove your cowls."

All of the guards did as they were told. Except the two guards that had stood beside the *Kasten*.

Dags, feeling a little light-headed, moved out and around his struggling attacker. Aaron was on his feet and looking at the black box once more, his brow knitted in concentration.

"Remove it," the Caliph was saying.

The room seemed to be in chaos. Dags noticed the technicians had not moved from their stations, but they weren't watching their posts either. Twenty or so caftan-uniformed guards filled the empty spaces, all of them armed with assault rifles, ranging in make and model.

It's an assortment of Inner Sphere technology. But then the Deep was known for taking what stumbled into its web and making it theirs. The scene blurred for a second and Dags put his hand to his forehead. *Whoa...I'm not feeling so good.*

The guard who had attacked Aaron struggled against his bindings as the Caliph removed the cowl herself.

To Dags he looked like every other Umayyad he'd seen since arriving in the Castile. Olive-skinned and dark hair.

The Caliph frowned, and then turned and moved up the dais to the second guard. This man screamed out something through his cowl and managed to throw off his guard. He wasn't restrained securely enough either and when he turned his right hand went into the depths of his robes.

Dammit—another needler. Dags was at the bottom of the steps and started up only to lose steam when his vision swam again. Aaron was closest, and ended up behind the attacker when he went for the Caliph.

The next few seconds moved slowly. Dags stumbled on the step. The Caliph threw up her hands and backed away, perilously close to the edge of the stairs. The attacker yelled something out as he pulled a needler from his uniform. Guards rushed to the dais to save their leader. There was screaming.

Aaron picked up the box in both hands, raised it above his head, and brought it down as hard as he could on top of the imposter's head. The outer casing of the box cracked as he fell to the floor in a heap. Dags managed to get up the stairs and put his arms out to brace the Caliph before she fell backward.

Aaron stepped back and went down on his knees, the broken box in his hands, as the other guards scrambled to help their leader. She moved forward without a backwards glance at Dags and knelt down, yanking the cowl from the unconscious guard's face.

Dags couldn't speak Umayyad very well, but he understood tones. Though he couldn't understand Lise Burill's words, he could only imagine she was swearing up a storm cloud.

"I know this man," the closest of the guards said. "He was with the King's guard that accompanied Francisco Wheeler."

The Caliph nodded as she stood. “We are deceived on many levels. Take this one and his mate to the dungeons. Tell Ishdul he has my permission to interrogate them. There is no limit.”

Dags wobbled, and sat down on the top step hard. His head was spinning and he was starting to shake. When he looked down he saw the blood. Lots of it. Seeping endlessly from the cut on his left forearm.

Oh. Great. I’m bleeding to death and didn’t know it.

Ria was by his side in seconds, with Ben beside her. “Sir—you are very pale.”

“Yeah,” Dags said. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Raja,” the Caliph said. “Get Major Honor to the Sick House. He’s wounded—there may be poison.”

Poison? Dags looked up at her with an arched eyebrow. No one said anything about poison. But come to think of it, he sure was feeling awful poorly from what should have been a little cut.

“Ma’am,” Aaron Garrett said. “May I continue to examine this box?”

Uh-oh. Dags’s vision grew darker as several of the Caliph’s men surrounded him, lifted him to his feet beneath his arms. He looked around and caught Ria’s gaze. The Nova Cat put a commanding hand on the guard on Dags’ right and leaned in close to her leader. “Watch Aaron. Don’t let him get us, or him, into trouble.”

Ria’s almond-shaped gaze searched Dags’ face. “I’m afraid, sir, we’re already in deeper trouble than we realize.”