

PORTAL HUNTERS: DARK HOUR

CHAPTER ONE

The sky was changing from black to deep blue, as the sun began to make its way toward the horizon. Azi pulled the reins up, bringing the camel to a halt. It would be full light soon, and it promised to be a hot day, hotter than the last. Here was as good a place as any to make camp. With a gentle word, the camel knelt to the ground and Azi dismounted.

To most people his journey seemed pointless. Few rode camels for any practical purpose anymore, save for show. But what his friends failed to realize was the journey itself was the point, not the destination. The desert was a solitary place free from any sign or memory of the war.

The war, it was that which he wanted to escape—a war now many months in the past, but forever a part of his mind. He had not fought in it himself, but two in his family had: an uncle and his older brother. His uncle died early in the war, drafted by the Empire and forced to serve on the front lines. His brother had fared better, surviving for almost two years. Had he survived another three months, he would have outlived the war itself. Tomorrow would mark the anniversary of his death, and Azi did not want to be anywhere that reminded him of the wounds. He wanted to remember the best things about his brother, and what better way than this. It was his brother who taught him how to survive in the desert. Their journeys together had always been peaceful and brought them closer together. That was what he wanted to remember, not the war itself.

Within a few minutes he had his tent up, if it could be called a tent at all. It was more of a pole and cloth, just enough to give him shade while he rested. He'd sleep through the hottest part of the day and then head out once the sun began to set. Reaching into his bag he pulled out a bit of food and began to eat. As he ate, he sat listening to the utter quiet surrounding him. There was nothing but silence, silence and the gentle sound the wind made as it blew across the sand.

A sudden chill passed over him. The sensation alarmed him so much that he dropped his food and rose to his feet. It was not a natural sensation, he knew at once. The air itself was as hot and dry as ever, and the wind brought no relief. Azi stood trembling. A lurking sense of dread was building inside him, unexplainably. *It is nothing, I'm just tired*, he tried to reassure himself. He was not even sure why he was so suddenly afraid. He waited to see if the cold would come again. Then, just as he decided it was nothing more than his imagination, Azi heard a soft whisper—and then weeping. It was a faint, distant sound, as if being blown along the sand from far off.

“Hello?” Azi cried out.

For two days, he had wandered through the desert without seeing a soul. He had not expected to see anyone. There were too many easy and convenient ways to avoid the desert, and there was nothing here except heat and sand. He scanned the horizon for any sign of life, besides his own. The sky was brightening, and he was able to see for a good distance in most directions. A large sand dune blocked his view to the north, but it was high enough that if he reached the top, he should be able to see for kilometers in every direction. Step by step, he trudged his way up the dune. His feet dug against the sand. The night's ride had been a long and hard one, and he needed rest, but his curiosity was in control.

So tired... He didn't remember being this tired after his last ride.

At last he reached the top of the dune—and froze.

Standing half way down the opposite slope was a patch of night the dawn had failed to drive away—that was the only way he knew how to describe it, whatever 'it' was. It stood approximately two and one-half meters tall, in an oval shape. The outer edges were aglow with a dark red hue, like embers at the bottom of a fire. The center was pitch-black, a black deeper than anything he had ever seen. Just to look at it caused the light to drain out of him, leaving him feeling alone and frightened.

A realization came upon him. This was a portal, it had to be, but it was not like any portal he had ever seen or heard of before. All the warnings the Civil Ministry issued about portals came to mind, and his heart began to pound. Any portal found outside of an authorized area was to be treated as a threat.

Slowly, he began to turn and head back to his camp. Even as he turned, his eyes remained fixed into the empty blackness. As much as he wanted to, desperately wanted to, he could not look away.

I must get away from here. No good can come from this!

A scream jarred him from his trance, allowing him at last to turn fully away from the portal. It was not a human scream. Wasting not a second, he ran back down the dune, but it was too late. His camel lay on its side. Its hair had changed from a sandy brown to a silvery gray. A deformed look of primal terror was carved across its face.

"No!" Azi cried out. He was as confused as he was frightened. Azi turned from side to side, panicked. There was no sign of anyone or anything anywhere in sight. He couldn't begin to imagine what had happened to the poor beast. If something from the portal had done this, he would have seen it. Yet, something had killed it. It was not a natural death, that much was certain.

He leaned over the camel and placed a hand on it. It was cold. A chill went up his spine, and then, he saw it—too late. The dark shape came out of the sand and moved quickly behind him.

He screamed as loud as he could. His cries of horror and pain drifted across the sand and were lost in the wind.

* * * *

“Fresh *grubra*, there’s nothing like it,” Ambassador Humrun said, as he lifted the steaming cup to his mouth and took a sip. He let out a sigh and turned his head toward the sound of birds chirping outside his office. The bright, morning light poured in through the floor to ceiling windows, bathing his desk in its warmth. His office was near the top of the consulate, and overlooked Lake Geneva. The sky was clear, save for a smattering of small, silvery clouds that drifted above the mountains. A small flock of pigeons flew by the window, looking for a place to perch. Finding none along the building’s edge, they fluttered away. All in all, it was a beautiful day and a most refreshing sight after having spent two weeks in Cairo.

Turning away from the view, he sat the cup down and poured a second one. The musty smell of *grubra* filled the room. “This is my last pot, I’m afraid,” he said as he pushed the second cup across his desk, “but fortunately the supply fleet is arriving this afternoon. I always make sure they have a few crates set aside for the consulate every time they come. The bile the humans drink—coffee, I believe they call it—is quite disgusting, but never tell the Prime Minister that. I swear, the man drinks more coffee than he breaths air.” Humrun chuckled at his own comment, but the Gaoro sitting across from him merely smiled politely and took the cup. “Of course, we have plenty of freeze-dried *grubra*, but it isn’t the same,” Humrun went on. “If the berries aren’t marinated and roasted at just the right temperature, it’s just—well, I don’t have to tell you, Yutt. Your mother had one of the finest brewers on Gaoro, as I recall.”

Fleet Commander Yutt Bruthun nodded as he took a sip. “So I am told, but honestly, I don’t have the same appreciation for *grubra* as you. It all tastes the same to me.”

“That’s what you get for spending your life floating around in a metal jar,” Humrun replied, offering a teasing grin as he spoke. “They really should allot better rations for such outstanding officers as you.”

“That wouldn’t be practical, and in space, practicality is everything,” Yutt responded.

“Bother practicalities! What’s life without its finer delicacies? Ah, you could have had quite the career as a councilor, or perhaps even served as an ambassador yourself, though I wouldn’t wish this job on my favorite cousin!” Humrun laughed again, but Yutt did little more than smile and take another sip.

“How was your time in Cairo?” he asked the ambassador.

“It was fine, but I am glad to be back here. Cairo is a dreary place, even before V'Moreth leveled it. And now, well, now it's a mix of sand and steel. Nine months later, they're still tearing down and clearing out the old buildings. Everywhere you look, it's nothing but cranes and scaffolding. Perhaps if V'Moreth had known we'd have to rebuild the whole blasted city, he might have left a few more buildings intact.”

“Yes, well, I think his idea was to make sure there wasn't a need to rebuild the city,” Yutt said, taking another sip. “So, I guess you haven't heard then?”

Humrun cocked an eyebrow. “Heard? Heard what?”

“That I'm being reassigned.”

“You're—?” Humrun's cheerful demeanor disappeared in a flash. “What are you talking about?”

“There's a command ship arriving with the supply fleet, the *Pumpt*. I believe you know it.”

A shock of memories seized Humrun, and he sunk back into his chair. He was beginning to understand what was happening in an instant, though how and why completely eluded him. “V'Moreth,” he muttered, staring into his dark gray drink. He looked up at Yutt. “Who commands the *Pumpt* now?”

“Captain Ruuth Ruthush, but the *Pumpt* serves as the flagship for Fleet Commander T'Tith Borxos. That's who should concern you.”

“Borxos?” Humrun mulled the name over in his mind. “He was one of the captains under V'Moreth during the Siege.”

“Captain on the *Thator*, in fact,” Yutt said with a nod.

“V'Moreth's own flagship.” Humrun's face darkened. “So, he was promoted to Fleet Commander.”

“He and about three others who served during the Siege. But, of course, Captain Borxos was the most distinguished.”

Ambassador Humrun got up from his chair and wandered over to the window. The morning's weather suddenly seemed less inviting. The bright sun reminded him of Egypt, and the fluttering birds had become an obnoxious distraction.

“Why is Commander Borxos coming here? He cannot expect a warm welcome.”

“Fott, you can't be this naïve. Surely you saw this coming. Fleet Commander Borxos has come to replace me, and you can bet it is no accident they choose him.”

“Not an accident, but a grievous mistake.” Humrun turned from the window and stood beside his desk. “I thought the Gra Chamberlain agreed it was best to keep the admiral and the other ‘heroes’ away from Earth, at least for a very good, long while. They need someone over this system’s defenses who wasn’t directly involved in bombing half the planet. You were perfect for the role. You were poised to attack the New Moon’s fleets in Xigxini space when the Siege was underway, so you played a key role in defeating the Earth’s Empire without any involvement in the millions of human deaths that came that day. That’s a hero the humans could appreciate—on some level at least—without resenting.”

“But, of course, that wasn’t your prime motive for choosing me, and they know it,” Yutt pointed out.

No, it wasn’t, Humrun thought to himself, but he did not feel like admitting it aloud. Many decades ago, the Humruns and Bruthuns were allied houses, tied together with a few well-placed marriages. When Humrun offered up Yutt’s name, his political opposition disputed his recommendations on grounds of nepotism. But Yutt was only a distant cousin, and the biological ties were not close enough to convince the Gra Chamberlain that his motives were based on family loyalties.

That much was true. In terms of family relations, the Bruthuns had drifted apart from the Humruns the last couple of decades. However, Yutt and he were very much like-minded, politically, with many of the same allies within the government. Ambassador Humrun knew he could count on Yutt’s ideology, plus a certain amount of personal loyalty for helping him obtain such a distinguished position as sector commander in charge of Earth’s defenses. With such a reliable ally as Yutt serving in this position he knew that, at long last, they would be able to get Earth back on the right track and undo some of the damage that the last few years had wrought. Now, less than a year after helping to establish Earth’s Civil Ministry, Humrun was about to lose his best asset.

Yutt put his cup back onto Humrun’s desk, still half-full. “You knew what the orders were regarding the portals. The Advisory Council isn’t happy at all with how you’re handling it.”

“I’m following orders, and our directive,” Humrun said, sharply. He curled a hand into a fist, then released it, not wanting to show his anger visibly. “Our focus here was to bring reconstruction and stabilization. There was to be no development on portal technology without filtering it through our engineering team. We’ve done exactly that.”

“Yet, you allowed them to develop the Alpha Device and manufacture portal staffs,” Yutt countered.

“After our team reviewed the findings, and under Director Ferrgerr’s oversight,” Humrun shot back.

“And you expanded the Guardian Project, allowing the Prime Minister to convert it into the Portal Hunters.”

“Allowed?” Humrun raised an eyebrow. “Yutt, we do not rule Earth, we merely—guide it. The Prime Minister is free to do what he will. But it is true. I endorsed the idea and allocated funds so that the Hunter Project might become a reality. And the Gra Chamberlain is punishing me for this? Is he a fool?”

“It’s not my position to say, but *you’re* beginning to sound like one,” Commander Bruthun said bluntly. “It wouldn’t help your career to let anyone hear you speak of the Chamberlain in that manner. As to the Hunters, you know full well that the Advisory Council instructed us to keep funds to the Guardian Project low. And despite what the treaty says, they don’t want the humans getting their hands on *any* new portal technology, even with our oversight.”

“The staffs hardly qualify as new technology. They’re more efficient, but otherwise don’t enable the humans to do anything they weren’t already capable of.”

“Except to destroy portals,” Yutt’s tone expressed an unspoken concern.

“And why is that bad?” Humrun picked up his cup and swirled the grayish liquid around as he spoke. “We cannot engage in any meaningful reconstruction, if the Portal Crisis continues. The rogue portals are wrecking havoc on the entire planet.”

“Fott,” Yutt leaned forward and lowered his voice. “That was the *point*.”

Humrun blinked, but offered no spoken reply. For a brief moment, he thought he’d misheard Yutt. Yutt settled back into the chair and continued. “Think about what we’re up against. Throughout the entire war, the humans were winning. There were no significant victories against them, and they did not sustain heavy losses. Whatever they suffered, they suffered during the Siege.”

“Most of humanity suffered a great deal during the Empress’ reign,” Humrun pointed out. “The only ones who benefited from her conquests were the Empress and her generals, not the rest of her species. Someone should remind the Advisory Council that it was human’s working against the Empress that gave us our chance for victory. Without their help, even Gaoro itself would have fallen.”

“Exactly! It would, but more importantly, it almost did! We have to make sure the new Earth government is not in a similar position. You and I have our ways of insuring that, but the Advisory Council has a different approach. They are pushing to slow the reconstruction of Earth, so that they do not recover faster than we do.”

“No one’s disputing the wisdom in that, but as long as the rogue portals remain, Earth won’t recover *at all*,” Humrun said. “There’s a difference between acting slowly and not acting at all.”

“There’s another reason, though,” Yutt explained. “During the war, the entire galaxy was terrorized by the portals, but up until now, the humans have never had reason to fear them. With the Portal Crisis, they have a reason.”

Humrun picked up his spoon and swirled it around in his drink. “They are trying to traumatize the humans, causing them to distrust portals.”

Yutt nodded. “Yes, precisely, just as many people in our government do, and as they do on Grafos and in Prajic space.”

“I might suspect the Krarnoes of such a tactic, but this seems—unusually cruel for the Advisory Council, much less the Gra Chamberlain.”

“People change with the times. Our people have been at war for years, and I’m afraid it has changed us. Officially, the Gra Chamberlain has not condoned this approach. He trusts the Council and others in the military to use their own discretion in the matter.”

“Thus providing himself with a political buffer,” Humrun nodded as he spoke. *A clever tactic, to be sure.* “But if he’s not opposing this position...” He paused. “That must mean it is gaining popularity back home.”

“That is the impression I get, as well,” Yutt admitted, taking another sip. “The populous still feels betrayed by the humans.”

“Even though the government that betrayed us no longer exists?”

Yutt shrugged. “To some, that’s semantics.”

The ambassador sighed. “It doesn’t surprise me that V’Moreth is a part of this. That Gaoro is a low-poor upstart and an opportunist—and a dangerous one. Of course, he’d seize on this chance to move you out and marginalize my efforts.” Frustrated, his gaze wandered out the window, then back over at Yutt. “How did you come about all this?”

“It is not widely circulated. I learned bits and pieces through my own sources, but even so, I thought you were—as the humans say—reading between the lines, just as I had.”

It made sense now that he’d thought about it, Humrun had to admit, and there was a certain brilliance behind it. “Then the ultimate goal is to take portal technology away from the humans entirely,” Humrun said, as he thought the rest through aloud. “The Council will never trust the humans with it, so we have to take it out of their hands. But in order to do so, without causing another war, we must give the humans reason to hand it over of their own free will. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“From everything my sources tell me, yes. The damage done to the Portal Matrix during the war is what caused the Crisis, and as long as the Matrix is on Earth, the Crisis continues. By activating the Hunter Project, you have made the Council’s plan all the more difficult. If the Hunters are successful in bringing the Crisis to an end by eliminating the rogue portals, or at least limiting their damage until a way can be found to fix the Matrix, the humans will have no cause to relinquish their control,” Yutt said. “Commander Borxos will no doubt try to undo some of what you have done.”

Humrun looked over at Yutt. “They would do this even though the Crisis endangers millions of humans and puts the entire galaxy at some degree of risk?”

“Yes, of course. You have to remember, for some, the war is not yet over,” Yutt shifted in his chair.

“Not for Admiral V’Moreth or the Advisory Council, at least,” Humrun muttered.

“And not just them,” Yutt added.

Humrun’s cow-like ears perked. “What are you not telling me?”

“There is something else you need to consider,” Yutt explained. “There are those among the humans who believe the war between our two people should continue.”

“You refer to the dissident groups?” he asked with mild interest. “They’re nothing more than rabble-rousers. You have to expect some of that, given the climate.”

“Of course, but that’s not what I’m talking about. This is something much more serious. I’ve received a number of reports in the last two months. There are forces organizing and moving around Earth in secret, trying to stock pile weapons, make contacts in the government, and position themselves for—for some kind of strike or attack, I’m not entirely sure. At first, I thought it was a few New Moon survivors who went underground after the Siege, but my most recent intelligence report indicates that’s not true. Whoever these people are they’ve even got the New Moon fugitives scared, including the ones we already have in custody.”

“Why haven’t I heard anything about this?” Humrun asked.

Yutt fingered his cup as he spoke. “The reports have all been through military intelligence, nothing that would make its way through diplomatic channels. I’ve kept as much of this as quiet as I dared.”

Humrun held his cup close to his mouth and paused as he took in this latest bit of information. “Curious,” he said, then took another swallow from his cup. “But without the portals, they cannot hope to win any significant victory. Surely, they must know, anything they do against us will only worsen the situation—for them.”

“Maybe,” Yutt admitted, “and maybe that’s why they haven’t acted yet. But remember, the humans who helped us defeat the Empress didn’t have portals, either, not until—”

He didn’t need to finish.

“Until the end,” Humrun said, for him.

“Exactly.” Yutt set his cup down, seeming, in that moment, to be very tired. “Well, in either event, it is not my problem anymore.”

Humrun swiveled his chair back toward the window and stared out, pondering this latest bit of information. Since the war’s end the only humans that worried him were the few, key members of the Empress’ government and military that had escaped justice. Since the New Moon originally developed the portals, he’d feared what they might do if they tried to use it against the Civil Ministry. The incident with General Rourke and Dr. Mustafa proved those dangers. However, he’d never considered the other options, the idea that the dissidents, or someone like them, would pose any real threat, but if Yutt was concerned, well—

“Before you leave, could you send me a report on all you know about this insurgence group? Do they have a name?”

“They call themselves the New Resistance.”

“The New Resistance,” Humrun muttered, pondering the implications of such a force carefully. Yutt was right, even for some of the humans the war wasn’t over. During the Portal War, members of the Uprising had often called themselves the Resistance. Did this new group mirror the old in anything more than name?

“Interesting, very interesting,” Humrun said. “What is it they’re really up to, I wonder. What is their game, this time?”

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“Now, let’s try this again,” the interrogator said in a cool, methodical voice. There was something paternal about the way he spoke, which only made it more unsettling. “If you answer truthfully, I’ll reward you. Had you been more cooperative at the beginning, I might have even spared your life, but we’ve moved beyond that now. It’s probably for the best, don’t you agree? Your death can serve as an example to others, but your life—who cares about that anymore? No, no—don’t bother denying it. Your family is dead, your allies have abandoned you and the current government has deemed you a war criminal. You really have nothing left to live for, do you? Death will be a kindness. The question is how, how will you die? Will it be peacefully, without further pain and dishonor, or,” the interrogator waved his hands, motioning at the multiple wounds that covered his subject’s body, “—or like this?”

The man sitting tied to the chair let his head sag for a moment, as drops of sweat and blood dripped from his forehead onto the front of his uniform. When the New Resistance had captured him, his uniform was already patched and faded. Now it was worse, torn and stained almost beyond recognition—almost, but not quite. The symbol of the New Moon was still visible on his sleeve and the jacket bore the obvious trim of a naval officer assigned to the Diplomatic Core.

Bruises marred his face, and both eyes were swollen, one so badly that the man could not possibly see out of it. Tangled and matted hair fell down into his face and covered his bad eye. The other eye turned upwards, slowly, as he lifted his head to look at his tormentor.

The interrogator was a less imposing figure than the one he was torturing. He was thin and hollow, and much of his hair was gone. He sat in his chair with a slight hunch in his back. His eyes locked onto the man in front of him with total indifference. Next to him was a small table made from oak, polished and painted in black, though the paint had begun to chip. Lying strewn across its surface was an array of tools: knives, pliers, wrenches—all common household items that, in-and-of themselves, were quite innocuous. The reddish mix of rust and blood that covered each one, though, told a different story.

Casually, and with no more consideration than a man examining a piece of silverware, the interrogator picked up a small knife from the table and gently rubbed a finger over the edge to check its sharpness.

“There’s never enough time to keep these truly sharp,” he said in a low, but audible voice. He looked up from the blade to the man in the New Moon uniform. “I noticed that one of your eyes has swollen completely shut. It must hurt terribly. Perhaps, I should just cut it out?”

The interrogator moved toward the man and brought the blade up, even with his bruised eye. His subject pulled back violently and with surprising strength. Had the chair not been bolted to the ground it might have toppled. “No, please!” he bleated.

“Then tell me where Dr. Klein is,” the interrogator inquired, holding the knife motionless, but very near his face.

From behind a one-way sheet of glass, Major Peter LeStrange felt his stomach begin to turn. He scratched his chin with his index finger repeatedly, but otherwise tried not to show any sign of emotion. Next to him Brandon Wang coughed nervously.

“It would go easier if we had a sayder,” Brandon said, breaking the uneasy silence.

“You mean it would be easier to watch,” LeStrange pointed out.

“And easier on the prisoner—in the long run,” he added.

“People have lost their minds under the sayder probe, some even their lives,” Major LeStrange replied, no longer masking the disgust in his voice. He looked away from the interrogation and directly at Brandon. Brandon would not return his gaze. He merely kept staring through the pane glass window, though his eyes did wander away from the interrogation. “Either way, it’s torture,” said the major, “and torture is nasty business.”

A piercing scream sounded from the other side of the glass. LeStrange turned his attention back in time to see the interrogator examining a finger he’d taken from the man’s left hand. The subject still had both eyes, though. If the interrogator had gone for his pinky instead of an eye, then it must mean the man said something he liked, but not liked enough.

“So, you admit Dr. Klein is alive, then?” the interrogator asked in a relaxed, almost half interested voice.

“Y-yes, from the last reports I heard,” the man said as he panted hard, more sweat pouring down his brow. “Th-they’d tried to make it look like he’d died during the Siege. It wasn’t hard, considering how badly Luxor was bombed.”

“So, then, where is he? Where do you have him stored?”

Brandon moved away from the glass and sat in an old, wooden chair; the only item of furniture the room possessed. Some of his color had left him.

“It wasn’t like this in the Uprising, you know,” LeStrange pointed out. “The Empress’ tactics were never our own.”

“Oh, I don’t know, I heard of several squads that would capture and torture Imperial officials, some even for the pleasure of it,” Brandon pointed out.

“Did anyone in your unit?” LeStrange asked.

“No, of course not!”

“Nor mine,” LeStrange replied. “The ones who did were just renegades, criminals who attached themselves to us, not real Revolutionaries.”

“It *is* working,” Brandon had to admit with a gesture toward the one-way mirror.

Yes, it does seem to be, at that, LeStrange admitted to himself. *But is this really even necessary?* LeStrange had to wonder.

For months they had operated successfully without having to torture a single person. Ever since the formation of the New Resistance, their leader—a man by the name of Raspin, or “Boss” Raspin as most called him—had a knack

for learning secrets. He seemed to know exactly what they needed for any given assignment. Every mission they undertook had an outcome that Raspin had already predicated, using information he came by, through means no one could guess at. It had been that way when he sent men to General Rourke's hideout, too. As always, no one questioned how Raspin learned Rourke's whereabouts. It was enough that he knew. The Resistance trusted him.

Even LeStrange was willing to take the information on face value. With the Rourke assignment, though, he started to wonder. When Raspin announced he knew the whereabouts of General Rourke, everyone expected a full-on raid, LeStrange included. Instead, Raspin sent only a single unit, not nearly enough to engage Rourke's men. When LeStrange confronted the boss about it, Raspin merely smiled and told him that a raid wasn't the point.

"Then what is?" he asked. "What orders did you give them?"

"To wait," Raspin answered, simply and matter-of-factly.

"Wait for what?"

"For the Gaoroes. The Gaoroes and the Guardians will do the hard part for us. There's no reason to put any of our people at unnecessary risk. If a few Gaoroes die in the attack, well, that's a few less we'll have to worry about later," he added with a faint smirk.

"How can you be sure they'll discover it?" LeStrange asked.

There was a curious, knowing look on Raspin's face—what little of it showed through the many scars and cybernetic implants. Only his nose and mouth were ever visible beneath the metal plating, and even that was badly deformed. Yet, LeStrange could detect a look of confidence in the way his lips moved subtly to the side and his electronic eyes fixed onto him as he answered. "They will, and soon. They will clear out that rat's nest for us. We'll be able to walk away with the exact thing we need without losing a single person."

"And what is that?" he asked.

"A portal engineer," Raspin said, and he would say no more.

And he was right. Someone had escaped the Gaoroes raid on Rourke's base, a lieutenant by the name of Jason McGregor. As it turned out, however, Lieutenant McGregor was an amateur engineer and dependent heavily on Dr. Mustafa's data to do his job—data the Gaoroes had confiscated during the raid. At the time, this had been a great source of frustration for LeStrange. Sure, they had let the Gaoroes take all the risk, but that meant they had also let them have all the reward. Mustafa and his data were the only items of value in Rourke's hideout, aside from perhaps Rourke himself. That left the Resistance with nothing more than one worthless novice of an engineer.

“He’ll serve,” Raspin told him. “Mustafa’s notes wouldn’t have been of any use. Mustafa himself was too insane and his mind too far gone for him to be worth capturing, and we could never have taken Rourke. The general would never let himself be captured alive. I said we’d find an engineer. I never said we needed his specialties.”

It wasn’t until then that LeStrange began to understand Raspin’s plan. He didn’t want McGregor to help reverse engineer the portals, he wanted McGregor to lead them to the person who’d created them, Dr. Hermann Klein.

McGregor had no idea where Klein was, but again, that wasn’t the point. Raspin was certain no one in Rourke’s unit knew, but there were other things McGregor knew that set them on the path to finding him. After being tortured, McGregor gave up the locations of other New Moon hideouts. Klein wasn’t at any of these, either, but each one yielded a clue that got them one step closer.

Their last raid had led them to a small safe house, containing only a dozen officers. Most were killed in the firefight that followed. A few survived, including the one man they were interrogating now. LeStrange wondered what clue this man would yield, and wondered how many more they would have to torture to reach their goal. This one wasn’t even a true soldier. He’d served as a liaison between the military and the Empress’ various propaganda agencies. LeStrange could not imagine what an agent of misinformation could possibly know that would be worth their time, but Raspin was certain he knew something, and so far, Raspin had always been right. *Right too often for this to be intuition or luck, far too often.*

This thought brought LeStrange back to his original question. As much as Raspin seemed to know on his own and/or through his own sources, he had to wonder if torturing their captives was really necessary. Did they really learn anything Raspin didn’t already know? What if he tormented them for another reason, one he did not divulge openly? There was a coldness about Boss Raspin. He wouldn’t put it past him to order these interrogations for his own amusement, sense of revenge, or perhaps even as a kind of test. Whether or not LeStrange was right to suspect the boss of such things, he decided to keep such suspicions to himself.

The sound of loud sobs brought LeStrange out of his thoughts. He walked back over the glass. In the room beyond, the tortured man sat sagging forward weeping violently—his weight held only by the bonds that tied him to the chair. The interrogator was standing next to him, filling a syringe with a clear liquid.

LeStrange had seen enough. He went over to the corner of the room and grabbed an assault rifle that leaned against the wall. With a sigh, he looked back over at Brandon. “You have this well in-hand. No doubt, he’ll soon tell us everything he knows.”

Brandon turned toward LeStrange and frowned, obviously unhappy to lose his only distraction from the grueling display. “Oh, where are you off to?” he asked.

“We all have our assignments,” he said. “If you do learn anything from this man, inform me at once. Or better yet, let Trevor know. I might be out of touch for a bit.”

With that he slung the rifle over his shoulder and stepped out of the room. Behind him, he could hear the prisoner screaming and begging. He paused for a second, his hand on the door. He started to look back over his shoulder, but then turned away and slammed the door close.

No, whatever the reason or the motive, it doesn't matter anymore. We've gone too far already. There's no looking back now.