

PORTAL HUNTERS

GUARDIANS

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Chapter One

It was late, very late in fact, past midnight. Even so, Hassan didn't feel the least bit tired. Time seemed a blur, a relative thing that did not factor as a variable into the many equations that lay strewn across the desk in front of him. His mind raced through numbers and figures so quickly that he barely registered the significance of each one, and yet the length of time it took to make each pen stroke seemed to stretch out as if it were a measurable fraction of eternity.

His mind pushed on, processing equations and even second-guessing their outcomes with surprising accuracy. The experience invigorated him. Each equation successfully calculated brought him that much closer to his goal. Just when he thought the lateness of the hour was finally getting to him, a new formulation would race into his mind, and the world around him would fade into math.

Although he was not aware of the time, signs of it were apparent all around him. The usually bright skyline that stood clearly visible through the double-paned windows next to his desk had dimmed, reducing the city beyond to little more than a glowing silhouette. Even the ever-present sound of traffic that glided unceasingly past his penthouse suite had faded into a low swishing sound that was barely audible. The only light inside his office was the desk lamp, and yet he did not notice the strain it caused his eyes until a light from behind him flooded the room.

"Hassan," a harsh, yet feminine voice called.

Hassan blinked at the sudden intake of light. It took only a second for his eyes to adjust. He refocused on the paper in front of him and continued without a second thought to the interruption.

"Hassan," the voice said again, "do you have any idea what time it is?"

The question did prompt mild curiosity. Without moving his head, so as not to give away his ignorance, he ventured a quick glance to a clock that floated beside his desk. It read 12:54 AM.

“No later than it would be if we were at another one of your thrilling receptions,” he replied with a touch of sarcasm.

For a moment, Hassan didn’t even notice the silence, but as he continued to scribble down more numbers he realized he had neither heard his wife respond nor leave. He dared a quick glance over his shoulder. Sara Mustafa stood there in the doorway. Her left arm rested against the frame tapping it with her polished nails as she scowled back at him. The reason for her irritation became immediately apparent.

She was dressed in a long black evening gown. Although the end of the skirt touched the floor hiding her feet, and the neck line was appropriately high in the traditional modesty for a woman of the New Moon, it nonetheless hugged her body tightly, showcasing her thin and fit figure. Her hair was long and wavy, and pulled to the side so that it hung across her right shoulder. She was wearing her finest jewelry as well; the platinum moon hung around her neck and large diamond earrings dangled against her cheeks.

“Hmm”, he muttered, “as I was saying.” With that he turned back and resumed work.

Sara grimaced. “You realize you missed dinner at the governor’s palace,” she said in an irritable tone.

“An exhilarating occasion,” he responded without looking up. “I’m sure you had a lovely time.”

“This was a dinner held in honor of General Korvan’s son. He returned from the front lines earlier this week. The governor awarded him the crystal star for valor on behalf of the Empress.”

“Fascinating,” Hassan responded, only half realizing what she had said. He tried to refocus the formula in his mind, hoping to push out the irritable sound of his wife’s voice and finish the calculation. He was so close to another breakthrough, he could taste it.

“I would think,” she spat back, “that someone in your position would appreciate the efforts of such a brave young man. And even if you didn’t, I would at least think you’d have the decency -- not to mention the good sense -- to show your patriotism by attending long enough to congratulate him. He’s the son of the general! And don’t think they didn’t notice your absence!”

Hassan stopped writing, but he did not turn around. “My work alone is patriotism enough, my dear, more than enough -- or do you think this war would have gone so well without it? I am sure the general appreciates my work at the

Compound far more than he would any empty praise I would heap upon his family. In fact, I'd venture he values it more than the services of his son. Even if he doesn't, I can promise you the Empress does."

Sara pulled herself straight and ran her nails down the frame of the door. "You've forgotten that it was a good public image that got you the position as chief researcher to begin with! Don't think that there aren't other portal specialists who could steal your position from underneath you! It would take no more than the right word to the right person."

Hassan stared at the paper in front of him, a smile briefly danced across his lips. "No, I don't think that they could, not after I finish this project." He then turned and gave his wife a hard glare, "Which is something I won't be able to do unless you'll give me a moment's peace. Now," he gestured back at the stack of papers across his desk, "do you mind?"

She glowered at him and then, without uttering a word, turned on her heel and marched out. The door slammed loudly behind her.

"Impossible woman," Hassan muttered under his breath, and with that he turned his attention back to his work.

The half-finished equation stared back up at him expectantly. Hassan scratched behind his ear and stared back. Where had he left off? He ran through it once more and retraced his steps, but immediately found an error. Then, after a moment's frustration, realized that the error wasn't an error at all... or was it?

He threw his pen down onto the desk. It was no good, the moment was lost and his train of thought broken.

"Impossible woman," he muttered again. "I can understand why Dr. Klein never married."

With a sigh he pushed himself back away from the desk, grabbed his pipe from a small glass table next to him and strolled out through the balcony door.

It was a cool, clear night. The touch of autumn's chill felt refreshing in contrast to the stale air of his office. His pipe lit instantly at the touch of a small button on the side and the aroma of *jurj* root filled the balcony for a brief moment before the wind carried it out into the night. Hassan looked off to his left towards the Giza pyramids. An orange glow enveloped them giving each one the look of gold. White, shimmering plasma danced off the security gates that encompassed the grounds around them.

As always, the Compound appeared secure. Hassan wasn't sure why he felt so paranoid about its security -- not that the Compound itself mattered so

much. It was replaceable. However, the Portal Matrix, which lay at the heart of the Compound, was not. Even so, he knew that Empress Drow had put the best security possible around it, and, even if the rebels could penetrate it, surely they wouldn't destroy the oldest monument known to humanity. But then, it wasn't really the rebels that worried him.

Hassan glanced up. City lights obscured most of the starlight. Nevertheless, the sky was clear and stars were visible. It was ironic, he mused. The stars always looked so peaceful, yet somewhere out there dozens of alien fleets were fighting to stop the Empress' expansion into space.

Admittedly, the war of expansion was going well, and the Empress had already managed to fend off one attack on Earth. However, if the enemy's fleets ever broke through the Imperial defenses and launched a counterstrike on Earth....

Ah, but then, the Portal Matrix had never failed them, Hassan reminded himself. Perimeters may be broken, cruisers smashed, but the portals were the one thing that Earth had that their enemies did not. The portals had been so flawlessly engineered that they ensured the victory of every battle -- well, aside from one or two minor defeats in outlying territories, but nothing serious enough to be concerned over.

Added to that, once Hassan had finished his current project he would ensure a swift and very decisive victory for the Empire of the New Moon. Once he was done, the Empire would have an ironclad hold on the entire galaxy, and all thanks to him. That is, if he could ever solve the current set of equations.

With a sigh, he leaned against the balcony's railing. He was close, he could feel it. Maybe in a day or two, then he'd have it.

"Just as long as there are no more interruptions," he muttered.

His thought turned back to Sara. The very thought of his wife stirred up intense feelings of irritation. The notion that she had been right -- at least about a few things -- only heightened that ire.

It was true, as Sara had frequently reminded him of late, that he had been little more than a talented, yet under-appreciated, research professor in the field of dimension physics when they first met. He taught at several prestigious universities, but dimensional physics was mostly theoretical, so he drew little attention except from the academic circles. Fortunately, for the sake of his future career, his post afforded him the opportunity to mix and mingle with a number of influential alumni. He met Sara at a dinner party one night there on the

university grounds.

Upon recollection, Hassan would have to admit he was infatuated with Sara, at first. What was more important though was that she was infatuated with him, and through her he had found the opportunity he was looking for. One of Sara's uncles was an admiral in the Imperial fleet. Being married to an admiral's niece during the Empress' reign, when the military was in constant ascension, afforded a person any number of lucrative opportunities. In Hassan's case it meant a chance to secure government grants to pursue further research in a way that he'd never be able to through the academic circuit.

Hassan often tried to convince himself that what followed would have transpired even if he had not married Sara. It was perhaps more a point of pride. He knew himself capable. He'd proven that. All the same, it was the admiral himself who invited him to the pyramids one afternoon, and it was he who introduced Hassan to the wonders that lay beneath.

The portal project was still in its early stages and top secret at the time, and the Compound little more than dust-filled tunnels hidden beneath the sand; but it was a dream come true. Hassan's expertise was needed in a way he had never thought possible. He had been formulating practical ways in which humanity could tap into the fourth and fifth spatial dimensions, something most believed to be impossible. However, as it turned out, dimensional gateways had already been established through a complex array of energy spikes now known as the Portal Matrix; a secret which the New Moon had closely guarded. It was now only a matter of how to harness and best utilize this discovery.

And utilize them they had. As part of a team of leading experts in dimensional and temporal theory, Mustafa had managed to tame the Portal Matrix. With that, everything had changed. The humans were the only sentient race without the capacity for faster-than-light travel. With the portals, however, they could go from any place in the universe to another in the blink of an eye.

The Empress wasted little time in putting the portals to use. Once they were satisfactorily tested, the Empress launched a campaign against the Krarno\ Prajics Alliance. The portals gave them the ability to strike without warning and disappear at a whim. Neither the Krarnoes nor the Prajics knew how to fight this. And once they were on the defensive, the Empress turned her attention to the Gaoroos.

Now the Gaoroos were on the defensive, too. Soon, the entire galaxy would be at her mercy. She would be able to negotiate any treaty she wanted.

If fear wouldn't drive their enemies into submission, greed would. The portals represented too great an asset to any world, yet the Empress had exclusive hold over the technology. Any other nation or enterprise of any sort that wanted access to the portals would have to come to her. Yes, soon Earth would become the center of the universe, the most powerful planet in the galaxy to whom all others would pay tribute. And Hassan had made all this possible.

Oh, he knew it wasn't entirely to his credit. Other engineers and researchers had contributed a great deal, but Hassan's research was second only to Dr. Klein's. As head of research, he had overseen a number of projects which were critical to the war efforts.

And once I finish the latest formula... he began to muse. He shook his head. No. It was best not to get ahead of himself. He would succeed, he was certain of that, but best not to get caught up in the results, however ambitious they may be. For now he needed to focus on the solving the problem.

First things first, he told himself. *Time to get back to work.*

He tapped his pipe against the balcony railing, pouring tiny bits of ash into the night's breeze, and turned towards the glass door.

Something caught his eye and he paused, his hand almost to the door handle. He turned his head to look.

Nothing.

For a moment, he had thought he'd caught sight of several bright flashes out of the corner of his eye, but the night was a dull glow of city lights mixed with dashing streaks of glider headlights. Putting it out of his mind, Hassan took hold of the handle and began to open the door.

Another flash, unmistakable this time, lit the sky.

"What --?" Hassan began to say aloud, but his words were cut off by a deafening boom followed by a tremor. He staggered back away from the door and fell back against the balcony's rail. The night fell silent once more.

His heart was pounding and his mind raced as it tried to grabble with the thought of what had just happened. He steadied himself against the railing, taking deep breaths in an effort to calm his nerves. From where he stood he could not see what the source of the eruption had been, but a large orange glow spilled out from behind a long row of skyscrapers. Judging by the intensity of the glow at least half a city block must have erupted into flames.

Slowly Hassan pushed himself upright and made his way to the other side of the balcony to get a better look. He was only able to take four steps when

another explosion sounded from behind him.

There was a sudden gust of wind and he fell to his knees. Panic seized him for a moment. *Steady, steady!* He told himself. He pushed himself up by holding onto a small table next to him. His instincts were to look back over his shoulder and see what had just happened, but he was too afraid. The second blast had come from the direction of the pyramids. He turned his head and closed his eyes for a moment, opened them and then let out a sigh.

The pyramids were still there, untouched. However, a tall building, two blocks directly down the street was engulfed in flames. Burning bits of the building fell off and plummeted dozens of stories down onto the street below. Then there was a loud, haunting, creaking noise and the tower began to implode.

Hassan's mind began to reel. What was going on? One explosion alone -- an accident of some kind, maybe -- but two massive explosions, each one only a few seconds apart from the other and only a handful of miles away? No, the laws of probability alone told him it was no accident.

A high-pitched whistle cut off his speculative thoughts and brought him painfully back to reality. Air traffic had frozen. Several gliders hovered about thirty meters away from his penthouse balcony. Two flashes of sparkling light flew up from the street below and struck the two gliders closest to Hassan. One exploded instantly. The front section of the second glider was ripped off, leaving the back section to spiral down to the street below. Hassan watched in horror for a second longer, then spun around and ran as fast as he could back into his study.

The door to his study flung open and Sara rushed in. Her eyes were wide with fear and her lips twitched.

"Hassan -- what was that noise? What's going on!?" she bellowed.

Hassan didn't even look at her. He grabbed all the notes from his desk and crammed them into his pockets. Several tore in the process. One page even fell to the floor without notice. He reached into his desk drawer and grabbed two small, flat devices, almost identical in appearance except that one fit easily into the palm of his hand. The other was also compact, but about twice the size of the first. The smaller device he slipped into his coat pocket. The larger he pointed towards the wall perpendicular to his desk and pressed a tiny light blue button on the upper left corner.

An oval-shaped, silver ring of light appeared against the wall. The center of the ring was filled with a kind of glittering fog. Hassan moved quickly towards the portal.

“Hassan, wait, please!” Sara pleaded. The anger that had been so prevalent in her voice earlier was gone replaced by a tone of desperation and fear.

“I’ve got to get to the Portal Compound,” he said without stopping.

“But what’s happening? I thought I heard explosions, and that light,” she said, gesturing out the balcony window at the ever-increasing orange glow.

Hassan paused, his foot at the edge of the portal, and looked back at her.

“The city is under attack. Don’t ask me who or how,” he said, cutting her off as she opened her mouth to ask the obvious. He turned back towards the portal.

“Hassan, don’t leave me! Hassan!!” he heard her cry as he stepped through. Then her voice disappeared entirely as the glittering haze engulfed him.

The journey through the portal took less than a second, no more than it would take to make a single step otherwise -- although it always seemed to take a little longer than that given the sensation of walking from one environment into a completely different one than the first. The room around him was dark, save for the faint blue and green lights blinking on and off from various instruments around him. The moment he stepped through the portal it disappeared behind him. The room’s lights flickered on, one by one.

The lab was just as he’d left it earlier that day. This, of course, he had expected, but what he hadn’t expected was the deafening quietness that engulfed the room. That would be normal for this time in the evening. However, he was certain that the alarms would have sounded. Surely with all those explosions, especially the one in such close proximity to the Compound, someone would have sounded the alert.

He stormed out of the lab and into the long, narrow corridor outside. This, too, was empty and utterly silent. He hurried down the long corridor. At every juncture he glanced up and down the passages for signs of someone, anyone, but without success. He came to a set of large plastic doors that separate Research and Development from Portal Command and Control. A single guard stood there at attention.

“Corporal, what’s going on? Why aren’t we at high alert?” Hassan demanded.

The soldier blinked and looked at him, almost as if he hadn’t noticed him enter. “Sir?” he replied.

“The alarms! I assume they always sound when we are at high alert, yes?”

“Yes, sir,” the soldier replied. “But we’re standing at yellow alert at the moment.”

“Yellow?” Of course, he remembered. He had been informed that a high priority mission was underway, and the Matrix’s full resources would be at the disposal of the mission commanders. He was not in a position to learn all the details, nor had he really cared to before now, but whatever it was he could tell it was a mission of no small importance.

But if they were maintaining yellow alert that meant they didn’t know the city was under attack. Or perhaps -- perhaps everything was already under control. He didn’t really know what was happening, after all. Maybe they were merely desperate acts of sabotage, or -- even as improbable as it might be -- some terrible accident.

Still, he had to make sure.

He dug around in his pocket and pulled out his security badge. “Here,” he said to the corporal, “clear me through.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but only security clearance level three and above are allowed access to this section while at yellow alert.”

“My clearance is level four,” he answered, trying to hide the irritation in his voice. The corporal was, after all, only doing his job, and it was reassuring to know that the security measures were being enforced. “My clearance code is Silver-25S99BA.”

The guard keyed the code into the system’s computer as Hassan read it out. As soon as he finished typing it a small green light flashed above the door.

“You’re clear to proceed,” the guard said as he flipped a small lever. The two large doors that separated Research and Development from Command and Control slid apart. Hassan hurried passed the guard and into the next section.

The change in the atmosphere was immediately recognizable. The sound of humming computer banks and loud murmurs flooded the outer corridor. Hassan turned a corner and found himself in front of a tall pair of transparent sliding doors. Beyond was a large, wide room. Computer consoles and monitors spanned along the walls, eight meters from floor to ceiling. Engineers and men wearing command-rank military uniforms scurried about the room, many wearing headsets and talking to someone unseen. Those without headsets either busied themselves by jotting something down onto data pads or manning a computer console.

Hassan recognized this room immediately. It was Portal Command, the

heart and soul of the Empire's military campaign. From here, hundreds of ships could be transported simultaneously to any part of the galaxy; moving supplies to where they were needed without a wait or delay. They could bring fleets into striking range of targets without any warning, and return them to safety just as quickly.

The wall opposite the entrance was a singular, giant, electronic image spanning seven meters in height and width. This screen displayed a sector of space. There were dozens of small moving points all along the image. It took Hassan a moment to realize what it was; a battle. Fleets of ships were engaging one another. Judging from the number of dots, it was a massive campaign.

A legend along one side of the screen explained what each point represented. Different shapes represented different kinds of cruisers, and the different colors represented different factions. There were only two factions that he could see -- the Imperial fleet and the Gaoroos. That made sense, he thought to himself. It was obviously a pivotal battle, and he knew that at this stage in the campaign only the Gaoroos represented a serious threat to Earth.

Hassan studied the stellar patterns, but he didn't recognize any of them. Whatever was happening wasn't happening anywhere near Earth, so it was logical to assume it had nothing to do with the explosions outside, he concluded. That was some assurance, Hassan had to admit, and yet it didn't put his mind entirely at ease. He had the urge to go inside and find out more, but even he did not have clearance into Portal Command during yellow alert.

He glanced at the four Rensha guards that flanked the doors, two on each side. They stood there motionless. The white eye-pieces on their helmets stared coldly at him. What little of their face was visible showed no emotion. He quickly dismissed asking them anything. The Rensha were the most ferocious, most deadly troops on the entire planet, and they answered only to members of the royal court. He wasn't afraid of many people, but these Rensha always made him feel very uneasy.

He turned on his heel and continued down the corridor. Along the way he passed several other control centers. Each one was locked and guarded, but nonetheless, the buzz of activity within each one filled the hall as portal technicians and security personnel dashed between the rooms, paying Hassan no mind as he hurried along. After another minute he at last reached a familiar, unguarded door that read above it 'Monitoring Station 3'. Hassan swiped the lock with his badge and the door opened.

Three of the four portal technicians assigned to this room looked up at Hassan. Without a word they immediately returned their attention to their stations. A fourth man paced the room. He was young, in his late twenties if Hassan had to guess, with pale skin and light brown hair. He wore a naval-style uniform with ranking insignia that indicated he was a lieutenant. In addition to this rank insignia, there was a red and gold portal design sewn onto the sleeve of his shirt. In his right hand he held a pad while his left pressed against a small earpiece. The lieutenant's eyes wandered to the ceiling and he frowned as he listened to a voice coming through his earpiece.

The young officer paused as he passed Hassan and then looked back.

"This area is on yellow alert, Doctor. I don't think you should be here," he said. Despite his polite wording Hassan could tell he was not offering this statement as an opinion.

Hassan ignored the comment. "Lieutenant Manuel, isn't it? Tell me, what's our status?"

The lieutenant frowned. "Sir?"

"The planetary status! What exactly is going on? I saw the screen in Portal Control. We've attacked the Gaoroes. Have they launched a counterattack?"

"Space is clear, Doctor," he answered, "but we're receiving reports of mass riots in New Delhi, Athens and Morocco. They all started in the last hour."

"Sir," one of the other technicians spoke up. His eyes were fixed on the computer screen in front of him. There was a worried look written across his face. "More reports coming in. Krakow and Tehran are also reporting large-scale riots."

New Delhi, Athens, Morocco, Krakow, Tehran... they all had one thing in common Hassan realized suddenly. They each contained military outposts.

"I saw explosions in the streets, two of them," Hassan said to the lieutenant, "and what appeared to be some sort of projectile weapons being fired into city traffic."

"Where?" the lieutenant asked urgently.

"Here!"

"Here, in Cairo?"

"Yes, here! Within a kilometer of the Compound!"

"He's right," said another technician, his eyes also fixed on the controls. "Reports are just now coming in. There have been a series of terrorist attacks both here and in Luxor."

“Contact General Alexander Rourke, get clearance to raise planetary alert status to orange,” said the lieutenant.

“Orange? By gods, the planet is under siege! Have him raise it to red. That’s an order!”

“Sir, we don’t know what is going on, and the skies are clear. If we are not under a direct orbital assault, we can’t raise the status to red. It’s most likely the rebels are trying to stir up trouble and, if so, we should be able to have the situation under control soon.”

This wasn’t right. The rebels shouldn’t be this organized, not well enough to stage a major global uprising. They’d always operated in the shadows and accomplished little, proving to be no more than a nuisance. Even if they had the manpower and a sufficient network to organize this, they wouldn’t have the equipment. The only way they could have the equipment for something like this was if the Gaoroes had smuggled it in, and he couldn’t see how that was possible. By all accounts, the lieutenant was right. The planetary troops should be able to put this down, and in doing so probably squelch the rebellion once and for all. But surely the rebels would know this. Why risk everything now? Was it desperation?

Maybe. It made sense that after years of futile efforts they would finally gamble it all on a single action, but wasn’t it ironic they would have chosen the night of a major operation to launch this? Granted, if they knew about the operation that might have inspired them, but how could they know? It had been put together at the last minute with most of the details kept top secret prior to launch.

Hassan ran his hands through his hair. He could feel moisture in it from bits of sweat as his anxiety mounted. He had a very bad feeling about all of this and wished more than anything that there was something he could do. If he’d finished his calculations and subsequent field tests, none of this would have mattered. But if something happened to the Compound or to his lab at this stage, it could prove disastrous.

“I’m going back to my lab,” he said finally. “Let me know if the situation changes.”

Hassan turned to leave. Before he made a single step the lights dimmed and flickered. He stopped immediately and looked around, frowning. The hum of computers faded for a moment, and then returned to normal as if nothing had happened.

“What was that?” Hassan asked.

“Slight power drain,” one of the technicians reported.

“Probably just an overload,” said another technician. “They’ve been working the Matrix at full capacity all night.

Hassan nodded without thinking then turned back towards the door.

The sudden sound of weapons’ fire echoed into the room coming from the hallway outside. It was followed by shouting and then what sounded like a small explosion. Hassan froze. The lieutenant and the technicians whirled around and stared wide-eyed towards the door. No one said anything. The hallway fell quite. Hassan and the other four stood perfectly still and strained to listen.

There was deafening boom and a sudden burst of flame and metal as the door flew off its frame. The room was instantly filled with a shower of sparks and debris. The force of the blast threw Hassan back and into the air. He came tumbling down on top of a monitoring station in the room’s center. Involuntarily, he rolled off of it and landed on the ground behind.

The impact stunned him, but he was nonetheless aware of loud voices inside the room. Hassan managed to push himself up slowly and peered around the station’s edge. Several soldiers had entered through the blasted door. They were Imperial troops, to be sure; their uniforms bearing the mark of the New Moon. However, unlike the soldiers stationed at the Compound, their uniforms were faded with patches of grease and dirt, and their helmets and armor were cracked and chipped. Each one had their rifle at the ready, and scanned the room as if looking for something very specific. There was a symbol on their jackets’ sleeve that Hassan did not recognize. It appeared to be markings designating an infantry squad. If that were the case, then these soldiers were from the front line.

What on Earth were they doing here?

Hassan had the impulse to stand and demand an explanation, but instinct told him to keep quiet and stay down.

Lieutenant Manuel pulled himself to his feet, apparently having been knocked over by the blast as well. “What in Hades is going on here?” he shouted at the troops.

The soldier closest to Manuel pivoted towards him and fired two quick shots into the lieutenant’s chest. Bits of charred flesh and blood erupted out the back of the lieutenant and his body fell back to the ground with a thud. The other soldiers opened fire. Hassan pulled himself back behind the controls and

listened as three more bodies fell to the ground with a thud.

“Janson, secure the door. Greg, check the room,” Hassan heard one of the soldiers say.

“Where’s Traush?” a second, deeper voice said. “He’s got the virus!”

“No, he slipped it to me. Come on, check the room. We don’t want to run into any unexpected surprises.”

One of the soldiers, a short but stout, dark-skinned African man with a thin, neatly trimmed beard came marching around the control station, his assault rifle out and at the ready. He spun around and took aim at Hassan.

“Naaaaahh!!” Hassan shouted, throwing his arms up in a defensive posture.

“Hold on, I recognize him!” said a higher-pitched voice.

Hassan peered through his fingers. The soldier stood aiming at Hassan’s head, his expression blank and emotionless. Another soldier, shorter with olive skin, stood just behind the first soldier. Hassan could tell by the sound of the second soldier’s voice that she was female, but the uniform and armor hid her form well. Even though her eyes were obscured by dark grey visors, Hassan could tell she was studying him.

Bits of sweat dropped off of his fingers and into his eyes. He blinked and felt his eyes sting, but he did not take his gaze off of the two soldiers, nor look away from the barrel pointed directly at him. Any moment he knew it could end.

“Who is it?” the first soldier asked the second.

“Yeah -- yeah, I’m pretty sure. That’s Dr. Hassan Mustafa,” she answered.

“Who?”

“Word has it he helped invent the portals. Not sure if that’s true, but he’s one of Drow’s leading scientists on portal technology, that much is true.”

“Well, well, well. Looks like we hit the jackpot,” the dark-skinned soldier said with a grin. He lowered his rifle and, reaching down, grabbed Hassan by the collar and hoisted him up. With one hand he shoved him forward and then slammed him hard against the wall, face first. Hassan’s head went numb and he felt warm liquid ooze down his face.

“W-what on Earth are you doing? This is treasonous! Y-you’re soldiers of the New Moon!” Hassan managed to stammer.

Hassan could feel the point of the rifle barrel press against the back of his neck.

“Yeah, well, you know what they say,” the soldier said with a sneer. “Don’t give someone a gun unless you know where their going to point it!”

Rebels, they had to be. Hassan had heard stories of how the Empress had conscripted a large number of able-bodied men and women from nations she’d conquered during her first years on the throne, as well as the sons and daughters of political enemies. The idea had been to take all the people who might have been effective as resistance fighters and send them across space to the front lines. It was the most dangerous place in the galaxy and the furthest place from her. It had seemed brilliant; a death sentence that forced these would-be rebels to not only die, but die helping the Empire. It was a bitter irony that any patriot could admire, but something had obviously gone wrong. How had these troops managed to get from the front line and back to Earth, much less in the Compound?

Hassan turned his head to the left to get a better look at the other soldiers. One, a tall, fair-skinned man with a sandy-blond mustache, was standing in front of a monitoring station pulling a small silver disc out of a metallic case. He slid the disc into the file-reader and began to work the controls.

“The virus is loading. Cross your fingers,” he said.

Everyone was silent, then... “Here we go. Twenty-five percent... fifty... seventy...”

The holo-map of Earth displayed against the far wall flickered then began to morph. The image of a globe disappeared and was replaced with an exact duplicate of the one Hassan had seen in Portal Command. Ships darted back and forth in a sector Hassan still didn’t recognize. From what he could make of it, it appeared the Imperial fleet had the edge; although the battle was still too close to call.

The lights in the room dimmed once more, but none of the soldiers looked the least bit concerned.

“It’s taking hold,” said the fair-skinned soldier. “Yes, yes, I think we have it.”

“W-what are you doing?” Hassan said, the pain now causing him to stammer as much as the fear. The numbness was fading and he was starting to feel the effects of being thrown over a console and slammed into a wall. The hot liquid dripping into his mouth had the taste of blood.

“Shut up,” the soldier restraining him said, not even looking at him as he spoke.

“Yes! That’s it!” the fair-skinned soldier said. “Corban, it’s all yours.”

The fourth soldier stepped forward and began working the controls.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s bring this sucker on-line. It won’t take them long to figure out what’s happened.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just get a data stream to Hammad as quickly as possible.”

Corban began typing at prolific speeds. The room fell silent again. Hassan wasn’t sure, but Hassan thought he heard the distant sound of gunfire. If so, this didn’t seem to bother the others at all.

“The data stream is good. Looks like Hammad has it,” said Corban.

On the holo-map, symbols designating portals opened directly in front of each Gaoro ship. Quickly, they all began to move into the portals and disappear. The four soldiers watched the screen intently.

Then it happened. It happened so fast, Hassan wasn’t sure what was going on. There was a brilliant, multi-colored flash, like a flare exploding, then the sound of weapons-fire. The soldier called Corban took a round of volleys in his back killing him instantly. The fair-skinned soldier was grazed by another shot, and the woman took one in the thigh. The soldier restraining Hassan fell back, avoiding a shot aimed at him by no more than two centimeters. He dove for the floor, rolled and came out of the roll firing. Hassan gripped the wall, too afraid to move. Glancing over, he saw three Rensha Terratroopers rushing into the room. The darker-skinned soldier unloaded on the closest Rensha and dropped him immediately. The other two fell back, but kept firing. The fair-skinned soldier scrambled for cover, firing as he went. The female soldier tried to get a shot off, but another volley caught her in the side and knocked her back.

Hassan staggered back, hugging closely to the wall as he went. The renegade soldiers and the Rensha continued their firefight. Bolts of energies flew across the room in all directions. Hassan ducked low hoping to avoid being hit.

There was no escape. The doorway was in the center of the firefight and there were no alternative exits. Hassan continued to creep back, as far away from the firefight as possible. He glanced over at the screen. The last of the dots representing a Gaoro ship disappeared. As soon as it did the image changed. An image of Earth appeared. Earth’s defense ships and orbital platforms were now illuminated the same color as the Imperial ships had been on the previous screen. The number of ships seemed smaller than usual, down by at least a third. Portals opened all around Earth, over a hundred of them, and Gaoro ships poured out.

The virus... Yes, it made sense now, Hassan realized with abject horror. The virus had reversed control of the Portal Matrix -- permanently or just for a brief time, he wasn't sure. Either way it had been enough. A major Gaoro attack fleet was now surrounding Earth, outnumbering the defense fleet four-to-one.

Hassan was in the corner of the room, crouching. He could make out the golden outline of two of the Rensha firing around the corner into the room. The wounded female soldier lie dead not far from where Hassan had been. The other two soldiers had positioned themselves behind a pair of monitoring stations. The Rensha blasted away, destroying computer consoles, stools, counters, tables, and anything else that stood between them and their quarry.

Hassan looked back up at the monitor. The Gaoro fleet was making fast work of the defense fleet. They now had a five-to-one advantage, and there was no sign of reinforcement porting to the rescue. Whatever the rebels had done to the Matrix they'd ensured themselves enough time for the task. Hassan swallowed, feeling his fear melt to despair then again into resolution. This was it then. There was only one recourse left to him.

Fumbling in his coat jacket he took out the small, remote-like device that he'd pocketed before leaving his flat. He stared at it for a moment. No one at the Compound knew he had this device. Even if the rebels had managed to disable or highjack the Matrix, he knew this would work. He'd created it just for an event such as this -- a security measure for himself, as it were.

Flashes of his wife's face came to mind. He sighed. Without wasting another second, he pointed the device towards the empty space in front of him. His thumb moved towards the tiny button on the device's side.

A sudden and blinding pain struck Hassan with incredible force. Everything went white and then his vision failed him. He thought he felt himself fall to the ground, but the intense burning that came from the side of his head drowned out all other sensation. The sounds of gunfire faded around him and blackness took him.

He awoke again with a start. It was quiet, much quieter than it had been before. Half the lights in the room had failed. The other half flickered causing a strobe affect to fill the room. The burning pain on the side of his head reeled with each flicker of light. He shut his eyes to it and lay there, motionless. There was a strong, bitter smell of electrical burning. He thought he could still hear gunfire, but he wasn't sure. Even if there was, it wasn't in the room. The soldiers and the Rensha were either dead or had taken the battle elsewhere.

After a few minutes, he dared to move his hand. Carefully and gently he touched the side of his head. A violent sting forced him to jerk his hand back. There was blood, he could tell. It must be pouring down the side of his head, he guessed. He'd need medical attention soon, and if he were to find it, it would be up to him. Whatever had happened here, whoever had won, it was obvious that no one was coming for him.

Slowly, and with a great deal of effort, he opened his eyes and pushed himself to his feet. He squinted as his eyes tried to focus. The large wall-display was still on and still displaying Earth. There was no longer any sign of the Imperial defense fleet. Only the dots representing the Gaoro ships were visible, and they had the planet surrounded.

Then he heard it. At first he thought it was just the pounding of blood through his head, but then he felt the ground tremble. It came again, then again. Bits of the roof broke off and rained onto the ground around him.

They were bombarding the Compound! There wasn't much time left. Hassan scrambled for the small remote still lying by his feet. With a click of the button a small, shimmering portal opened in front of him. This portal was different than the one he'd used to enter the Compound. It was tall, skinny, and translucent. It rippled and hummed. Hassan shoved the remote back into his pocket and staggered towards it.

The moment he stepped through, the air changed around him from cool and dry to warm and humid. It was blindingly bright in this new environment. He flung his arms up to shield his eyes and just as he did his foot caught something hard causing him to lose balance. His face hit what felt like dirt and the pain in the side of his head roared loudly throughout his entire body.

He began to fade out of consciousness once more. The last thing he remembered was the sound of the portal closing behind him, and the heavy sensation of finality that left him with a feeling more terrible than death itself.