

On Gates and the Qhal

The gates were the ruin of the *qhal*. They were everywhere, on every world, had been a fact of life for millennia, and had linked the whole net of *qhal* civilizations—an empire of both Space and Time, for the Gates led into elsethens as well as elsewhere... except at the end.

At first the temporal aspect of the Gates had not been a matter of great concern. The technology had been discovered in the ruins of a dead world in the *qhal* system—a discovery that, made in the first few decades in space, suddenly opened for them the way to the stars. Thereafter ships were used only for the initial transport of technicians and equipment over distances of light-years. But after each World Gate was built, travel to that world and on its surface became instantaneous.'

And more than instantaneous. Time warped in the Gate-transfer. It was possible to step from point to point across light-years, unaged, different from the real time of ships. And it was possible to select not alone where one would exit, but when—even upon the same world, projecting forward to its existence at some different point along the course of worlds and suns.

By law, there was no return in time. It had been theorized ever since the temporal aspect of the Gates was discovered, that accidents forward in time would have no worse effect than accidents in the Now; but intervention in backtime could affect whole multiples of lives and actions.

So the *qhal* migrated through future time, gathering in greater and greater numbers in the most distant ages. They migrated in space too, and thrust themselves insolently into the affairs of other beings, ripping loose a segment of their time also. They generally despised outworld life, even what was *qhal*-like and some few forms that could interbreed with *qhal*. If possible they hated these potential rivals most of all, and loathed the half-*qhal* equally, for it was not in their nature to bear with divergence. They simply used the lesser races as they were useful, and seeded the worlds they colonized with the gatherings of whatever compatible worlds they pleased. They could experiment with worlds, and jump ahead in time to see the result. They gleaned the wealth of other, non-*qhal* species, who plodded through the centuries at their own real-time rate, for use of the Gates was restricted to *qhal*. The *qhal* in the end had little need left, and little ambition but for luxury and novelty and the consuming lust for other, ever-farther Gates.

Until someone, somethen, backtimed and tampered—perhaps ever so minutely.

The whole of reality warped and shredded. It began with little anomalies, accelerated massively toward time-wipe, reaching toward the ends of Gate-tampered time and Gate-spanned space. Time rebounded, indulged in several settling ripples of distortion, and centered at some point before the over-extended Now.

At least, so the theorists from the Science Bureau surmised, when the worlds that survived were discovered, along with their flotsam of *qhal*/relics that had been cast back up out of time. And among the relics were the Gates.

"the gates exist. we can therefore assume that they exist in the future and in the past, but we cannot ascertain the extent of their existence until we use them. according to present *qhal*/belief, which is without substantiation, world upon world has been disrupted; and upon such worlds elements are greatly muddled. among these anomalies may be survivals taken from our own area, which might prove lethal to us if taken into backtime."

"it is the bureau's opinion that the gates, once passed, must be sealed from the far side of space and time, or we continually risk the possibility of another such time-implosion as ruined the *qhal*. it is theorized by the *qhal*/themselves that this area of space has witnessed one prior time-implosion of undetermined magnitude, perhaps of a few years of span or of millennia, which was occasioned by the first gate and receptor discovered by the *qhal*, to the ruin first of the unknown alien culture and subsequently of their own. there is therefore a constant risk so long as there will ever exist a single gate, that our own existence could be similarly affected upon any instant. it is therefore the majority opinion of the bureau that utilization of the gates should be permitted, but only for the dispatch of a force to close them, or destroy them. a team has been prepared. return for them will of course be impossible; and the length of the mission will be of indeterminate duration, so that, on the one hand, it may result in the immediate entrapment or destruction of the team, or, on the other, it may prove to be a task of such temporal scope that one or a dozen generations of the expeditionary force may not be sufficient to reach the ultimate gate."