

While the Gate is Open

by Sean McMullen

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As I was being driven to work today I noticed fresh bullet holes in the walls of a plaza near the hospital, and glass from a shattered windscreen in the gutter. The scars and detritus of another assassination attempt. An attempt on the life of someone so junior in the government that it had not even earned a mention in the morning news. An attempt to kill someone no more important than myself, the Surgeon General.

"That's not the way to do it, Señor, not the way at all," I whispered to myself as we drove past.

I am not a native of this small republic. I came here for the power and freedom that its violent chaos provides. By its very nature my research requires a great deal of both.

As the car continued on to the hospital I found myself thinking about my work in Los Angeles, and the first time that I saw Brian Muir. His eyes and nose were all that was visible amid the white windings of bandages, and he was heavily sedated. He had been a social worker for some church group, and had been bailed up by one of his clients, then shot in the mouth as he tried to talk his way out. The small-calibre, low velocity bullet had bored a freakish path through teeth, cartilage, bone and tissue, coming to rest in his pituitary gland.

"He has been awake several times since coming out of surgery," said Tyler, the leader of the research team that employed me. "He displays complete loss of long-term memory assimilation."

He was talking to Franklin, our electronics expert. She merely raised her eyebrows and shrugged, her usual reaction when shown a difficult problem whose solution she already knew.

"I can duplicate the function of the lost tissue as long as a good enough surgeon is available to get in there and install the Quantum-Effect Gate," she told Tyler, glancing briefly at me and smiling.

Damn the woman, I thought. I could never tell whether she was praising my abilities or mocking them. With Tyler there was no doubt. He turned to me for the first time.

"The hospital is happy to have us try our device so long as we do not degrade his condition further. They have even offered us the services of the surgeon who extracted the bullet. He will require you as an observer and advisor of course, Dr. Hall."

I knew my place, and I nodded. Even though I had installed such Quantum-Effect Gates in the brains of dozens of monkeys, and was a fully qualified surgeon, Tyler would not trust me with an installation in a human patient.

"I've watched a videotape of him extracting the bullet," I said. "He is very good, but there are some new techniques of nerve interfacing that he would not know. I could--"

"You could instruct him," Tyler broke in, smiling. "Good. I shall arrange for you to meet him at once."

No more of that now, I thought to myself as I watched the olive-green truck of my armed escort enter the hospital gates. Here I gave the orders, and here I did what operations I pleased. Many of my assistants were so ill-educated that they had no idea of what I was doing. The others crossed themselves and presumably agonised over the relative merits of a well-paying job in this life and the chance of retribution in the next.

Juarez phoned as I was checking the mail in my office. I paid him the deference due to any current dictator of a South American republic while still maintaining the firm attitude of a doctor to his patient. He was not my patient in a medical sense, yet my research has a great bearing on his conduct, and on the

running of this country.

The man is terminally ill, but I have never been told just what disease is responsible. I suspect cancer or AIDS, but his body's health is not my concern. Apart from being a thief, rake and murderer, the man is a lapsed Catholic, and the prospect of what the afterlife has in store for him has become an obsession. It is one thing to philosophically acknowledge that an assassin may strike at any moment, but knowing for certain that death is only months away is something very different. His religion holds the spectre of eternal damnation before him, but I have promised him a scientific opinion.

"You are ready for an operation?" he asked anxiously.

"I have done it already, *Señor Presidente*. A priest injured by a blow from a truncheon during the demonstration last week. He will die from his injuries the moment that the life-support equipment is turned off, but I made the operation seem like an heroic attempt to save him. We shall get some excellent results in tonight's experiment."

"I am sending another man, Dr. Hall. He is strong, healthy, and thinks that he is volunteering for a project that will earn him a pardon from the death sentence. Your visitor from the US has brought you another of those Gate devices: install it in him today."

"But that will be murder!" I exclaimed. "When I first proposed this project to you I made it very clear that I would use only dying patients."

Juarez could not see that I was smiling. For some time now I have suspected that he would break our agreement.

"Follow my orders," he said firmly. "I will not argue."

"But why the urgency? Why is your subject better than the man I already have prepared?"

"Not better, but worse... and so better. Raone is a convicted murderer, and a habitual rapist. He enjoys dominating others and inflicting pain. I had a talk to him, incognito of course. He is without doubt a very bad man."

"I... begin to see," I said slowly. "How long do they say you have now?"

There was a pause at the other end. I wondered if I had gone too far. This was not just any patient, but a man whose death will have international consequences-- and who could order mine.

"Ten months. There will be a very rapid decline at the end," he admitted reluctantly. "I need to know as much as I can. When will the operation be done?"

"With a healthy patient, no more than six hours. Your man will be awake by some time this evening."

"And well enough to question?"

"So soon? But yes, I don't see why not."

"Good. I shall arrive at eight o'clock. Have the test set up to start punctually. I want to witness everything and ask questions this time, not just watch videos later."

I took my time scrubbing up and dressing for the operation, checking all my equipment and instruments personally. The staff here are the best available in the republic, yet they are so often slack with basic procedures. Life is cheap here, and the patients who have money fly to the U.S. or Britain for treatment.

There had been no such trouble with Muir's operation, back in Los Angeles. We had the finest facilities in the world, yet even then it had taken fifteen hours to install Franklin's Quantum-Effect Gate interface in the patient's damaged brain. Most of that work was through a microscope, and the hospital's surgeon sensibly deferred to my experience and allowed me to do all of the actual nerve connections. At the end I reeled away to an empty ward and slept solidly for the next half day.

It was Franklin who woke me. I noticed that she was very well-dressed and her hair was unpinned and carefully brushed. There was even a trace of makeup on her face. That meant announcements, interviews, television appearances... all the trappings of success. With uncharacteristic euphoria she told me that Muir had regained his long term memory assimilation. We were famous.

Or at least Tyler, Franklin and the patient were famous. I had merely helped install the miracle of organ synthesis and micro-circuitry that was the Gate. Even at that stage, though, I harboured little resentment for missing out on the credit. For the whole of my life I had been considered to be industrious but mediocre. My reputation was a steel mould that I could not break, but that did not worry me. I seldom strained against it. The Gate itself was strapped just above Muir's navel, and a bioflex sheath took the

wires and tubes past his lungs, through his neck, and into the base of his brain. A few cynics pointed out that our work was not entirely altruistic, and that the team now had a rare opportunity to study the physiology of perception and memory directly. This was true, and Tyler had an extensive programme of tests planned. We could alter the rates of flow of hormones and selectively shut down parts of the Quantum-Effect Gate while Muir would describe how it felt. Our critics suggested that foetal tissue-culture implants to repair brain tissue would be better than replacing it with a machine, but Right-to-Life groups promptly entered the argument, condemned fettle tissue-culture techniques, and praised our cybernetic approach. Muir supported us too, being very happy to have escaped a limbo where he was confined to only the last few minutes and the distant past.

It was I alone who first observed the Gate Projection phenomenon and identified it for what it was. I made the discovery under Tyler's very nose, and he suspected nothing. I had been helping him route the Gate's processor through an external computer so that he could map Muir's touch-related memory pathways. As I was cracking the seal on a hypodermic syringe Muir suddenly cried out in pain. He had been several feet away from me, lying on a trolley with his eyes closed.

"Something the matter?" I asked as I raised the hypodermic to the light.

"Oh. Ah, I just wish you would give me some warning before you... have you injected me as yet?" He seemed puzzled, and he looked from the needle to his bare arm.

"No, but hold out your arm and we'll soon fix that. Felt a twinge, did you?"

"Er, yeah. Just like a needle went in."

"Don't worry. Nerves can fire by themselves sometimes," I assured him as I administered the injection. "Now just-- "

He gave a start, and jerked his head around to the right.

"Another twinge?" I asked, with the stirrings of concern.

"I... I thought someone tapped me on the shoulder. It's odd, you know. In a way I feel numb, yet I still feel as if I'm moving."

"Well, you're going to be moving now," I said, patting him on the shoulder and wheeling the trolley over to the bank of monitoring equipment where Tyler was waiting.

"That was good shooting with the needle, Doc," he said as I was about to go. "You stabbed me right on the twinge, and it really didn't hurt at all."

It was not until twenty minutes later in the staff cafe that I realised what had happened. Muir had been feeling sensations from about twenty seconds in the future.

Had I been with Tyler at the time I would undoubtedly have blurted out my conclusion at once, but as it happened I was sitting alone, and was able to get a grip on myself and think it through. A fantastic discovery. My discovery, yet I could see an article in Nature as clearly as if the page was in front of me: "Tyler first noticed the phenomenon when an assistant pointed out that the subject's reaction to stimulus preceded that stimulus by twenty seconds. The conditions under which..."

It would be Tyler's discovery, and Franklin would share in the glory, of course. I could stand having my surgical skills ignored in favour of the invention itself, but this was different. This was my discovery. Damn those who actually designed and built the Gate. We remember Armstrong for being the first to set foot on the moon, and his fame is not diminished because other people designed and built the vehicles that carried him there.

I studied Tyler's notes for that day in great detail. He had routed the Quantum-Effect circuitry through an unusual pattern of nerve paths for no better reason than sheer convenience. He had simply run short of spare lines for whatever test he was doing, and had patched some paths together using the nerves from the soles of Muir's feet, his upper arms and shoulders, and his sense of balance. Had the man attempted to walk, he would probably have fallen in a disorientated heap at once, and the cat would have been well and truly out of the bag. As it was Muir had done no more than lie quietly on the trolley, and Tyler had noticed nothing unusual.

Later that day I told Tyler that his patchwork routing of the patient's nerves and the Quantum-Effect circuitry was causing Muir numbness and disorientation. It was my opinion that a separate circuit-switching unit should be made up for that series of tests. He deferred to my opinion without fuss,

and said nothing more about it. Perhaps he thought that he had been hasty, and had made some foolish mistake. His occasional visible mistakes were always admitted to curtly, then forgotten. My own errors never seemed to die, and were constantly recalled. "Don't forget the nerve surface electrolysis step, Dr. Hall. Remember the time..." Even when that time had been four years previously, and I had done dozens of flawless operations since.

Over the days that followed I could scarcely sleep as I alternately dreamed of being awarded the Nobel Prize and designed circuit configurations to verify my discovery. Using the very techniques that I had forbidden to Tyler I was able to extend Muir's sense of touch twenty-two minutes into the future. Further than that and thermal activity in the Gate's semiconductors introduced a noise factor, but I calculated that by using liquid helium coolant, Muir's sensations could be projected twenty-five minutes forward.

All the while I had my patient sedated, and did my tests using simple electrical stimuli. It would not do for him to catch on, then excitedly tell Tyler and Franklin what I had discovered.

What I had discovered. My discovery. More and more I thought of what my supervisor had said in medical school: "Go into surgery, Sig. You just don't have the imagination for research." It had always rankled, just like my brother's success. He was a great innovator, and had made a lot of money for Ford with breakthroughs in design that could be seen in every new car on the road. I made a point of driving an old model Porsche, even though spares were becoming harder to obtain.

Nine weeks passed before I realised that I had a dilemma. How could I announce my discovery without revealing that I had deceived the rest of the team? Far from conferring glory on myself, I would be revealed as dishonest and scheming. I could pretend to make the discovery again, but then how to account for the experimental results of nine weeks? Without those results nothing could prevent Tyler from stepping in to appropriate my discovery. I needed to have Muir fully conscious and reporting his sensations, instead of relying on just the minute bursts of neural activity of my tests thus far. Tyler would have had Muir awake and talking, but if I tried that, Muir would soon catch on-- and tell everyone. Always the obstacle of that well-meaning, innocent fool. I began to hate Muir, hate him enough to...

Kill him? If he died while the Gate was operating, he could give me a twenty minute window into whatever lay beyond death, and would not be around later to tell anyone else. The idea was at first repugnant, but the more that I thought about it, the more attractive-- and fascinating-- it became. The idea was evil, to be sure, yet the glamour of being an evil person can enfold a person so easily that one wears it like an old and familiar coat. For the whole of my life I had lived the role of a drab and clinical specialist. Now evil was at last giving me a little colour.

I became quite excited as I laid my plans, and began to view Muir as a scientist would a robot space probe that was hurtling towards the surface of a planet-- it was vital to keep him in perfect health until the last moment, but death had to be his destiny.

It is not hard for a doctor to kill someone in his care and remain undetected. Muir was violently allergic to a certain type of muscle relaxant, and would die of shock if even a normal dose was administered. There was an orderly in the stores department who was lax about accounting for common drugs, and I only had to wait until he issued me with a safe, intravenous relaxant without entering it properly in his register. I had already obtained a dose of the relaxant forbidden to Muir through an untraceable supplier. Muir's death would seem to be an accident, and the orderly would be blamed.

By now I was running routine monitoring sessions on Muir, ostensibly to ensure that no harmful effects were building up from the other experiments that Tyler and Franklin were doing. Nobody questioned my work, and the computer-generated nerve pathways that I used would seem harmless to even an experienced observer.

Muir was in an odd, pensive mood as I set up my equipment and rigged a pocket-sized video recorder to cover his bed. I have since wondered if he had somehow learned to anticipate the future without the use of our equipment.

"I've been wondering where my life is going, Doc," he said as I inserted a needle into a vein in his arm and attached a tube that ran to an automatic pump. The pump contained the relaxant, and a timer would switch it on some minutes later. Unless I intervened, Muir was a dead man. I strapped him firmly to the

trolley.

"I would say that your life is well looked after," I assured him. "Wearing that unit strapped over your stomach is not much of an inconvenience, while the research that you help us with is unique in the world today."

"I'm a man of God, Doc. I should be out on the streets, helping people."

"But you help people here. Think of the future accident victims who would be human vegetables without the medical techniques that we are learning through you."

"But that's not me working. I'm not doing anything, don't you see? You're examining me like a dead body in a dissection room, Doc. I mean, like at the end of each day I want to say to the Lord 'This is what I did for you. This is all my own work.'" He smiled and sighed, as if this was a conversation that he often had. "Oh, I don't suppose you understand."

This is all my own work. Indeed I did understand, although it was not God that my offering was being made to.

"You understand that we are reluctant to allow you to get into any sort of danger," I said calmly, although my heart was pounding. "Perhaps, though, we could have you made a sort of chaplain in the hospital."

"Oh Doc, I'm only used to dealing with addicts and muggers."

"Addicts and muggers end up in hospital a lot more often than the rest of the population. It could be very effective to have a streetwise chaplain in here."

"Yeah, yeah, work on them while they're forced to slow down, and are away from their buddies. Doc, that's a great idea."

He was smiling beatifically as I plugged the main computer into the unit strapped to his stomach. For the first time in my professional life, my hands were shaking. Evil is something like anorexia-- the more it eats you away, the more you want of it. I switched in the computer, which had been programmed to project his sense of touch about twenty minutes into the future, but this time I had added the optic nerves as well. Until now I had not dared, as he would certainly have guessed the nature of his new powers if he had seen events happening twice over. I taped cotton pads over his eyes, not wanting him to be distracted, and reasoning that if there were such a thing as a soul, it might make use of optic pathways as it left the body. I left his speech centre and sense of hearing in the present. I had to talk to him, to know what he felt and saw.

"You may hallucinate mildly," I warned him as the seconds ticked away and his senses began to project. They were less than a minute from the lethal injection of drug. "Tell me all that you see and feel, though. I may not be able to try this test on you again."

"All normal so far, Doc. You know, that chaplain idea of yours has given me quite a lift."

Twenty minutes into the future, Brian Muir received a lethal dose of relaxant.

"Heart, Doc, my heart!" he cried, straining at the straps.

"The pain's only illusion," I said, squeezing his wrist, but his sense of touch had already projected past the comforting gesture. "Tell me what you feel, tell me if you see anything."

"Pain, pain like needles in the heart. I'm scared, Doc."

Drops of sweat beaded his face, and his features were drawn into a grimace.

"Trust me, Brian, I'm watching the monitors, and they all show you as normal. The pain is just your nerves fooling you. Keep talking, tell me everything. The pain should pass."

Even as I spoke he began to relax.

"Yeah, yeah, the needles are going out again. Heart's so smooth now you'd think it was stopped."

"If it had stopped you wouldn't be telling me about it. How do you feel? Hot, cold?"

"I feel cool, yet sort of glowing too. Like a dose of pethadine, yeah, and I'm floating, and I feel so good I don't want to move a muscle. And Doc, I feel happy-- happy like I was the moment you said I could be a chaplain, yet that first high keeps on going."

He had been dead for a full minute, yet the lethal drug had not yet been injected into him. He was dead, but I had not yet killed him. I had killed him in the future, I was looking back with remorse upon a crime that I had not yet committed. I realised that I could not kill a man in cold blood.

I hastily slipped the ampoule from the automatic pump and replaced it with the one that the orderly had given me. Nothing could kill him now, yet... yet he had already displayed signs of death by allergic reaction! What had happened nearly three minutes ago in the future? How could he be dead?

"Things brightening up, Doc," he reported, and I quickly turned my attention back to him. I must be taking the pads off his eyes, I thought to myself.

"Very good, and does the room look normal, no tunnel vision or anything?" I asked, listening to the difference that relief made to the tone of my own voice.

"No Doc, things are brighter, but with no up or down. There seems to be patterns all around me, but... sort of not quite visible, like trying to read small print by moonlight. It sort of makes sense, yet you can't quite make it out."

This was suddenly beyond my understanding. Data! I needed as much data as possible. This window into oblivion might not be open for long-- if he was dead.

"Tell me everything! Do you feel afraid? Hot? Cold? What sort of colours are there? Are things drifting about, like smoke?"

"Sort of pressure on my ears, as if a drum was being beaten nearby, or I was standing near a loud PA system. I can't hear, but... I ought to be hearing something that isn't sound, I know for sure, and it's real hard to concentrate on listening to you. In fact I'm talking too, but with another part of me. I feel much bigger, if you follow. I'm talking to you with a really small part of me."

This was absurd. His speech and hearing were in the present.

"But what do you see?" I insisted. "Colours? Forms? Squares and triangles?"

"Colours are not important, Doc. I mean I can see to make what I want, and what I see is space and flows and densities... That's not right, though, but I don't have the words that you would follow..."

I had more qualifications after my name than he had letters in his, yet he knew that I could not follow! He had been dead nine minutes now, if the timer had contained the lethal drug.

"Getting lighter, brighter," he said, the tone of his voice becoming flat, as if he was getting bored with me. "I could think the feelings around you better than talking, but you are small, small... dim with guilt, hard to... focus..."

This was not the Brian Muir of a few minutes ago. This was something very alien that was growing like the mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb. Shaking with fear, I backed away from the trolley.

"Ju-- just keep talking, Brian," I pleaded. "I need words to understand. Is it like special effects in space adventure movies or something like that?"

"No, no... I'm tearing away, like a scab coming off. Hurts and tickles a bit, but all new and fresh underneath. The more that tears away, the more... I..."

"Muir! Tell me what you feel, don't stop."

"Have to work hard to become... even the little bit that talks to you needed to... integrate here without..."

"Yes? Yes? Go on? To what? Do you see God, Muir? What is there?"

"... killed my... precursion," he said faintly. His body seemed to be glowing, and I noticed sweat evaporating from his face as if he were an exhausted athlete. "... made you think..."

I noticed that the room was very warm and humid, and there was a smell like that of a shower room after a football match. Then I heard the faint hissing, and there was a new smell: that of burning fat. Muir's body burst into flames.

Holding my breath, and with the skin blistering on my face and hands, I seized the video camera then lunged for the door through reeking clouds of smoke and the water from the sprinkler system.

At the inquiry I was stunned to learn that the careless orderly really had dispensed an ampoule of the relaxant that Muir was allergic to, and that his death would have been a genuine accident. Would have been. The lethal dose had never been pumped into his body because it had burned first. I realised that Muir had been destined to die, but some stupendous overload on his projected nerves had burned his body away before the relaxant killed him. Like relativistic effects at high speeds, it seemed to defy logic, yet relativity has a solid scientific basis.

The Coroner's inquiry accepted my account of the supposedly harmless tests that I had been running.

No heavy currents had been directed through the Quantum-Effect Gate, and there had been no flammable materials on Muir's trolley. Of Muir, nothing remained but dark grey ashes mixed with water from the sprinkler system. The sheet beneath his remains was burned through, and the two layers of plastic under that melted, but although the underlying mattress was partly charred, the metal base below it was not even discoloured. Everything had been made of fire resistant material. Data was tabled from some of the better documented cases of human spontaneous combustion, and the effects were strikingly similar.

Amid all this sensation and close scrutiny I did not have the courage to announce my discovery of the Gate Projection. The shock of what happened to Muir had weakened my nerve badly, and I counted myself lucky not to have been directly implicated. Perhaps taking precedent from the earlier inquiries into cases of spontaneous combustion in humans, the coroner returned an open finding. He did, however, warn that the Gate could not be ruled out as a factor in Muir's death.

A few days later I visited Franklin at her home in the hope of salvaging some of her equipment. The house was as spotlessly clean as the set for a television commercial, and the air had a faint tinge of disinfectant to it. It reflected her personal appearance: smartly turned out, but scrubbed to the point of mania. It all confirmed my suspicion that she, like myself, was a hypochondriac.

She was studying a copy of the Coroner's report when I arrived, and wanted to discuss it with me.

"This reminds me of an article that I read in the New Scientist years ago," she said, indicating the file on the coffee table. "It was written by a forensic officer with the Gwent Police, and it described a death by fire. Except for his feet and skull the victim was reduced to ashes, yet the chair that he had been sitting in was only partially burned. Nothing else in the room received more than a light scorching. Nobody was able to come up with a convincing explanation."

"You're also suggesting spontaneous combustion?" I asked. "That has the same reputation as flying saucers."

"Some of the 1965 flying saucers turned out to be the SR-71's secret prototype," she said as she poured me a glass of wine.

"You think there is a conspiracy?"

"I... I wish I did. The Gate probably touched off some process that we can't even begin to understand. Electronics is my field: I build equipment to other people's specifications. The Gate had to be involved, Sig, but I don't have enough biology to do my own investigations. I'm getting out of the medical field, you know. An electronics lab wants to hire me to do some fairly straight semiconductor work."

It was the perfect opportunity for me, and I had trouble holding back my eagerness.

"I'm getting out of prestige medical research too," I admitted with a studied sigh. "I'd like to work in some Third World country, where I can do some real good." I forced myself to pause, and took a sip of wine. "Still, I found our work with the Quantum-Effect Gate quite interesting, and I'd like to take it a bit further if I can find a few monkeys and some spare time. Do you have any units left that I could use?"

She looked up in surprise. "I have a couple of Gates in my workshop. You mean to say that you actually want to do more work on the Gate? After what happened?"

"Can't find out why it happened without more work. The Gate is a superb concept, Kaye. I have great faith in your design."

She smiled with genuine surprise, squirming in her seat. It crossed my mind that she was somewhat attractive. A rather pear-shaped figure, the very shape that my taste would have run to. Would run to. I am such a hypochondriac that fear of disease precludes my having casual affairs.

"Okay, you can borrow my spare Gates," she said as she stood up. "Keep me informed if you find anything, though."

Without thinking I followed her out into the workshop. Then I stopped with a gasp as I realised what covered the walls: butterfly collection cases containing hundreds, perhaps thousands, of prophylactic devices! Franklin had not realised that I was going to follow her, and her embarrassment was as severe as mine.

"I... collect them," she tried to explain.

"Ah, of course. Very sensible, these days."

"No, no, I mean I've never used them..."

There was a rather long and extremely awkward pause.

"Well, as long as you don't move in high risk circles I suppose it's safe enough," I managed. "I, ah... personally speaking, I'm rather a hypochondriac. I've never been able to trust anyone enough to--" I realised what I was confessing to and stopped, blushing.

She nervously thrust two Quantum-Effect Gate units into my hands then turned to one of the cases, determined to give me a tour of the collection to hide her own embarrassment.

"This brown thing here with the bow is over two hundred years old," she explained. "And I love these Japanese ones. Each has an original haiku poem on the package. They cost over \$50 each."

"I suppose the idea is to make the seduction very special," I mumbled miserably.

"I-- I wouldn't know either, Sig. I'm a hypochondriac too, you see. I collect these out of a morbid fascination, I suppose, but I've never used one. I've never had to. I'm too nervous to even kiss anyone."

I smiled with relief, glad to find someone who understood my fears. Franklin misunderstood the smile. Very tentatively she put her hand on my arm.

"I've watched you in the cafe, Sig. The way you keep your gloves on while eating, and drop purifier tablets in the soda water. I just felt shy about, well, talking to you."

Now I was really taken aback. This was Franklin, who had always smiled at me in condescension, or so I had thought. I had never dreamed that other people could feel anything but contempt or hostility for me.

"And I have seen you wiping the cutlery with medical alcohol," I replied. "Ah, weren't you and Tyler, er, attached?"

Her eyes bulged, and the hiss of her indrawn breath was like that of a giant lizard being deprived of its dinner. For a moment she seemed to contemplate some stunningly sarcastic reply, then she regained control of herself.

"Not beyond going out to dinner and sitting together at conferences. The man's insufferable, always calling in other experts to check my work, and mocking me. I don't even eat with him any more. If I try to clean a smear off my cutlery he does things like asking the waiter for a sterilised tablecloth, or dipping a pH meter in the wine instead of tasting it."

Almost without thinking I put the precious Gates down on a bench, removed my gloves and took her hands in mine. They were warm, smooth and very, very clean.

"Most people just don't understand," I agreed. "They laugh at us, so we hide our fears. It's so hard to meet someone else who has our concerns, one who can be trusted to be clean and responsible."

There are probably few things quite so preposterous as a pair of thirty-five years old virgin hypochondriacs trying to teach each other about sex. It is a very messy business, and we seemed to spend most of the first few days washing, comparing the symptoms of minor irritations and inflammations, and taking antibiotics. Gradually our sense of alarm over the mechanics-- and potential for infection-- of the physical act was replaced by affection, and with affection came trust. We loved dining at home together, eating carefully cooked meals made from fresh ingredients on sterilised plates, with sterilised cutlery. It was wonderful to be with someone who was truly understanding, and our affection undermined my fascination with being an evil person.

In spite of our new intimacy, however, I did not reveal my discovery to Franklin. I no longer thought that she would try to steal it from me, but I was afraid to let anyone know what I had been doing with Muir. The best course seemed to be to conduct a series of experiments with terminally ill people in some backward country. I would be relatively free from scrutiny, and could stage the operations to look like humanitarian work. Then I would announce the discovery of Projected Touch with a great display of surprise.

After some preliminary investigations I decided that Juarez and his miserable republic met all of my criteria-- that is, a powerful patron and freedom to practise some very doubtful medicine. Franklin showed me quite a lot about the practicalities of operating and maintaining the Gate during the course of our affair, and promised to make spare parts for me if I needed them. I packed my notes and equipment, and booked a flight south. Franklin saw me off at the airport.

"Are you sure that you have to go?" she asked as I waited for my flight. "These last weeks have been... Well, I'll really miss you."

"And I shall miss you, just as much," I said sincerely. By now I had come to love the woman so much that I did not want to leave. She kept pointing out how bad the sanitation was where I was going, something which swayed me almost as much as the thought of our separation. My resolve to go nearly cracked as we kissed goodbye. Now I wished that it had.

Today's operation on Raoul Raone did him no real good, but it was nevertheless a success. He regained consciousness early in the evening, and I had already made much of running a number of Projected Touch tests for the benefit of the spies that Juarez had planted on the staff. My paranoia has its uses, and I took such care in the falsification of my results that Tyler himself would not have doubted them.

Raone was ill-educated, sensual, cunning, and given to letting his passions have free rein. He did what felt good, and he did it without consideration for any other. Raone's victims had been mere flesh to consume. He was dangerous; one could sense it from his confident arrogance, but I also knew that he feared me. Everyone feared me. My staff, *El Presidente*, and my other patients. Only Juarez actually knew that I killed to look beyond death, but I was nevertheless a man who did such a thing, and it made me subtly, disturbingly different.

"So I am free to go when my head heals, eh Doc?" he asked as I assessed my results. "My friend who knows Juarez said that I would."

"You will go free," I acknowledged, "but only after we have done all of our tests."

"You mean there is more than the operation?"

"Yes, I have some tests planned. You will feel heat and cold, see odd colours. You must report all of this back to us faithfully. The results are very important to President Juarez and myself."

I knew what was to come, indeed I had been leading him down a carefully determined path. It is far more effective to crush an invited attack than to do the attacking.

"I think if that's the case, you'd better make it more worth my while to report what I see," he began, but stopped when he saw the grin spreading over my face.

"It is already worth your while to be truthful, Raoul. We will be sending you very close to death, and what you tell us will allow us to adjust certain equipment to keep you alive. One inaccurate word from you, and that will be the end."

"*Santa Maria!*" he exclaimed in a voice pitched at least two octaves higher. He thought about the consequences for a moment. "I... do not think that I wish to go on."

"The choice is out of your hands."

"Then I want to see a priest. I have much to confess."

"Excellent. You will have no priest."

"I-- what?" His eyes bulged with alarm, and he gaped stupidly in disbelief.

"Raoul, fear of damnation will keep you truthful. You will have no priest, and the devil will be scratching at the door as we suspend you above the chasm of hell. A single lie from you and we cannot help but let go."

He regarded me steadily for nearly a minute. I smiled back at first, then returned to checking my tests and results.

"Devil at the door, hah! The devil is in here already, he sits by my bedside, scribbling on a notepad."

The role appealed to me, in a perverse sort of way.

"Had I wanted your soul, Raoul Raone, I could have had it this afternoon. Right now you would be hanging by your toes over a bed of glowing coals, and your sweat would be burning fat from your soul's eternal flesh. Try any tricks during tonight's experiment, and you will be doing just that by morning. Now lie back and gather your strength. You will need it."

Juarez arrived. He showed small signs that could have pointed to a number of medical conditions: a slight tremor of the hands, a nervous tic in his cheek muscles, severe loss of weight, and coarse, flaking skin. In front of the other staff he maintained a formal and confident front, but in my office he was fearful and distracted. He confided that he did not trust Raone to tell the truth. I told him what I had threatened

the patient with an hour before.

"But you cannot bring him back!" he exclaimed. "I thought that the whole idea was to kill him while his soul was black with sin, so that we can watch the fate of the damned."

"That is true, but would you tell him that? Hope for life and fear of death will keep him in line."

"So... you lied to him," he said, relaxing again.

"I lied to him. Soon I will kill him, and unconfessed. That will damn him for eternity-- at least as far as your religion is concerned. What is a lie compared to that?"

"I... I don't care about the lie. I only want to know exactly what is happening."

"I shall always tell you that, *Señor Presidente*," I assured him. "I shall also tell you what is about to happen."

He smiled weakly, fearfully at my promise. His unease and trust were amusing. He had nobody else that he could confide in, but needed to talk.

"When I was a boy," he said in a low, hoarse voice, "a nun told my class that Hell was like holding your hand over a candle's flame forever. I was a bad, tough kid, so I tried it. I must have lasted half a minute." He turned his right hand over and showed the old scar on the palm. "Doctor Hall, I can stand pain. I can even stand the idea of ceasing to exist, but not of being burned forever-- or frozen, as your previous experiment suggests."

"So why repeat it? You have seen what happens to someone like Raone already. I still have the videotape of your minister's death."

"Hah! I have seen science fiction films that are much more convincing. I need to sit beside the bed as he dies, to see for myself that your Gate is not some trick of the devil."

I knew that when Juarez spoke of the Gate and the supernatural in the same breath he needed the reassurance of being blinded by science. I obliged him.

"The Gate is based on sound, proven science. It's built around a device called a macroscopic quantum object, a Superconducting Quantum Interference Device or SQUID. SQUIDS have been around since the 1960's, and can be used as very sensitive magnetometers, or as voltmeters in another mode.

"They are of great value in brain research. Dr. Franklin, my former colleague, developed a Quantum-Effect Monitor, which is a large array of SQUID systems which monitor the electromagnetic fields of data pathways in the brain. She later went on to build the Gate, an interactive version which replicates some biological functions as well. Quantum objects raise certain problems, however. Does a SQUID have a magnetic flux when nobody is monitoring it? If not, or not always, does the flux cease to exist altogether, or move to another timeframe? I think that it might do the latter, and I can go into some of the mathematics involved..."

"Enough, Doctor, enough," protested Juarez, who was actually smiling again. "I am not a scientist, but I am a good enough politician to know when someone is speaking sincerely." Like many politicians he liked to go on the offensive after displaying weakness, and he did so now. "One day you will have to die, Dr. Hall. Are you not worried about being punished for what you are doing, killing people to see the next world?"

"There have been several recent breakthroughs in halting the ageing process, and I am only thirty five. I may never die."

"You may catch a fatal disease, or die in an accident." He smiled broadly. "You may even receive a death sentence."

"Please do not speak in riddles, *Señor Presidente*," I said impatiently. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"You are very rigid about the choice of subjects for your experiments, Doctor. Terminally ill patients are not the most convenient subjects to work with."

"I operated on Raone."

"Yes, but I suspect that you only did so because he was a condemned man. You would consider yourself no more guilty than the state executioner. I require experiments that cover a wide variety of people, and I cannot wait until disease or accident puts them in medical danger."

Having a strong streak of paranoia myself, I recognise the signs in other people. Juarez was in a

dangerous way.

"You have showed me that not everyone shares the same fate after death," he continued. "That virtuous social worker from your first experiment blazed like the sun, yet when my former cabinet minister died of a brain tumour he became just a lump of frozen meat. If Raone freezes too, it will confirm our discovery that evil souls merely cease to exist, but the good become something bright and magnificent. After Raone we shall allow the next subject a priest before death, to see if confession and absolution can save one from becoming nothing."

"I have only two undamaged gates, including the one that Dr. Franklin brought with her yesterday. We shall need more than half a dozen to do all that you want."

"No problem, Dr. Hall. Franklin's holiday in this country will be extended so that she can build more. You should be glad of her company, or so I am told."

I glared at him for a moment, pretending helpless fury.

"I won't have Kaye dragged into an insane murder conspiracy," I warned him.

"Ah, but I will, Doctor, and I have the power to do it."

Franklin had arrived the day before with a spare Gate, and I had not expected the visit. The news that she brought turned out to be far more important than the package of circuitry.

"I know what happened to Brian Muir," she told me as soon as we were alone in my high-security apartment. "The Gate projected his senses forward in time, and past the moment of death."

The room seemed to sway before my eyes, and I sat down heavily on the bed that we had been preparing to climb into.

"So you found me out," I said flatly.

Now it was Franklin's turn to be surprised. "Found you out? So you *did* know!"

I stared back, puzzled, and she sat down beside me and put her arms around my shoulders.

"Sig, there's a bright young Canadian mathematician who has been doing some exciting new work in quantum theory. His latest paper predicts that certain quantum states can be influenced by events outside our timeframe. I recognised certain similarities with my Quantum-Effect Gate's behaviour, so I started checking the configurations that had been used in our work with Muir. The computer archives show over a dozen that might have induced some sort of time projection effect. I've done some very simple experiments that confirm it."

"And what does Tyler think?"

"Tyler! He's the last person I would tell. The man interviews well, and he would be out there in front of the television cameras with his bow tie and blow-waved hair before you could say Quantum-Effect Gate. He would claim the credit, and it's *my* discovery."

My discovery, I nearly echoed, but said instead: "You ought to publish, and quickly. There may be others working in the area. Me for example."

"I nearly did, but I suspected that you had discovered the phenomenon independently. You, a surgeon, with little training in physics, electronics or even neurochemistry. Sig, I... I tried to send a paper of my own out for publication, but it would not have been fair to you. I was so proud of you, I wanted to share this with you. I thought that you might like to pool your results with me and publish a joint paper. Have you done any new work?"

I tried to make a carefully censored confession of what I had done, but somehow the entire story came tumbling out. I also told her about my illicit experiment with the dying cabinet minister. Instead of seeing colours and patterns then burning up, he had reported nothing but cold and darkness before he stopped speaking. His body had then frozen solid, its temperature dropping so low that thick hoarfrost had formed on the skin. The implanted interface of the Quantum-Effect Gate had been damaged by hysteresis phenomena normally seen only below the condensation point of helium.

I also told her about Juarez, and how he would not let me stop the work now.

"Even if I escaped from the country he could denounce me in the media, accuse me of murder. Believe me, Kaye, I may have done some very unethical things, but I am not a killer."

"Sig, Sig," she sighed, cradling my head in her arms. "If only you had stayed with me. If only we had talked earlier."

"Paranoia has its uses, but there are drawbacks too," I said.

We lay awake for most of the night, talking mainly about that small, cloudy window past death itself. I had shown that there is a type of existence there, and that only certain people could achieve it. Perhaps they become part of some greater consciousness. Would that consciousness atrophy and die if work on ageing reversal led to a serum that brought immortality in this life? Should we care? Could we communicate with it? The publication of our paper would unleash debate and sensation on a scale not seen since Einstein's work on relativity.

Kaye lay half across me, weighing so heavily on my skimpy frame that I had trouble breathing. I would not ask her to move, though: I hungered for as much contact with her as I could get. I did not resent her duplicating my discovery. It would have been easy to get Juarez to silence her, but there was no point. Love made me want her to share it all.

Juarez. He knew about her, and that she could be of great use to us. I realised that I had become dangerously protective towards my only friend and lover.

"If I knew that I had a week to live, Sig, I think that I would volunteer for an experiment like yours," she whispered as the warm darkness gave way to dawn. "There is nothing criminal in the idea-- it would just take the authorities a while to adjust, and give their approval."

"This isn't Los Angeles, Kaye," I reminded her. "The authorities are the criminals here, and the highest authority of all wants to steer my work in the most unspeakable directions. I thought that I was like the devil tempting Faustus when I first approached Juarez. Now I find that it was really the other way around. Remember, he wants me to experiment with people of his own choosing, people who are not terminally ill."

She held me so tightly that I gasped for air. Perhaps she had been trying hard not to remember.

"So what can we do?" she moaned softly. "Try to escape from here, then deny any public accusations that Juarez makes against you?"

"And you." Now I paused. This time it was I who was suspended over the chasm, but I had a choice of whether or not to let go of the rope. I made my decision. "I have a plan, but it's dangerous for me. If... I die, and you go on to publishing a major paper, please put in a line for me. Something like 'The phenomenon was first noticed by Doctor Siggurd Hall, who called it to the attention of the author.'"

She sighed, then giggled, as if a little exasperated with me. "I'll mention a lot more than that, love. I don't just trust you in bed, I really care for you."

She cared for me. Someone actually cared for me. Her gentle whisper had just condemned Juarez to death.

"If I was to die..." I began.

"I'd think of you Sig, and I would not wish for a long life."

The experiment with Raoul Raone is set up in a modified cold storage room in the hospital basement. Because I will be there with him, Juarez thinks that he will be safe. The room has been searched for weapons, and he is satisfied that it contains only life support equipment, a patient, and the Quantum-Effect Gate's peripherals and computer. He is quite correct.

We enter, and the guards wait outside, slamming the heavy door behind us. Juarez pointedly checks his machine-pistol as I check the patient-- whose face is unrecognisable beneath the bandages. My patron walks across to the door, which has been altered to unlock only from the inside. He satisfies himself that it is indeed secure, and that we cannot be interrupted. The catch is a spring-loaded lever, and a very bad design. The full weight of my body is barely enough to release it. Juarez has wasted away to a much lower weight than myself.

I set a timer to turn off the priest's life support system only twelve minutes in the future, then switch in the computer link to the Quantum-Effect Gate. The unconscious priest is a good and kind man, one who was willing to give his life for the peasants in his parish. Like Muir, he will blaze like a thermite bomb, fill the room with choking fumes, and consume all the oxygen. Juarez may be able to grope his way to the door before he suffocates, but he will need my help to release the catch.

Juarez asks why Raone is not awake. Raone is six floors above us, his head smothered in bandages and his bloodstream full of tranquilliser. I tell Juarez that the patient is being kept sedated until the last

possible moment, and that the experiment will begin in ten minutes, when I have completed my tests.

I think of Kaye Franklin being showered with honours for our discovery. Our discovery. As far as the media and public are concerned it will be her discovery, but as long as she knows the truth and is proud of me, I do not care what anyone else thinks. I wonder if this newly born altruism has made me different from Raone, Juarez, and the cabinet minister. I hope that it has, and that I shall continue to exist-- and perhaps not be too alien to remember my lover when she eventually dies and joins me. I shiver, although the air has suddenly become warm and humid.

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