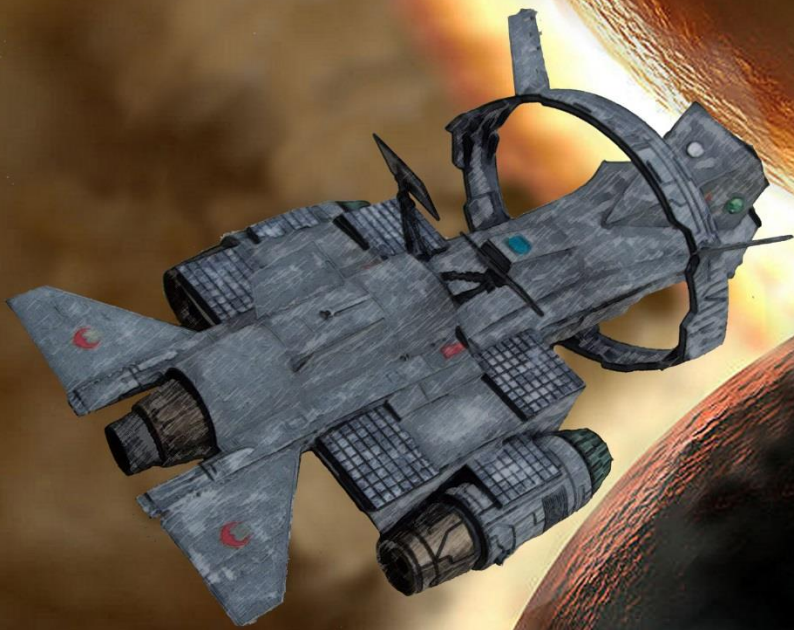


*Tales of the  
Black Lotus*

THE GATE  
OF ETERNITY  
PART 1



All was blackness beneath Shasa's eyelids. The sensation of nothingness ran through all her senses; every muscle was numb, her skin was torpid, her blood felt still. Her lungs filled and released at their own leisurely pace. Sound was vacuumed from the room, and Shasa was detached from the universe. She had accomplished this complete feeling using particle yoga. This involved increasing the pressure in the room to a near breaking point. Her muscles were squeezed until she ached everywhere. The shell of her body almost crushed inward. Then... release. She lay with clean sheets on her bed above and below her, the pillow fluffed so it felt as though it was floating.

Shasa needed this time away from the constant strain of captaining. The minute by minute decisions, the bargaining with merchants and the need to keep her crew fed and happy. Even when they had all they needed, they still wanted to go on a dangerous raid every now and then just to satisfy their pirate blood lust; or at least their sense of adventure. But most burdensome was the bureaucracy. Being an "independent contractor leading a band of like-minded souls" did not exempt her from having to keep track of inventory, supplies, and payroll. Her crew only remained "like-minded" as long as they were making enough to make it all worthwhile.

Recently, they were getting more than enough. The museum they had raided had netted them a handsome profit. So had that lost alien city, whose artifacts were purchased at a high price, as long as they could find the right people to buy them. This had proven harder than she had expected, and the cost in fuel, payments, bribes, and extortions were making it hardly worth the profit.

"Hull breach on level three," came a voice from just above her face. She sprang forward from the hip, knocked her forehead against something and fell back down on the pillow. Her eyes were wide now, and she shook off the shock as quickly as she could. Standing next to her bed was her brother Otto holding his own forehead in pain. "You've got a thick head!" he scolded.

"Alert the repair teams! Seal the inner chambers and have Domi give me a damage rep..."

"Whoa! Whoa! Cool your jets! I was kidding!" Otto said, still holding his forehead but smiling out of one side of his mouth now. "You take everything way too ernst."

"One of us has to!" she rebuked. "Did you ever consider that maybe that's why I'm captain and you're not?"

"You're captain because of a coin toss."

"Yeah," she said, pushing away the remainder of the pain and sitting up as she wrapped the white sheet around herself. She had never told Otto that the coin had been fixed so she would win. "Why are you in here?" she asked testily.

"What? Oh, yeah. We're coming out of Spectrum in the Mintaka system."

"How close are we?"

"We're on the far side of the fourth planet. The moon will be rastering over the horizon in an hour or so."

"Fine. I'll get dressed. Prep the bridge."

"Already did that. We're eating pizza. You should hypo up there." And Otto left, forgetting to close the door behind him.

Shasa didn't bother calling after him. She picked up her boot and threw it against the door panel, pushing the button and closing it. She sighed for a moment, enjoying one last moment of peace before getting to it.

A professor was supposed to be living on this planet. A real hermit. Not only did he live on a world with no name, he didn't even live in the small colony that sat in the temperate valley. This man lived alone up in the mountains. It was just him and him and his collection of artifacts, far away from the influence and interference of corporate governments.

Shasa's contact into this world of traders and hoarders, Bo of Bo's Spirits and Burgers, had given her his name and coordinates, claiming that he would have interest in one artifact she had in particular. It was an odd looking piece; it looked like the hilt of a bladed weapon, except that it had a hollowed out circle at its base that resembled a mouth. Something resembling eyes squinted at the end of the circle, and the opposite end, claws grasped onto the rest of the rod. It was rumored to have magical properties, Bo had told her. It seemed like they all were rumored to have magical properties. And why wouldn't they? They all belonged to various alien races that no longer existed. Wizard potions in old stories would have more connection to humanity than any of these things. She wouldn't understand any of it. All she comprehended was the addition to her bank account when the transaction was complete.

A couple quiet conversations between bridge members were murmuring in the background as they approached the gray-green moon hovering close to its parent gas giant planet that gave it just enough warmth to sustain life. Much of the planet was covered in clouds, though the mountain tops, including the one they were going to, peeked out over the fluffy waves. Shasa absently took bites from her cold pizza as she watched the monitor, reading each status that scrolled along the side. No matter how routine the landing, there was always a reason to stay on the alert.

The thin atmosphere caused minimal shaking, but it was still enough to silence the conversations on the bridge and place all eyes forward. Shasa tossed the last piece of her meal into one side of her mouth and went through the high atmosphere orbiting procedure through the other side.

They were able to bring the Black Lotus moderately close to the mountain to minimize the distance the shuttle would need to travel. Otto loaded it up with a small group, including a pair of raiders and their sergeant, Ricard Tenac. He didn't want to scare the old man they were heading to meet, but he also didn't want him to get the wrong idea of who was in charge during this encounter. He also brought Ansil Marin, the crotchety old communications officer. He liked to rattle on about the good old days when Otto's parents were commanding, and had a romanticized view of the past that only existed in his selective memory. But he would probably be the best choice to speak with an equally obstinate old hermit, and was the most likely to understand what he had to say about artifacts and who to take them to.

With room for one more, Otto decided as an after-thought to bring Dr. Leon Brody just in case the professor needed medical attention. The one-eyed doctor would fit in with the two old crotchety men anyway as his bedside manner left a lot to be desired. But he was a scholar as well, and might know something about the professor's discoveries.

The bottom front of the Black Lotus opened like someone's jaw dropping and the shuttle spat out. It arced across the sky dropping slowly toward the curved plateau of the snowcapped mountaintop which stuck up like a finger grasping for a grip on the clouds. The front of the house jutted out of the large rocks that pimpled the top. The entry was little more than a mortar enclosure with a roof and door, but it was clear that the building would go deeper underground.

Sergeant Tenac didn't let the informality of the situation fool him. He ordered his two raiders to march in on the door wide on the flanks, watching closely for ambushes. He would be at the front, directly in the doorway, blocking whatever might come out.

Otto, however, would be doing the talking, with a direct communications link up to his sister, the captain, open at all times. Typically the blithe spirit, Otto was now stern and professional, his large rifle Vera across his torso. It was pointed to the ground, but very visible to remind whoever came to the door that it was there.

No one came, despite three knocks. Otto wanted to be surprised by this, but he wasn't. Several of their attempts to sell these trinkets had led to dead ends. But they had come this far; might as well find out what's inside. He nodded at Sergeant Tenac, and he shot the lock, then kicked in the remains of the door, Vera at the ready. His two raiders hurried in to aim over his shoulders. Tenac was ex-military, having served in two corporate armies and with mercenaries before settling in with the crew of the Black Lotus. He knew how to sweep a room.

They only had a couple to clear before they came upon a long chamber lit only by the lights on their guns and a fireplace on the opposite end. Along the walls were books, holo-files, vis-screens, and relics, all categorized by their respective alien civilizations; all lost to history, each one a puzzle to be solved. Otto recognized good loot when he saw it, but as he drifted toward one of the walls, his sister reminded him of his mission in his ear. He turned and focused on the fireplace, and the lone chair sitting before it.

Sergeant Tenac recognized a hand on the chair before anyone, and he had his rifle aimed immediately. The lone stranger must have been aware of this, as he began speaking almost immediately after. "Rather rude of you to burst down my door like that."

"You wouldn't answer," Sergeant Tenac responded abruptly.

"It is my home. I will answer to whom I please." The stranger was rather arrogant for a man who had three guns drawn on him. He would not even turn to them, not even look around the back of the chair.

Dr. Brody started toward the stranger to check on him, but Otto stuck out his hand to stop him. He instead stepped forward, slinging forward the bag he had around him, and he removed the alien device from it. "We brought something for you to gaud," he said. "Someone who used to know you said you'd know where we can sell it to the highest bidder."

He now rounded the side of the chair and saw the stranger. A wrinkled despondent old man; his glazed eyes were fixed on the fireplace, their pupils barely reflecting their flames. He slumped in the chair like a sack. The expression on his face and his body language implied that he hadn't bothered to lift out of that chair in many days. Presently, his eyes dragged from the fireplace toward Otto. They lifted, as though heavy, to his face, then looked down at the hilt in his hand. His eyebrows raised slightly, but he did not look surprised. "You brought it," he said.

Much to Otto's concern, the man sounded more disappointed than anything. Otto reacted by pulling the mechanism back. "How much is it worth?" he asked.

The man shook his head slightly. His many wrinkles made their own face, expressing despondency. "Countless. Invaluable."

Otto was both thrilled and annoyed. This could turn into millions, or it could turn into a reason why it's "too valuable to put a market price on, and they should just care about it for the sake of humanity." He waited for a figure.

There was a silence broken only by the crackling of the flames. At length the man said wistfully, "It will open the gates of eternity... But not for us."

"What do you mean?" Otto asked, meaning that question for both statements.

The man settled his burdensome eyes on Otto directly now and said, “My son, you have just walked into a trap.”