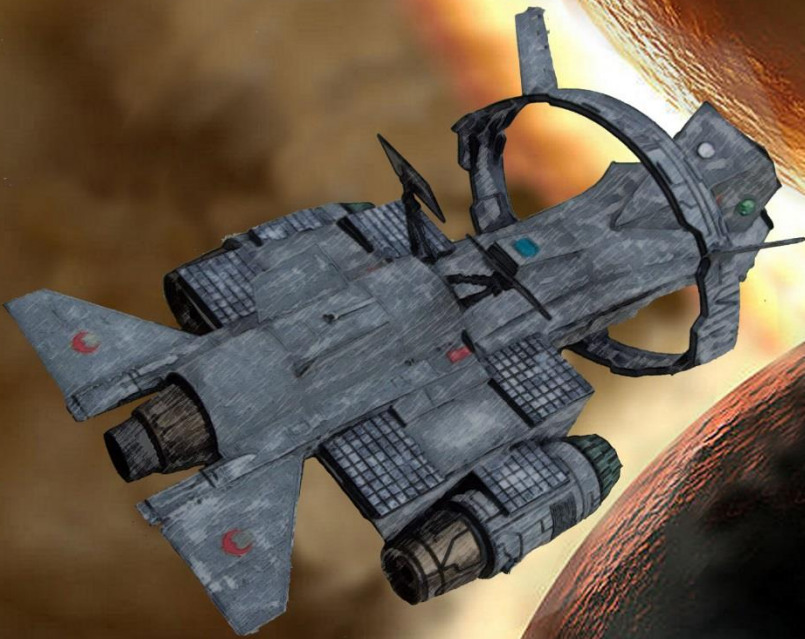


Tales of the
Black Lotus

THE GATE
OF ETERNITY
PART 2



Tenac and his soldiers did not wait for orders. As though the man's words of warning were their command, they turned toward the entrance and any other possible passage ready to fire. Otto put away the artifact and grasped his gun, but he stalled and asked, "Who set a trap? How did they know we were coming..."

"The Dark ones. Those who wish to deny humanity is not alone in the universe. For decades they've wanted at my research. I had hidden it all away up here. They told me you've been making noise selling relics everywhere, and that you'd be coming to me next. They're just outside and they'll be coming in any moment."

"What are your other exits..."

"There are none. They made abso there weren't. If, by some bluck, you can make it out of here, however, I will show you how that device prevays. And if it works, you should be rich beyond your wildest dreams."

It was, of course, the last sentence that convinced Otto to get him out with them. But getting out would require some help. "Shasa, come in. We need backup," Otto said directly into his mic on his shoulder. There was no response. "Okay, Captain, whatever. Just respond. We need to pike out of here." Still nothing. He listened closely and heard the mild hiss of a jammed channel. Otto only hoped she recognized the problem and was sending help now. But he wasn't counting on it. "Tenac, use your private line to Gizi. Tell her what's passing."

"Wilco," Sergeant Tenac said. He and his girlfriend, the communications officer, had inserted cybernetic communication implants in their minds for a Valentine's present. They had done it as a romantic gesture, and it had more than once been useful in a jam, but never for anything this serious. Much to his relief, she responded, and even more to his relief, the ship had not been attacked. She was safe. Now they needed to be as well. "Let's jonder," he said.

Without orders, Dr. Brody rushed for the old professor and asked him if he could walk. "I'm a slothist bugger, but I can move."

"I'll help," Dr. Brody said.

"I've got him," Otto said.

But Dr. Brody interrupted him. "You've got the best weapon and you need to mag us out of here."

"Wilco," Otto said, turning toward his overwhelming responsibility.

"Don't get us rubbed," Brody insisted; a completely unnecessary gesture.

Otto nodded and sucked in his desire to respond "Thank you, Captain Obvious."

They hurried to the front door, the two raiders checking the corners each time they entered a room. They were grateful to learn that the "Dark Ones" had not gotten inside yet, and with any luck, their trap had gotten old and they had left.

One look outside revealed that they hadn't. A little under a dozen thruster trails dangled below black suited soldiers with darkened visors and small rapid shot rifles trained on the door. One or two saw them approach and a flurry of shots riddled the entry. The raiders jumped back, but they knew that when everyone opened fire, there would be no chance for them to escape, especially since another dozen were flying up into position, and about twenty or thirty more were approaching the entry on snowmobiles. The shuttle was a discouragingly long way from them, and their enemy was blocking the path already.

But then came the artillery; blasts from the Black Lotus crashing down in front of the entryway. The snowmobiles were shattered into smithereens. The shockwaves blew back those in the jetpacks, and the resulting smoke filled the air, mixed with white puffs of dissolved snow.

Otto recognized an opportunity when he saw one, and he ordered everyone to run. The raiders and their sergeant went first, their rifles covering their faces as they fired at any living thing they detected, whether flying or driving. The doctor and his patient went next, hobbling along as fast as they could while still trying to keep their feet. Then Otto took up the rear, wishing the doctor and the professor would pick up the pace a bit, crippled or not. He also took the shots he could, though he held his fire until he had clear ones to avoid giving away his position.

They pushed forward blindly through the swirling whiteness, avoiding the blue-green shots that rattled through. Tenac sent messages to Gizi telling her which direction the majority of shots were coming from. A moment later, he knew she heard him because the large blasts exploded in that direction, and the laser blasts became less numerous.

At last he spotted the door to the shuttle up ahead. He sprinted for it, and a moment later regretted his decision. The raider to his left, Clara, went down. He heard her scream in pain, then gasp through a sob for a moment. By the time he looked over at her, the pained expression on her face and her still form, arched backward, told him that she was gone. He fired several covering shots in the direction from which the blasts had come, and when he saw more fire from the same direction, he was able to take down one of the flyers.

The doctor and the professor rushed passed him, opened the door to the shuttle, and went inside. Otto helped to cover, and told the second raider to get inside next. Then he and the sergeant argued over who would cover and who would go inside, both insisting the other move first, until at last they hurried in together, almost crushing one another at the door.

A few shots fired after the shuttle as it took off, trying to get that lucky shot that would knock it out of the sky, but they found no such mark, and the shuttle made it away.

* * *

Shasa's eyes fixed rigidly on Professor Gustav, as he had introduced himself. She glared at him as though he was to blame for the death of one of her raiders, and the injury of a second. They were light years away from his planet now, and it was time for him to talk. She expected answers from the professor, and they needed to include a tidy profit to make this whole venture worthwhile. Sergeant Tenac, Ansil Marin, the communications officer, and two raiders, both friends of their gunned down comrade, also shared the room. Every one of them was expecting the same answers from the man they had rescued.

Shasa had set this meeting in the mess hall where they could sit at a table on which she could place the rod. The interrogation room seemed overly harsh for someone who was ostensibly an ally, but she was in too foul a mood to be inclined to provide the luxury of the lounge. Besides, the professor was hungry, and Shasa determined that he'd provide more thorough answers on a full stomach.

The professor was digging through a meal they had provided. It was the first ration of off-world food, including fresh vegetables, that he had had in a long time. Oblivious to their stares, he satisfied his hunger first before looking up to give them any answers. At last he spoke. "They call themselves the Dark Agents. So named for their ultimate design to veil all knowledge of previous alien intelligence behind a dark wall of secrecy. They are the scourge of xenostudies; opposed to all knowledge and education on the subject. They hunt down and destroy alien artifacts, murdering those who have seen them, and covering their tracks behind them." He said the last sentence as a closing thought while he leaned down to take in more food.

“Why would anyone do that?” Shasa asked. “What do they even gain?”

“They are cultists,” Professor Gustav explained. “Their goal is to shroud humanity in ignorance.”

“Where’s the profit in that?” Shasa pursued.

Professor Gustav looked Shasa in the eye the way he would a childish pupil in one of his classes. “My dear girl. Not everyone is obsessed with the pursuit of currency. Consider my daughter, for instance. She has dedicated her life to the very opposite of the Dark Agents. She jonders from planet to planet seeking out clues to new life and civilizations. When she finds artifacts, she sends them to museums and universities for study, rather than destroying them like the barbarians you just encountered, or selling them to corporations that will only use them for their own self-interests.”

Shasa half rolled her eyes. One of the benefits of being captain was supposed to be that she was beyond such chastisement. But this artifact, while not so much valuable in itself, was supposed to lead to something that could be worth millions of electros. Perhaps this man’s daughter was the key. “Where is your daughter?”

“She is the reason I told your officer that I could answer your questions. She and her team of archaeologists are researching the ruins of a Raginor settlement on Beta Andreas. They believe they have discovered the legendary Gate of Eternity. The rod you are carrying is the key to this powerful portal,” he concluded as he nodded to the rod resting between them, its mouth opened wide toward the professor.

The officer that the professor referred to, Otto, was at the present time commanding on the bridge keeping the ship in a holding pattern until they figured out where they were going. Shasa was glad he was at the moment, as she knew he would come up with a snarky remark to this insane concept. And Shasa suspected it would only get stranger.

Presently, she was proven correct. Shasa suddenly noticed also that other utensils on the table were pointed toward the rod. It was possible this was a coincidence as they could have been placed that way originally. But it wouldn’t have made a lot of sense to have laid them out crooked like that, and on opposite sides of the table. She looked up to see some of the fruits which they hung on the ceiling were also leaning unnaturally toward the rod, as though they were in some way reaching for it.

The professor noticed her perplexity and said, “There is a slight gravitational pull inside it which fluctuates. Sometimes there is no sign of it at all. Other times, like this, it becomes stronger. It’s supposed to be at its strongest when the Gate of Eternity is near.”

“What’s the Gate of Eternity?” Shasa asked, not certain she wanted to hear the answer.

“Nobody knows for certain,” the professor answered. “It’s only written about in the Raginor’s most sacred texts, and even there, it’s only rumor. It is said to be a passage to nirvana... The path to Heaven.”

Shasa felt like rolling her eyes again. She was more thankful than ever that her brother was not present.

“Even the Sigueran, a race bent on the destruction of the Raginors, wrote of this Gateway. They were trying to find it, and the rod which controlled it. The Raginors hid their secrets well before they were destroyed. The Siguernas thought they had discovered it...” The professor smiled slightly, running his finger across the mouth at the end of the rod, “...but it disappeared from their grasp somehow. And now you control it.”

Shasa yanked the rod away from him. She would be damned if he'd use some sleight of hand to take this treasure away from her. "So if we take it to your daughter, she'll pay us well for it?"

The professor again looked disappointed in Shasa, as though she was an underachieving student. "You will be properly compensated for your efforts, captain. I have no doubt."

* * *

Any planet with the designation Alpha, Beta, or any other Greek sign, is one that has not yet been charted, let alone settled by humans. It means the planet is on the fringe, far away from the interest of corporations and even explorers. And far away from any help should one require it.

Captain Shasa Kerikova was very aware of this fact as the Black Lotus appeared out of the colorful flash of spectrum drive in the silent, empty Andreas system. If Professor Gustav was correct, this system once thrived with ships flying to and from the second planet until some other race came along and destroyed them. Since that time there had been nothing for millions of years, save for a handful of archaeologists led by Gustav's daughter Shayda.

Communications Officer Ansil Marin was now trying to hail Shayda and her crew on the planet's surface. He first tried a general signal, then narrowed it down to a frequency provided to him by the professor. There was no response. They placed the ship into orbit and tried again, still nothing. Gustav worried while Shasa recognized the inevitable conclusion to what had happened. The Dark Agents were more than a step ahead of everyone. They knew about this outpost and had already sent a team to capture the location of the gate. They were merely waiting for their other team to arrive with the rod that Shasa now held in her hand. She never trusted anyone else with anything of value. Her crew was held together by her denial of their individual capacities to get wealthy off their discoveries.

What was a little disconcerting was the lack of a Dark Agent ship in orbit. There could be a smaller one on the planet, but if they had come in force, as Shasa had assumed, they would need something large enough to be detected. She had Gizi Sioban, the sensors commander, run a second, then a third scan to be certain. She moved on to scanning the planet's surface, coordinating her two sensors operators to cover as much ground as possible as efficiently as they could.

Shasa then wondered if that was the point; to lure them in the way they had been baited onto the professor's moon where the Dark Agents could spring a trap. She wanted to ask Gustav what he thought, but the man was beside himself with worry. He scurried along the dividing wall on the bridge where the sensors operators did their work, trying to spot any sign of his daughter or her crew. They were running across the most likely spots where life may be, whether friend or foe.

Shasa was already organizing a landing crew. She would go with them this time, taking the rod with her. She alone would arrange the sale once they located the archaeologists. Shasa was not so naïve to believe they would have enough to pay on the spot, especially after being captured by cultist weirdos. But she would need the proof that she had it, and she didn't trust anyone else with the responsibility. Otto would come with her; she wanted his muscle and his weapon. Mostly his weapon. With that in mind, she would also bring Sergeant Tenac and a raider for more support. She wanted to bring more firepower, but she knew she'd need Professor Gustav with them to help search, and Dr. Erida in case he was needed for the archaeologists.

There was no official chain of command after Shasa and her brother, so she appointed Gizi Sioban to take command in her absence since sensors would be so important in this instance, and she had direct communication to her boyfriend Sergeant Tenac.

Gustav made an exclamation of recognition. "You found something," Shasa said, approaching him.

"Yes. Go back a half tick. There." The screen revealed a misty jungle. It looked no different than most of the rest of this planet, which was overgrown with greenery, mountains, and oceans. This was in a valley near a thin river that cut through as though weaving drunkenly toward its destination. Just to the southwest of one point in this river, an elongated, misshapen tree seemed to branch out in a triangular fashion. Upon closer examination, one could see that this was no tree, but a thin tower. It was easy to miss, especially with moss and other greenery pressing through its cracks. But it was unmistakably a constructed tower. Having now spotted that, another sensors operator found a second tower nearby, then Gizi found a third. "That will be the Raginor settlement," the professor said. "They were a race of climbers and almost always had towers somewhere in their cities. The rest is probably beneath the canopy."

His last word was the very problem with landing right next to the towers. There was a veil of green leaves that blocked their view of the ground. Navigating the shuttle past them would be difficult enough, but if anything was waiting for them down there, it was certain death. Shasa ordered them to find a nearby clearing that wasn't the river.

One was located two kilometers to the northeast. It was large enough for the shuttle, and then some. In fact, this was confirmed to be where the archaeologists had been when Gizi noticed several crates nestled at the edge of the clearing, just under the edge of the jungle's canopy. An occasional breeze pulled back the leaves far enough to reveal the supplies for just a few moments before they were replaced. This was clearly where they had embarked from, but where their own shuttle could be was now the mystery. And if the Dark Agents had landed, where was their ship? This was the most logical location for anyone to land, but nothing was visible.

The six of them would just have to land and find out. Simeon Tabor, the navigator, put the Black Lotus into low orbit, close enough for support and a quick escape just over the clearing. The starship was just getting into position when Shasa and the others got to the shuttle. She called up to the bridge crew, confirming everyone there was ready, and they were.

She looked at the five others in their seats, all strapping in and preparing for departure. "Everyone ready?"

"Yes, ma'am," they responded; all except Otto, sitting next to her. His silence garnered her attention, and he looked at her confidently in the eyes and winked. She sighed, and told him to take them down. The front jaw of the ship slowly dropped open, and they slid out.