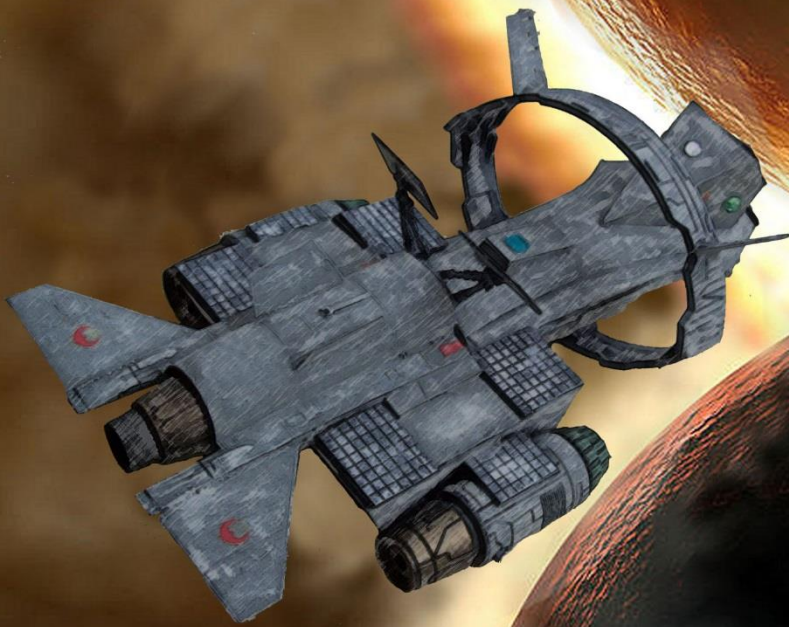


*Tales of the
Black Lotus*

THE GATE
OF ETERNITY
PART 3



Otto, Tenac, and his raider fanned out as soon as they landed, scanning the tree line carefully for an ambush they were certain was prepared to spring. They kept low and kept moving, making themselves hard targets and trying to do the work that normally required twice their number. They moved their rifles from the trees to the crates to bushes to the ground where they could be hiding in foxholes. Nothing.

Each said in turn “Clear,” though none said the word with much conviction. The Dark Agents were around somewhere. If they weren’t, the archaeologists would be out here welcoming them, or asking what the hades pirates were doing landing near their camp.

Considering that this very fact might be the reason for the archaeologists to hide, Professor Gustav exited the shuttle and called out to his daughter. He shouted in every direction, hoping for an answer from someone, anyone. But he was met with only the chattering noise of the jungle. There was one sound that stood out from the others as particularly obnoxious. A sort of cackling that was interrupted by an occasional whistle. Otto got a quick glimpse of the source of this sound; a sort of gangly monkey-like creature with a torso as small as its head, and bat-like wings connecting its left leg to its left arm and its right leg to its right arm. The whistle came from it sucking in air after it had blown it all out from its cackling. This came in rapid succession with its lungs being as small as they were in such a tiny body.

Shasa exited as well, striding over to the crates, one hand always close to the pistol strapped to her leg. She laid her hand on the metal as though inspecting it by touch and sight. They were plain, worn, well-traveled metal crates with a fading stamp “Universalis Arcanum”. She felt confident enough in their authenticity that she opened one. Inside were dozens of individualized shrink-wrapped meals ready to be heated with any portable cookery. The sealed container she had opened was lined with preservation materials to keep them from spoiling, but regardless, Shasa guessed they hadn’t been here long. If they had, either the archaeologists or the Dark Agents would have consumed a number of them, and there was no sign that they had been so much as rifled through. Only the top couple layers had been taken out, enough to feed a team of a dozen for a day or so.

She opened another crate briefly to see replacement parts, picks, brushes, and electronic gadgets for finding old relics; stuff Shasa had no idea or interest in how to use. Her job was to get the valuables once they were out of the ground, or sell them to people like the ones currently missing.

Speaking of which, it was time they were located so she and her own crew could be on their way. She abandoned the crates and stepped toward the only cleared trail away from the landing area. It opened immediately into a second clearing with erected huts. These were not ancient stone structures Shasa had seen on some alien planets where long ago civilizations had once thrived. These were temporary, recent homes for humans. The archaeologists’ camp, she gathered. “Otto!” she called. “I want your opinion on something.”

The last sentence made it clear to Otto that his sister had an ulterior motive. She wouldn’t be simply asking for his opinion. He met her at the crate to see what she wanted. Shasa opened the door and leaned as far as she could inside. Otto leaned in with her, confused. “The agents are hiding inside the archaeologist huts,” she told him quietly.

“How do you know?” he asked, equally conspiratorial.

“Isn’t that where you’d set the trap?” she asked.

“Away from any support from the ship,” he concluded, nodding.

“I’m going into the camp with the howling professor and the doctor. You take the two raiders through the woods and moze in behind them. Comprend?”

Otto stared at his sister with worried eyes. But he knew she was right. They had ambushed merchants and traders in the past using the exact tactic she was suggesting the Dark Agents were using. Whenever he did it, he was so focused on the target that if they had someone around the perimeter, he probably would miss it. He couldn't argue with the plan, so he lifted his head from the crate and called to Sergeant Tenac and the raider, "I want you two to go through these crates! You're going to apprend whatever clues you can about where their owners disappeared!"

Shasa in turn gathered Professor Gustav and Dr. Brody to her. She would not tell them they were bait. Brody would throw a fit, and at best would reveal so much fear that the agents would know there was a trap, and she had no idea how the professor would react. She just pointed out the huts and herded them in that direction. As she predicted, Professor Gustav began shouting for his daughter and Dr. Brody wanted to rush to the huts to check for survivors. Shasa had to slow them down long enough for the second team to slip into the woods and make their way around to the flank. She used the pretense that she wanted to check for traps first to keep them from hurrying past her. When Dr. Brody began to ask about Otto, Shasa interrupted him saying they should check everything outside the huts first.

Assuming there was a reason Shasa didn't want him to ask the question, Dr. Brody didn't ask again, and got to work searching. Professor Gustav was too involved in his search for his daughter to even notice they had reduced to half their original number.

There were close to ten huts in all, some of them with small enclosures next to them that housed necessities. One of them, ostensibly the meal hut, was larger than the others. None of the fires were smoldering, nor was there smoke emerging from any chimney, so there was no sign anyone had just been there. A couple of the crates had been brought into the area with a remote control dolly which was parked by one of the huts. One was open, but did not look ransacked. Above, the canopy of trees shrouded over the clearing to hide their location. On the opposite end, another trail cut into the depths of the jungle

Shasa was trying to appear interested in the search, but she kept running her eyes across the huts, trying to catch a glimpse of the people she knew were inside them. She spotted no one, and began to wonder if she had been mistaken as she approached a small chest near one of the buildings. Opening it, she found it full of old relics no doubt discovered in the alien ruins.

At last she heard the words she had been expecting. "Put your hands up." The same was repeated at other huts, directed at the professor and the doctor. Shasa was just glad they had attempted to capture them rather than firing first. These guys were fast... and quiet. She had thought she would hear them with just enough warning to go for cover and to tell the others to do the same. But they had surprised even her ears, not an easy feat to accomplish.

Shasa and the two men raised their hands obediently. Her hands didn't go high. They wouldn't be up for long. She now saw her captor. He was not a big man, not someone who would rely on his brawn. But his pistol was perfectly steady in his hand, as though held on a tripod, and his gaze was unwavering. Or at least that's how it seemed. She could not see past his dark goggles which covered most of the upper half of his face. He wore a black suit with a hint of white near the front collar, almost like that of a priest, but more narrow, and able to be folded over to hide all hint of lightness in his attire. Every part of his clothing was so well pressed, he appeared more prepared to enter a board meeting than fight on a battlefield, or search ruins in a jungle. He wore a hat with a thin, crisp little rim and a gray feather whose front point was directed straight at its target. His pistol, too, was all black, but with switches and nobs of which Shasa was unfamiliar.

Gustav began blithering, "Please. I only want to be abso my daughter is safe. What can I offer you ensure her safety?"

The agents did not answer. A few more emerged from the buildings; all of them dressed the same. Someone took Shasa's pistol and communicator. She waited for her brother to emerge.

Gustav turned to every member of the gathering crowd and pled with them. "At least one of you must be a father! I implore you as a parent, please tell me what has become of my daughter!" Still no response.

Shasa continued to wait for her brother. Where in hades was that idiot?

Her question was soon answered as he was led out of the jungle into the clearing along with the sergeant and the raider, no weapons in their hands. They were followed by Dark Agents who did, some of whom were carrying Otto and Tenac's rifles. "They got Vera," Otto told Shasa.

Shasa didn't know how to respond. This was their one play, and it was foiled. Now what would happen to them? The same thing that had happened to the archaeologists? Would the same thing happen to their ship?

As if appearing to answer her questions, an older, female Dark Agent emerged from one of the huts. She wore her goggles on her forehead rather than over her eyes. Her curly strawberry hair rippled out from under her hat, and her suit bore flourishes of white. She began by addressing Otto, "And we will take good care of her, First Officer Otto." She then turned on Shasa and approached her. "Captain Kerikova. I regret to inform you that you will not be receiving compensation for your contraband. All I can offer is a short extension of your lives in exchange for a peaceful passing of the artifact in your possession." The woman's voice was as crisp as her outfit. Every consonant was enunciated with sharp precision, yet her eyes were gentle, as though she was trying to ease the blow of a break-up. The Dark Agent officer held out her hand in front of the captain.

Shasa saw no choice. She unbuttoned the pocket of her pants in which she kept the rod and pulled it out. She wanted to smash it against the woman's cheek, but knew she wouldn't get halfway before she'd be shot down. Instead, she shoved it into her hand. The woman held it up to her face, examining it, as though the mouth of the rod was opening to her. "The gateway to utopia."

"You can't really believe in that," Shasa said sardonically.

The woman looked piteously at Shasa like she was a child who just asked where babies came from. "If you set eyes on only a small percent of what we have vised, nothing would seem impossible."

"But..." Professor Gustav blurted. He paused, confused, then at spoke again, now with the officer's attention. "You're organization is bent on destroying artifacts. Suppressing all knowledge of its existence."

"Professor Herod Gustav," the Dark Agent officer said, striding over to him. "One of the prime collectors of ancient xeno-artifacts. Your collection was impressive. I've vised images of your confiscated stash. Just before they were demolished, of course. But even garbage men hold onto a memento or two." She grinned sardonically, as though sharing a private joke with Gustav.

His will overcome at the knowledge of his life's work ruined, he could think now of only one thing. "M... My..." He blubbered, trying to speak.

“Your daughter?” the woman asked, her voice cold like iron on a frigid day. The old professor nodded. “We are not a cruel people, Mr. Gustav. Despite what rumors may spread about us. And as such, I cannot in good conscious take you with us.”

“Why?” he asked, both fear and relief in his voice.

“Because,” the woman said leaning into him so she could speak softly. “I would not wish you to go through the trauma of vising what we have done to her corpse.”

Professor Gustav’s eyes widened with fear and anger. Tears welled up immediately.

Before he could begin crying aloud, the woman swung the rod into his head. The sound of his skull cracking echoed into the trees and disturbed the animals, who cackled and fluttered. She beat him again and he screamed in pain as he fell to the ground. She lifted the rod higher this time and brought it down on his temple with a mighty blow. It cracked open the left side of his face. His right eye fixed in place, and faded. His raggedy, slight form went limp.

Dr. Brody had already started toward him, but had been grabbed by two agents who held him back. When the professor was still, Brody exclaimed, “You dirty, cowardly malfas! The man was helpless...”

“It was a mercy kill,” she interrupted. “You will all understand soon. Though you’ll have to push through the pain to see it.” She strutted toward a shelter next to one of the huts and dragged out a magnabike while she ordered her agents to take the prisoners to the city. She’ll race ahead to get the rod there for the ceremony. She activated the bike and it raised up over the ground, ready to go.

“I have one question,” Shasa said, speaking like she was giving someone an order. She wasn’t about to grovel now that she saw they were all to be killed in any case. “How do you expect to leave? You’ve got no ship, and ours is guarding the planet.”

“Oh captain,” the woman said, her eyebrows drooping on the sides as though she was disappointed in Shasa’s stupidity. “We have all of that arranged.” With that she hopped on the bike, and turned into a blur zipping down the trail. A moment later the other agents urged Shasa, Otto, Dr. Brody, Tenac, and their raider along, leaving behind the body of Professor Gustav in the remains of his daughter’s camp.

* * *

Gizi wanted to get everything right. She didn’t take the captain’s chair very often, Shasa and Otto hardly ever leaving the ship. And even during those very few times, someone else usually took over. She wanted to prove herself up to the task. Her first obstacle to overcome was her shyness. Though often very well liked, especially by men, Gizi had always been extremely insecure. She had no trouble speaking up to those she knew well, such as the members of her sensors crew. But when it came to larger numbers of people, such as the six people on the bridge, or calling to the entire crew, her voice became breathy, as though she was standing at a great height looking down, another fear of hers.

The first few orders she gave had to be repeated when crew members heard she was saying something, but couldn’t make it out. It was unimportant at the moment, they were merely keeping orbit and monitoring the landing party. They had just departed the ship and half were heading down a path while the other half were cutting through the woods. Gizi wanted to make sure their scanners did not lose them.

Gizi overcompensated by imposing an overbearing formality. No one called her Gizi, first of all. She was Lieutenant, or Acting Captain Sioban. No one was to use the shorthand

language they often used to say things quickly. They weren't in a rush, so there was no need to cut corners. She even tightened the belt straps of her outfit to give it a more brisk appearance. Though the bridge jackets and trousers were indeed uniforms of a sort, they were so individualized and worn so loosely that they didn't look like they were. She would change that while in command.

She had a thought that might help the captain, and would certainly help them keep an eye on the group from above. She ordered one of her sensors personnel to switch the view to infrared so they could keep an eye on the landing party. They may also see danger up ahead. As soon as the view changed, it most certainly was helpful. They saw the heat from the bodies of men and women lying in wait inside the huts of the archaeology camp. It was a trap.

Gizi lunged to her feet and ordered communications to hail the captain. Before he could open the channel, the ship was knocked so hard from the side, it felt like they had been rammed. Sparks flew from the consoles, and the lights blinked out. Reserve power brought back a couple small spots of light and the view screen, but little else seemed to work. It was as though someone had flipped the power switch off.

Then the starry sky on their view screen was replaced with a stern, unflinching face with a bald head and only one eye. His left was covered over with a mechanical and electronic monocle, and this seemed to be peering out at them more than the real eye. Gizi whipped her head around at Comm. Officer Marin, but he leaned out of his little room to shrug his shoulders with confusion. He had not opened a channel, the man had just appeared there.

"You have been blasted with an electronic surge," the man said. "You are unable to escape. Remain where you are, and you will be processed in due time." And just as quickly as he appeared, he disappeared, replaced by the planet and the stars beyond. A sensors operator turned the view behind them so they could see the enemy ship.

It looked like a beetle in both color and appearance. Its slick black form made it almost impossible to see in the dark sky. Its aerodynamic form made it look like a wing in space, save for the wing-like shapes sticking up over the top, giving it more of the appearance of a flying insect.

"Closer in," Gizi ordered.

The image zoomed into the juttied out wings. It was just as Gizi feared, they were bristling with weapons and missiles, enough to blow them out of orbit.