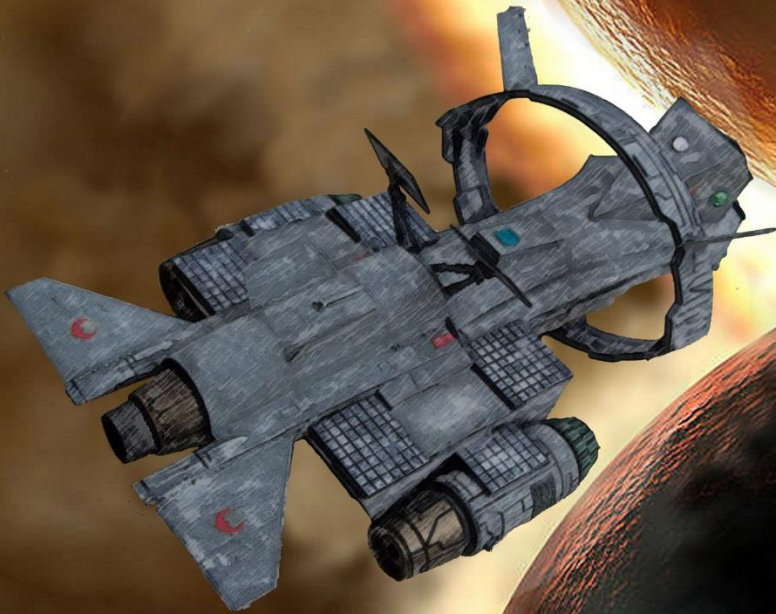


*Tales of the
Black Lotus*

THE GATE
OF ETERNITY
PART 4



Ricard Tenac learned about the troubles on the ship through a mind message Gizi sent him. His own ground team was in a bind, being escorted down the trail to a long rope bridge across the gorge that accompanied the river. They were surrounded by approximately 20 armed Dark Agents taking them to who knew where, but it was clearly somewhere that they were all supposed to die. He had obviously already known they needed to escape, but now that he knew the trouble facing Gizi, he was all the more determined.

The bridge was the place to do something. The agents at the front had to narrow down to single file, as did the prisoners behind them. Everyone was vulnerable here. The drop was more than a hundred feet into a river whose current would sweep away the body as though it had never been there. He studied the anchor points at the end of the bridge as he approached them. They were staked deep into the ground, but could be cut easily with a single blast from a pistol, or possibly a harsh swing of a knife. He felt the sharp, cold metal of a gun push him forward. He wanted to swing around and knock its barrel on its back, but he knew he'd be dead before he got halfway around, so he kept his temper in check. It was not his window of opportunity yet.

Shasa was at the front of her landing party, just behind the agents. The rather scrawny young one that had stepped out of the hut closest to Shasa and captured her was directly in front of her. He was walking sideways, his pistol perpetually on her, always level despite the rocking and swaying of the bridge, as he used his other hand to guide himself on the rope and walked across like a crab. It did not slow his motion. In fact, he was slightly faster. The agents wanted to get across the bridge as quickly as possible.

Otto, directly behind Shasa, was none too pleased at the speed up. It increased the wave-like motion such that he felt as though he would tumble off. This would not be so bad if he thought he could survive the fall, or he could make the agents tumble off before he would. But neither was true by his estimation; so he held tight to the ropes on each side and tried to slow them under the guise of steadying himself, which was not entirely a lie.

Dr. Brody, behind Otto, was lagging behind anyway, and Otto's slowdown was merely closing the gap. "You still with us, old timer?" Otto asked.

"I've hiked mountains that wore you out just gandering at them, snapper!" Brody responded.

"You ever go through something like this with my parents?" Otto asked.

Someone shouted at them not to talk in line, and to hurry up. Brody answered anyway, "They never took the wild chances you kids take."

An agent near the front made a noise. There followed a short argument. Shasa peeked around the scrawny captor to see what was happening and spotted an agent at the front holding Vera as if ready to shoot something with it on the opposite side of the bridge. Looking forward, Shasa saw the rifle was pointed at one of the glider monkeys, like the one that had been spying on them near the landing spot. It was standing at the end of the bridge, staring at them curiously. Cackling spread first across the tress ahead of them, then echoing into the trees behind them.

The agents at the front didn't seem to notice. One of them said he was going to shoot the glider monkey; the other one said he'd destroy the bridge if he did. Shasa secretly hoped he'd fire. If the bridge fell, at least some of the agents would fall, and she and her crew would have a better chance of holding onto a falling bridge than they did of shaking these guards before they took them to their doom. Otto was just anxious to see his "girl" in action.

The glider monkey dashed Shasa's hopes as it jumped off the bridge and swept majestically into the canyon. The path was clear, and they could continue. But the agent with Vera followed the animal and fired. The beam hit the glider monkey squarely in the back. What

parts of the torso didn't explode hung loosely on the glider wings, flopping in the breeze as they sailed slowly downward.

"That's my girl," Otto said, callously disregarding the useless murder of the animal as the agents started them forward again. Shasa focused on the rising sounds of the chattering through the trees. They seemed to be objecting to what had just happened, and they were growing increasingly agitated.

The front of the line was mere steps away from laying their feet on firm ground again when another glider monkey landed in front of them, closer this time. Then another landed closer still. They folded their wings in front of them, as though guarding themselves. The agent with Otto's rifle Vera lifted it and took aim.

Then the roaring cackles from the trees emerged, bathing the sky in a deafening continuous chattering. There were so many diving from the branches on both ends of the gorge that they nearly blotted out the sun. No one knew how to react at first, too uncertain were they as to what the gliding monkeys were doing. Then Shasa took a guess, looked back at her people and motioned to the ground. They all got down low to the planks.

The Dark Agents did not notice what the pirates were doing. Their eyes were skyward, and soon their weapons were, too. They did not want to add to the fury of the animals by firing again, but it soon did not make a difference as the dark brown cloud of small bodies descended on them. The Dark Agents fired, knocking a handful of fury bodies out of the sky, but it was a few grains in a rain of sand that poured over them. Many of them tumbled over the edge. Some stood their ground, and the monkeys latched onto their bodies, their limbs, their faces.

The scrawny man next to Shasa screamed in agonized horror. The claws of the glider monkey's feet were dug into his neck. Its little hands were clawing into his eyes. His whole face was covered in blood as his legs tripped against the rope railing and he somersaulted off the side. The glider monkey let go of him halfway down and flew away.

Shasa motioned forward and she and her team rushed ahead. Sergeant Tenac was grabbed by a Dark Agent at the back. He turned to punch the guy, but just then they were both accosted by a glider monkey. Both agent and pirate struggled to peel the animals from their bodies as another couple latched to them.

The raider turned and, not considering the critters, punched the Dark Agent several times to get him away from his commander. One of the other Dark Agents who had now peeled all life off of himself fired at the raider, missing him, but hitting the rope railing, weakening it. Sergeant Tenac managed to remove the two glider monkeys from himself. Holding one in each of his large hands, he spotted the freed Dark Agent, and he threw the small animals at him. The agent shot one out of the air, but the second, seeing the execution of its friend, latched onto the man's arm and bit deeply into his hand, causing him to drop the gun.

The raider was now locked in combat with the Dark Agent, their arms grasping one another as they wrestled for the upper hand. Neither noticed the glider monkeys coming at them full speed until they knocked into them, and threw them against the weak railing. The rope split, and the two men fell over the side, tumbling down into the abyss.

The rest of the bridge jilted sideways. Sergeant Tenac grabbed the railing on the other side. A handful of agents who lost their footing slid off, and others managed to keep their feet until the bridge steadied. Otto grabbed R. Brody and tossed him forward onto land where he overcame Shasa dashing into the woods.

The Dark Agent with Vera saw her and aimed at her. Just before he could fire, Otto slammed into the man. Furious at someone who had stolen his "girl" and tried to shoot his sister,

he slammed the rifle into his jaw, stunning him. He yanked it away and swung it into the only other agent on land, knocking him out cold, then brought it around again to knock the man who had stolen his rifle from him off the edge into the abyss.

Sergeant Tenac was in his own rage. Having lost another raider, and aware at the danger his girlfriend was in, he didn't think to run, but rather swung at everything in sight. Leaning to the left to stay on the bridge, he swatted glider monkeys like they were gnats and rushed the few remaining agents on the bridge. He kicked one, sweeping him off the bridge, punched another, then put a third in a head lock. A couple wild shots fired his way, but the animal bodies were too thick to get a good aimed shot.

At last Tenac heard the shouts from his commanding officers, and his sense of duty kicked back in. He threw the agent he had at his fellows and turned to the edge of the bridge. Then, hobbling toward the left, he hurried across to the other side.

Gizi got the message that Ricard and the others were safe. She needed to pull off a similar miracle, but she had no glider monkeys to help. She did, however, have Domi Marida, an engineer whose clever mind had kept the Black Lotus flying despite a shameful lack of necessary resources for years. Oftentimes her patchwork repairs involved using or creating assets that were more mechanical in nature than electronic. Gizi now wanted to know how many of those systems could be used to get at least part of the ship running again.

She met with Domi in the engine room so she could see the parts for herself. As soon as Domi started pointing them out, Gizi knew she was in over her head and that the trip was wasted. As Domi pointed out the long pipes, the joints, the rods, the engines and all the electrical wiring that was now almost entirely useless, Gizi just took her word for everything.

“Bottom line, Chief Marida. Can you rig enough to give us anything?”

Domi sighed and looked hard at her engine parts. “I can rig enough with compression and mechanical parts to give us a little maneuverability, maybe some missiles, but not a trill more.”

Gizi smiled slightly. That would be perfect. One of her sensors operators had managed to use what little power they had to detect a weakness in the enemy ship. Its rear was weak in its point defense system. A well placed missile could take out their engines. It wasn't much, but if they then remained in the rear arc of the enemy ship, they might be able to remain hidden from any firing long enough to repair their power. She gave Domi the go-ahead to start making the alterations, and she returned to the ridge.

Shasa and the remains of her landing party crept through the jungle, avoiding the road for fear of more agents who might find them. There weren't many animals to fear among the trees; the majority of them seemed to have attacked the bridge. Shasa slowed them when they heard drums beating and voices. It sounded like some ancient, tribal ceremony. They moved quieter now, approaching a drop in the landscape, staying low, Otto with Vera pointed forward, and Ricard Tenac with a pistol he had taken from the unconscious dark agent at the ready.

They arrived at the edge of a wide, round valley; a large crater overgrown with grass and moss with trees ringing its edges. At the base was a large, modern campsite complete with light stands, air conditioned tents, amenities such as mobile restrooms and cooking facilities, etc. Scattered among these human setups were ancient stone ruins. Some were statues, some were partial buildings. It looked like a half destroyed alien version of the same campsite, but more permanent. Men and women in the usual dark outfits of the cult walked among the structures.

They were all dressed in their uniforms, and Shasa wondered if they ever dropped their formal façade.

Near the center, the majority of them were gathered in wide arcs, half surrounding a partial stone pyramid. Stairs on one side led to a flat top. Carved into the stone center of the flat top was a round symbol Shasa could hardly make out. Four broken columns stood at all corners of its plateau, and they were continued by modern rods which held up a tarp. Hanging from this tarp was the vertical flag of the Dark Agents, a red eye against a deep black background with a star at its pupil. It was almost as if these eyes were watching everyone around them.

Also dangling from this overhang were four bodies, both men and women. Their throats had been cut, and their blood drained down into drains that ran along the sides of the steps where it collected into a pool. An altar sat in the center close to the steps. Behind it, a large, muscular, shirtless man with ceremonial paint drawn in stripes stood ready. His black dress slacks and polished shoes clashed with his tribal appearance, but they were mostly hidden behind the altar. He also wore his goggles, apparently the true sign of a Dark Agent cultist.

Coming up the stairs were two more muscular men with their faces painted, though they wore modern clothes from neck to toe, the black and white uniforms of the Dark Agents. Also, unlike the man at the top, they had shaved their heads and painted lines on them, almost as though to make up for their lack of tribal dress. They were dragging with them a woman dressed in an earthen colored outfit and a vest that was covered in pockets. She also wore a utility belt, two of the surest signs of an archaeologist aside from their rambling on about ancient alien sites. She was doing no such talking at the moment. She was screaming and crying through the gag in her mouth. Her most horrified and sustained call came when she looked up and saw the shapes of her friends hanging dead from the rafters. Weakened from the site, her legs barely resisted, and they drug her almost faint body up the stairs.

“This isn’t our fight,” Dr. Brody said. “There’s nothing we can do for them.”

“He’s on the bull,” Sergeant Tenac said. “They outnumber us. The bridge will probably be clear soon. We can hypo back to the shuttle without anyone knowing.”

Otto agreed as well, despite his enjoyment of a good fight. “We came for a profit,” he said. “They’re not going to buy that thing. They’ll just kill us for it and take it. We can find someone else who’ll buy it.”

Shasa didn’t take her eyes off the woman being dragged up the steps. There was something familiar about her. It took Shasa a moment, then realized what it was. She would be the head of the archaeologists, Professor Gustav’s daughter. The guys were right. This was not their fight. But she could not shake the memory of what lengths the professor would go to find her; the passion in his eyes as he pled for his daughter’s life. His last act was in trying to save her. Shasa then spotted the female Dark Agent who killed him. She was standing near the base of the stairs. Though she held a stone cold expression behind her black goggles, it appeared smug to Shasa. If nothing else, she didn’t want that worm to win.

Shasa stood and held the rod above her head. “Hey! You’re going to need this if you want to have your little ceremony!” she shouted.

The entire ceremony stopped. All noises stopped save for the distant rumble of animal life in the jungle. Dozens of goggled eyes now stared up at Shasa. The muscular man with the ceremonial blade stared at her in disbelief. The archaeologist and her two escorts looked up in confusion, almost as though no longer antagonists to one another but sharing in a bizarre moment together. The smug woman with the blank face looked up at her, too. She looked surprised that

her own agents were not with her, but pleased that the pirate captain had joined them nevertheless.

The other pirates were down in the bushes, too hidden for anyone in the valley to see. But they glared up at her with wide eyes. “What are you doing?” Otto asked in a repressed shout.

“I have no idea,” she responded through gritted teeth. “Keep your weapons trained on them and don’t let them see you.”

Otto and Sergeant Tenac had no choice. They readied their weapons. Dr. Brady grabbed a rock, aware it would probably be of little help.

Shasa stepped away from them and onto the trail. Her footfalls were labored. She really had no clue where this was going. But there was no turning back now. As she walked down into the valley, her footsteps were the only sound. The large camp of easily more than a hundred people added nothing. They all just watched her, trying to guess the plan that was non-existent. Shasa really knew she had reached a point of no return when she passed a wall of Dark Agents which then closed behind her. She would not be getting out but fighting, or somehow bargaining.

She marched up to the female Dark Agent she hated so much wearing her best Poker face. “I won’t ask you how you got away from my boys...”

“Good. Then you won’t waste any more of my time,” Shasa said sternly. She sometimes even surprised herself how well she could turn on this persona.

The woman was visibly taken aback, and a little intimidated. “What do you want?” she asked.

“To make a bargain.”

“A bargain?” the woman almost chuckled.

“Yes. I give you this rod. In exchange, you let go of her, and whatever other archaeologists you have, you get the power running on our ship in orbit again, and we leave you alone.”

The Dark Agent paused, trying to read Shasa. She then said, almost cautiously, “How about this counter offer. I kill you, take the rod, we do whatever we please with the archaeologist, and we blast your ship out of the sky.”

Shasa paused before answering. It was a sign of weakness, she knew, but she had to think. Her response therefore needed to be more powerful. “Anything happens to me, and we’ll do the same to you that we did to your friends that tried to bring us here. Here’s a little demonstration.” Shasa held aloft her hand with the rod. Her intention was to signal to Otto to have him take someone out. He could do it on his invisible setting where the blast was not seen. Someone just simply fell with only the source of the sound to belie from where the shot came. But in this environment, the sound should echo everywhere, so they’d never know where he was.

But just as she raised her hand in the air, a strange thing happened. Just above the platform at the top of the short pyramid, a swirl of vapor formed. It turned and twisted, condensing as it did into a thick fog. Then it ripped apart, a bubble of blackness forming in the middle. As it widened, dots of light were visible. Distant colored shapes of gas appeared. As the view grew, it became clear they were stars and gas clouds. This was a celestial sphere summoned forth by the ceremony and the rod.

Shasa’s hair blew past her face toward the dark globe. The wind was picking up and blowing everything, dust, loose particles, smoke, everything light directly toward the source. Even the trees that ringed the crater leaned inward, as though bowing to it. Its expansion slowed,

then stopped approximately ten meters off the top of the half pyramid. It was as large as the structure over which it hovered, and its edges shimmered, as though it was barely keeping its shape.

Everyone was transfixed, including Shasa, who never took down her arm. “The Gate of Eternity,” the Dark Agent woman said next to her.

It was now time for Shasa to play the bluff to its maximum. “Yes. I alone control its power,” she said. If you want it, you will provide us safe passage.”

Now the woman was truly smug. She turned on Shasa with a large grin on her face. “Nice try,” she said, and she calmly pulled out her pistol.

Shasa’s arm dropped in reaction to the move, as though slightly panicked. The movement seemed to affect the globe, for as soon as she did, the shimmering around the edges collapsed, and a flared ring appeared along the edges. The wind picked up, the trees bent further, and heavier objects were now thrown toward the epicenter.

A shot rang out from somewhere distant, and the female Dark Agent fell back. Her feet no longer planted on the ground, she was lifted into the air and fell up the pyramid toward the globe, screaming along the way. One of her feet caught on a stair and she tumbled head over heels toward the altar. There she smacked into the hands of the shirtless ceremonial leader who was now holding onto the altar to keep from being sucked in. Upon being hit by the female agent, his fingers let loose, and the two tumbled head over heels into the globe, disappearing in the blank darkness of space.

Others, too, were losing their grips to the ground, and were tumbling into the abyss. It soon became clear to Shasa, who had witnessed her share of hull breaches, that this was indeed a gateway, but not to a pleasant eternity, but rather open space. The inequality of pressure meant everything in the area was being sucked inward. Utilizing her training, she grabbed onto the nearest immovable structure, a stone ruin left over from whatever aliens lived here before, and she locked her hands with the rod stuck up her sleeve.

The force pulling at everyone became greater, and soon, many people were being sucked off their feet and tumbling into the dark globe. Tents were being yanked off their stakes and flying through the air like colorful ghosts. The makeshift roof collapsed and sucked in. Some of the larger Dark Agent structures crumbled and drifted in piecemeal. Even some trees were ripping out of their roofs and flying in. Human bodies added to the mix like rag dolls in garbage heaps.

Otto, Tenac, and Brody were hanging on to trees they prayed would not get uprooted, but who knew how much stronger this thing would get.

On board the Black Lotus, they had regained just enough power to get a few basic systems running, including a few of their sensors. They detected the anomaly on the planet, and though they did not understand what it was, they knew the Dark Agents would be distracted by it. The time had come to strike. Gizi sat down in the captain’s chair and called to engineering, “Go for it, Domi.”

Domi and her entire engineering crew were inside the large room where they had rigged all of the levers and gears to manually operate the ship. It looked more like a steam ship from the early days of sailing than it did a starship. All at once, they pulled what they needed to, and the thrusters engaged just enough to give the ship some momentum.

“Starboard high, 20 degrees!” Gizi shouted into the communicator.

“Starboard high! Twenty degrees!” Domi repeated, not only to confirm she got the order, but also to inform her crew. They ran to the proper gears and turned them, though not perfectly, and Domi had to correct them over the loud noise of grinding engines and steaming pressure valves.

The ship floated up and slightly over the Dark Agent vessel, but they felt a bump as the shuttle bay grinded against the Dark Agent top. The element of surprise was gone now. They had to do this quickly. Gizi stood and leaned over the holo-table, looking intently up at the view screen the way the captain always did. Now she understood why. Every ounce of her muscles were tensed. Her blood was pumping through her veins at an impossibly fast rate. As soon as she saw they had cleared the back of the enemy ship, she shouted to twist port.

The fast dance continued in the engine room, turning nobs and yanking levers, turning some back to their original positions, turning others to new positions. The noise intensified. A pipe burst, blowing steam out and threatening to domino into more damage. Domi shouted for repair teams to hurry to it. She reported to the captain that there wouldn't be much more from her end. They might have reached the end of their capabilities.

This had to work. Gizi's eyes were wide as the screen panned past the planet ahead. The move made her dizzy and light headed. She had never admitted it before, but sometimes when the ship made quick maneuvers, especially near planets, she looked away at her consoles. Now, as captain, she couldn't do it, and she sucked in an urge to vomit as she held firmly onto the holo-table. “Ready the missiles,” she blurted.

The weapons officer said they were ready. They could see the butt of the Dark Agent ship now. The engines had fired up and it was turning. They might be just too late. If it turned enough, the point defense systems would render their missiles useless. But this was their only chance. “Fire them all!” Gizi said.

A flurry of gray trails burst from the Black Lotus. They arced through space at the Dark Agent ship, fingering their way at the enemy. Sparkles of light appeared on the Dark Agent ship, their point defense system taking out some of the missiles. But a few of them got in behind the glow of the engine, and the next thing they saw were a short series of bursts, and the engine glow stopped. The Dark Agent vessel ceased to move, and the Black Lotus floated in behind it.

Gizi waited until they were safely in position, then she spat the contents of her lunch onto the floor.

On the ground, the gate was only expanding, and the force of the wind was increasing. The globe itself was even growing, slowly but surely. Its base was almost on the pyramid. Many of the Dark Agents, most of whom had not been near anything to hold onto, had been sucked inside, so Shasa found it to be the right time to stop it. She dropped the rod into her hand again and raised it up, believing that would close the gateway. It didn't. She tried pointing it down. Nothing. Her arm holding the ruin was now tiring so she slipped the rod back down the sleeve again and held on concerned she wouldn't be able to stop this at all.

One of the Dark Agents on the stairs suddenly caught her attention. The two who were there and the archaeologist with them were holding onto the steps for dear life. They were down to grasping with their fingers, and one had lost his grip. He tumbled up the stairs, over the lip at the top, hit his head on the altar, and flew into the abyss. The other slipped most of the way too before grabbing something else, but he was soon to falter as well. The archaeologist dropped a step or two as well, and would soon lose her grip.

Shasa thought that she might be able to crawl away from where she was. But she now realized that she simply couldn't live with herself if she abandoned the professor's daughter. So she let go of the ruin and let herself be pulled to the half pyramid. There her fingers found one of the lower stairs and she held on, her feet dangling at a 50 degree angle into the air above her. She saw the archaeologist about ten steps up. Beyond her, the last Dark Agent was grasping onto the altar for dear life. He lost the struggle, and was sucked into the bubble.

Shasa crawled down the steps as calmly as she could, remembering a hull breach when she was a child where she had to hold her breath and make her way to safety along an inverted ladder. Her parents had called her a brave little trooper then. No one would be there to call her anything here, especially if she failed.

She got to the level of the woman. There she reached out to grab her arm, and just in time, as the archaeologist lost her grip and began to fly back. Shasa held her tight with one arm, and kept her grasp on the stairs with the other. She struggled against the overwhelming pull of the gateway. It was a fight she was bound to lose, for she had to let go of one or the other in order to climb back down the stairs. Sweat and increased pressure were like time bombs to foil her, and the globe itself was expanding and would eventually reach them anyway.

Shasa remembered what her mother had said to her after the ladder climb against the hull breach. She told her that the best thing she had done was to keep her wits about her; to continue to think despite the pressure. She had remembered not only how to hotwire the hatchway to open for her, but even more importantly, how to make it close behind her.

There was no hatchway to crawl through here. But then again, she had a gateway. And the rod was the key. And keys lock as well as unlock doors. She remembered what Professor Gustav had said about the rod having a gravitational force, and she wondered if that would have an effect on the gateway.

Shasa still was unable to get the rod out without letting go, so she knew it was an all or nothing risk. She looked up to the row of trees where her brother was. She couldn't see him, but she knew he was there. She hoped he could see her expression, and hoped he'd read her wish that he get back to the ship and fly away if this plan didn't work.

She let go of the stair, much to the chagrin of the woman she was holding. They both tumbled backward, smacking the stone steps as they rolled upward. Shasa shook her arm, trying to bring the rod down out of her sleeve. After a couple more steps it dropped into her hand. She pulled it all the way out as her helpless form rolled up to the top. The woman was at the altar now, grabbing onto it with both hands. Her legs dangled off the end, her toes almost touching the globe.

Shasa flung the rod into the void. It plummeted end over end, flying through the globe's event horizon. Her hands now free, Shasa also grabbed onto the altar and held on for dear life. Side by side, the women kept hold of the stone slab as their bodies arched up toward the slowly expanding black bubble nipping at their feet.

The pull suddenly increased, causing their fingers to both slide, and they screamed all the air from their lungs. Looking back, though, Shasa saw that the globe was collapsing, shrinking smaller and smaller to the size of a marble. The pressure increased until at least their fingers were pulled loose, but they were thrown only to the opposite side of the altar where they fell to the cement ceiling of the pyramid. There they lay, panting from exhaustion among the debris left behind by the gate's rampage. It was gone now, everything was still. Even the animals were quiet, sucked in, retreated, or just plain humbled by the Gateway of Eternity, they had nothing to

say now. What few Dark Agents survived retreated into the woods in case something else was to happen.

Shasa looked over at the woman lying next to her, and through panting breaths asked, “Is your... last name... Gustav?”

“Doctor Gustav... Yes,” the woman said, another confused look on her face.

Shasa just nodded and laid down her head.

By the time the landing party returned to the Black Lotus with Dr. Gustav and some artifacts that might bring in a tidy prize, the Dark Agent vessel had repaired the damage to its drives and zipped away. It seemed to use some form of extra-light drive other than the standard spectrum drive that all humans used, but Shasa and her crew couldn't venture to guess what it was. Nor did they want to at this point.

They were just ready to get their own repairs done, and find somewhere else to make money. They now had an archaeologist who could appraise values more effectively; someone who may not stick with them for long, but owed them a favor and was willing to pay them back in services.

She was also able to escort her father's body to a proper burial spot; somewhere perhaps at the top of a lonely mountain among many ancient relics he once loved.

Shasa was back in her quarters for a couple days taking a well-earned rest. The ship only needed to go trade in some of the relics they had found for cash, and then needed to get repaired at a port they trusted. Lieutenant Sioban could handle that. Her handling of the Dark Agent ship proved she was not to be overlooked. Shasa was just glad she had Sioban's boyfriend as the ship's sergeant to keep her from leaving and finding her own command.

Shasa was nearing another dip into blissful sleep when she heard a deliberate clearing of the throat in her room. Only one person made such an obvious and poor attempt to get her attention, and he was also the only one who barged into her room uninvited so much. “What is it, Otto?” she asked.

“My room smells funny.”

“Your room always smells. I keep telling you to clean it up. You probably have something growing under all your stuff.”

After a beat, Otto said, “I'll never vis monkeys the same way again.”

Shasa smiled with a brief chuckle. “How did you look at them before?”

“As funny little people in cages.”

“That's 'cause you always saw them in zoos.”

“And that's where I want to vis them from now on.”

“They don't usually claw people's eyes out.”

“Yeah, well. Just case of it happening.” Another long beat before Otto finally said, “You know, next time you aprend what a device does, you can tell me. No need for all the dramatics...”

“I didn't register what the rod did,” Shasa sighed, still trying to keep her eyes closed and relax.

“You what? You really had no idea what you were going to do?”

Shasa shook her head.

“You may be a chick, but you've got bigger balls than all us guys on the ship combined.”

“You're a poet, Otto.”

“Your stunts are going to get us both killed. You comprehend that, don’t you?” Otto got up and started walking out of the room.

“No one says you have to stick around.”

“Yeah, but who will be ranging over your shoulder.”

“You may get your limbs yanked off by monkeys,” Shasa said, laughing to herself again.

“I can spare a limb. I have two of each,” he said. Shasa stopped chuckling and looked over at him quizzically. “I only have one sister.”