

VII. OPPRESSION

“Thou shalt not pursue the dark and occult arts – sorcery, alchemy and acts that defy nature.”
– *The First Terminal Law, from the Book of Novus*

On the far reaches of a world covered in barren rock and vast wastelands, a lone space ship descended into the atmosphere. Super-heated from entry, the ship parted poisonous clouds as it surged toward the rugged landscape below. The vessel only had one passenger, a man clad in armoured robes with his face hidden beneath a hood. Landing and disembarking from the ship, his arrival was unheralded except for distant flashes of green lightning in the distance, followed by the roar of thunder from the ionic storm.

The man uncovered a hidden hatch leading into a dank, dark cave. It was devoid of light except for the gentle bioluminescence of irradiated blue fungus, sheltered from the harsh environment of the planet's surface. Standing upon a Dark Artist symbol etched into the ground, a massive vault door stood before him. With a gesture of his hands the hooded figure activated the symbol beneath his feet. The heavy vault gate rumbled as it opened; revealing a tunnel that led even deeper into the earth.

After some time had passed the man eventually reached the far end of the tunnel, the location of an abandoned research site. It had several shelters, each with various facilities. One contained a large, advanced laboratory with expired research materials, another a small library, yet another with deteriorated bedding and even an armoury for Dark Artists from long ago. Most importantly, this location contained a functional rift gateway: a construct that could activate a portal. After scratching symbols onto the floor with a piece of chalk, the symbols flashed then faded. This caused the gate to come to life, revealing a destination that defied the laws of physics – a great fortress floating in an ocean of cold space.

After what seemed like an eternity, this hooded man, who had been known simply as the ‘Curator’, was finally home. This fortress held an arcane library and many artefacts; it was his refuge nestled within the Infinite Dark... yet still anchored to the Novus universe.

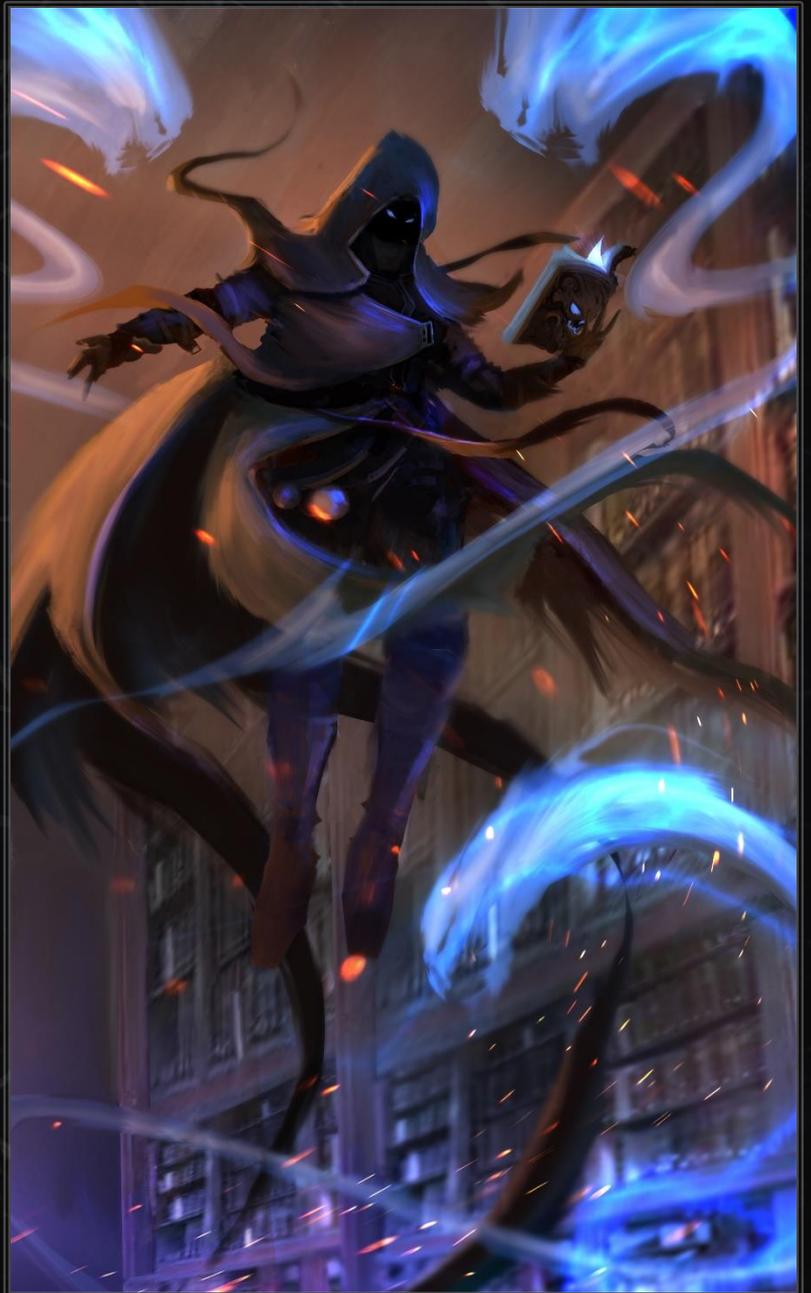
It had been many years since the Curator first discovered the vault on this forsaken ball of rock. He had learned much here, and also gathered powerful relics and weapons. Indeed, perhaps it was fate that he had come across this place.

In his childhood, he and his parents would regularly visit this planet. At that time, the world was a verdant paradise and a popular destination for recreation with the Novus citizenry. One fateful day while exploring the coastline he fell into the cave that housed this vault and sanctuary – an accident that saved his life.

The Curator's mind drifted, reflecting upon those memories... of the time when he was a child.

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The boy gasped and his heart skipped a beat as the ground gave way. Before he knew it, he was sliding down a rock surface and then, with a scream, he plummeted into a cave. Descending into darkness, his fall was caught by a subterranean river, which carried him even deeper into the caverns. Frantic and gasping for air, his eyes adjusted to the low lighting of the local fungus and rays of light trickling from the surface. He swam, then crawled onto a dry rock before catching his breath.



Listening, he could hear a distant waterfall, but more so the steady drips of water that surrounded him. He called out, but no one answered. Checking his body, he had no major injuries, just a few scratches and felt a little shaken from the sudden fall. Looking at a nearby pool, he could see his reflection. His black hair disappeared into the cave, while his usually smooth face bore a small cut on his right cheek. He could still see his large, blue eyes in the dark... normally inquisitive and curious, but now gripped with fear.

Lost in the caverns below, he wandered for hours, venturing deeper and deeper with only the glowing mushrooms for light. He constantly cried out for help, but no sound answered him except the seemingly endless echo of his own voice. After his last call faded, there was a massive rumble followed by the shaking of the very earth. The child fell over and cowered, thinking that he would die.

After what must have been several minutes, the shaking stopped. The cave seemed unaffected aside from a few rocks being dislodged, and some stalactites that snapped and fell into the seemingly endless underground river. With the passing of the tremor, the boy realised again that he was all alone.

While sobbing to himself, a woman appeared from the shadows. Her face was hidden beneath a cowl, and she was as surprised to find him as the boy was to hear her speak.

The woman asked him, "Child, how did you get in here?"

At this, the boy suddenly turned and was speechless. He couldn't even utter a sound; such was his surprise.

"I'm not going to hurt you, boy. Speak." She said.

The woman removed her hood to assure him of her good intentions. She was revealed to be beautiful and young, having long chestnut hair. Her stature was somewhat tall and strong, but still feminine in form. Her eyes were hazel and fixed upon the child, who finally summoned the courage to answer her question.

"I don't know. I fell down and got lost." Wiping away his tears, he asked her, "Who are you?"

The woman faintly smiled before she spoke. "My name is... Lucille. I don't get many visitors, especially children. Shall I lead you outside?"

The boy nodded and took Lucille's hand, which surprised her. She had seldom dealt with children, but none like this.

"First, I'm going to take you to my home and ensure you are unharmed before we head back to the surface. It will also be quicker this way."

After walking for several minutes, she led him to a rift gate and then for the first time he saw it — a great fortress. He gasped when he saw the suspended structure floating in space. Together they entered the rift, and it closed behind them.

"You're still soaking wet I see!" Lucille said with a laugh. "Here, take this dry robe. It was for a young acolyte some time back, but it should fit you well."

The child hadn't heard that term before. "What's an acolyte?"

"Ah, just an assistant in my work." replied Lucille.

"What do you work on, miss? I've never seen anything like this place before."

"Many things." Lucille kept the answer short then diverted the subject. "For now, let's check you over."

Lucille examined the boy, only finding a few scratches. "You're very lucky indeed! So, you fell from the surface into these caverns you say? I'll treat these little scrapes."

With her left hand having its index and middle finger raised together to the ceiling, Lucille then slowly waved her right hand as a fine mist of water gently settled on his scratches and healed them. The child was astonished.

"How did you do that?" he asked.

"I learned that in my own days as an acolyte, in a book I borrowed from a library. Come now, let us get you home."

"Could you teach me how to do that?"

"...Yes, but we don't have the time today, nor am I accepting any new acolytes or apprentices. Let us get you home."

Exiting the rift gate and returning to the physical world, Lucille led the boy out of the vault, and to the surface of the caverns. She was preparing to cast a spell on him to distort his memories, but she hesitated. She could not shake an unsettling feeling that something was horribly wrong. Prior to discovering the boy, there was a great and unexpected earthquake that felt as though it had shaken the core of the entire planet. She was investigating the damage to the cave system before she got distracted by the child.

Lucille spoke to herself, saying, "Something isn't right." She then faced the boy and told him, "Stay here."

With a gesture of her hands, the young woman disappeared through a rift she created beneath her feet, leading to a lavishly furnished room, presumably built inside the caverns. The rift promptly closed behind her, which left the boy in awe and wonder once again.

From the room she just entered, Lucille uncovered a pedestal which held an orb. It was a dangerous artefact to many; it could remotely grant sight by causing one's spirit to leave their body. Using this ability, she ascended to the surface and was speechless with horror at what she discovered; a world engulfed in green fire. When she returned to her body, the young woman slipped through the floor once again, landing from above in front of the child and startling him once more.

"How do I say this..." Lucille was lost for words.

"How did you do that with the floor?" the child was still astounded after she had landed in front of him.

Lucille sighed and crouched, looking the boy in the eye at his own height. "Your parents and everyone above... are dead. We are not going back up there; nothing awaits us but an ocean of emerald flames and certain death. We may be the only two left on the planet."

The boy's eyes widened, and he began to cry uncontrollably. She couldn't get any more sense out of him, so with a weak pulse of energy, she knocked him out and caught him in her arms, then carried him back to her home. The upper caverns would become poisonous due to the surface, so they would remain off-world or deep in the earth until such a time that it was safe again. She would need to seek help from allies, and answers. She placed the boy on a bed and though he was still unconscious, she quietly spoke to him.

"Don't worry child, in time you'll see that this is destiny. From this day, you will call me teacher, and you will master the impossible."

Thus, at that time the Curator began his journey into enlightenment. That was many centuries ago now.

The Novus Empire painted a different picture to what the Curator had heard from Lucille, which he still remembered hearing about as a boy. According to the official statement, while he had been sheltered in the caverns below the surface, a 'devastating environmental catastrophe' completely destroyed the paradise world. The details provided by the Novus Empire of the incident were contradictory or vague at best, leaving some sceptics at the time to believe the truth was something more sinister. He believed that the Novus Empire was creating a powerful prototype weapon, but why it was necessary for such scale he did not know. It must have malfunctioned, for it seemed beyond their control and destroyed the entire world... he had not seen or heard of such a weapon since.

In response to the attack, Lucille established a secondary gate in the depths of the caverns to another planet, so other Dark Artists could join her in the sanctuary while the poisonous flames on the surface faded. There was a great war raging against the Novus Empire, and they would need all the arcane warriors they could get.

It took little convincing for the child to join them. He had lost his parents and all he knew – burned into ash by emerald fire. From the time Lucille had adopted the Curator, she trained and provided for him; a tough teacher, but she loved the boy. In time he grew into an accomplished young man and a very powerful Dark Artist. Like his teacher, he was tall and physically well built. Although he often concealed his face, those who saw him unhooded noticed that he was easy on the eye; and often stirred the hearts of many she-initiates. The Curator held fond memories of those times spent with his teacher, Lucille, though that was so long ago now.

It was soon after that the Arcanum Conflict entered its zenith and Lucille had to leave for a new warfront. At this time, she entrusted the Curator to manage her fortress on the fallen paradise world, and granted him the title and name he became known for. Due to her calm and tactical mind, she was going to fight alongside her brethren as a commander; to claim another world deemed strategically valuable for the Dark Artists. She succeeded in her campaign and built a new sanctuary for the war effort in that region, also becoming ruler of the planet she conquered. Her power rose enormously, both as a commander and with her arcane prowess.

Dark Artists came to and left the Curator's sanctuary, doing their part in the war known as the Arcanum Conflict. On rare occasions Lucille herself returned for artefacts or arcane weapons as well. As for the Curator, he never saw Lucille in command of a whole planet or her new sanctuary, only hearing of such things. He had been left with instruction to maintain his fortress in the absence of its owner even if she should not return – to keep studying and practicing. He was to remain its keeper, its guardian.

What disappointed the Curator was that he did not know what became of Lucille, even to this day. He assumed that she had fallen, for the world had been lost when Creaos fought alongside the Novus Empire. Since those times, the surviving Dark Artists and their descendants have only known oppression, death and secrecy in this cruel universe. Even so, he could not rid himself of the feelings he clung to deep inside; how he longed to see his teacher once more.

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With this, the Curator came to his senses. Too long had he been drifting through those memories, for he now remembered his purpose for returning to the sanctuary. Taking out a tome he found on his last expedition, with impeccable precision he floated toward the top of a bookcase

to place it on a shelf... but on the way noticed a book he hadn't seen before. It was almost as though the strange grimoire were alive, bearing a distorted face that gently breathed as he held it in his hands. Titled 'The Tome of Rebirth', the book seemingly sighed as he opened it. Before long, his eyes settled upon a paragraph that stood out from the others.

"Before time began, countless possible realities co-existed. Impossible wars took place over billions of battlefields... conflicts that spanned across multiple realities... linked by rifts of space and time itself. There was blood. There was death. There was war."

The ancient text made bold statements, giving account of events that the holy book of the Novus Empire had no mention of. There was some truth to be had in this. He felt it. There was also mention of 'Omniversal Alchemy', it seemed familiar; perhaps a source of power that he hadn't known by that name, or something he had heard mentioned once. He continued to read.

"The god creature sealed and isolated this cosmos from the rest of the realms inside infinite space. A universe is like a drop of water in an ocean... so many alternate realities, so many dimensions that are hidden, containing knowledge and truth... others with resources, treasures and power unbound. The 'benevolent god' knew this, and kept it from us. He deceived us all."

Upon reading the paragraph, everything made sense: the hunt and persecution of those like him. The state of the Novus Empire itself. These were truths, and they explained everything. Something at the edge of perception urged him to dig deeper, to keep reading and uncover more secrets. The book also spoke of resources and power: both shamefully squandered and abused by the Novus Empire. There were too many coincidences to ignore. He did not care how the book ended up in his possession; he only wished to seize this opportunity.

A new revelation entered his mind – only he could lead the universe to true enlightenment. Those that resisted would learn by force.

The Curator then swore an oath to himself upon the living tome he found: "From this moment henceforth, I will be known only as the Prime Alchemist. By mastering Omniversal Alchemy, I vow to restore the universe to its true and natural state and undo the lies of Creaos, a selfish and false god."

