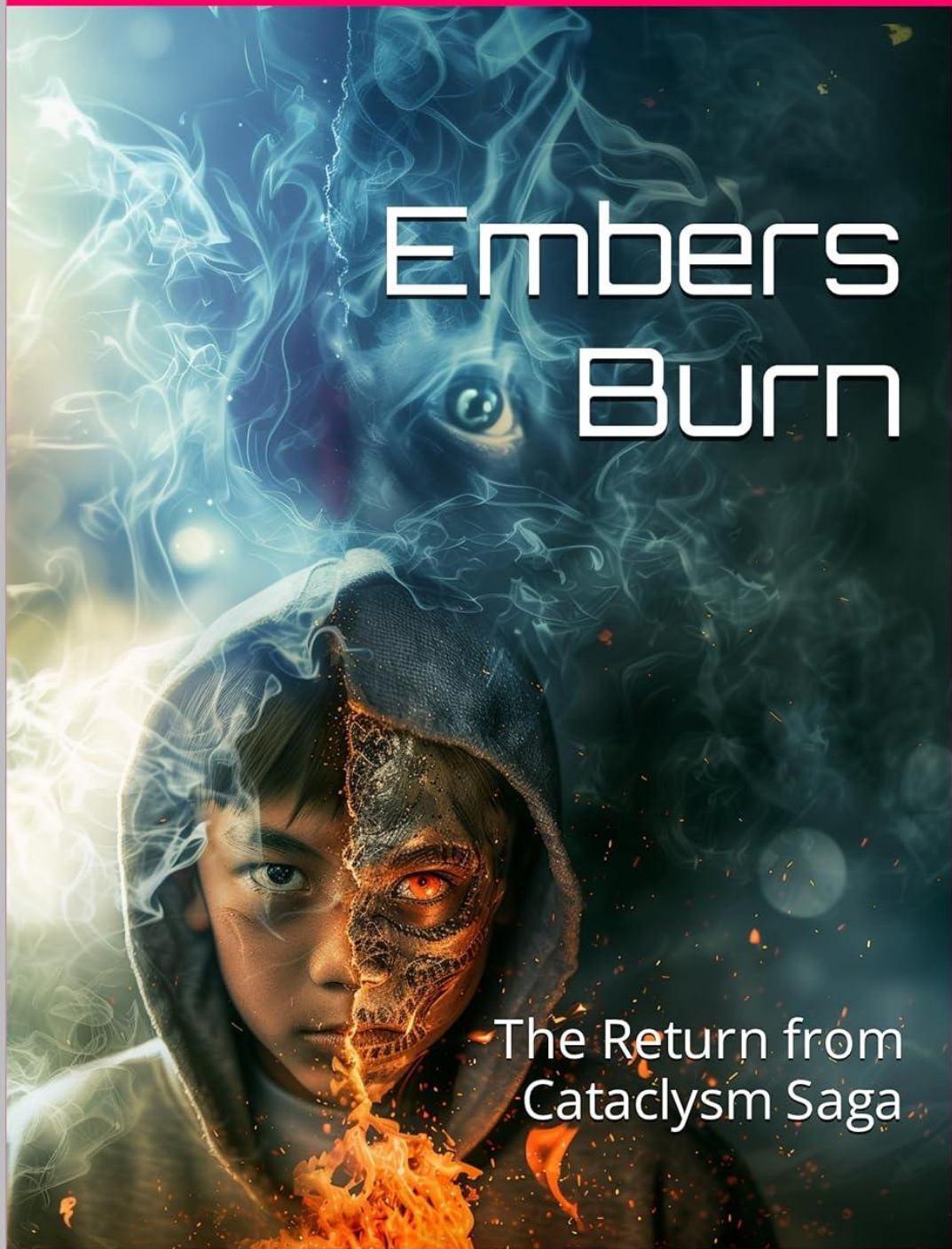


Michael L Nelson

Embers Burn

The Return from
Cataclysm Saga



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The Return from Cataclysm Saga

BY MICHAEL L NELSON

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About the Author

Authors Note

This story is a complete work of fiction. The story has people, they are not like us. The people depicted in this book are a more rugged, designer version of ourselves. They were built for the purpose of traveling the stars and colonizing new worlds. They are smaller, built to exacting standards, with very little variation in body size and proportions. They have some chameleon-like abilities allowing some minor environmental adaptation. They grow up rapidly and are born with basic language and math skills. They live on average to be 100 years old and spend 80 of those years in prime health. There are other differences, but it's important that I call out their rapid growth and maturation. Their six-month-olds are toddlers, their six year olds are preteens and only a year or two from puberty, and by 14 years old they are mature fully grown adults.

Now throw in a screwed up 6,000-year-old religion that pits people against each other, discourages waste, glorifies stoicism, yet promotes innovation. Give a large percentage of the population access to use magical abilities. You get a mishmash world that is part Steampunk, part Teslapunk and part old fashioned agrarian society populated by farmers, duelists, bureaucrats, barons, tycoons, priests, and an ancient order of Defenders all trying to get along until the return, whatever that is. I hope you enjoy my stories.

The Beginning

YEAR 6994 ST (SETTLED TIME)

BRUST KEEP, CITY OF BRUST – CAPITAL OF BRUST VALLEY

Prologue - Malo, Chapter Seven, a prequel to The Return from Cataclysm Saga

Pekelo and Liko see the last of the fire disappear as they come running back from their errand to see what is happening.

Pekelo had started cooking preparations and left to fetch some cheese from Liko's. When he didn't have any, they walked together to the next circle where a friend lived. They returned as fast as they could when they smelled the acrid smoke of a housefire. They arrived as the last flame disappeared. Seeing Pekelo's home was the source of the smoke and fire left them both stunned.

The neighbors are amazed by the sudden explosion; it must have been an explosion that put out the fire. The very timbers are now cool to the touch. They're discussing among themselves how this kind of thing can happen.

Pekelo and Liko join them and are more stunned than amazed at the sudden turn of events. The fire went out leaving enough structure intact to be repaired instead of rebuilt.

The sudden turn from tragedy to recoverable setback has all of them laughing and slapping each other on the back. The neighbors may not give Pekelo anything for free, but they all know they're not going to negotiate nearly as hard as they should.

Pekelo eventually gets around to his youngest's whereabouts, "Has anyone seen Malo?"

A few of the neighbor's recall seeing him around before the fire went out.

"He seemed upset, he probably ran off crying like a baby," barks Bahter.

Something is nagging at Pekelo, it feels like he's here, but looking around proves he's not.

"Liko! Did you see the flames as they went out?"

"Sure, they just withered down to nothing. It was incredible."

"Didn't it happen away from the house?"

"I don't know, but that would explain the timbers being cool to the touch."

"Help me look."

"Look for what?"

"I don't know, just look, NOW."

Liko respects his papa and dutifully proceeds to the well, then starts searching in an ever-widening circle, examining the ground as he goes. It doesn't take him long to find something. He can't tell what it is, but it doesn't belong.

"Papa, come see this."

Pekelo trots over to where his son is standing. On the ground at his feet is a misshapen burnt log. In the dim light it looks like a stump with a head-like shape on it and nubs where arms and legs could attach. But it isn't a stump, it's shivering and oozing blood.

“Fetch Greta! Now, GO!”

Pekelo wraps his arms gently around his sons charred remains, “hang on Malo, papa is here. Ge’get is on the way.”

Pekelo sits with the charred, but alive remains of his son in his arms.

Malo screams, but nothing comes out. There’s an incredible force keeping him alive, stretched to its limits it can’t regenerate so much as a cell, it can only make him live.

He wants to die, his organs are burnt and dead, he has no skin protecting him from the thousands of irritants surrounding us at all times. The dirt, scrub grass, even the air is an unbearable source of pain.

Something is holding him, the rough wool and felt garment is like sandpaper to his unprotected body. He can’t see, he can’t hear, he tastes nothing, he can’t breathe. There is nothing but pain. But he isn’t alone, he knows for certain its papa holding him. Papa is here.

It takes Greta an hour to appear at Pekelo’s side.

Pekelo brushes off his surprise at her sudden appearance, it should have taken an hour for Liko to reach her and the same for the return trip, he quickly appraises her of Malo’s situation.

Greta glances at the house, then at Malo, “I can only do so much. I don’t do the things I once did. And this, is more than I could ever fix.”

She places a hand on what could be the front or back of Malo’s head and weeps for him. She had been certain the Return had begun. Malo must have been one more sign that it is near and not the beginning as she had hoped.

“He was going to die back then when you first came to us. You and Luella did something, you made a deal or a pact. I was listening. Do that again.”

Greta grimaces at the thought of that night, the night of her re-birth. She had no more control over those events than Malo. All she did was connect the two. Then Malo, yes then Malo did all the work. Maybe he did have control. But Luella did something too and what that was, she had only the slightest idea.

“Pekelo, would you give your life for your sons?”

“Luella was the purest happiest person I’ve ever known. She lives on in him, I can’t let him and her die like this. He laughs like her. Not often but when he does, she’s alive again.”

Greta remains silent for a moment, “I only heard her laugh twice, but it’s a sound I hope to never forget. Take my hand.”

Greta knows this part has to be perfect. She can do her part and she’s confident that Malo will do his or he’d be dead twice over now. Pekelo needs to establish in his mind the perfect image, the perfect intent, with perfect resolve. That’s not something an untrained distraught father should be asked to do with so much riding on his success.

"I want you to close your eyes and forget where you are and what we are doing. I want you to think of Luella and nothing else. She just gave birth and is holding your son, she's tired but looks as beautiful as ever. Can you do that."

Pekelo does as she says, with clenched eyes he remembers the image of his wife and son together. She knew she was dying, but she smiled and laughed anyway.

He remembers the first time he saw her; she was 14 and he was 15 working at the Feltworks when she was hired. He couldn't believe he was lucky enough to train her. They had breakfast together and her smile would make him stumble over his words. He felt like a fool but couldn't stop himself from trying to make her laugh.

They ate together every day for weeks, until he asked her father if he could court her. That was the second happiest day of his life. The first was the day she said yes to his proposal and agreed to be his wife. The feelings of that day rushed into his heart and filled him with so much joy that he began to laugh aloud, the memories of the moment filled his mind, body, and spirit with a joy so pure it could only be from Luella. He felt complete for the first time since her death.

Greta didn't know how he was doing, at first, he was sobbing, then he started to smile while tears streamed down his cheeks, then when he began to laugh, she knew it was the closest he'd be to ready.

She opened her mind to a part of herself she locked away nine years ago, she opened up her spirit harvesting tools. When she did that, it was like the night Malo was born all over again. There before her was Pekelo's spirit and what a spirit it was, it was far deeper than it should have been. And just like that night, a tiny string connected her to it, she took the string and nudged it towards Malo, it's up to him now.

Malo didn't know anything but pain and his papa's presence. Then something changed, papa grew and was a bright light radiating a soothing aura. This is what Malo needs to live.

The agony of his existence could end if he takes it, but papa will die. He knows that, even with the raging pain tearing at his sanity, he knows it's a trade, a life for a life. He doesn't want to do it. If he tries hard enough, he can make the thing keeping him alive stop and papa can live. But the force that existed inside him, keeping him alive also recognized papa and wanted to join him.

Against Malo's will his spirit reached out and took hold of papa's spirit anchor and pulled it.

Pekelo shuddered and stopped laughing and simply slouched as his life left him. The expression on his face showed contentment.

Greta, blinded by the streams of tears rushing down her cheeks, took Malo from Pekelo's lifeless arms and placed him on the ground a few yards away.

Malo body convulsed, splitting open his burnt body in a dozen places. An endless supply of blood seemed to ooze from every crack of burnt flesh. He continued to convulse as his internal organs were regrown and began working again. When his lungs were nearly done, he started gasping violently for air and coughing out charred bits of lung and more blood. When his airway was almost clear, the screaming began. At first weakly then they became stronger and louder until you could hear them echoing back from the valley walls.

Once his internal organs were functioning, he regrew limbs and thankfully skin. Seen in this light he appeared almost normal.

The healing did everything it could but came up short on half his body. His right side looked exactly like it did before the fire. The left side of his body was covered in scars and open sores where the skin didn't completely regrow.

That wasn't a concern to Greta. She was concerned about the spirit cloak she'd woven a few months ago. The under layer is gone and the top one is burning away rapidly. She quickly applies another layer. Her best guess tells her it won't last the night, but worse. It isn't working like it should.

Now that his spirit is done regenerating his body, it's doing something to itself. His spirit that displayed an unfathomable depth before began to warp and expand deeper. It appeared as a bottomless colorless rainbow of energy, churning, folding on itself, each fold taking it deeper.

It will increase by another magnitude over the next few hours. She knows this is beyond her abilities.

Greta begins to panic, frenzied thoughts about what just happened and how she can't conceal it. Her old master will feel it, come here, and kill her for running away and hiding, then he'll consume Malo.

There have been times when she would have welcomed death, not anymore; and not out of a selfish desire to be immortal. She's finally learned to enjoy life, in all its weird, and wonderful moments.

Eyes now dry she vows that Malo must live, but he'll need protection. This is Brust Valley, and they are under the protection of the Defenders from Mammatus.

Greta calls out to the trepidatious neighbors, "Who has a cart and can transport this child to Lord Brust's Keep, tonight?"

Liko would be the obvious choice, but he has a father to mourn and bury.

"You want someone to take that brat away from here? I'll do it with pleasure."

Greta turns to see who spoke up. Bahter Santosa is standing with a sneer on his lips. Not her first choice but it will have to do, time is not on her side.

"Bahter, you get the boy safely to the that keep, and I'll owe you and your family 10 years of healing. Do we have a deal?"

"Sure, to the keep."

Greta asks Liko to get some clothes for Malo. She spends the next ten minutes wrapping spirit cloaks over Malo, she can't completely hide him, but the added layers will keep his presence undetected outside a few miles. Now it's a race against time, can he reach safety before he burns away his protection.

It seems like only a moment has passed and Malo is lying in the back of a cart driven by the cruel idiot Bahter as it rolls up valley, pulled by a single draft inu, taking him to Brust Keep. That burst of spirit would have been noticeable all the way across the high mountains, would one of the famed Defenders of Mammatus respond first or did her old master have an agent in the area?

Chapter One - Shook

The hour is late, with only a minimum of the keeps servants and personal staff remaining awake or on the premises. The Lord of Brust Keep, Jgeorg Brust and his Lady, Terara Brust sit comfortably on a small couch in the library. Both reading books that have perked their interests. Jgeorg is reading a history book that tries to chronologically categorize 8,000 years of appearances by the Free'er. Lady Terara is devouring a book on treaties between various trade unions and governments both big and small.

The library isn't all that large when compared to those found at a Study. No more than twelve occupants would be comfortable in the cozy room. The room is well lit with electric table lamps conveniently located anywhere a person can sit. The shelves have room for a few thousand titles. Older titles are read then donated to the local one-room studies. If passed over they are given away to the public or are given to merchants that will take them to the next region on their trade route. Knowledge is appreciated here.

Both readers are still dressed from their day's activities. Jgeorg in his red pants and tabard with a golden winged snake on his chest. The winged snake has been the Brust family symbol since they settled this valley. Jgeorg's three times great-grandfather, Jaxsun Brust claims to have witnessed the creature upon entering the valley, no one else saw it that day or ever since. Its unique silhouette has propagated to every branch of their family across South Cenoka. Terara is wearing a traditional modest green dress, the sleeves covering both shoulders, a white cape across her bodice reinforces the image of modesty she wishes to project. Both have abandoned their daily footwear in favor of matching worn out grey fuzzy slippers.

Jgeorg finds himself at a good stopping point, having finished the controversial period around 6,020 ST when the Free'er sanctioned dueling using proxies, giving rise to what some people refer to as legalizing serial killers. Jgeorg sets his book on the side table and shuts off his reading lamp.

The click and sudden drop in lighting lets his wife know he's ready to turn in for the night. She makes no indication that she noticed.

Jgeorg waits patient and silent, using the time to admire her beauty.

Upon finishing the page, she was on, she closes her book and sets it aside and shuts off her lamp.

Looking to her husband, Terara says softly "Ready for bed so early?"

"I'd enjoy staying up with you either here or in our bed chamber, but I have an early start tomorrow."

"Holding court for the petitioners already? It seems like you just fulfilled that duty."

"You know my schedule better than I do, of course it's time again. It's important that I remain accessible to the citizens of the valley that shares my family name."

Terara decides to change the subject, "My book on treaties is turning out to be quite the page turner, how is yours?"

"It's history, so it's interesting, but not much information that we both don't already know. Though there is one passage in the opening chapter that shook my spirit and almost made me stop reading."

Playfully Terara responds, "Oh, do share. What could possibly be written about the Free'er that a scholar like you, didn't already know, let alone, shake your spirit."

"It wasn't a direct sighting, but a reference to his relationship with the Dragon."

"Dear, everybody knows the Dragon is his creature."

"Yes, but this reference was from a pre-cataclysm source."

"What? There's nothing that survived the cataclysm. It's been more than 6,000 years since it ended, and we don't even know how long it lasted."

"According to scholars there was a book, that a sect of our ancestors valued enough they would go to any lengths to preserve. Even with their best efforts nothing but scraps of pages survived the cataclysm."

Terara looking shook herself, "Why have I not heard of this before now?"

"According to this books author, the Dragon Priesthood has been collecting every copy, full or partial no matter how trivial and destroying them."

Crossing her arms to show her annoyance, "And just what did this scrap contain?"

Jgeorg knows his wife will be as unhappy with his answer as he is but continues, "The author only had access to a single torn and damaged piece of a page. It didn't say much." Jgeorg reopens the book and flips to the beginning where there is a single quotation in large print.

Terara leans over and reads the proffered snippet.

"...the Dragon, the beast, <smudged words> spirits who work miracles and go out to all the rulers of the world to gather them for battle against the <smudge> on that <smudge> day..."

"That's it? I was shaken until I read that passage. Now I am only feeling disappointment."

"I too was unmoved by the passage alone. Then I read on to discover there's more to this scrap then what was written."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"That book and much of its content has been passed down in some families as an oral tradition. They dare not write anything down for fear the dragon priests will destroy them like they do the books."

"Ok, now you have my interest again. Please go on."

"According to these sources, there is actually more than one Free'er. They are a race of giants that come and go from this world at will. The author attempts to identify how many there are, and which ones make each appearance."

"Oh, that does sound wonderfully entertaining. Certainly not very scholarly though."

"Yes, much of this is conjecture, but it does get your mind thinking. The only thing the author seems sure about is that there are at least two of them. He calls them the Free'er and the messenger, because one of them always identifies himself as the Free'er while the other seems to drop in and reveal some secret

before leaving. Those secrets often create turmoil and war. It is his opinion that the messenger is trying to trigger the return and undo the work of the Free'er and return us to enslavement."

"Oh dear, I don't like the sound of this giant messenger at all. What does that have to do with the Dragon?"

"If there are two beings appearing as the Free'er, which one is the Dragon beholden to help. That scrap mentions going out to all the rulers of the world. Does that not sound like something a messenger would do?"

"Ok, now I'm shaken again. No more talk, take me to bed and help me forget this conversation for a while."

They stand in unison and proceed to shuffle their slipper clad feet to their sleeping chamber, an hour later both are contently sleeping.

Chapter Two – Something Terrible

Terius, the Dean of Testing and Evaluation at Mammatus Study, and by contract the Defender of Brust Valley is nearing said valley on foot. Still wearing his Defender uniform, black chinos, with a matching shirt. Long knives secured at each hip, a short staff and sword over his shoulder. His dirty blond hair is matted to his head from sweat and being beaten by 60 and 80 mile an hour winds.

The previous day he was tutoring and administering tests to his students at Mammatus Study before being dispatched to stop a duelist in the small city called Brass. He was preparing to return to the study, when a near decade old mystery resurfaced and drew him here.

It's nearly dawn which makes him anxious. On the one hand he can return to flying without the worry of missing the city in the dark. It's amazing how dark a traditional city is at night, the thousands of banked hearths appearing no brighter than rocks heated by the days sun or the body heat of small game sleeping in their dens. When traveling at free fall speeds you can blow by them without realizing it. On the other hand, he is finally going to confront whatever has been lurking in this region, subtly showing off its power for the better part of a decade.

The incident last night was the strongest in almost a decade. Last night's explosion of power was likely felt by every energy sensitive person within a thousand miles. Every year as if on a schedule, there have been little outbursts, rarely lasting more than a few minutes. Never lasting long enough to pinpoint the exact source. But last night was different, there was an outpouring of power that lasted nearly half an hour, and Terius was close enough to get a feel for the sources center. It was here in Brust Valley, and then gone again. Now that he's close he can pick up its trace again.

Terius finds himself hesitating out of uncertainty; what could be the source? He'd fought all manner of sorcerers, necromancers, witches, desolators, and duelists. This is something much stronger, perhaps this is the Power Lord that must have sent the duelist he fought and killed in Brass the night before. Power Lords, if they still exist, have not been seen in several hundred years. What would one be doing in Brust Valley and why would it be so careless about its presence?

Terius decides to stay on the ground, he can move almost as fast along the road as if he's flying. He pushes on the flow of time with his spirit which distorts the direction of gravity. The flat road ahead is now a steep slope that eats nearly 80 miles in an hour. At this rate he'll reach the City of Brust before noon.

Terius isn't the only one on the road today. There's a noticeable imbalance in traffic. Usually there are more travelers heading towards the city before noon. Today there are more than usual hurrying away. None of the supposedly fleeing individuals look suspect, but why would they? The mature couple he passed could be as they seem or she's a Hedge Witch and he's been hired as protection. The caravan of carts with metal lined walls could be hiding all sorts of contraband, or the owner wants extra protection for his wares. A well-dressed dandy fast traveling like Terius, heading out of the valley is definitely a duelist. Dueling in Brust Valley is illegal and enforced by none other than Terius. Fortunately, the dandy is leaving town of his own volition, no need to stop him.

Something is putting Terius on edge; he's getting more and more anxious the closer he gets to the city. It's the power from ahead. He can feel it getting stronger, the potential is maddening. It's like someone bottled

an earthquake and is teasing the cork out. Terius can feel the energy potential wearing away at the cork, how much longer until it pops, unleashing the earthquake?

That's not the complete picture, there's something else to what lies ahead. He can feel more than raw power. There's an emotional element. *It*, whatever *it* is, is afraid.

Terius realizes he stopped fast traveling. In fact, he stopped running entirely and doesn't know how long he's been standing there for certain. He checks the sun and realizes it is already noon. He lost an hour of progress by slowing down and stopping. He needs to keep his mind focused. Yesterday he was tutoring a student on meditative breathing. He recalls the lesson and takes a moment to focus and find his calm. Newly focused, his spirit again distorts the interaction of gravity with his body and Terius resumes his downhill run to the City of Brust.

After an hour of running the city gate is before him. The City of Brust isn't as large as most, they are not on a major trade route. But they do have a steady economy thanks to exports of felt and wool. The ruling family are sticklers for law and order and built the wall around their city to ensure trade is controlled and taxed. They also signed a contract with his Study to provide services as their Defender.

There's always a contingent of guards and bureaucrats stationed here, today is no different. He slows to a walk and approaches. There's no visible sign of damage, that tells him whatever lays ahead didn't fight its way here. He can also tell exactly where the anomaly lays. Terius scoffs internally at the thought of trivializing what lies ahead as an anomaly. That anomaly will most likely try to kill him on sight, and he isn't sure he can stop it.

Terius calls out to the lone guard in sight who is staring back towards the city center, "Guard, who's on duty?" They're all on duty technically, but he'll know he means who is the ranking officer on duty.

The guard ignores him for a moment before slowly turning to see who addressed him. Terius is a well-known figure in this region and much respected, "Sargent Brandt, sir!"

"Can you fetch him from the guard house so I can have a word with him?"

"No sir, he's not in the guard house."

"Is there a problem?"

"Yes, er no, maybe there is one, sir!"

"What's the problem?"

"We don't know, sir," the guard looks anxiously at Terius.

"You know I never asked you guards to treat me like an officer. Why don't you relax or be at ease, or whatever you call it and tell me what's on your mind."

"Thank you, sir! We don't know why but the keep seems to be afraid! Sargent Brandt took his men to assist the keep. I was left behind to mind the gate."

"You can feel that? Can you describe what you feel?"

"There's something big and terrible up there and its afraid of something."

“You say big and terrible, how can you tell it’s terrible?”

“Because it feels like there’s a mountain sized rock hanging over my head by a string and that’s a terrible feeling.”

“Can you usually feel energies, are you sensitive to them?”

“Not at all Sir, no gift in my family ever. If this is what it feels like to sense energy I don’t ever want too again. Are you going to go up there and put a stop to it?”

“Yes, that’s the plan. What’s your name?”

“I’m Nakoa, thank you sir,” snaps the guard as he gives a small respectful bow.

Terius isn’t the bowing type but feels it appropriate to acknowledge the gesture before turning towards the city center.

There’s no reason not to rush at this point. The streets are deserted, shops are closed. If Nakoa can sense the danger, so can everyone else. Terius will fly the remaining distance using the open form. Leaping three yards into the air and pushing against the flow of time, gravity is altered, Terius falls perpendicular to the ground, straight down the center of the street towards Brust Keep, the apparent center of the *anomaly*.

Chapter Three – Punch it

Terius reaches the outer perimeter of the keep, a four-yard-high wall with a main gate that remains closed most of the time. A grand doorway to the left of the gate is used throughout the day for foot traffic, that door is wide open. Terius lines himself up and flies through the doorway and down the four-yard passage through the wall with its murder holes and hot-oil spouts. As he passes through the physical space of the keep, the emotion emitted with the leaking power doubles in pressure. It's like he's free diving 20 yards underwater. Terius focuses on his breathing and remains calm.

Terius explodes from the dark passage into the courtyard. A contingent of guards, perhaps this is Sergeant Brandt, is running awkwardly towards the Keeps front steps. Not slowing himself; he continues to fall upright towards the front entrance. Flying well over the heads of the stumbling guards.

Having been there many times he knows the door mechanism well enough that with a few kinetic nudges to a latch and a hard shove of kinetic on the right edge, the door swings open before he flies through it.

A subtle shift in concentration releases the pressure he'd been exerting against the flow of time, allowing gravity to resume its normal behavior to roughly set him down in the grand entry.

Four guards are standing at the door leading to the reception hall. They are all standing still as if waiting to hear a noise to repeat that has recently startled them. These are wearing the Brust colors of red and gold marking them as a personal detail. The pressure coming from inside that room is almost unbearable. How these guards are holding on is beyond him. He starts walking towards them when he notices the shadows are moving faster with every step. Stopping and then taking a step back has the shadows slowing their advance but not entirely.

It was such an innocent detail that he almost didn't realize what he was seeing. He changes course and goes to a window set halfway between the entrance and the doorway with the four guards. They seem to be done waiting and are laboriously turning towards the door they were meant to guard. Terius stands for just a moment and watches in amazement as the sun moves rapidly towards the horizon and sets in less than a minute. He sees the moon moving just as rapidly across the sky and is sure if the rapidly moving clouds would allow him to see them, the stars would be doing the same.

Terius speeds up his mind as fast as he can, pushing his thought process beyond biological limits, he doesn't have words to quantify this ability. But it makes the whole world look like it's running at a snail's pace, except this time his world is moving slower than a snail. This anomaly or effect he's never heard of. What do you call an area where time is slowed down, a time-sink? He realizes he's putting off the inevitable again and turns away from the window where the rising sun is beginning to cast shadows from the west.

Terius once again fast travels, this time pushing time hard enough to make gravity six times stronger than is natural, if he had room to get up to full speed, he'd near the speed of sound. Since it was only another ten yards to reach the doorway, he covered the distance a little faster than if he was walking. Maximizing his fast travel ability is barely countering the effect of the time-sink. With his mind accelerated the guards once again appear frozen from his perspective. The time to be subtle is over, he uses a blast of kinetic energy on the door hinges and latch, shattering the mechanisms. Tiny splinters stay frozen in space where the wood shattered. Then directs a series of kinetic shoves to knock the door back his way and then up

and over the frozen guards. Another couple of falling strides has him in the room where Lord Brust and his Lady are listening to petitioners.

The source of the pent-up earthquake, fear, and time-sink is somewhere in this room. The pressure, which he now understands to be the time-sink is unrelenting, the harder he pushes against it the more he feels compressed. He stops his fast travel but keeps his mind functioning as fast as his spirit allows.

Staring straight ahead he categorizes what he sees. Lady Brust is looking at the petitioner a rural looking man, possibly a farmer and his rough-looking companion, she's smiling but her eyes show concern. Lord Brust is also smiling but is turning to speak to his friend and advisor, Horace Moon. Horace doesn't look happy, but he never does. The crowd is mostly locals, merchants by their clothes. He starts to meticulously look over each of them.

Something draws his attention back to the two rural petitioners in the center of the room. The companion has strange proportions. At first his height put him at maybe 12 or 13, not quite fully grown. His face while youthful is twisted as if in agony. No not agony that's terror, he's afraid and he's also not frozen like everyone else. He is clearly breathing as if not affected by the time-sink.

Terius fast travels across the room, slowing to a crawl even though he should be moving over several hundred miles per hour at this point. Up close he sees the youth is terribly disfigured.

An assessment of the boy's combat posture shows he isn't trying to defend himself. Terius isn't surprised when his laboriously slow moving fist, makes contact with the boys head, rocks him off his feet and renders him unconscious.

Time resumes, the fear dissipates. But the mountain of pent-up energy is just as overwhelming. Terius looks over the unconscious young man with all his senses and sees a primitive spirit cloak dissolving from the inside. He quickly makes one of his own, inverts it and covers the inconceivable spirit contained within the young man. Terius' spirit gaze is momentarily drawn into its depths and he feels his mind start to unravel from the immensity before him. Averting his gaze and working by feel, he finishes the cloak. Doing otherwise would have led to madness he's certain. Now just like every other year, the unusual, abrupt display of power in Brusk Valley disappears.

A half dozen powerful entities on this continent and the neighboring one to the north cease looking longingly towards Brust Valley and turn their attention elsewhere.

Chapter Four - Runt

Now that time is no longer distorted, the four guards from the doorway stumble into the room and push through the crowd and create a barrier in front of Lord and Lady Brust. Another four guards come through the rear entrance and take up station behind the royal duo. The local merchants show the expected amount of indignation at having guards suddenly storm into the room. The first petitioner glances down at his felled compatriot, smirks and turns back to Lord Brust.

Another dozen guards storm the room looking for a royal body to protect, they dejectedly resign themselves to manning the exits. This looks like the group from outside, maybe Sergeant Brandt from the gatehouse made it here after all.

Lord Brust is the first to speak, "Master Terius, what a surprise. Was that your doings?"

"Lord Brust, if you are referring to the time-anomaly it was not of my making."

"What time-anomaly. I was referring to the light show. The sunlight disappeared and reappeared; it was very shocking. And more so, what happened to that young boy?" Lord Brust nods his head to the petitioner's companion who is still unconscious on the floor.

"As to that it's best we speak in private."

"Of course, this is what I pay you for after all. Defending our lands from unexplainable mysteries and those overpowered idiots calling themselves duelists."

Advisor Moon stands up and declares the days petitioning period is over until next month. He then signals for the guards to clear the room.

Having so many guards standing around made short work of clearing the room. In less than five minutes only two guards remain, along with Lord Brust, the Lady Terara, Horace Moon, Terius, and the petitioner whose name is Bahter Santoso and his oversized but young companion, Malo Feltman.

Terius attempts to explain the mechanics of what occurred but settles for Lord Brust, accepting that time sped up outside this room. Everyone agrees that the merchants are going to be very upset when they learn what happened.

As for Malo's involvement. His companion, probably not the right word for their relationship, insists Malo be locked away for his crimes. Including the delusion that time sped up outside the room. His other crimes are apparently matricide and patricide. Bahter backed off the matricide claim when they got him to admit she died giving birth. Killing his father just happened the night before by fire, and the evidence is literally on his body. He's covered in third degree burns on his entire left side from head to toe.

Lord Brust is used to his role as a judge for crimes of this magnitude, and hears out Bahter before questioning him, "Bahter, you said the fire just happened and Malo received these burns in that fire. How is it that they are half healed? My advisor assures me those burns have been treated extensively for more than a year to look the way they do."

"He has an ally, a Hedge Witch. Everyone knows she's one, but she won't accept payment, so nobody calls her out. She showed up the day Malo was born, and he's been nothing but trouble his whole life."

Now Lady Brust speaks up while still smiling at the unconscious *boy*, “How can such a joyful boy be trouble?”

“For one he’s dumb as a rock. The valley masters had to teach him every single word and their meanings. They even bought him one of those dictionaries so he can look up words and their definitions. He should know the same words as everyone else. Don’t get me started on math, he had to be told how to add and subtract numbers when he was already three years old. He barely talked until he was two. Even for a runt he’s denser than expected.”

Lord Brust looks up at that last sentence, “A runt you say? I’ve never heard of a runt surviving this long. They’re usually so sickly that they die in just a few months. He must be sixteen maybe seventeen by his size.”

Bahter looks apologetic, “I don’t want to be correcting you my lord, but he’s barely nine years old.”

“That must be a mistake look at his size, you’re telling me he’s going to grow even taller?”

“I don’t know about the growing, but he’s nine years old for sure.”

Lady Brust used this time to put the pillow from her chair under Malo’s head, then sends a guard out to find a blanket.

Terius is also studying Malo, using his expanded senses, he finds nothing out of the ordinary, except for those burns. The only way he survives those is through the gift. Terius is confident that he could be equally burned and would heal, but he would heal one hundred percent. Malo healed just enough to close most of the blisters and replace charred skin and then stopped. If it was his internal ability, it would continue until he was fully restored. If it was this ally who isn’t a witch, why would she leave him like this?

Help from a Hedge Witch does explain the crude attempt to cloak his spirit. Most of them have very little spirit to hide of their own, Malo’s cloaks would have been adequate for a witch’s purposes. Terius wishes the boy would wake up, he has a lot of questions and is anxious to know if there will be a fight.

Bahter continues to plead his case to have the boy locked away, “The boy once tried to summon a leaper to be his familiar. He almost got his friend killed that night.”

Lord Brust is not moved by the ever-evolving narrative, “Horace, Mister Santoso traveled all night to bring Malo here, he should be offered refreshment before his return to Feltworks.”

“Of course, my lord, I’ll see it done. Mister Santoso, would you come with me please?”

Bahter’s eyes light up at the prospect of eating in Brust Keep. He hasn’t had a bite in 12 hours and telling everyone that he dined in the keep will be a story to tell his great-great grandkids.

As if his presence was the cause of Malo’s state, Malo begins to moan when Bahter leaves the room.

Terius, concerned for the safety of the Lady and Lord, “Lady Terara, I must ask you to leave at once, and the same goes for you, my Lord.”

In answer she kneels down and sits next to Malo and repositions his head to her lap; Jgeorg just sighs at his wife’s resolve and stays put as well.

Malo's eyes flutter open and all he can see is the beautiful face of Lady Terara gazing down at him with soft purple eyes and a broad smile, all framed by her golden curly hair. He takes a deep breath and falls asleep, now with a smile on his face.

Lord Brust mutters, "Well, that was anticlimactic."

Terius, "I agree, we know nothing of this boy but the words of his travel companion. He said he was promised compensation to bring the boy here for protection, didn't he?"

"Eventually, he let that slip. He first attempted to convince me that the whole town wanted to lynch the poor boy and it was *he* who insisted on bringing him here for a *fair* trial."

"It's strange that the man has such disdain for the boy."

"I agree, it's downright impossible to conceive of such an attitude where he's concerned."

"I believe the part about the ally. I think she patched the boy up after this fire but knew she had reached the limits of her skills and sent the boy here in hopes someone like me would arrive before the others."

Lord Brust looks uncomfortable, "What do you mean by others?"

Hoarce Moon returning from the kitchen where he dropped off Bahter, "Yes, tell the good Lord Brust about the others."

"As you know my Order has taken an oath to defend against people and entities with similar capabilities, but with less scruples on how they are to be used. Some of them seek out young and powerful humans like our Malo to use in ways I'd rather not say in front of your wife."

The Lady doesn't look up from the sleeping boy, "You speak of the ones that devour spirits and the flesh of children. I read about them many years ago, that book gave me nightmares for weeks. Thank you for *sparing* me." Somehow, she managed to convey an eye role without moving her head.

Everyone but Terius picked up on the sarcasm, he replies, "You're welcome my 'lady.'"

Lord Brust has a plan formulating, "Did you say this Malo has the gift? And is powerful?"

"I believe I did. What are you getting at?"

"Can you take him to your study and train him to be a Defender?"

"I was planning on doing exactly that."

"Excellent, my Lady. What do you think about adopting this orphan?"

"That would be wonderful," Lady Terara pulls her gaze away from Malo long enough to glance at her husband.

"Eh' hem," Hoarce clears his throat. "My Lord, what are you doing?"

"If we adopt the child and he becomes a trained Defender. My son will have a loyal and powerful protector when I step down in a few years. He won't have to buy one from a study like I did. No offence meant Terius, but this is the truth."

Terius sighs before speaking, "First off you are not buying me. The contract states that the Study of Mammatus will provide services required to Defend your people. It won't always be me responding to your calls. Secondly what makes you think that any Defender would choose an adoptive family over their Study. If he trains with us, we become his adoptive family."

Horace clears his throat again, "Do any of you think it's odd that the three of you are mooning over an unconscious boy who a few hours ago altered the natural order of the universe for an *entire day*?"

The room became uncomfortably quiet for several minutes as the three adults pondered that question and the implication.

Lord Brust was the first to speak, "Horace, once again you've proven that I could not have a better voice and advisor at my side. I can't explain why, but I have this unnatural desire to help and protect this oversized, half crispy boy."

Next to speak is Terius, "I too seem to be unreasonably enamored with this child. Thank you for the insight. I've never heard of such a gift, a nudge to one's emotional state is possible, but this is wholesale instant trust and invocation of paternal instincts. I've had an affinity for many of my students, this far exceeds that feeling."

Last to speak is Lady Terara, "I don't care why I have these feelings. I'd like to adopt Malo anyway."

Lord Brust, "Terius can you explain what is happening?"

"This is no part of the gift. This is something unique to Malo. Perhaps his spirit is the cause. I had a glimpse of it before I cloaked him, it is easily a hundred-fold deeper than I could have imagined one to be."

Lord Brust looks bewildered, "A hundred-fold you say, how is that possible? What did it look like?"

Horace interrupts, "Perhaps it is because he is a runt. There's so little known about them, mostly tall tales, and superstition."

"Yes, my favorite advisor, how did you see through the cloud of adoration and realize something was amiss?"

"That was easy, I don't like the little shit one bit. I could watch him lit on fire and cook dinner over his smoldering corpse. I found myself sympathizing with that ass-face Bahter. Yet, I have no reason to feel this way and seeing you three mooning over him made it clear that none of us are in our right mind when it comes to Malo."

"Master Terius, would you mind staying at the Keep tonight, in case any of those other beings show up?"

"Of course, Lord Brust, that is what you pay the Study to do."

"Thank you, maybe in the morning our heads will be clearer."

Lady Brust had a room prepared for Malo and spent the night by his side while he slept. Horace, Jgeorg, and Terius were awake most of the night. Jgeorg was excited by the possibility of leaving his son a Defended kingdom, Horace was worried about the mental state of his Lord and Lady, and Terius spent the night in meditation to disassociate his feelings from Malo. Nobody but Malo slept well that night.

Chapter Five – Instant Friends

The morning came and chaos was the word of the day. People all over the Keep had different perspectives of the length of time that passed these last two days. Visitors, residents, servants, and vendors coming and going entered and left the time-sink at different points and were affected more or less depending on proximity to the anomalies center. Some people lost a few hours, while the people in the audience lost a full day. Lord Brust settled most issues by compensation with gold, a small price to pay to quell tempers and fears.

The person who seemed the least affected was Malo. Either the trauma of the last few days or the knock to the head by Terius erased the last three days of his memory. The only part of his situation that caused a reaction was hearing of the loss of his father. The adults decided to hold back the spotty news about him being the cause of the fire, not knowing how true that story to be. When he looked at himself in the mirror and observed the burns for the first time, all he did was grimace. He sulked for a bit while Lady Terara tried to comfort him, until he asked to be alone to grieve. Lady Terara obliged his request, but had a servant stationed outside the door in case he needed something.

Two minutes later he was poking his head out the door asking about food.

“Excuse me, ma’am? I don’t know when I last ate, and I don’t have any food. I do have a couple silver; can I buy something to eat around here?”

The servant, a young girl in her twenties, didn’t know Malo’s status, but considering the way her Ladyship was treating the young boy she had to assume he was well considered. Even if he was gross looking and so uncouth to bring up money when the Lady has granted the keeps full hospitality. They don’t get many guests in the keep. She’s been assigned to babysit many of them. Some are as disgusting to the eye and as ill-mannered as this boy. In spite of her personal feelings, he will get no better or worse treatment than anyone else.

“You can get food from the kitchen at any time. I’ll take you there whenever you are ready.”

“I’m ready now and thank you.”

The servant turned without saying a word, her long brown braided hair flopping around behind her as she led her creepy guest down the hallway.

Malo had never seen braided hair before and thought it looked nice.

“I like the way your hair is all twisted together. What’s that called?”

The young servant couldn’t believe the creepy boy was being genuinely complementary and inquisitive, he must have some sick game in mind. Her cheeks began to redden at the thought of what he may try to do to her.

Malo has been dealing with these scenarios his whole life, the girl in front of him with her back straight and shoulders tense is walking yet barely moving her arms. She is clearly troubled and uncomfortable.

Having dealt with this issue, his curse as he thinks of it, he knows what to do. Being direct is the best way forward when someone is unnaturally nervous or hateful around him. It's always been this way, people either like him unconditionally or hate him to his core onsite.

"Tell me your name please."

The now scared servant gets more tense if that's possible, "Mill... it's Milldy. My name is Milldy."

"It's nice to meet you Milldy. My name is Malo, and I can smell fresh baked bread from here and I'm sure I can find the kitchen on my own. I'm going to stand over here against the wall until you go. I didn't mean to scare you. I really think your hair looks neat. Nobody in Feltworks wears their hair like that so I don't know what to call it. I'm sorry."

Relieved at her dismissal, Milldy hurries to the end of the hall where stairs extend both up and down. She pauses with her hand on the rail leading up a flight, "Forgive me I don't know what came over me. Braids, my hair is braided. Thank you, Malo. You are to kind." Done speaking, she forces herself to walk up the stairs at a normal pace.

"This is not bang-up," mutters Malo.

"He-he," comes a youthful giggle from the staircase leading down.

"You hear something funny," asks Malo of whoever is lurking down the stairs.

"You, you're funny," says the young man who had been crouching on the stairs just out of sight and is now standing up. His mother's golden hair, and his father's green eyes and button nose give him away as the Lord and Ladies child.

Malo asks, "Were you spying on me?"

"Why would I do that? I was spying on Milldy."

"Ohhh, do you like her?"

"No. It's not like that."

"Sure, I bet you just like her braided hair."

"Yeah, that's it, I like braids. I'm Tomas, I live here. You must be Malo, because you're all burned up," Tomas pauses not sure if he should continue. Then decides he should, "Does it hurt?"

"Ummm," Malo takes a moment to consider his answer. Sometimes it's best to lie when asked how you feel because the person asking doesn't really care and only asked to be polite. In that case always default to something positive. He decides Tomas is genuine and deserves the truth. "Nice to meet you, Tomas. Yes, I hurt all over. I've never had burns or cuts that didn't heal complete before."

"You're so tall. I was hoping you'd be close to my age, so you'd want to play."

"I'm a lot younger than I look, I just turned nine years old. But I still like to play. One of my favorite games is sneaking. Would you like to play a sneaking game?"

"Sneaking is the best!"

“Good, because the game is to sneak me into the kitchen and steal some food without anyone seeing me. The game is called Smuggle. You play as the smuggler and it’s ok if you’re seen. I’m the contraband and have to remain hidden or we lose. Does that sound fun?”

“That sounds bad, my dad is always trying to catch smugglers.

Grinning broadly, Tomas continues,” Yes, let’s play Smuggle!”

“How old are you, Tomas?”

“Don’t laugh at me. I’m only five, but I’ll be six soon.”

“I won’t laugh, I think six years old is a perfect age for playing smuggle. Where do we go first?”

“That’s easy. We’ll use the new servant’s passages.”

“Wouldn’t the old ones be less used?”

“Nah, the new ones were made too narrow. There’s only room for one person at a time. If someone is coming the other way you have to back up or climb the wall to get past them. The servants all use the old ones.”

The sound of soft footsteps coming up the stairs was signaled the games beginning.

Tomas took the lead by rushing to one of the side doors that Malo had barely noticed, opened it and waved for Malo to enter.

Excited by the prospect of sneaking around a real castle and the prospect of food, Malo complies. Tomas ducks into the room and quietly closes the door.

“That sounded like mother in her slippers coming up the stairs. Follow me.”

The room was a butler’s pantry and would be used to stage meals to be served to guests staying in this wing. It had the bare essentials, nothing perishable.

Tomas whispering, “Shhhhhhh, don’t make a sound.” Then walks lightly to the back of the room. He uses the toe of his right foot to lift a section of baseboard. This recesses and tilts the back wall panel up and inward a quarter inch, then he slides the panel to the right. Still whispering, “it’s a pocket door.”

Malo has never seen a pocket door, so the hidden opening mechanism doesn’t appear out of place. The servant’s passage can’t be more than 24 inches wide and runs perpendicular to the doorway. There are wooden steps leading down a little more than a yard in each direction. There is no light, Malo can see fine but wonders how Tomas handles the situation.

Tomas pushes Malo on to the top step and squeezes in with him before sliding the panel back into place.

Tomas is excited beyond belief that he gets to share his secret hiding place with someone. “Head back towards the stairs,” speaks Tomas softly. “It’s ok to talk quietly, these walls are thick in most places. You only need to be careful when we’re between the windows.”

The two shuffle along back in the direction of the staircase. They pass one set of stairs like the ones they started on. Tomas taps Malo on the shoulder and whispers, "Let me go first." He then braces his hands and feet on either wall and shimmies up and over Malo, dropping back down lightly on his feet.

Malo's mind is blown when he sees this normal kid crawl up the passage walls like a spider. He makes a note to try that himself sometime.

Tomas continues ahead, he has both hands trailing along the two walls, there are horizontal slots chiseled into each side about one every yard. Tomas appears to be counting them, to know where he is in the dark passageway. There are also pairs of metal railings evenly spaced every three or four yards, Malo has no idea what those could be.

Speaking softly Tomas continues, "Are you ok in the dark?"

"I'm fine, I can see in the dark. There's always a little light and that's all I need."

"Whoa, you're like Master Terius. He has the gift too. I wish I did, I'd be the greatest Defender ever."

"Wait, you mean that guy with the blond hair is a *real* Defender?"

"Yes, a really good one too. That's why he came here and knocked you out."

"Wait, what?"

"Didn't they tell you? You were messing up the sun or something and had trapped mom, dad, and the whole court in a sink or something. Then Master Terius came in and knocked you out. Then everyone started arguing over who gets to adopt you. I don't understand adults. I hope I don't become a stupid-face like them, when I grow up."

Malo's head starts to hurt, all this information makes a certain amount of sense, apart from the sink-trap and messing with the sun. Auntie Ge'get used to do something to lessen the effect he has on people. It seems to be completely gone now and maybe worse.

"Tomas, I'm sorry. This was a bad idea. Can you smuggle me back to my room?"

The disappointment was obvious to see on Tomas's face, but he agreed, "Hold on, let me get on the other side of you." He spiders up the wall and drops back on the other side of Malo, then counts slots until they are well past the starting point.

Now whispering again, "Remember when I said you need to be quiet around the windows? Up ahead at the end of the hall are two pocket doors, but smaller. One leads to your room, the other to the room below yours.

Malo can't figure out how a servant or anyone could use such a tiny door for anything practical. But this will get him back in his room without anyone seeing him, so he goes along.

Tomas goes first, using the slots in the wall to reach the upper rails, he feels around for a tiny handle and slowly pulls it out. A hole a half inch in diameter floods the passage with light. He peeks through the hole and listens for a few seconds before poking his finger through and pulling the panel inward and sliding it to the right. Revealing an 18 by 18-inch opening into Malo's room. He then shimmies inside with Malo right behind him.

Malo is glad to be back in the room, he doesn't want to cause a problem, and him showing up in the kitchen could have started one.

Tomas may only be five years old, but he's been tutored and groomed for the better part of four years to be the new Lord of Brust. He knows the look of defeat when he sees it and Malo looks defeated.

"Hey friend, I don't know why you changed your mind, but I bet some food will make you feel better. I'm going to play smuggle on my own. I'm going to slip down to the kitchen and get you some bread and cheese and whatever else I can easily carry and come back here."

"Thank you, Tomas. I didn't realize how much trouble I caused, and I don't want to make anymore."

"No problem, friend." Tomas slips feet first into the secret passage and closes the panel.

Malo goes to the mirror and studies his face. Then starts looking under his clothes. He really is burned only on his left side. "Well, that explains why I hurt worse than I could have ever imagined." he says to himself.

Before Lady Terara left, she had a servant bring him a wash basin of water, a clean towel, and a change of clothes. The water was cold, soothing his burnt skin. He couldn't scrub much around the blisters and sores, settling for dabbing them with a wet corner of the towel. He felt better when finished. The clothes were a good fit, he absently wondered where they came from. The pants were brown, the shirt was white, maybe the guards were wearing a similar cut of clothes.

The bed started looking good even though he wasn't tired, he lays down and listens to the distant sounds of people barking orders and running up and down hallways. He doses off after a while until a familiar voice wakes him.

"Hey friend, I'm back!" Tomas shouts as he pushes a bag full of food ahead of him through the open panel under his window. "It's crazy out there. All our guards are running around searching for something. I wonder what they lost?"

Malo sits up and helps Tomas to his feet. He glances out the window and sees sentries posted inside the gate, watching the keep. "I was wondering what all the shouting was about. Maybe you should go out and ask someone?"

"Nah, if there was an emergency or something bad happening, they'd come looking for me."

"Oh, Ok. What kind of food did you bring me?"

"The kitchen was empty, so I made us a couple cavi sandwiches and I grabbed all the cookies I saw."

"Now, this is Bang Up!"

"Yeah, Bang up," parrots Tomas.

The two traded stories about their childhood and shared their biggest worries about growing up. While unspoken, they know they are now best friends. It was sometime after sunset when Tomas said he should get going.

"Thank you, Tomas. I'm glad I met you. Will you come see me tomorrow?"

"I'll try but I have a lot of lessons to make up. I was told that I missed a day of sword training. I don't remember skipping it, but that's ok. I enjoy our sword master and his lessons."

Malo hears something outside his door, "Wait, someone is coming. I can hear them whispering."

Tomas stays quiet, not wanting to interfere with his gifted new friend's ability to hear.

"It sounds like your mom, I mean Lady Terara. She isn't happy. There's a bunch of people with her and they're trying to stop her."

This description of events doesn't make sense to either boy.

Then her voice erupts, and Tomas can hear too, "Foolish men! There are two missing boys and a ransacked kitchen missing three dozen cookies and in your mind that adds up to something nefarious?"

"Lady! We don't know what to think. Your son and our unknown guest have been missing for the better part of eight hours. Anything could have transpired in that time!"

"Yes, they may have eaten all the cookies without you," rebuts Lady Terara.

The two boys did in fact eat all the cookies.

"Lady, please let Master Terius enter first," pleads the guardsmen.

The familiar voice of Terius speaks up, "Master Gertus, you can stand down. I can clearly see both boys are in the room and there is no indication of harm to your young charge."

That was enough for the Master guardsman. He relinquished his position and allowed the Lady to knock on the guest room door.

Rapping lightly, she calls, "Is everything all right in there?"

Tomas jumps off the bed and pulls open the door, "Of course everything is all right. I'm here taking care of our guests' needs. He was hungry and afraid of the trouble he could cause if he were to show up in the kitchen."

Lady Terara shakes her head slightly, "Our guest was hungry, so you decided to sneak him some food. Leaving the entire keeps staff in a panic, while they looked for the two of you?"

"The sneaking part is right. I didn't ask anyone to panic. Malo and I were on our way when he decided it might be better if he stayed in the room, so we returned. I don't blame him. You should have seen the way Milldy reacted around him. She was terrified. Malo thinks his curse is getting stronger."

"Yes, she said as much," affirmed Lady Terara.

"We turned around and came back here. Then I went for the food. Right Malo?"

Malo wasn't nearly as assertive, "Yeah, that was what happened." While slumping forward and covering his face with his hands.

Lady Terara becomes mother Brust at the site of the destitute boy before her. "Tomas, go with Milldy and get ready for bed. I trust you ate enough cookies to constitute a dinner?"

“Yeah, I had three of them. Malo ate the rest, it was amazing.”

With those as his parting words, Tomas happily followed Milldy to attend to his bedtime routine.

Mother Brust whisked through the room and climbed onto the bed next to Malo, wrapping her arms around him.

“You, poor dear, I don’t care what kind of spell has been cast to cloud my feelings. You have no mother; you recently lost your father. You are in a strange new household surrounded by strangers, half of which don’t like you. Know that you are safe here. We’d like to make you family. Would you like to have Tomas as a brother?”

Malo is quiet for a while and wonders if he should mention that he already has six brothers. He decides against it for now, and just nods his head to answer affirmative.

Chapter Six – Double Bluff

The next morning Terius visit Malo in his room, “Tomas tells me you’d like to become a Defender. Did you know that I am one?”

“Yeah, he told me that,” Malo sticks to his policy of being direct. “Did you really have to punch me out, to save everyone? I’m not mad or anything, I’m glad everyone is safe, but what was I doing?”

“I was hoping you would know so you could tell me how you were doing it.”

“Sorry, but the last thing I remember before waking up in the Lady Terara’s lap was walking home and smelling a fire.”

Terius nods at those words as he reconciles the previous story with this new information. “I did render you unconscious. I’d do it again if the situation repeats itself. As to what you were doing, I have a hard time grasping what I experienced.

We gifted have these incredible powers, but they are focused internally and for the most part only apply to us. When I want to alter gravity to fast travel or fly, I use my spirit to push the flow of time out of alignment. The interaction of mass across time creates gravity. When I alter the direction of time, I alter the direction of gravity. The flow of time is massive, if I were to push in direct opposition it would roll right over me.

You were pushing hard enough to slow down time, if not stopped you may have halted it entirely. But more incredibly this was not localized only to you. I can’t make you fast travel, these things are internal, remember. You slowed time for everyone within a few hundred yards, that is not something the gift allows. Until now.”

Malo tries to follow the master’s explanation, he grasped most of it. The interaction between time and gravity sounds contrived, but who can argue with results. “I wish I could tell you how I did that, but other than running without getting tired and seeing in the dark, I don’t think I’m all that gifted.”

Terius in his most serious tone, “Malo, I saw your spirit. You are the most gifted individual alive today. Don’t ask me to describe what I saw. All I will say is it had a depth that is unimaginable. You shouldn’t try to examine it too closely either, it could drive you mad.”

Changing the subject, Terius asks, “You smelled a fire. Was that the house fire that Bahter was telling us of?”

“I guess,” Malo shrugs his shoulders, glad for the topic change.

“He tried to tell us that you started it. That doesn’t add up if you first noticed it by smell.”

“No surprise there, Bahter has never liked me. It’s the same with many other people.”

“About that, Tomas said you think you are cursed and it’s worsening?”

“Way worsened. The way that girl behaved. It was like she was afraid for her life. Usually, people just frown at me a lot and call me names.”

“What about the people that don’t automatically hate you?”

“You mean all the normal people? They’re just like regular people and are nice to me.”

“Do they go out of their way to help you?”

“No more than anyone else. I get some special treatment from the feltworks vendors because my papa and brothers run, err ran the works. But that’s because of them, not me.”

Terius frames this next question carefully, “Is there anything someone does for you that makes things better?”

“Just my Auntie Ge’get and her spirit cloaks.”

Terius, think to himself, “Of course he knows about spirit cloaks,” but says out loud, “Tell me about that.”

“Every year before my birthday, she renews my cloaks, that’s what she calls them. She said it’s for my protection from ancient horrors like her old Master.”

Terius doesn’t react externally, but inside he rages when he hears those words. This boy has been helped by a Hedge-Witch, there is now no doubt. One that has turned on her master, that Master would be a Power Lord. If she could be located, she could lead Terius to him, and the world could be rid of that filth forever. If not for the boy he’d leave at once for this Feltworks Hedge Witch that isn’t a witch, but that will have to wait until he can secure the boy.

“Malo, I’ve cloaked your spirit the same as I cloak mine? My cloak is much more powerful than any previous cloak used on you. It won’t need renewing every year, and I can teach you to make your own. There must be something subtle about your aunt’s cloak that also tempered your spirits effect on people. Do you have any idea what that may be?”

“I can’t think of one,” after a pause Malo continues. “You say your cloak is more powerful, maybe a weaker cloak is needed to mask the other part. My Auntie didn’t know how to make a stronger one, so she always made two.”

“I saw the multiple cloaks, there were barely three left when I arrived. There were several unnecessary layers that did nothing to hide your spirit, I assumed they were crude attempts to improve the cloak that didn’t work out. I think I underestimated your auntie’s abilities. A Hedge Witch needs to hide her spirit *and* her aspect. They need to be liked, seen as trustworthy. Maybe that element tempered people’s reaction to you.”

Malo only shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ll need to do some research. We should bring you back to Mammatus Study where more scholarly minds can be applied.”

“I guess that would be ok. What about Lady Terara, she wants me to stay here?”

“I’ve discussed this with Lord and Lady Brust. They agree you should accompany me to the Study. I had to concede to bring you back here for three months each summer for you to be trained as a gentleman of Brusk Valley. I don’t care for that provision but couldn’t get them to budge. It was with great reluctance, but I conceded to that demand.”

"I can come back, here? That's bang-up! Can I go see my auntie and brothers before we leave?"

"I don't think that's a good idea. We need to leave today and hide you. Your display of power the other day will attract the attention of some powerful creatures. It would be safest if you were observed leaving. The sooner we leave, the better for those that live here."

Malo takes in the new direction his life is moving in stride like he does everything else. He doesn't want to bring more trouble to these people than he already has, "I understand. I'm ready to leave right now."

Terius realizes the boy has nothing to pack, nor does he. He'd fly back immediately if it were just him. On foot, walking, it will take the better part of two months to reach Mammatus Plateau and the Study, which is why he arranged to borrow a riding steed for Malo. A riding inu will cut that time by a third or more.

"Malo, have you ever ridden an inu?"

"No, but I'd like too."

"Good, let's head down to the kennel and pick one out."

Malo stands up promptly and waits for Terius to lead the way.

They move quickly to the stairs and go down to the first floor. Malo notices there's nobody in sight, it's like they are alone in the keep. "Where did everybody go?"

"Staff meetings. I had asked Lord Brust to lock everyone in their quarters when we moved you so as to not trigger anyone like that poor servant Milldy. His advisor Horace instead directed the Master of the guard and Master of the house to hold staff meetings while we departed. We have 45 minutes before anyone will be about."

That sounded like a good plan to Malo. This is the first time he's been out of his room past the first hall and didn't realize how big this place was. They cut through several huge rooms, one was for banquets, the other must have been for combat training, as there were training weapons and protective gear everywhere. After the training room they came to a hall that led to the back of a kitchen. Inside were two packs with provisions. Terius picked up one and slung it on his shoulders and tossed the other to Malo. On his way through the kitchen, Malo covertly, grabs a half dozen links of dry aging sausage from a hook, and drops the last of his silver on the counter. They exit the kitchen through a mud room leading outside, delivering them near the kennel.

"Wait here, I'll fetch your steed."

Malo suddenly felt very alone as Terius disappeared forty yards away into the kennel. The distant echoes of screeching raptor's are the only sound cutting the silence. Malo has never been truly alone. There's always been someone he knew somewhere nearby.

Now he's about to leave the few people he can count on behind to go to a Study he's never heard of. One that can finally answer the questions he dared not ask himself. Questions about his nature; like why is he alive? Why is he different from everyone? Is he good or evil? The reactions people have to him make him wonder if he deserves their disdain and fear. Did the servant girl fear him for good reason? Is he really human or something else? He looked up the definition of human once and by all accounts he met the

definition, but something rang hollow to him. Something was missing from the definition or missing from him.

Terius emerges from the kennel with a riding inu in tow. It was magnificent, calico patches of black, grey, and brown decorated its coat. Patches of white highlighted its feet, and forehead. All five hundred pounds were made for running. It trotted next to Terius like it was leading him, until it reached Malo, where it proceeded to lick his left cheek like it was trying to heal his burnt skin.

“She likes you, that’s a good start.”

“I’ve never been this close to an inu. Hachi, I mean Mr. Hikmat, the owner of our general store has a pair of draft inu. They are nowhere near as friendly as this one.”

“Her name is Chloe, and she’ll be carrying you for the next two weeks.”

Terius tosses a bundle of stuff at Malo’s feet.” Have you ever dressed an inu for riding?”

Malo, ever direct, “No, never. Can you teach me?”

“Malo, it’s my vocation to teach you. Let’s get started.”

Terius proceeded to teach Malo how to attach the tack and harness to an inu. Then he showed him how to balance their gear evenly to least impede the inu’s gait.

When finished, Malo wondered how he was to mount the energetic beast.

“If you’re wondering how you’ll mount Chloe, you won’t. At least not right away. We’ll be walking through Brust City, until we reach the gate. We don’t need you falling off and drawing more attention to us. I want us to be seen leaving, but mostly only by whoever is watching out for us. I don’t need half the city chasing us with pitchforks and torches because you crashed Chloe into a cabbage stall. There’s a riding cloak in your pack. Put it on with the hood up. I want it to look like I’m trying to hide your face.”

Malo can’t argue with that logic and doesn’t want to look foolish in front of the whole city. He dons the cloak and takes Chloe’s lead and follows Master Terius around the keep to the main entrance. Two guards were stationed there, both had been in Malo’s presence the day he arrived, and both had favorable attitudes towards him, making them exempt from the mandatory staff meeting.

One of them calls out, “Safe Travels, Master Terius,” as they pass through the gate.

Chloe was practically dancing from excitement, at the prospect of running, the entire trip through the city. Malo felt the same way, he’s been stuck in a bedroom for two days worrying about his future, mourning his papa, and missing his home that was reduced to a pile of ash from all accounts. Being free to run and feel the wind in his face is just what he needs to regenerate his spirit. That must have been what Auntie Ge’get was talking about with her gardens. Thinking of her made him sad, he wants to see her again, but doesn’t want to expose her to danger either.

Wind, running, forgetting, that’s what he needs.

The walk through the city took 40 minutes, it seemed much shorter as Malo desperately tried remembering how he arrived. He can picture himself in the back of a wagon. The angry voice of Bahter

chastising him for miles until his voice became a background noise playing counter point to the squeak of the axles, and clatter of metal shod wheels over the brick laden highway leading to Brusk.

Malo's thoughts return to the present as Terius abruptly hops over the shallow ditch running parallel to the road. His inu, Chloe follows, dragging Malo off road and into the field of grass that seems to go on forever to the west.

"Isn't Mammatus to the east?"

"It is, but we don't want to be seen going straight there. There's no safer place for you to be, it's our obvious destination. I don't want the watchers to know for sure how aware I am that I'm being watched. Call it a double bluff. We're taking a fake route, and everybody knows it. To do different might force a move on their part. I want you to be safe at the Study before that happens. For now, we stay predictable, it's for your safety."

Malo pulls on Chloe's leader and stops, "Safe from who, and what would anyone want with me?"

Terius turns, "Malo, there are people in this world who see you as food. You are nothing but a rare meal that bestows power to whoever eats the most. Those ancient horrors your aunt mentioned used to hunt in packs and tear the flesh and spirit from the gifted and gorge themselves, expanding their own gift. But now, someone like you is so rare they can't afford to waste a drop of your blood or a thread of spirit. There will be alliances, betrayals, and infighting to see who gets to hunt you. We need to get you protected, prepared, and trained before they are ready to move."

Terius stops talking to gauge his young companion's state of mind.

Malo's eyes harden at the thought of being reduced to food. He's more than that, nobody should be relegated to less than others. A feeling he hadn't felt in years, since the day he was attacked by a leaper burned in his stomach.

Malo's riding cloak mostly hid his eyes, Terius was certain there was a flicker of light behind them.

Chapter Seven – Researching Thuma

Headmaster Fallon Gale stares at the letter in his hand. It must be legitimate, sent from Lucy Lael of Thuma and addressed to Luscin Lael of Mammatus, the information should be considered good news by Luscin, but puts Master Gale in the selfish position of not wanting her to read it. On the one hand he's delighted that the family drama that prompted her to leave home has been resolved, while the part about children in danger from a problem left unfinished has him worried. If it were a letter saying she was missed and please come home, he's sure she would choose to stay at Mammatus. The news about endangered children he's sure will be more than she can ignore. In another time with any other student, it would be an easy choice, destroy the letter, watch out for more until her training was complete. But this is Luscin the greatest wild card of his lifetime.

The world is changing or perhaps Fallon Gale is getting old, the practicality of destroying the letter feels selfish and not in the girl's best interest. A second opinion might help clear his mind, he reaches for a small hand bell and gives it a shake.

A page boy pokes his head through the doorway a moment later and waits for his instructions.

"Please, ask Master Robles to join me in the library when he has the chance."

The page ducks back out and hurries away on his errand.

Fallon, with letter in hand heads to the library to see what he can find out about dangers to the children of Thuma.

An hour later Master Paras Robles enters the library and finds his headmaster at a table covered in stacks of old broadsheets and journals, "How may I assist you, old friend?"

Saying nothing, Fallon holds the letter out for Paras to read.

Taking the letter, his eyes open a bit more when he sees to whom it was addressed. He takes the time to read it twice before returning it to the waiting headmaster.

Paras presumes he is here to advise, "This could be nothing, or something terrible, or anything in between. You called me here for a reason, I doubt it was for an answer as pithy as I just delivered. What are you thinking?"

"You're right about that. This is a decision I can't make lightly and without more information. The first part of the letter is good news, no more family drama. Her father was allowed to adopt an heir for the family business, removing some unnamed burden from Luscin. That news in itself wouldn't draw her away. The news of some unfinished task endangering children will definitely trigger her desire to fight. We've all seen it; hazing, bullying, anything bordering on insult has been eliminated by her presence. She has no tolerance for the strong picking on the weak.

She's amazing, I'm tempted to tell her to go. But I know what kinds of dangers lurk in a city like Thuma. If she faced it once and survived it could have been through surprise and luck. Whatever awaits will be ready this time and is just as likely the real source of this letter, taunting her for a rematch, not her mother."

Paras looks at the broadsheets stacked before him. "Those are old papers from Thuma are they not?" Not waiting for an answer, "I suppose I should start reading them for news about children disappearing. How far do we go back?"

"This pile is ten years; you know how long these creatures live. We'll need to search back at least 500 years to be sure we gather all the information we can."

"While I'm reading obituaries and missing persons reports, what are you researching?"

These are journals from my predecessors, I'm looking for dispatches that may reference Thuma. It's well outside our territory but each Study sends a report to their neighbors when dangerous creatures, be they duelists, witches, or liches are encountered. There may be some clue as to who or what we are dealing with in these pages."

The two settled in for a series of long nights and days. Their gift driven metabolisms allowing them to work tirelessly for 15 hour stretches before they'd take an hour comfort break and return to their work. Pages were used to fetch new batches of broadsheets from the archives so as to not interrupt Paras's reading and note taking. Three days of missed lessons and shirked duties left them depleted of additional material to consume.

The two, sit blinking their eyes, slowly remembering what life is like outside this room.

The headmaster speaks first, "We should take a break to gather our thoughts before presenting our findings to the others. Be back here in two hours."

Master Robles stands and stretches before heading to his chambers to wash up. Headmaster Fallen Gale wastes no time on personal matters. He summons a page and scribbles down a note and hands it to the approaching girl, "Deliver this at once."

Two hours later the entire teaching staff of Mammatus Study with the exception of the Dean of testing and evaluation is present in the library at the summons of the headmaster.

The first to arrive is Master Vania Adara, Dean of Sight and Sound. Her auburn hair and bright blue eyes are uncommon in this region while common place back north in her homeland. Dressed in a tailored teachers uniform she looks more in charge than the headmaster. She plops roughly in the seat to his right and gives Fallen a polite nod when he looks up.

Master Kail Blackwell is next to arrive. Looking every part of his role as Combat Instructor, his chiseled physique ripples with muscles that others have only seen on medical diagrams. His short cropped reddish-brown hair, strong jaw, and golden eyes lend him an otherworldly appearance. He moves with a conservation of motion that gives the impression that he could turn and attack anyone in the room from any direction at any time. He has one incongruous feature, a disarming smile that is forever on his face. He somehow projects a sense of friendly danger, that's best not tested.

Masters Hron Black Hill and Paras Robles came in together laughing about something they did not feel like sharing because they stopped when they saw the current occupants. Master Black Hill the Dean of Thermal and Kinetic Energies has a boyish face, his attempt at facial hair an attempt to make him look closer to his 51 years, fails terribly. Perhaps that is why he is always frowning. Straight black hair frames his face adorned with brown eyes and a smallish nose.

His companion, Master Paras Robles, Dean of Shell Theory is known to all as the voice of reason. He has mid length light brown hair, pale red eyes with wrinkles in the corners from late nights of reading ancient manuscripts and technical journals. He looks to Vania to give her a nod of greetings, and to convey he misses having Terius around and hopes to see him return soon.

Master Jayden Bailey, Dean of Potential Energy is next to arrive. He strolled in like he hadn't a care in the world. Short black hair, blue eyes and his relaxed demeanor conceal the fact that he's so sensitive to potential energy that every sharp object, every corner, feels like it's stabbing him. He forces himself to ignore those sensations and often overcompensates to the point of being too laid back.

The last to arrive is Master Halle Talyah, Dean of Lightning and Static Energy. Physically a mirror copy of Master Adara, same height and build, but with blonde hair and orange eyes. They also differ in continence, where Vania has self-confidence and is naturally competent at everything she tries, Halle is forgetful, nervous, and always second guessing herself and habitually fearful of trying anything new. The only time she seems comfortable is when she's holding enough lightning to illuminate a mid to large city.

After seeing the last of his staff arrive and take her seat, the headmaster stands, "Thank you for joining us at this hour. Let us begin."

Chapter Eight – Selfish Curiosity

Page Sanne couldn't stop herself from peeking at the note she was handed by the headmaster. It was a summons for the entire faculty. Something big was happening and it all started when the letter for Luscin arrived. She was the one that delivered it to Master Fallen three days ago and he's been holed up in the library every day since that moment. She can't listen in on the library meeting, every Master in that room would detect her if she was anywhere near them. The only person that might know what's going on would be Luscin.

Standing outside Luscin's door, she knocks twice and waits.

After a brief wait the door slides open revealing the tiny girl that is suddenly of interest to the entire Study. Now that she's here she realizes she doesn't know what to say.

Luscin seeing Sanne is confused, "Do you have a message for me?"

"Message? No. I'm not here on business." Sanne wants to blurt out what she knows, but she doesn't really know anything. "Can I come in and talk?"

"Sure, go crazy," Luscin swings the door all the way open and turns away from her guest. She goes to one of the three wooden chairs in the corner away from her bed.

Sanne enters and closes the door quietly. She has a sudden urge to be quiet as if she's sneaking, which is silly, she's a page and doesn't need to sneak anywhere on study grounds. Regaining confidence, she strides to Luscin's side and takes a seat without one being offered.

Luscin takes the initiative as always, she doesn't care if she's right, she wants her opponents to be reacting, not pushing. The fact that this is a fellow student doesn't change her instinct to treat her like an adversary. "What can I do for you? Is someone bothering you, some city man stalking you? I'll make him regret he ever looked at you?"

Sanne blinks for a moment as she processes the barrage of questions, "No, no! It's nothing like that. Why, would you?"

Interrupting her Luscin continues, "Why would I not? You show up at my door at bedtime with your head hung low. You're a senior page and acting like a little lost girl in the red district for the first time. If it's not a man, I guess it could be a girl. I don't want to know what they did, just give me a name and they'll never bother you again."

Sanne's cheeks have turned completely red by this point and she's about to lose her temper at the accusation that she can't mind her own affairs when she remembers whose room, she's sitting in. Luscin has a reputation for getting under your skin and making you wish you'd never met her unless you somehow meet her impossible standards and then you're suddenly exempt from her caustic nature. She falls back on her training and breathes, not combat breathing, but restorative. She needs to change her stance from defensive to passive or Luscin will continue to pick at her nerves.

Seeing the change in demeanor of her visitor, Luscin relaxes in her seat and waits for her visitor to speak up.

"Luscin, I have some news for you, but I don't know what it means."

"It must be important for you to come at this hour. How about if you stop being dramatic and tell me already."

"It's more complicated than that." Sanne stops talking and looks Luscin in the eyes before continuing. "A letter arrived three days ago. It was redirected to the headmaster's office. That's why I know about it. When Master Fallon read it, he and Master Robles spent the next three days in the library doing research. That's where they've been these last few days. Now they're finished, and they've called all the Deans to a meeting in the library. All of them! I've never seen them all together like that except for official functions. Something big is going down and they're not telling us anything!"

Luscin is nonplussed, "that's it? You're worried that a bunch of scholars are upset over a letter? What was in the letter do you even know?"

This is the part Sanne kept back because once she reveals this last bit, she has no idea what Luscin will do, "I don't know what was in the letter, I didn't dare open it. But I know it was addressed to you."

Luscin's breathing changed slightly at that news. A short abrupt intake of air signaled a shift to combat breathing. She stopped herself and resumed taking normal breaths, "Is that it? A letter addressed to me?"

Sanne noted the slip and continued cautiously, "No I also saw your family name, Lael."

"So?"

"It was sent by someone named Lucy Lael. Is that your mother? Why would that cause the headmaster to lock himself in the library for three days?"

Luscin was quiet, the minutes stretched from one to two, to three minutes before she finally spoke, "Thank you for telling me about this letter. You should go now."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. The same thing you should have done. Coming here and revealing this information doesn't help anybody, except satisfying your need to make everything about you. Go about your business and stay out of mine."

"Luscin, it's not like that. I'm worried about you. Something terrible must have happened and I thought you'd want to know."

"No, you're confusing your selfish curiosity with concern. I'll find out what is in that letter when Master Gale decides it's safe to tell me. He is a sworn Defender, he will not do anything that puts any of us in danger. Telling me my mother is trying to contact me could be exactly what I need to be protected from at this time and you've now exposed me to that information. Stop pretending you're better than the rest of us because you wear that page's uniform. You are nothing but an errand boy. You've run your personal errand. You should leave on your own before I see you out myself."

Sanne stands and leaves, her blood pressure spiking, cheeks flushing red, her temples throb, the sound of her pulse fills her ears, "I... I'm sorry, Luscin."

Luscin doesn't move until she hears the sound of the door click shut. She stands slowly, looking around at her room for perhaps the last time before she begins to pack.

Chapter Nine - Devastator

The assembled group of instructors sit patiently and wait for their headmaster to let them know just what is going on. When he finally stands and addresses them, he has their full attention.

“As you all know we have two rare students here at Mammatus. Students with talent of a magnitude seen once in a lifetime. The fact that we have two such students is truly special and the notion of this being a coincidence, or some contrived act of fate can’t be ignored,”

Fallon takes a moment to make eye contact with each of his instructors to make sure they are listening before he continues. “The training and mentoring of these two youths will change the course of history for the better or for the worse. A recent event endangers our efforts to help make history for the better. I called you all here to take your council, before deciding the best course of action. To best equip everyone with as much information as possible, Master Robles and I have been researching the problem before us.

A letter addressed to Luscin Lael from her mother arrived three days ago. It assures her that her family obligations are no longer an issue, and she can safely return. That alone was nothing to concern us. It’s the second message about a danger to the children of Thuma that Luscin left unfinished, that is our concern. It is in this area that Master Robles research should assist our decision making. If you would Paras, please share what you found.”

The headmaster and Master Robles switch places. Now standing at the head of the table Paras Robles reports, “I’ve looked at broadsheets from Luscin’s home city of Thuma and the surrounding region of the Finger Lakes and compiled statistics of crimes against children over the last 500 years.”

Halle gasps at the proposed timeline of crimes.

Paras ignores the interruption; he knows she can’t control herself sometimes. “There was nothing out of the ordinary in the city of Thuma until the year 6642 ST. at that time the number of missing children jumped three-fold, from one in 10 thousand to three in 10 thousand. That may not sound like many but at the time there were 200 thousand people in Thuma. That means they were somehow misplacing 60 children a year. Over the next two decades that number crept up to more than 90 with little population growth. The number to note is 60, when you take average disappearance numbers from neighboring cities and compare them to Thuma on a per capita basis, Thuma averages slightly above their neighbors. If you subtract 60 from the total and adjust to per capita, they fall within 1% of every other city of the region. That could be coincidence, or the danger warned about in the letter.”

“So many; how can we allow this to continue,” Halle blurts out?

Kail Blackwell grips the table like he’s about to flip it over, “We can’t. What are we going to do?”

Hron with his usual frown, “We are going to give our council, that’s what we are going to do.”

“Let’s not rush into anything until Terius returns,” adds Vania in her casual drawl.

“We’re not finished hearing all the information. The two of you were sequestered here for three days. What did you discover Master Gale,” asks Hron Black Hill.

Master Robles changes places again with the headmaster.

Once again standing at the head of the table, Headmaster Fallan Gale speaks, "While Master Robles was uncovering his evidence of a danger to the children of Thuma. I was looking for the source of the problem. I read through close to a hundred journals left to me by my predecessors. I too started back 500 years. There is corroborating evidence that the spike in missing children coincides with the arrival of a Devastator in Thuma."

Another gasp was expected and given by Halle Talyah.

"340 years ago, a report of an influential woman attached to dozens of scandals was recorded by the Study in Thuma. That study has no Defenders and has never been able to attract any, but that didn't stop them from documenting and reporting on suspicious activities. This particular note was not forwarded for almost 200 years. It was only after similar stories kept repeating, that the pattern emerged. A woman of middle age with black hair, purple eyes, and a cleft chin would get caught in some scandal and be forced into excel. After the fourth time, in 200 years a woman with purple eyes and a cleft chin was exiled someone saw the pattern and sent a report. My most recent predecessor, Headmaster Sarah Fountain sent an investigator who never returned. Her report made it sound like she couldn't spare anymore manpower to such a distant problem. But looking back at that investigators track record; tells me he was her best Defender, and she didn't want to send anyone else to their death."

Fallen took a moment to let that information settle before continuing, "Master Robles and I went back through the broadsheets to search for anything on this purple eyed woman with the cleft chin. She didn't operate alone. There was always a rich benefactor that somehow kept clean of the allegations but would gracefully step away when the allegations against the woman were at the worst. There isn't one Devastator at work in Thuma. There are two."

This time Halle was too stunned to gasp.

"The problem we face is Luscine and how she'll react to this news. I've thought this through and have already decided she should be told. Betraying her trust would be the worst thing we could do at this point in her development. This is where your council is welcome and expected." Done speaking, Fallan sits down.

Vania speaks up first, "We can't allow her to go home alone and face two devastator on her own."

Kail adds, "I agree with Vania, she's too young to fight one Devastator, two would be impossible."

Paras speaks up, "According to the letter, she faced the female devastator and left it for dead once already. I suspect at the time she had no idea of their regenerative abilities. Had she known I doubt it would be alive today."

Kail, "Do we really believe an untrained five-year-old child could destroy a 350-year-old Devastator on its home field?"

Paras speaks up, "Kail my friend, she may not excel in your field of physical combat, but I assure you she does in everything else. She has an uncanny talent to copy any attack on first sight. She showed up on our doorstep capable of countering kinetic and thermal attacks without having to capture the incoming energies. She juggles power like a street performer with a dozen apples. The most unreal part of her ability is she barely understands what she's doing. She struggles in my shell theory classes as much as your weapons drills while the rest of our fellow masters are in awe of her abilities."

Master's Bailly, Black Hill, Adara and Talyah all voice their agreement.

Kail rebuts, "That may be as it is, but the reality of the situations is there are two. None of us would consider taking on two by ourselves."

"Ha," blurts Vania! "Have you not met Terius? That man backs down from nothing."

Jayden Bailly with eyes furtively scanning the room, "We all know of his exploits and track record. I don't envy the day he bites off more than he can chew."

Hron Black Hill rebuts, "Haha, I enjoy the mixed metaphor. If only you did such things on purpose."

"Quiet!" Headmaster Gale slams his hand on the table. "I didn't call you in here so I could listen to your bickering. I want actionable advice on how to keep Luscine Lael safe. While not betraying her trust!"

The room falls silent. After an indetermined number of seconds that seemed like minutes, Master Vania Adara, Dean of sight and sound speaks up, "I stand by my earlier statement that Leones is the best of us for this task. In his absence, I will volunteer to accompany Luscine home to sort out her family business. We've connected in the past and I believe she trusts me enough to listen to my council."

Headmaster Fallen Gale would have preferred to wait for Terius to return as well, but he's on an equally important assignment. If his last report is as it appears, they are dealing with a third once in a lifetime... no, this one is a once in 10000 lifetimes talent, an unexpected gift that is sure to change the world. It will be up to this group before him to shape that change for the betterment of the world and to avoid the worse.

Nobody spoke up to challenge Master Adara's offer to accompany Luscine.

"It's settled," Fallan picked up his hand bell and rang for a page.

A young man poked his head through the door.

"I know it's late; can you ask your fellow student Luscine to join us here in the library?"

Chapter Ten – Running Away Home

Luscin didn't take long to pack, two changes of clothes, soap, comb, and water flask go into a pack and she's ready. She straps her pack to her back and heads out on her last errand.

She wants to let Teum know she's leaving, but she isn't looking forward to leaving him behind. He'll want to come with her, worse he'll want to help. That sweet boy has no idea how horrible the real world can be. The worst thing to ever happen to him was getting drugged and chained to a wall. He tore down the wall and had the man arrested.

Compare that to Luscin being sold out by her best friend to be fed to some crazy witch. She had to kill the woman, then find her way out of the house filled with hundreds of decomposing bodies, and she looks at that incident with less revulsion than her family life. Teum gets sad because he thinks his sister and dad are mad at him. Luscin was almost forced to marry her own father to make an heir for her mother's sick family legacy. Teum is strong but innocent of the real world. Seeing the ugly, twisted world would ruin him.

Standing outside his door, she raises her hand to knock.

The door opens, Teum is standing there looking down with a huge grin on his face, "I did it! I saw it was you on the other side of the door!"

Luscin isn't much impressed. Everyone can do that with minimal training.

"I know what you're thinking, everyone can do that. But how did I know to look before you knocked?"

This is why she likes him so much. He's strong, which is what attracted her in the first place. He's smart too, people underestimate him because he's so open and honest they assume he's simple. Best of all he's cute with those grey eyes and that narrow-crooked nose. She looks around with her sight and notices a series of thin lines of kinetic energy spanning the hall to either side of his door. "You made a machine to alert you of someone approaching? Clever."

"There's one other thing. Look at the door."

Luscin takes a glance at the door and sees an inverted plane of fuzzy energy.

Pointing to it, "what does that do?"

"When you went to strike the door with your hand, that inverted plane converts potential energy into kinetic, that I was able to feel as if you were about to strike me instead of the door. I need to charge it every few knocks to keep the potential up. I can show you how sometime." Teum is beaming with happiness at sharing this with Luscin. There's nobody that makes him feel the way she does. He likes her so much it hurts when he thinks about it. His happiness doesn't last though. As Luscin noted, he's smart and realizes she's come to his door, packed for travel, and is here to say good-bye.

"Luscin? When will you return?"

Gushing with pride that he didn't make her say anything, "Soon, I have to clean up a little mess I left behind in Thuma. I'll need a few days to find the mess, fix it, and come right back. I bet I'll be back in under a week. You won't have time to miss me."

“Thuma is a long way from here, don’t tell me you’re going to fly.”

“That’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

“You don’t know how. Terius doesn’t teach that to students until their 5th year; if they even can fly.”

“I saw him do it once, it doesn’t look hard.”

“You saw him take off. Did you see him land? What about all the stuff between takeoff and landing?”

Luscin’s mood is starting to sour, “I’ll figure it out. If I don’t, add six months to my estimated return.”

Teum smiles at her, “Yeah, I know you’ll figure it out. I just don’t want to lose you. Promise you’ll come back safe?”

“I promise,” that did it she was going to hug him. She leans in and manages to get her arms a little more than halfway around him.

Teum gently closes his arms around her, lightly squeezing their bodies together. He doesn’t let go until she gives him a little squeeze and relaxes her arms.

She takes his giant hands in hers and stands up on her toes to give him a kiss, which lands on his chin.

Teum holds onto her hands and lowers himself down so their kiss can be better aligned.

A minutes later, Luscin is dizzily wandering away from Teum’s room.

A voice interrupts the wonderful moment, “Luscin! I’ve been looking for you. The entire faculty is waiting to talk to you in the library.”

Luscin sighs to herself, then says out loud, “Oh wonderful, another page butting into my business.”

Page Leven doesn’t let her comment bother him, he bumped into Sanne and was given a summary of their encounter. “I had nothing to do with that. Sanne is the gossip not me. I’m just an errand boy.”

Luscin looks up in surprise at the boy with the crazy purple hair with black stripes, “She told you I said that?”

“Yes, she did. You’re not wrong. Our job is to run errands, so it’s hard for me to be offended by that label.” Leven continues, “None of that matters now, all of the study masters are gathered and prepared to help you. I know what a runaway looks like. Remember, I was once one too. You don’t have to do this alone. There’s a room full of real-life Defenders that just dedicated three days to formulate a plan waiting in the library to help you. You’d have to be as crazy as Teum says to pass that up.”

Deadpan, “Teum, says I’m crazy?”

“No way, he’s too smitten to see it. It’s everyone else who thinks you are,” Leven grins.

Incredulously, “Now everyone thinks I’m crazy?”

“Oh yes, Cuyle thinks you’re crazy smart. Jef, Mies, and Rik think you’re crazy pretty. It’s only Griet, Sanne, and Antje who thinks you’re nuts. And that’s only because you don’t let them know you.”

Leven waits to see her reaction, “Let’s go to the library and find out what’s really going on.”

Luscin suddenly feels tired. She allowed herself to react to the news of the letter instead of taking the initiative. She chose to battle Sanne when her real opponent was the author of that letter.

“Leven, you are good. I’d tell you you’re as good at influencing people as this guy I knew back in Thuma but comparing anyone to him is an insult. He was gifted with words, but garbage in every other way. Let’s go see what old Fallon has to say.”

“Fallon? Oh, you mean Headmaster Gale? Does he really let you call him by his given name?”

“No, stupid-face, of course not. You’re not the only one that can use words to mess with people.”

Chapter Eleven – Letter from Home

Headmaster Gale was getting increasingly nervous the longer it took for Luscin to arrive. He was fighting off the sinking feeling that he was handling this letter wrong, and she was going to go off on her own and get killed. He was impatiently pacing when she finally arrived. The room collectively relaxed when she appeared with the page boy that was sent to retrieve her.

Luscin was equally nervous. She hates being the center of attention, yet here she is standing alone with six of the seven Study masters that she respects more than any other person in the world staring at her. Her biggest fear is to disappoint them, how could she not. She's a nobody from Thuma, a runaway, a murderer. If they knew about her past, they'd send her away or have her imprisoned. Now they're all looking at her as if expecting her to say something.

Initiative, Luscin speaks, "I hear you have a letter for me?"

Furtive glances bounce around the room as if to ask who told her. Everyone turns to look at Headmaster Gale.

"Yes, it arrived three days ago. Considering the nature of your situation I took it upon myself to read it before passing it on. Upon reading it I learned of a dangerous situation that you will want to confront. I felt it best to arm you with as much information on the danger as we could find. Would you like to read the letter?"

"It's a letter from my mother, of course I want to read it. Do you intercept everyone's family correspondence?" Luscin kept a brave front or so she thought. Her body language didn't match her tone, eyes cast down, shoulders slumped, one foot turned inward.

As appalled as Kail was at his student's horrible readiness stance he was the first to read the situation correctly. He's been getting soft and more perceptive of other's pain, being 78 years old makes him the oldest instructor at Mammatus by several decades. In another 15 years he might start showing signs of aging. "Luscin, do not take the headmasters intrusion as a sign of disrespect. We must protect you and your fellow students until you can protect yourself. We knew you had a terrible start in life, we are only now learning how bad it was. Let us help you."

Luscin stood for a few heart beats before slow walking through the room, eyes still down, until she was standing beside Headmaster Gale. She sheepishly holds her hand up to receive the proffered letter.

Letter in hand she moves a little faster until she reaches a reading nook. She sits in the chair, legs up, ankles crossed, as if she were on the floor.

Summer, 6993

Luscin,

I am writing this letter for a multitude of reasons. The first of which is to inform you that Father and I have adopted two beautiful children. The oldest, Liam, is now the designated heir to my father's holdings. I'm sure you understand how this changes your family obligations. Liam will start study this fall, and his sister Linley will start next year. I do wish you'd visit and meet your new brother and sister.

I want you to know that I took your parting advice. I looked up the group operating out of Downwind and you were right, they were delighted to join my Bird Watching club. I've also decided to find better things to do with my days. I started a Cobbler business, some of my new associates brought along a lot of talent and are pitching in. You should consider a fresh pair of shoes the next time you are home.

This last bit of news is the hardest. You had a dangerous brush with someone before you left. It seems your warning has only made her angrier. The cost to the children has doubled. I've been assisting in every way I can, but she is willing to go out of her way, even to neighboring cities to collect her toll. It is for that reason that I implore you to not come home unless you bring assistance.

Sincerely, Lucy Lael

p.s. We miss you and are sorry we drove you away.

Luscin only needed to read it once. The sub-text was loud and clear, except the bit about shoes. She can ask mother about it when she sees her. More concerning is the toll being paid. Being paid because of her. She left the hag with a fist sized hole through her chest. How was that only a warning? She was dead, did she really survive that? Her thoughts can't get past the part where the hag survived and is angrier!

Luscin wrinkled up the letter and left her seat to toss it in a waste bin. She then looks around the room after remembering she's not alone.

She needs to take the initiative, or she'll wilt again, "Why did it take a year to reach me?"

Master Robles, always the academic, "Your mother did not and still does not know where you are. She must have known you'd continue your studies. She gave that letter to the Thuma Study and asked for it to be circulated until it found you. It took a year to make the journey, it could have easily circulated forever.

"Can you answer a question for us, and tell us about this person that is angry with you?"

"There isn't much to tell. She kills and eats children. I was supposed to be her next meal, but I blasted a hole in her chest and left her for dead."

Hron asks, "Was that the whole encounter or only the ending?"

Sounding annoyed she's being forced to recount that terrible day, "There was more. First, she tried to scare me with some spooky ghost inu that tried to eat my thoughts. I made one myself to fight hers, mine won. Then she stabbed my head with a cold spike, well not a real spike, it was just energy. I snapped it off and spiked her stupid-face with one just like it. Then I sucked all the energy from the air around the house and jammed it through her black heart."

Individually they each broke her words down into actions and abilities, and one by one they concluded that Luscin at five years old, did indeed defeat a devastator on her own.

Master Talyah speaking quietly, "Luscin, you really did it once. You could defeat this Devastator once and for all. I know you can."

Luscin hears the whispered words and feels a surge of confidence.

Master Adara adds, "But, not alone. Masters Robels and Gale have been researching Thuma and there is more than one creature operating in that territory. The one time it was seriously investigated, resulted in the disappearance of the investigator. I've not read your mother's letter. Only Fallon and Paras," using their first names is a slip, "have out of necessity. They tell us your mother begged you to bring help. I'd like to be there for you. Plus, I'd be delighted to meet your mother and father."

Luscin, hadn't thought about any of these possibilities. She was planning on rushing to Downwind and seeking the gang of children and asking them for news of her family. She hadn't considered the hag was still alive. Her assumption was this is a trick to get her back into Fathers grip. She had imagined a lot of yelling and him trying to hurt her, before she ended it by hurting him worse. The idea of striking Father appealed to her, the thought of striking *her father* was unsettling.

She needs to consider if the letter is real or fake. The last time she saw mother she was passed out drunk, like always. The woman who wrote this letter, if she's reading it correctly, has built her own spy network. The previous gang leader used the kids for information gathering, called them bird watchers. She had

suggested mother look after those kids, not become one of them. The shoe making business could be some related criminal activity. The notion that her father was part of the Thuma crime apparatus never occurred to her until after she ran away. Seeing the larger world put many of his actions into a new light. Luscini may understand him she does not forgive him. Believing what she thinks she knows of Father, makes believing her mother is running a spy network of runaway children easy to buy.

Could the hag have written it, or Father, or maybe grandfather? Would any of them take this tactic? Doubtful, Father and grandfather wouldn't use luck to find her, they would hire someone to find and kidnap her or worse. The hag might have, she has no idea what that monster is capable of doing. Her brief interaction showed the woman to be gross, overconfident, and narrow minded. Would she know anything about her family though? There's an easy way to find out. If Father is alive, those two have not met.

"I accept your offer, Master Adara. How fast can you get there?"

Smiling over the fact that Luscini is going along with their plan, "I imagine the two of us could run there in under two weeks."

Luscini doesn't say anything as she casually crosses the room with her left hand behind her back, smiling. When she gets to the door she says, "I'll wait one week before I contact anyone. See you in Thuma."

Luscini disappears in a blur as she streaks along the corridors up the stairwell and onto the roof in a few heartbeats. She moves fast by pushing herself with stored kinetic energy. Something she learned to do long before coming here. It's a frowned upon mode of fast travel as that same kinetic energy could be used as a weapon. Most Defenders can manipulate gravity enough to fall near parallel to the ground. It takes tremendous strength to push hard enough to fall completely in opposition to gravities intended pull, few have that strength. Luscini has never tried but she thinks she can.

Master Adara realized Luscini's plan almost immediately and followed her to the roof, "Have you any idea how to fly?"

"I know enough. Are you going to try and stop me?"

"Free'er no. Whyever would I do that? I'll be in Thuma before you and you'll get to learn a valuable lesson on hubris."

Luscini has to think about that word to know what it means, "You think I'm overconfident and can't do it?"

"I'm sure you can fly. You've been able to reproduce every technique you've been shown, and I only know a few people with your strength, and they can fly. It's reaching Thuma on your own that will be your downfall. I have to pack, see you in ten days, unless you get delayed."

Master Adara turns and casually walks back to the stairs in her usual slow, curvy way.

Luscini bites her lip and backflips into the air.

Chapter Twelve – Hubris

Luscin does exactly as she observed Terius doing on several occasions. She reaches out to the torrent of energy that permeates everything and pushes with all her willpower. At first, she only diverts a needle's width of flow. She feels a wave of nausea as her stomach suddenly feels weightless and realizes she's falling. The amount of potential energy approaching is growing exponentially, grabbing up that much at once will hurt. She widens her stance mentally and pushes on a wider swath of the rushing force permeating everything. This time she doesn't shove directly perpendicular, she starts by pushing along in the same direction of the flow and brings her opposition up slowly, like a clock hand moving from the six position up to the seven. That does something, the growing potential lessons and feels a little bit behind. She pushes harder and moves the clock hand to eight and then nine. The massive potential below is almost gone now.

She feels something coming at her and realizes her eyes have been closed all this time. Opening her eyes reveals she will strike a building in a few seconds if she doesn't do something fast. She rotates the figurative clock to the right, causing her to swerve to the right, missing the building.

She's going to need more altitude or she's going to smack into something eventually. She digs deeper and turns the clock hand past nine all the way to eleven. Amazingly she is now rising rapidly, it's only been a few seconds and she's already moving faster than she thought possible.

The lights of Mammatus fall behind her and rapidly disappear. She's doing it, she's flying. Mentally it's much harder than she imagined. Her ankles feel like they're on fire and her legs are going numb from the cold. She has to hold her shirt out of her face with one hand. Why would Terius fly feet first? She tries to turn herself to be moving headfirst and finds herself spinning uncontrollably. Now her eyes are burning from the buffeting air, tears flow making it harder to see. Her entire body is going numb from the cold air and breathing is getting difficult.

Luscin realizes she can't feel anything except the sun. It's somewhere beyond the horizon, but there isn't a single object or bit of energy except the freezing cold air that she's tumbling through. Master Adara's word, 'hubris' consumes her thoughts.

Luscin needs to put her feet on the ground, Teum's question about landing replaces 'hubris' in her thoughts for a moment.

All at once she stops exerting herself and relaxes. In moments that incredible amount of potential energy is once again below her. The wind that has been buffeting her is also changing direction, it's slacking off and she isn't tumbling as fast. She flattens out her body, arms and legs spreading out seems to slow her tumbling further. She isn't quite as dizzy now and realizes the ground is approaching fast, maybe another 15 seconds and she'll be eating more kinetic energy than she's ever attempted.

She steadies her will and pushes back on the six position again. Then moves it rapidly back up to nine, her head reels from the sudden direction change. She realizes as she does this it feels like her clothes are dragging her sideways in the opposite direction. Not from the wind, but something else. She pushes that thought away for now. No longer falling towards anything of note she works on controlling her tumbling. She's still freezing, but the air feels warmer. She experiments with moving her arms and legs, bending them at elbow and knees to see how the air interacts. Eventually she manages to be falling face first, limbs

spread, arms and legs bent at knee and elbows, to keep from tumbling again. Now she needs to come down, she backs the clock hand down a little from nine and feels the danger of potential energy ahead. It's a long way off, at this angle of descent she'll be flying for an hour or more. She moves the clock gradually down to eight. The impact will be in less than thirty minutes now. She goes down to seven and realizes she's going to hit in less than a minute. She's not ready, back to nine, but now she rotates the clock as she's falling parallel to the ground. Now travelling in a circle, she dials back to eight. She keeps rotating in a wide circle while descending.

Seconds from impact she exerts all her will to the 12-position. Nothing happens, that all powerful force washes through her like she's made of nothing. She prepares herself to take the weight of the world, her ability to hold fills to its limit, her desire to persevere through any trial has her take more than she imagined was possible. She feels like she's being torn in half as the kinetic energy from freefalling at terminal velocity is absorbed, held, and overflows.

The trees and bushes covering the forest floor break some of her fall, they also break some bones. She's awake long enough to realize she has no idea in what direction she was flying.

Her last thought before drifting into unconsciousness was, "Hubris hurts."

Hours or days later, she can't know for sure, she awakes. Sore ribs and a numb left leg inform her which bones she broke. Every breath is accompanied by a stabbing pain in her chest. The temperature was hotter than she expected, the air was damp and cloying. She's thirsty and a little hungry, she fishes her water flask out of her pack and takes a sip, takes another sip, then another. She can feel her body working on the bone breaks, she'll need more water and some food soon. The sun has been up for a while, she looks over her arms, she doesn't see any sign of sun exposure, she was only unconscious for the remainder of the night she thinks. Evaluating the sun and its position has her confused for a minute. When she sorts out magnetic north, she must have been flying north most of her trip because she's closer to the equator than she would have expected.

The surrounding forest is bizarre in every way. The birds and raptor sound different, the trees are barely recognizable to her. A few names come to mind, the massive tree that broke her fall is an ahuehuete, she's never seen one before and wouldn't know the name had she not been looking at one.

She's holding a lot of kinetic and it's starting to make her feel sore inside. Not knowing her surroundings and what predators are lurking she decides to hold on to it a little longer.

Luscina closes her eyes and uses a trick taught to her by Windmaster Wheller. She listened and felt for the chaotic energy of water. Nothing moves like water; it has a distinctive flow that can be recognized if you know what you're looking for.

To the east, a quarter mile is a slow flowing body of water. A possible source of drinking water, and maybe some food.

Luscina braces herself for what's to come and forces herself to stand on her broken leg. She starts walking, wincing in near unbearable pain with each step. She comes across a sturdy stick that's about her height, picks it up and uses it as a crutch. She's moving slower but the pain is tolerable now. The forest is thick with sharp plant leaves that slice at her exposed ankles and lower arms. If it weren't for the ability to

detect water, she'd probably be walking in circles trying to navigate through the thick trees and brush. 90-minutes later she sees the water, a shallow pool fed by a small stream.

The water is mostly clear, she can see fish and what she realizes are eels swimming in it. Both should be edible.

Luscin settles down on the bank and dangles one hand in the water to see if anything will approach. One of the larger eels comes for her. She starts remembering data about eels and learns just in time that some have an electric attack. The shock of sudden joules biting her hand makes her gasp as she gathers the static and stores it. The eel, confident in its attack comes up and bites Luscin's proffered finger. She closes her hand on the eel's mouth. Then blasts its head with enough kinetic to crush its skull before jerking it out of the water and dropping two yards of eel meat on the shore.

She takes a moment to inspect her hand, the bite is superficial and will heal by morning. She has no knife or other utensils; she'll have to cook off the outer slimy skin. She casts around for some dead wood, finds enough and makes a stack. She'll need a good-sized skewer; she sees a tree branch in a nearby white oak that will do. She uses some of the stored kinetic to snap the branch and bounce it to the ground within reach. She uses more kinetic to sheer off all the smaller branches and twigs until she has a near straight three-yard stick.

Luscin proceeds to inexpertly jam the stick down the length of the eel. She gets it more than halfway before giving up and blasting off the butt end of the eel and stick. She throws the back half into the water for the fish to eat.

A slow and painful trip to the river allows her to scrub and rinse off the eel's slime, and after a minute of gathering thermals, she builds up a store strong enough to ignite her stack of sticks. With a little more effort, she props her eel-on-a-stick over the fire.

She decides to bleed off more kinetic by taking target practice at the surrounding trees while her meal cooks. She remembers one of Master Black Hill's lessons and builds up as much thermal energy as she can comfortably hold. She's in an unknown situation and should be prepared to defend herself.

Two hours later, her stomach is full, and she needs sleep. She crawls to a white oak, put her back to it and dozes off, picturing Master Adara running to Thuma with that smug look on her face.

She awakes with a start, a loud belching-like noise rumbles through the night air. Then several more, just like it grumbles in answer from some distance. She attempts to see where the sound is emanating, but there are too many surfaces deflecting and echoing the low-pitched noise to locate.

She's tired, her mending shinbone still hurts, at least her ribs are nearly healed, breathing is much easier now. After an hour the belching noises subside, and she drifts off to sleep.

Later, she's awakened by another sound, this one much closer. A low rumble, but not like what she heard earlier. This was close, and she feels a creeping sensation of potential energy as if someone is about to punch her from above.

Luscin holds out her hand and envelopes it in light. She looks up and sees the face of a large cat, its eyes reflecting green from her glowing hand. The panther, not knowing what to do when its food has a light, turns, and disappears as it leaps from tree to tree.

She feels each jump as it recedes into the forest. She knows it's gone for sure when the birds resume their night calls. She drifts back to sleep.

The belching grumbling resumes at daybreak for another hour. What a terrible place to sleep, she thinks to herself. Luscini takes another inventory of her health, her breathing no longer hurts, and her leg is nowhere near as sore as before.

The thought of staying another day does nothing for her already sour mood. She needs to leave, but not until she figures out how to land. Luscini pours through her recollection of that night. It was all going ok until she tried to push 100 percent against that ever present constant energy. She wishes she had a name for it. When she tried to conjure a memory that fits the description all that comes to mind are references to fictional sources. She resigns herself to waiting until her fifth year for that answer from Terius. She had little trouble going from six to eleven when diverting that flow. She wonders what happens if she rotates the clock 180 degrees rapidly. No gentle spin, just all at once, flip it. Will she instantly reverse direction or will she have to bleed off all her forward momentum before changing direction.

Luscini realizes she doesn't have to leave the ground to try that one. She briefly considers climbing into the water to reduce friction, then she remembers all the joules she picked up from one eel, she doesn't care to take on more.

A large, leafed plant grows around the pond's edge, she pulls off one large enough to sit on. The far bank has a sort of muddy beach and will be perfect for this experiment. Sitting on her leaf in the middle of the muddy beach, she prepares for all the thermal and kinetic energy she's about to generate, then she shoves the clock hand to nine. Gravity started pulling her forward. She siphons off the kinetic energy caused by the friction of her leaf covered butt on the ground. Once she's moving at a walking pace, she slams the clock hand around to three. She almost immediately stops forward motion and reverses direction. She does it twice more, allowing more speed to build before changing direction each time and is positive that changing her fall horizontally can bleed off speed just as well as vertical, but without completely opposing the universe. It seems obvious now. The force she is interacting with isn't gravity, it is something else and it is nearly immutable. You can't directly oppose it. But gravity is just an effect of that force and can be manipulated easily.

Luscini has half a day left and would rather not stay in this strange forest any longer. She tops off her water flask and stows it in her pack.

She pictures how Terius dresses before leaving by air and does her best to apply the same principles to her current clothes. Her shoelaces get double knotted, to prevent them from whipping around and lacerating her ankles as they did before. She tucks her pants legs into her socks to keep them from riding up. She tucks her fresh shirt into her pants and cinches them tight with a strip of cloth she tore from her dirty uniform top. Another strip is used to tie her hair into an inu-tail that gets tucked inside the back of her shirt. The final preparation she makes is to verify her pack is secure and tight.

Feeling under-prepared and a bit foolish, Luscini turns to face north-north-east and back-flips into the air, launching herself at the 10-position into the sky.

She levels herself out at the 9-position after half a minute or so, the forest looks tiny at this altitude as it leisurely rolls beneath her. Facing the ground makes a lot of sense, but why fly feet-first she keeps asking herself. Then she starts thinking about landing, and the idea of headfirst doesn't sound so good either.

A man with drab dark skin, and drab brown hair who has been watching Luscin since morning slowly stands from concealment. His clothes are colored and patterned to blend with the local fauna, making his outline difficult to notice. He notes her direction of travel and returns to base and reports everything he can recall about the invader from South Cenoka.

Chapter Thirteen – Getting it Right

Nothing makes sense from up here, Luscin sees plenty of landmarks, but has no idea where she is. She should have studied maps, like the fancy cartography maps Terius keeps in his office. She knows true-north, and is flying southernly, the Fuarial Ocean is somewhere to the east. If she can manage to find it, she can get her bearings. She rotates her direction of fall to dead east. Not the most efficient route to Thuma which is to the west. If she can find the shoreline, she can follow it to the first port city and crash there.

It takes less than thirty minutes to spot the coastline and only a few more minutes to spot a city. The buildings are all massive square constructions. Many have huge bases and taper to blunt points, making them pyramids she realizes. Panic sets in as she realizes she's flying over North Cenoka. She turns her clock to 11 and shoots upwards, not wanting to be seen.

When the air becomes too cold to bear and she experiences difficulty breathing she levels out and begins a slow descent as she drives forward. She's made herself about as aerodynamic as possible and is falling forward at near maximum free fall speed, cruising around 175 miles an hour. While idly watching the ground scroll past she attempts to use her store of thermal energy to keep warm, the flowing air relentlessly strips away everything she tries, layers would help trap air, something for next time. After an hour she sees what has to be the massive Rocky Waste ahead. Somewhere in those tens of thousands of square miles is Mammatus.

She decides to put her experiment on slowing down to a practical test. She throws her clock hands from nine back to three. The wind buffeting her decreases rapidly, until for just a moment she is stationary before she begins falling headfirst the other way. Feet first was by far more comfortable. Flying headfirst is the same as hanging upside down, our circulatory systems are not built for that.

Perfect, with no momentum she drops all pressure, and her direction of fall adjusts towards the ground. As she picks up speed, she shifts her direction back to parallel with the ground. Now she just needs to get close to the ground while falling slow enough to not break anything on impact.

She experiments with her slowing down technique while bleeding off altitude until she sees a large port city ahead. That should be Gateland, the northernmost city of South Cenoka.

Luscin sees an empty pasture and circles it until she is moving at a safe speed with a distance less than 20 yards to the ground. She drops, sticking the landing like she's done this before, while absorbing the accumulated kinetic energy from her drop. Since she was already holding a sizable amount of kinetic, she should lighten her load. After checking the ground for animal dens, and finding none, she releases half of her hold into the ground with a thump.

A two-hour walk brings her to the city gate. She looks for a cheap place to eat and sleep and calls it a day. She's already wasted a day and two nights learning to fly and managed to put herself hundreds of miles further away than when she started. She needs to clear her head and figure this out or Master Adara will be waiting for her in Thuma.

Luscin starts the moment the sun clears the horizon to the west. She washes up as best she can, noting that her leg is no longer bothering her. She pays the innkeeper to launder yesterday's clothes and vows to pick up two more outfits, and some sort of jumpsuit before leaving Gateland.

Luscin spent all of the next day in a library pouring over maps and reading books on navigating by speed and direction. Navigating on the ground by landmark is simple, she was born with that knowledge. Navigating in the air, or at sea requires time keeping and knowing your speed. Two things she doesn't know how to solve at this time. That leaves learning to read the ground. Luscin decides her best course is to trace back the larger towns and cities she passed through on her way to Mammatus when she was following Teum.

She supplied up for another five days at most and planned to sleep outdoors the rest of the trip if the weather held. The winter jumpsuit she purchased brought some odd looks when she wore it out of the inn the next morning.

After stopping on the outskirts of the City of Brust, she overshot Twoya and Liama and had to backtrack adding two days unnecessarily. She was able to reach Thuma after seven days of flying by day and resting each night.

This concludes the FREE SAMPLE of Embers Burn. You can continue reading with Kindle Unlimited or purchasing the eBook, Paperback, or Hardcover edition on Amazon.

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About the Author

Michael Nelson was born at the end of the 1960's and has been a fan of Dinosaurs, Monkeys, Hard Science Fiction, Heavy Metal, D&D and other RPG, reading Sci-Fi and fantasy novels, playing computer games, messing around with fireworks, and watching professional Hockey all or most of his life. He also has been happily married to his High School sweetheart and managed to survive raising three children. Professionally, computers have been a passion, driving him to open then close a couple retail computer stores, do private consulting, and work for a fortune 100 IT company. All the time, thinking of magical worlds, characters, and stories.