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Exordium Popule

A Compilation of Prequals from the
Return from Cataclysm Saga

Exordium Popule

*A compilation of prequals to The Return from
Cataclysm Saga*

BY MICHAEL L NELSON

*Included are sample chapters from the
short stories titled,*

Luscin

Teum

Terius

Greta

Malo

Defender

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About the Author

Authors Note

I've been creating, planning, and dreaming about this world and the story it tells for a couple decades. It never would have happened had I not received the advice of the author Steven Brust in the back of one of his books for aspiring writers. He said write about what you love or something to that effect. Since it was 2am and I was on a business trip in a time zone that made it feel like 11pm and I had finished the only book I had with me; I asked myself, "What would I write?" My mind spun for hours while I checked off all the things I love in fantasy and science fiction. As I mentioned above, I continued doing this for decades.

My father had been doing the same, except he actually started writing and publishing, he's doing quite well for

himself. If you like stories about alternate history, look up Ed Nelson. After listening to him talk about his writing hobby turned profession for a couple years, I realized I had a cool story idea of my own I could tell. This led me to begin Embers Burn. An epic saga with a new take on magic, a unique take on humanity, and a story that takes place on a global scale.

It was terrible. It read like an adlibbed D&D campaign, which is fun to play for a while but eventually breaks down. That's when I realized I needed to do some world building. Each of these stories introduces elements of the world in which my story takes place. Defender introduces the history and its defining event, 'the Cataclysm. Lucsin, Teum, and Malo introduce the young heroes of the saga, Terius explores the magic system of the world, while Greta (and Defender) introduces you to the bad guys of the

world. After writing these short stories I had a better formed framework to write Embers burn and I hope my efforts prove enjoyable to you the reader.

Luscin

Part One of Six



Luscin- Exordium

YEAR 6981 ST (SETTLED TIME)

CITY OF THUMA ON LAKE TANSEE OF THE FINGER
LAKES

Luscin | Chapter Three - Wendy

Downwind was well named, there's a prevalent wind coming off Lake Tansee blowing north most of the day. It briefly reverses direction around sunset as the temperature differential between the air over the lake and the shore reverses. It's not that time yet and Downwind reeks of fish guts. It's not as bad as Luscin expected, after a few minutes she hardly notices it. Wendy isn't doing as well; she has her blouse pulled up covering her nose, exposing her tummy. The two explorers keep walking with the wind in their faces, staying on the larger streets. There's a surprising number of people about and none of them look bad.

"Luscin this place smells terrible, we should leave."

"It's no worse than the fishing boat."

“We were only there for a few minutes. We’ve been walking towards the fish market for ten minutes.”

“Don’t be a baby, it’s been maybe five minutes. The dare is to see a bad person. I’ve only seen merchants, and some of them are my neighbors. I don’t think any of them are bad people.”

After a pause in the conversation, “Wendy, where have you been going? I’ve not seen you in study until today for a week.”

“Nowhere. I mostly stayed home and helped mama with chores.”

“You don’t have chores, you have servants.”

“There are some things too important to leave to servants. I do those.”

Wendy wanting to change the subject, "Maybe we need to get off the streets and go down an alley to find a bad person."

Luscin not wanting to look scared says, "Ok" and turns down the next alley.

It's a narrow walkway between two shops. One sells fish and caviar meat, the other was some sort of chemical supply store. The ground debris was a collection of crushed paper containers and animal viscera. Not a lot, the people of Thuma take care of their city but some garbage is bound to end up in infrequently traveled alleyways. The two daring explorers pushed on, gently stepping around the occasional squishy animal remains and stomping on the paper containers, some giving up small clouds of dust of their unknown content. The alley opened up onto a deserted street. A dilapidated warehouse is the only standing structure on the block. They

would have turned but the sounds of kids' laughter drew them towards the warehouse.

With no more than a glance and a nod to one another they move towards the busted lift gate, climb up the ledge which is set to the height of an inu driven cart and peer into the dark interior. The laughter and voices that had lured them this far fell silent when they reached the ledge. Without that reassuring familiar sound both girls begin to lose their nerve.

"You wait here, I'll go first," whispers Wendy.

"Since when did you get brave?"

No longer whispering, "'I'm brave, braver than you. Now stay!"

Wendy places both hands on the wall and jumps up, kicking one leg out to catch the ledge's top and pulls herself up. Turns and

points at Luscin, "Stay until I call you. When it's ok for you to come in."

Something seems off to Luscin, Wendy being brave and wanting to go first. But she did have her left hand behind her back, like always. Whatever she's pulling it better be fun or dangerous.

Luscin didn't have to wait long to find out. Her friend Wendy, who disappeared moments ago into the pitch-black warehouse suddenly shrieks in terror and yells for Luscin to get away.

Luscin doesn't run away, not even from Father. The ledge that Wendy scrambled up is behind her in a bound, landing on her feet, she runs towards the unknown.

It's dark, she forces her eyes to adjust to the dark in an instant, she sees her friend Wendy has been forced to the ground by two boys that are close to grown. Her shirt

is being pulled up by one of them as he gropes her. Standing around are more than a dozen other younger kids who start cheering the two attackers on. Wendy's shrieks turn to laughter and all the kids turn to look at Luscine.

Eyes glowing, breathing with purpose, instinctively in a loose fighting stance, Luscine doesn't know what she should do. Eyes skipping around the room assessing everyone, she holds.

Wendy's voice now muffled by the boy's chest she's wrapped her arms around, "Like I told you, she's gullible as a baby. Now stop tickling me."

Realization hits Luscine that her friend Wendy set this up to make her look dumb. Her cheeks flash red and she starts to shake as she winds down the energy within that was about to go wild.

The other boy, the one not kissing a compliant Wendy tells the other kids to go play somewhere else and approaches Luscian.

"I'm Alfie and my friend over there with Wendy is Felix. She told us you're bang-up and we should give you a chance."

No longer shaking but with red cheeks on display, "a chance at what, being groped? I guess this means I finished my dare and can go."

"No, no, not yet. I need to talk to you," turning back to the now wrestling couple behind him he adds, "You two should go somewhere, you're not animals."

Wendy starts woofing like an inu as her and Felix pick themselves up and run off somewhere behind a pile of debris.

"I know you don't have much time, but I think we can help each other. If you hear

me out, I think you'll agree. We can talk here or head back to the offices and sit down."

"I can sit here," Luscin drops into a crouch ready to move quickly if needed.

Recognizing her resolve to try and regain some control, Alfie joins Luscin on the floor but with legs crossed and elbows on his knees.

Now that Luscin isn't concerned about her friend's safety she takes a moment to assess Alfie. He has green eyes, and a narrow nose, thin lips and the wisps of a yellow moustache matching the yellow mop of hair tied off in a knot behind his head. He appears healthy, maybe a little tired. His height at about 50 inches puts him around age 14 but he acts more grown up than that.

“How old are you and Felix, and who are those kids,” demands Luscine.

“It’s that way with you I see, but that should be expected, You’re only six years old, practically a baby still. Can’t stop yourself from asking questions.” Alfie pauses to read her face, one thing for certain she wears her emotions on the outside. She looks angry at the little dig about her age.

Changing to a new tactic, “That’s a good thing around here. All those kids you asked about, those are mine. Not for real though I’m not their father. I take care of them since they don’t have homes or parents. Kids like that always end up in Downwind. That stink of fish and bleach that everyone moans about starts to smell tasty when your belly’s been empty for days. We keep our eyes peeled for any new strays. That’s how we found Wendy.

She was wandering about looking all lost. Of course, it turns out she was just bored and looking for something to do. She's been back almost every day since. She's been a big help at marking targets, but we'll get back to that. For now, I'm offering you something, we can discuss the price later."

Alfie pauses again to assess the five-year-old in front of him. He only called her six before to butter her up before calling her a baby, he learned that complimenting and then insulting girls in a way that sounds innocent is a good way to make them seek his attention. They're all the same, they want some boy to see them as valuable. Too bad they're all gullible trash. Even this little girl after a few minutes is already looking at him with wonder.

"Luscin, has anyone ever told you your eyes glow when you get mad?"

“Only Wendy has said that, but she’s the only one that makes me mad.”

“Well, I’m telling you too, because I just saw it. Do you know what that means?”

He can practically read her thoughts; it’s written on her face. A mix of hope and fear battle for control over her expression, her eyes going wide with a spark of fire and at the same time she’s crunching her brow in consternation, she knows exactly what it means but is too afraid to say it aloud in case it’s not true or some joke, or worse Father finds out and puts her to work.

“It means you can hold. You know what that means right?”

She boldly nods her head a little.

“You can get out of here, write your own story, you can escape your father.”

Too far, her eyes that were looking all dreamy snap back to reality when he mentioned her father. Wendy filled him in on the details she knew. He was abusive, often beating Luscine and his wife. Luscine never complained and went through a lot of effort to hide the damage. Her latent abilities have probably protected her from the worst of it. Absorbing impacts, healing bones and bruise in days instead of weeks. Wendy says she once disappeared for ten days, he must have broken a dozen bones to lay up someone like Luscine for that long.

“What kind of lies has that zasskoken been saying about me!”, explodes Luscine while abruptly standing.

“No, listen, it’s not like that. She’s worried about you and wants you to get away from whatever is hurting you. She’s seen the bruises you think you keep covered. Nobody misses that many days of study

unless their home life stinks like the Downwind. Please stay, hear me out.”

“You said you had something for me, what is it? Tell me now,” sapphire eyes glowing with power!

“Ok, ok, just don’t hurt me,” pleads Alfie.

Luscin demeanor softens immediately. Alfie barely suppresses his urge to smile at how easy that was. Luscin has only ever heard those three words, ‘don’t hurt me’ in her head when Father is mad. Hearing someone else saying them because of her was chilling.

“I can introduce you to a Master, a duelist actually, but they take on students. You’ll have to work out payment and stuff, but I think you have a good chance. You’re young and strong, I’m sure she’ll overlook how reckless and scary you behave.”

Alfie pauses again to take stock of his handywork. Luscine is now trying to look as calm and unimposing as possible. She really is gullible even for a five-year-old.

“All we need you to do is crawl through a window, pick up a chest and drop it down to the street below. None of us can do it because it’s too heavy for us. But not you, I bet you pick up super heavy stuff all the time, don’t you?”

Luscine, wanting to make amends for scaring Alfie, nods affirmative. She’s been lifting her mother, and all sorts of things considered heavy. Whenever she needs to lift something impossible, she somehow becomes stronger. She isn’t strong now, but she could be in an instant if she needed to be.

“What’s in the chest?”

“Coins, jewelry, a lot of gold. That’s why it’s so heavy.”

“Why do I have to drop it out the window?”

It’s an old strong box, locked tight. But the sides are wood reinforced with iron bands. A drop like that should bend the iron and pop at least one board loose.”

“What do you need it for?”

This part is important to make this work so has to be the absolute truth, “I feed and clothe my kids. We have twice as many brothers and sisters as last winter, we need coats and blankets and coal for the stove. I need that money so I can protect my little children.”

Luscin hearing those words, ‘protect my little children.’ warmed her very spirit. Alfie isn’t just a proper father to these kids; he is their Defender.

Eyes now wide and full of admiration,
“Yes, I’ll do it.”

“Don’t you have one more question?”

Luscin stares blankly for a moment, “Oh,
who am I robbing?”

“That’s the best part. It’s the mayor’s mother. She’s the one that closed the Thuma Orphanage. Because of her, Felix and I were put out in the streets when we were four. We had to fend for ourselves, that’s why we do this now, so no kids have to go through that alone again.” Every single word of that was a lie, but Luscin was all-in emotionally and would believe anything he said now.

“When do we do this... now?”

“No, no, we need to wait until the old hag isn’t home. That won’t be until the weekend. She has a vacation home on the shore, she spends half her days there, the

other in her townhome. We'll hit the townhome when we're sure she's gone."

Alfie doesn't even bother assessing Luscin at this point, "I bet Wendy is ready to go by now, you two should stay away from Downwind until we come collect you. We don't want anyone wondering what you two are doing in here all the time."

That sounded reasonable to Luscin, she agreed to stay away until the weekend.

Teum

Part Two of Six



Teum- Exordium

YEAR 6983 ST (SETTLED TIME)

TOWN OF OIHO IN THE MISSACON TERRITORY

Teum - Prologue

The weight of a two-story high cathedral ceiling's main support beam just crashed into Teum's face. That in itself isn't a problem, he was the one that had gathered that energy when a support beam fell on him the day before.

The problem comes from the fact that he unloaded the literal weight of a building at this tiny person in front of him and with barely a twitch they returned it so fast it felt instantaneous. It feels like he's punching himself with every attack.

The difference between them is that he only has one attack and it's everything he's got in one blow. The waif confronting him is mixing it up, some attacks are hitting all at once, and others are split into dozens of attacks from every direction.

His opponent is better trained and doesn't have to use a focus like a fist or foot to deliver blows, they can simply manifest the impact with a thought. A small fist to his stomach can deliver half the blow while an invisible cannon ball hits the side of his head. After every exchange he feels like he's holding the exact same amount of energy as before.

Teum has never lost a battle, he's going to need more than the brute strength he was holding to beat this impish challenger.

Teum continues what feels like a mutual exchange of blunt force trauma, capturing nearly all of the energy each time. Little by little some energy is getting through leaving small bruises that his spirit goes to work at healing. His adversary should be feeling it too he thinks with a grin.

Teum probes the sky looking for a pocket of static that he can coax down to the

ground for himself to capture or better yet, direct at his unsuspecting foe. This isn't the first time he's found himself fighting against an opponent with more skill. Eventually they all realize they can't overwhelm him and quit. Nobody has been able to come close to doing that, yet. This nit can't keep up forever.

A large pocket of static is sitting a little under a mile above them. Teum wills it towards himself. At that distance his gathering will be slower than he likes but there's a lot up there and it could easily double the amount of energy he's unloading.

The negative particles of static begin to infuse and mix with the kinetic the two combatants are violently exchanging. What previously looked like two people punching each other with no regard for defense starts to crackle with tiny

lightning strikes. Most go into their intended targets but some leap away towards anything connected to the ground. That can include bystanders who are now backing away.

A blast of heat coming from a kick nearly catches Teum off guard. His foe must have been holding some thermal energy from the beginning or he would have felt the temperature drop. No problem he thinks, fire, lightning, and force are all the same to him, and he can hold more than anyone.

Teum has no formal combat training, over time he's unlocked some of his inherited knowledge of combat arts. He's mostly a western style boxer and wrestler. Teum alternates between jabs and haymakers, he's not interested in defense and doesn't bother trying to block.

His opponent slips most of his attacks. When Teum finally connects with her face, he instantly feels the same impact in the back of his head.

Maybe defense is a good idea he thinks while backing away a step.

Teum is suddenly rocked by a thronging cacophony of noise made of low frequency sounds. The low-pitched waves pound his bones, making them vibrate painfully before he's able to adjust and gather that too. He's no stranger to controlling sound waves but would never have thought to use it as a weapon. Who is this person, and why did they come here and make that challenge?

The fight continues, neither combatant gaining an advantage, Teum's spirit continues to patch his body from knicks, blows, and burns. His clothes are starting to look overly worn, somehow his

challenger's wardrobe looks as fresh as they did at the start of this duel.

I'm no duelist and neither is his challenger he surmises from the lack of ceremony displayed at the onset.

Teum's thoughts begin to wander, they frequently do that when a task takes longer than a minute or two to complete. How did this start? What sequence of events occurred that brought him to this place at this time? What bad decisions did he make this time to put himself here?

Terius

Part Three of Six



Terius- Exordium

YEAR 6985 ST (SETTLED TIME)

THE STUDY AT MAMMATUS PLATEAU

Terius | Chapter Three — Conversations

Headmaster Fallon Gale is sitting at his writing desk when Terius arrives. The reason for the summons is in his hand. The desk is bare except for a single stack of paper, the headmaster's office is tidy as usual.

There are three chairs, one at the writing desk, the other two by the lone window. A workbench lines one wall, floor to ceiling bookshelves fill another. A garish red rug covers most of the floor.

"Defender Terius, you have work."

"Master, how may I serve?"

"We can start by skipping the formalities. You have a long way to travel, we should

not waste time. There's a duelist causing mischief in Brass."

"What kind of mischief?"

"I'm sending you, that tells you there's at least one dead. The message says the Duelist is named Sholto. We don't have a record of him, I don't know how strong he is. You should read the report yourself."

Terius takes the report from Fallon, reads it twice.

The duelist arrived in Brass a week earlier, pumped the locals for old rivalries and spent every spare moment stoking the hate held by two families until one took him up on settling their differences with a duel. If both parties had duelist representation it would be fair, it never is. A duelist never wants a fair fight.

Terius returns to his office; Master Robles is no longer there. He makes his way past

his desk, eyeing the small pile of papers he's yet to read, and passes through the door separating his personal room from his office.

His room, unlike his office, is cluttered with personal affects and trophies taken from past conquests. Nothing gory like the scalps some Defenders will take. He prefers personal items from a beaten opponent. His collection mostly consists of jewelry and weapons. Besides the trophies he likes to collect items from places he visits. Strange garb, specialty tools, and figurines made after the fashion of the ladies of the region being a small sample. Despite his disdain for the Dragon Priesthood and the Free'er they serve, he has two paintings of dragon's adorning his walls.

Under his bed is a flat trunk. He slides it out and puts it atop the tightly pulled

sheets. Opening it he removes his Defenders garb, dons it and goes about arming himself.

People always ask why someone like himself bothers with a sword, knife, or staff. The answer is always met with disbelief as it goes against the Free'er' teachings.

Besting an opponent when you can command the elements and they cannot, is not a victory; it's an execution. The laws he follows and the oaths of a Defender mandate he shows restraint to allow his opponents the opportunity to submit. Punching a hole in their chest with a lightning bolt doesn't give them that opportunity.

His Defender garb is basic, a close-fitting shirt tucked in and tied down to his chinos. The chinos also tight fitting is tucked inside and secured to his boots with ties. All

black for the practical reason of hiding burn marks and his opponent's blood.

A short staff and sword are secured behind his back, both accessible over his left shoulder. Two long knives are affixed to his belt and a third shorter blade is attached to his right ankle over top his chinos. A pouch containing shot, like those used by slingers is the last of his weaponry is affixed behind his right long knife.

Everything is secured with two loops of leather cord to ensure they do not come free when traveling. A drop leg bag strapped to his left thigh holds writing instruments and stamps used in various jurisdictions, round out his gear.

Now equipped for work he makes his way back to the kitchen for a light meal; he walks this time.

The dining hall and kitchen are nearly empty as lessons are over and the students have some free time. Most leave the study to play or visit one of the nearby bars at this time. They'll all be back by sundown looking for food and comradery. One person of interest was alone at a table with two plates in front of her. She looks up as he approaches.

"I think you like parading about in your little costume a bit too much," says Dean of Sight and Sense - Master Vania Adara in her slow drawl. "A man of your position should dress like a scholar when the students are around. You're going to inspire them into joining your foolish cult where they'll use all this knowledge and training to help others." She raises an eyebrow while waiting for his response.

"Yes, that is my intention, why else would I do this?" Terius knows from experience

that Vania often says one thing but means another. He gave up on understanding her a long time ago. He continues, "May I join you or is that second plate of food for someone else?"

Her bright blue eyes wide with humor. "Oh, please do sit down. Paras stopped by my office and told me you were summoned by Fallon, that either means the Fox boy burned one of Black Hills books from your little prank or you were leaving the study on some Defender business. As I didn't smell any more smoke than that mess you made in the atrium it must be the first option."

She pauses to push a stray lock of auburn hair behind her ear and takes a bite of bread to give her mostly silent dinner partner a moment to respond.

Missing the subtle hint as he always does, he continues eating as well.

Shaking her head she continues, "So where is the old man sending you this time, back to Brust to finish hunting down... what was that by the way, you never did tell me?"

"I can't say what it was because we have not found it. I'm going to Brass to confront a Duelist named Sholto. I should be back early tomorrow."

"It must be nice being able to fly. You just kick up and fly anywhere you want, traveling for hours instead of days."

"The time saving is incredible, but it's boring, cold and easier to get lost than you would think."

"Yeah, yeah, that's what all you fly-boys say. Nobody believes it."

Finishing his food, Terius stands and makes to leave, "Believe what you like, you

always do. If I'm to be back in the morning I need go now."

"When you get back, you should stop by my office so I can debrief you?"

"I'll have already written my report for Fallon. Maybe I can stop by your office for something more intimate than a debrief?"

"Yes, that sounds wonderful. Why, I should have thought of that, whatever was I thinking?"

Terius, liking this future plan, takes his leave and heads for the roof.

Greta

Part Four of Six



Maureen E. Ewing M.U.

Greta- Exordium

YEAR 6971 ST (SETTLED TIME)

CITY OF EL'HAT IN THE PROVINCE OF REBIRTH

Greta | Chapter Two – Entrances

The deputy governor's estate is made up of a three-story living quarter and a pair of two-story outbuildings; one is living quarters for staff and the other is for hosting guests. The shorter buildings sit on either flank of the living quarters and are connected by 20-yard enclosed walkways. Behind the estate are the less grand structures, the kennel, garage, a barn, and pool house.

The exterior of the living quarters is made of precision cut stone painted white in some symbolic gesture of purity. The style dates back more than a thousand years, it's a poor imitation of the architecture from a superior era in Greta's opinion.

The house staff assist Greta from the carriage and direct the driver to the kennel and garage. She watches her inu get back

on their feet and stretch before eagerly pulling against the carriage brakes. The driver content they are all equally ready, releases the brake and glides around to the rear of the buildings.

Double doors are both opened to allow her passage and to show respect. They make the customary offer of accommodations, all are declined. The house steward offers Greta his arm for her to hold as they walk across the spacious reception room where another set of double doors are opened to allow entrance into the sitting room where the other guests are gathered.

When the doors swing open, all eyes flicker in her direction, conversations don't stop but the tone of the voices go up a notch momentarily as she enters. Head held high Geta goes to work.

She sees a group of women by the window being led by tonight's hostess, Betty Nassar. Betty slowly inches towards the center of the room with her small entourage to conceal that she knowingly was in Greta's preferred place to receive people.

Greta glides through the room and takes her place before the window. The timing of her arrival could not be more perfect, the sun was just touching the horizon, the light hitting the east facing window backlighting her perfectly, casting her shadow down the room's center from end to end. The only enhancement she added was to suppress the room's soft lighting until the sun completely disappears two minutes later.

Conversations were dying, someone tried to fake a laugh to show they were unaffected by the sudden gloomy

atmosphere, it ended as a stifled coughing fit. Around half of all eyes were now on her either directly or indirectly. Greta smiles and allows the lights to return to their previous level. The babel of voices goes back to normal as the three dozen or so people sigh in relief not even knowing why. Orchestrating such moments keeps her entertained. After 400 years of doing the same job, she needs those moments.

The group of women led by Betty Nassar, gracefully drift back towards Greta.

“Lady Mirra, it’s so nice that you could attend, my husband is always working, and we get so few occasions to get together with friends.”

A servant comes by with a tray laden with glasses of wine. Betty nervously grabs a fresh glass with an empty one still in her other hand, making an obvious breach of etiquette. The servant sees what she’s

done and with a subtle hand gesture silently offers to take the empty glass.

Greta likes to see powerful people trip over themselves by her presence. But tonight is Betty's lucky night she isn't here for her.

"Your home is always so beautiful, and your friendship means much to this old lady. In fact, I'd like to return your hospitality by inviting you and your husband over sometime soon. I think a luncheon would be nice. Do you agree?"

With defeated eyes and a perfect smile, Betty responds the only way she can, "That sounds exceptional. I'll let my dear husband know that he's already agreed, and we look forward to your invitation."

Greta meets the eyes of the four other socialites one by one in the group. One looks away and nervously clenched her

untouched glass of wine in both hands. She's sure to be speaking with this one later. Greta wonders what vapid favor this one will ask.

"Please excuse us, as hostess I must circulate, and I've not spoken with Franny since she arrived," Betty leads her band of hens away so they can fake greet a woman that was with them by the window when she entered. Greta is constantly amazed at how bad people are at lying.

Greta signals the servant with the wine tray and helps herself to a glass. The next person to approach is the El'Hat Chief of Police, Mavis Trippler.

"Good evening officer. Have I done something wrong."

"Hehe, of course you have. You've been invited to an exclusive dinner party with the city's top officials. Not an innocent

person in this room. Of course, me being the exception.”

“Is that so, I know for a fact that in the time we spent in the coat room of the El’Hat Bistro we broke several laws of the lewd and lascivious sort.”

“Those laws only count if you get caught.”

“But officer we did get caught. Remember the coat girl interrupted us?”

“Yes, but she joined in, so it didn’t count.”

“Oh, it certainly counted. Too bad there’s no coat room here. I could use a diversion,” Geta enjoyed the verbal foreplay, but now it’s time for the main course.

“How’s your little problem? Are you comfortable sitting in your chair now?”

The captain glances around to make sure nobody is listening, "It's fine. I'd rather not think about that."

Greta smugly agrees, she wouldn't like to think about having hemorrhoids or to experience her cure. When the Chief came to her for help, he didn't imagine she'd use her finger to burn his insides and then use her own spirit to make him whole again. Regrowing that much tissue is equally painful to burning it.

Well, it hurts the way she does it. He cried the whole time. When he finally stopped sobbing, she collected her price. She used her spirit to pick at his, until there was a tear in it, then she gently pulled on it like a hang nail.

When it tore off, she ate it in front of him. She made sure to bend the light around it so he could see the otherwise invisible whisp of spirit and watch it as she slurped

up his life's essence like a noodle. Then she made him gratify her sexually, all the while recounting what she had done to him. That was their first time, the coat room incident was him trying to replace the memory, to forget the pain, the humiliation, and the loss of essence; she will never let him do that.

The Chief mumbles an excuse and leaves to find something stronger than wine.

Next up was the woman clenching her wine glass with both hands. She's holding it casually now, but it remains full. Greta watches as she saunters across the room. Clearly, she has decided something and is ready to act. This should be good, Greta thinks.

The woman is probably in her thirties, right at the beginning of middle aged, she'll look like this for another fifty years, but her behavior suggests inexperience,

her perfect blond hair is in a modern style fitting someone who hasn't settle on a look they'll keep for their remaining days. Sharp blue eyes and pale skin, she's wearing last year's style of dress; the color matches her eyes.

No introduction, no small talk, she whispers, "Can you really make things happen?"

Greta is old and tired of pointless small talk and takes an instant liking to the brash woman in front of her. She whispers back, "That depends on who is asking, and what they want to happen. I'm Lady Mirra, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

No longer whispering, "Oh, I do beg your pardon. I'm not used to this kind of thing and completely forgot my manors."

"I'm Emma Shalaby, the daughter of Judge Shalaby," responds the woman while holding out her hand as if to shake.

Greta ignores the hand, "I know your father well, how is he doing? Is he here tonight?"

"I'm afraid he didn't make the invite list. How I was invited I don't understand either."

"Oh, that's not hard to figure out. Somebody brought you here so they can influence you into doing something that concerns your father. But you know that, you're a grown woman with an important father. You've been coached to deal with that fact all your life. Now why are you here," Greta points to the floor to make sure Emma understands where she is standing.

Emma's resolve started to soften. Greta doesn't care one way or another, this woman will be hers eventually.

Emma closes her eye's and takes a deep breath, "I want my father dead."

Patricide, she's not heard that in a while, "Don't say such a thing out loud ever again. Why would you even think such thoughts?" Greta already has an idea of what's at play. Tonight's host has four sons, two are near this woman's age and single. A relationship between her and the son of the Deputy Governor would be a huge scandal and destroy the appearance of impartiality of the Judge in affairs involving the Office of the Governor. Still no need to rush this, she waits to hear what Emma has to say.

"I met someone, and we want to marry, but it would ruin fathers' career and we'd lose everything. You see, the person is

someone that might one day be standing on the wrong side of my father's court. But if he were to pass away mother and I would have his pension and I'd be free to marry whoever I like."

Greta isn't surprised at the cold-hearted explanation. The judge is a terrible person himself; he beat his children until they were able to move away. He cheats on his wife with cheap whores, and he has a foot fetish; that's gross to even Greta. He's as corrupt as any judge, he's probably already on the payroll of Emma's lover. People today have no imagination. There are countless ways to make this happen that don't involve murder, but this is the world she's been tasked to build, she shouldn't be surprised when her efforts produce such useful results.

"I accept."

"What? You accept? Does that mean?"

“I told you to not say such a terrible thing out loud; you’re liable to make it happen, and you are going to owe me a favor of equal weight. Understand?”

“Yes, I expected that,” she did not, but there’s nothing she can do about it now.

“It’s been a pleasure, Emma Shalaby. We’ll talk again after I decide the favor, not before.”

Emma nodded agreement, taking the no talking command literally.

A servant walks through the room with a small metal triangle dangling from a string. She strikes it with a tiny metal rod as she circulates around the room.

Ting-ting-ting, as a signal that it’s time to move to the dining room for dinner.

Some start walking right away, others don’t seem to hear the annoying little

instrument. Greta waits until there's barely anyone left talking before joining the meandering crowd as they walk towards the promise of food.

A figure stands in the doorway, people are walking past him, stepping around him, but nobody sees him. Her heart skips a beat as she's overcome with fear. Silently she asks herself if she's about to die.

Malo

Part Five of Six



Malo- Exordium

YEAR 6983 ST (SETTLED TIME)

TOWN OF FELTWORKS IN BRUST VALLEY

Malo | Chapter Four - Defend

In situations like this Malo lets the other kid set the pace. Kaden knows the score when running with Malo and doesn't push himself. Better to go slow than get tired and need to stop. Malo and Kaden are good friends now that Kaden has grown up. Malo also knows that in a year or two, Kaden will be ready to move on from him. He doesn't understand it, but other kids are in a hurry to grow up. He's learned to appreciate people in the moment.

They climb to the top of the first ridge, no more than a 20-yard increase in elevation, it's steep but not so much that they needed to climb with their hands. Their destination is straight ahead but they turn east and walk along the top of the ridge. To go straight would take them back lower than they started. On the other side of the

ridge is a bog where most of the mountain's runoff flows year-round. Children are warned away from playing there because sinkholes have claimed the lives of adults and children alike.

It's less than a mile up the ridge before it loops around. The path they're following is interrupted by shallow gullies and deep ravines. Some can be jumped others require them to climb down and then up the other side. When they reach 'the big one' as the kids refer to the largest of these ravines, they change course and start trekking uphill again, carefully navigating the rocky dry riverbed.

They're here looking for building materials. There are hundreds of homes up the valley sides. Anything blown or washed loose from those properties will end up in one of the ravines. It doesn't take them long to find a decent sized

signboard, it's maybe 40 by 40 inches. One side is unfinished, the other is painted white and is lettered, 'No Trespassing' in red. They agree this is a perfect beginning.

Malo, being bigger than Kaden, naturally is tasked with carrying their finds. Not a problem at first but once they added three heavy fence posts, his load began to get awkward.

"Kaden, can you carry the sign, while I drag the posts?"

"I think so, let me give it a try."

The two continue up the ravine, their newly distributed load slows their pace.

Their destination is close at hand when they reach a section of the ravine with gently sloped walls that are easily climbed.

This is where they plan on building the fort. It's not only accessible from the

ravine, from here they can also climb the southern slope and follow game trails to this point in the rainy summers.

They've been trekked four hours to get here. The two sit down and start discussing fort construction. The posts will make for good corners and the sign could be the door. They'll need to find a lot more building material or build using lumber they cut themselves. After another hour, Malo realizes they're going to have to make good time to get Kaden home before dark.

"Hey, it's getting late. We should get moving so you're not late."

"Aw, we just got here. I can't keep moving like you do. Can we rest a few more minutes."

Malo isn't sure this is the best course of action, but he also knows other kids have

more limitations than he does, “sure, but not too long. Let me know the second you feel rested.”

The few minutes turn into ten, then stretch to forty; Malo is getting restless. He knows exactly where the sun is and can sense its movement. He knows time is slipping away.

“Kaden, we have to go. I won’t have you be late and worry your mom. She’ll never let us play together again.”

“Alright, let’s go then.”

The two head down the sloping bank of the ravine and set off at a trot. Malo hanging back as usual, watching the pace, watching and sensing the persistent motion of the sun.

Kaden’s pace slows, Malo is beginning to realize there is no way he could make the return trip in time, let alone Kaden.

Malo makes a decision, a rash decision,
“Kaden, Stop!”

The boy slows to a stop, panting for
breath.

“Get on my back, I’ll carry you.”

“No way, I can do this.”

“No, you can’t. I wouldn’t make it in time
if we backtracked the same way we came.
Get on my back while there’s still time.”

Reluctantly, the smaller boy climbs on
Malo’s back. Malo doesn’t waste a second
and launches ahead at his maximum
speed. Bounding over obstacles in
tremendous leaps as if unburdened.

“Woah, is this what it’s like to be you? This
is incredible! You can give me rides
anytime!”

Kaden’s exuberance cooled when ‘the big
one’ fanned out into the bog.

“Are you sure we should go this way?”

“We don’t have time to circle the bog, I’ve been here before. I know where to step.”

Malo watched his footing for signs of swampy ground or signs of water. Sticking to clumps of roots when he can and tearing through islands of brush where he knows the ground is solid. In two minutes, they were nearly through the worst of it, the tree line where solid land resumes is in sight.

Something smashed into Malo’s face and yanked him forward. The impact threw Kaden backwards where he landed on his butt, unharmed. What Kaden saw horrified him.

Malo was on one knee, his other leg out front, bracing himself from being dragged forward. Attached to his face was the sticky grasping tongue of a giant leaper.

The leaper was big enough to swallow Malo whole and sat a mere five yards ahead. Half hidden, afloat in a pool of brackish water.

Malo peels some of the tongue away from his mouth, tearing away skin, “Kaden!”

“I’m here Malo. It’s a leaper, a giant leaper.”

Giant leapers usually live in and around the upper mountain lakes; rarely seen in the lowlands of the valley. This must be the first sighting, or a hunting party would have formed to track and kill it before something like this happens.

Malo doubles his effort to free his face. Squeezing the sticky, acid laced muscle in both hands. Not making much progress, he formulates a plan, like before, a rash plan.

“Kaden, when you see it jump. You run and get help.”

Kaden doesn't have to think about it long. He knows he can't help. All he can do is get a grown up, “Ok, ready.”

Malo falls forward. He read all about leapers and how they hunt from a book given to him by his friend, the friar. When a leaper sees their prey prostrate, they do exactly as their name implies, they leap. The leaper follows its nature and wiggles up onto the bank and uses its massive hind legs to launch all 400 pounds of indifferent hunger into the air. It disengages and retracts its tongue on lift off.

Malo rolls sideways to escape the incoming predator. He also realizes that the tongue's acid is more than a skin irritant; he's blind.

Panic set in, did Kaden get away? What if it attacks his friend from behind? Malo feels an emotion he doesn't entertain very often bubble to the surface. He feels anger towards this creature. He knows he came into its territory; he knows it's nothing personal. To the leaper the two boys are just food.

The fact that Kaden could be considered food makes him more than angry. He feels angry when he meets a complete stranger, and they instantly hate him. He feels angry when people assume he's stupid because he wasn't born walking and talking like everyone else. The idea that simply being in one place instead of another, a life can go from being your best friend to some dead-eyed stupid-faced oversized amphibian's food, infuriates him.

Malo throws out his arm to stop his roll and reverses back toward the leaper. He

has his tear-filled eyes wide open and can see a little now. His back hits something wet, cold, and slimy. The leaper doesn't sit still, it awkwardly turns in his direction.

Malo has no idea what to do. He climbs to his feet and starts flailing, his arms wildly striking the leaper's flank and then its head.

Unlike Malo, the leaper knows exactly what it is doing. Mouth gapping wide, it lunges forward, enveloping Malo's head and upper body in one motion. It then lifts its head up, heaving Malo up overhead, and starts gulping the flailing boy down its gullet.

It takes but a moment for Malo to realize the sudden change of orientation. He reaches back and grabs the leaper by the jaw. His first grab puts his hands in the corners, and he gets mostly soft flesh. He knows he needs to improve his purchase.

The leaper gives him a shake and tries to swallow him again. The acid secreting tongue is now pressed against the upper half of his body. His skin is on fire, the growing pain reflects his building fury.

Malo needs to open the jaws; he pulls his left knee into the mouth and uses his leg to push on the lower jaw. But that pushes him further inside as there's nothing pressed against the top jaw. The reek of acid is becoming overwhelming, he's been instinctively holding his breath for almost a minute.

Malo doesn't know why he did this, but in retrospect he's glad he did. In a fit of rage, he grabs the base of the leaper's tongue with both arms and squeezes. This triggers a reflex in the leaper to regurgitate and extend its tongue, bathing Malo in a shower of acid.

Feeling open air, Malo gasps for breath. His entire body feels like it's on fire. Not waiting for the leaper to react, he blindly lunges back towards his emotionless assailant. Instead of flailing his arms in another useless attack. He feels for its head and doesn't have to wait long for it to once again open its mouth to swallow him.

This time he doesn't go blindly down its throat. Instead, he climbs in with first his left and then his right foot while grasping the sawblade like top jaw with both hands and stands up.

The leaper would be confused if it were intelligent enough to understand. Instead, it reacts to the fact that its food is now sideways and won't fit down its throat. First it shakes its head violently back and forth, heaving its prey violently side to side. Malo has his knees locked straight

now and is pulling the upper jaw upwards with all his might, while curved teeth tear chunks out of his palms. When Malo isn't dislodged it tries to regurgitate again, bathing him in another shower of stomach acid.

Malo's rage carries him through both reactions and fuels his arms and legs to continue opening the leapers jaws ever wider. If he could see he would have been heartened when the leapers eyes burst from internal pressures; but was pleased when he felt something give, and after a sudden jolt and drop he was standing on the ground holding the leapers upper jaw over his head.

It wasn't dead, not even close, but it won't live long without the bottom half of its mouth. Once again, the leaper would be confused by its current situation if it were intelligent enough to understand. It could

not see, and it knew something was wrong with its mouth, but that didn't deter it from wanting to eat the troublesome food ahead of it.

Malo can't see either, but he can feel and hear, and he knows the leaper isn't done yet. This needs to end. This needs to end now.

Malo knows he can hit harder than he did before. When he runs, he knows he is tapping into some other power that isn't of his body. He needs that same power to fuel his fists. He gets an image of himself in his mind, he's running at full speed with his fist at the ready. He's approaching the leaper and as he reaches it, in his mind and with his body he swings his fist with every bit of strength he's holding.

His left hand is still clenching the top jaw ridge of the leaper. His right fist punches a hole through the roof of the leaper's

mouth and continues through its skull. Shards of bone covered in grey viscera explode along with his fist out of the top of the giant amphibian's head. What's left of its little brain is now scrambled inside the shattered remains of its skull. The corpse kicks for another minute while Malo drops to his knees trembling.

After what could have been a few minutes or hours he realizes his sight has returned and it is now night. The sun's position tells him it set half an hour ago.

He sees what's left of the leaper and what he's accomplished when the words spoken often by auntie Ge'get come back to him. She's warned him over and over to not do anything to draw attention to himself. Killing a leaper on his own, with no weapons would sound unbelievable and certainly draw attention. He picks up the chunk of jaw and throws it back towards

the water it came out of. Then he somehow taps into that tireless pool of strength and drags and rolls the massive dead weight into the same sinkhole.

His clothes are nearly dissolved, they're more hole than cloth, nothing he can do about that. He starts walking towards the tree line when he hears voices. It's Kaden and what sounds like half a circle of townsmen.

There was a huge sigh of relief when they saw him alive. They were concerned about the acid burns and his torn-up hand and made him promise to see his auntie in the morning if he could wait. The men who had come with pikes and spears expecting to track and kill his killer, were glad they could get back home early. It was dark enough and nobody was looking, so they didn't notice the floating corpse in the pond, ten yards behind him.

Malo made up a story about the leaper being wounded before it attacked and gave up when it couldn't eat him. It must have tangled with some wild raptors up the mountain because its jaw was torn away.

The story sounded plausible enough, and his injuries could be healed with help from his auntie, everyone agreed it could have been much worse. The men that came were ones that naturally liked him, they grumbled about missing dinner, but bought the story and told him to run home and get some fresh cloths.

Kaden was in trouble with his mom for being late, but she was proud that he did the right thing by running away and leaving Malo behind.

Malo didn't bother with seeing Ge'get, the acid burns were healed before he arrived

home, and his hand would be fine before morning.

Defender

Part Six of Six



Defender- Exordium

YEAR 737 OF THE CATACLYSM
(2,228 YEARS BEFORE SETTLED TIME)

NORTHERN SHORE OF THE KNOWN WORLD
(SOUTH CENOKA)

Defender | Chapter Three – Langrid

Langrid didn't realize it wasn't the ground shaking him any longer until it was too late. The next thing he felt was a kick to the head.

“Get up you lazy meat-sack,” bellowed the sergeant while lining up for another kick.

Langrid was drowsy but had fast reflexes, he rolled away from the assault and bounced to his feet. The sergeant turned the missed kick into a foot stomp and did his best to crush Langrid's toes. Now mere inches from one another the sergeant continues his assault verbally.

Langrid has heard it all before, his eyes fixed straight ahead as if looking straight through the angry shouting man before him, his mind wonders what kind of chow they will have after plundering the

compound ahead. He hopes they have meat; he hasn't had fresh meat in a month. The tailless cave rats found in most of the places they've conquered would be a welcome change from the scavenged bird carcasses that provide the majority of their protein these days.

He missed the days when hunting was an option. Of course, if it were, they'd still be in their own compound. Clouds of poison gas have been a constant for decades, anything with a respiratory system caught in one when they appear is soon dead. Large game, Langrid has never seen large game, has been extinct for a hundred years. Small game animals are all but gone these last few decades. If they find something dead, it goes in the stew pot. No sense in going out and looking, you're as likely to find a pocket of poisonous air as anything to eat.

It suddenly becomes quiet. What were the last few shouted words? Something about rotation and turns; the rotation shouldn't have him in the front for this engagement, he should have three more rotations before moving up to the front. He doesn't acknowledge comprehension and hopes the sergeant starts up his diatribe again.

"We march in 30 minutes. Get moving!" The sergeant doesn't wait for a response, turns and heads back to the command pavilion.

Langrid is one of six soldiers from his compound with the gift. The sergeant is another, they have the special job of being the spearhead of every assault. They have a high chance of survival in these fights, but you never know when the other guy will be stronger or have more capabilities. Langrid can absorb fire and physical force, others can throw lightning too. There are

stories of fighters flying and slowing down time, but those sound too incredible to believe. But he can't rule it out, nothing is certain in this world, except the sun is going to set and the ground is going to shake, everything else is as good as a guess.

Langrid casts his gaze around camp to see if anyone was paying attention to the sergeant's rant. He catches the eye of Wesley the camp snitch and top gossip standing not so far away to have not heard it all. A subtle nod serves as an invitation that a big mouth like Wesley couldn't resist.

"You heard the sergeant, what was that all about?"

Wesley, who cares not for Langrid, gages the situation, "Did you seriously not listen to what he said?"

“All I heard was blah-blah-blah, you’re up front again. That’s a load of crap, they can’t keep coddling the others like this.”

“Nobody’s being coddled you idiot, you’re all up front on this one,” Wesley waits a few seconds for that to sink in before continuing. “Our scouts say there are thousands of old corpses around the compound ahead. Somebody or a bunch of somebody’s or a champion is defending them. Commander thinks it will take all of you to crack this one open.”

This isn’t unexpected; people in every compound are sprouting abilities. Everywhere they go they are facing fighters with gifts of their own.

“What else did the scouts find out? What are their women like?”

“Another disappointing find, their women are all stage-one colonizers like us. Life

here in the north must be rougher than our homeland.”

“Ugh, I’d like to see a face that doesn’t look like mine at least one more time before I die.”

Langrid’s homeland was far to the southwest and was until recently well provisioned. Life was easy for a couple hundred years. Their easy life allowed them the luxury of advancing genetically, with each generation becoming more diverse than the last. His mother had yellow hair, and his father had silver hair, but then it all changed. Hunting parties started coming home empty handed, some didn’t come home at all. Their water supply became poisoned from the same volcanic and geothermal activity that was producing the gas clouds plaguing them for hundreds of miles.

It's the same everywhere, poison in the air, no game to hunt, all plant life picked clean of anything edible by a dwindling population of scavengers. Everyone and everything are struggling to survive. The stress and low sustenance existence re-triggering their biology to produce more stage-one colonizers. More people just like Langrid, just like Wesley, just like the sergeant, and just like the men and women they are about to raid, rape, and pillage in the compound ahead.

Langrid considers pumping Wesley for more gossip but decides he's heard enough bad news for one day. Instead, he finds another place to lay down until the final forced march had them moving again. He sits with his back to a southern red oak tree; he knows these are called southern red oak because he was born with that information baked into his brain. It's a stupid name, why call a tree southern

when they only grow in the far north? Langrid ponders the accuracy of the information in his head while watching the others check their weapons and stowing gear in their shelters in preparation of their march to battle.

A soldier in a colony army's primary weapon is a multipurpose tool. Essentially a short shovel, no more than 24 inches in length when folded, one edge is sharpened like an axe blade, the other is serrated like a saw. When they are not being used to kill, they can dig holes, chop trees, and cut through branches.

Their brains are full of knowledge of hundreds of weapons, but for some reason they were deployed to settle this place with nothing but what was found in their bunker-like compound. Their old home had been equipped with all the supplies they needed to survive in this

world, but nothing to use to protect it or themselves from the predation of others like themselves.

Langrid briefly wonders if he's missing something. He shakes his head; Nah, Wesley would have told him if there was something else, he was supposed to do.

The End

THE RETURN FROM CATAclysm SAGA

PREQUAL

Exordium Popule

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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.