

THE  
LIGHT  
HUNTERS



*Also by Dan Walker*

SKY THIEVES  
DESERT THIEVES





DAN WALKER

uclanpublishing

*For Charlie, Maddie and Ivy*



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*“You ask me what Light is? Light is everything. Every single thing. The very fabric of our world is made up of this force – people, trees, the chair I am sitting on, this pen I am writing with. Few can access Light, control it. You are one.”*

Professor Majeson Medela





# CHAPTER 1



“If there’s one thing I am absolutely and utterly sure about,” said Maya Murphy ducking under her desk on the classroom floor, “it’s that Mr Winter is a monster.”

“If anyone’s a monster around here,” said Lux Dowd, “it’s you.”

Maya checked her watch. “I mean, look at the time.” She pushed the device up to Lux’s face. “Does that not say five to three?”

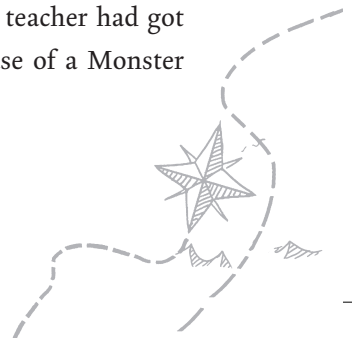
“Yes.”

“And what time do we finish school?”

“Three.”

“And how long did the last Monster drill take?”

Lux thought back to the previous time their teacher had got them to overturn their desks and practise in case of a Monster attack. “Half an hour.”



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“Exactly.”

For Lux, it had been a long day. Not only was Maya in one of her moods, but also their regular teacher, Mr Garside, had been off sick with a stomach bug. In his absence, Lux and his classmates had suffered through yet another day of grumpy Mr Winter. And now, just five minutes from the bell, when they’d all been about to go home, Mr Winter had announced a Monster drill. Even Lux had to admit, it was ice-cold.

“Now remember children,” said Mr Winter crisply, standing with his hands on his hips, “what’s the most important thing to do during a Monster drill?”

The kids replied as one. “Don’t panic.”

“Louder.”

“Don’t panic!”

Mr Winter walked up and down the line of tables. “I hope everyone’s safely tucked away.” He nudged a pair of boots at his feet, prompting a small girl to shuffle backwards. “These Monsters all have excellent eyes, you know? They can see a child from over a mile away.”

Lux and Maya backed up against the wall. “Does he think we haven’t done this before?” whispered Maya irritably.

She was right. Lux could recall twelve Monster drills that year, and more the previous. To most of his classmates, they were a complete waste of time. But Lux knew better. Indeed, the last time a Monster had crashed into town – a slaving, three-headed Cerberus as big as a house – Lux had lost both his parents and his sister. Even the Light Hunters had been unable to save them. Still,

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why their teachers considered it vital to practise a Monster drill every single month, Lux had no idea. *Especially not*, he thought, *at five to three on a Friday afternoon.*

Maya took a pair of metal compasses out of her back pocket and started to scratch absently at the table leg. “Are we still set for tonight?”

“Shh,” said Lux, looking quickly at Mr Winter.

“Don’t worry, he can’t hear us.”

“Yes, but someone else might.”

Maya looked at the boy under the table with them, who was staring curiously at the rubber end of his pencil, as if it might turn into a cat. She gave Lux a have-I-made-my-point look. “Seriously, are we all set?”

“Yes,” Lux sighed.

“I’ve nicked those black jumpers off the other girls at the orphanage. We should be able to sneak in. The library won’t know what’s hit it.”

“We’re not going to *hit* it,” said Lux, frowning. “Look, Maya, if you can’t take this seriously . . .”

Maya sat up straight. “I can. I can. I want to come. Especially if it’s really there.”

“I said I *think* it’ll be there.”

“That’ll do.”

“You’ll have to be sensible,” warned Lux.

Maya spread her arms, elbowing the boy with the pencil. “Sensible is my middle name.”

*Numpy, more like*, thought Lux affectionately.

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He caught his reflection in the classroom door window. His messy, mouse-blonde hair hung around his ears, and he had dark bags under his blue-green eyes. Lux had stayed up late the past few evenings, long after his grandpa and the old man's live-in carer, Miss Hart, had gone to bed, planning his and Maya's mission into the town library. This one was important. He had to get it right.

"Ahem."

Lux blinked. Mr Winter had returned from the other end of the classroom and was crouching in front of them.

"Yes, sir?"

"Lux Dowd, are you with us?"

"Yes, sir, I'm with you."

"Are you sure? Because for a minute there I thought you'd seen a Monster."

"Only you, sir."

Maya giggled. Fortunately, Mr Winter seemed to have missed Lux's joke. He looked at Maya with a confused expression, then back at Lux sternly.

"Have you two remembered it's a test next week?"

"We can't wait, sir," said Lux.

"Is that right?" Mr Winter held Lux's innocent gaze. Then he saw Maya's carving in the table leg. His brow furrowed. "Who did this?"

Lux and Maya didn't respond.

"I'll ask again, who did it?" Mr Winter pointed at the table leg.

Lux turned so he could see. Carved messily into the wood were two words and a symbol.

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“Who was it?”

Lux looked at Maya, whose eyes were wide, panicked.

“Maya,” said Mr Winter, “I’ve warned you three times today about your behaviour. This seems like just the kind of thing you’d do.”

Maya said nothing.

“The headmistress takes graffiti very seriously. If she found out a student had been carving Light Hunters into one of her tables, she’d be extremely unhappy. If I was responsible, I’d own up now. Better a detention with me at the school play this evening than a visit to the head’s office.”

Lux looked again at Maya, who was rigid with fear. She’d been in trouble so often that year that the owner of her orphanage, Mrs Piper, had threatened to ground her if she got in trouble again. Lux took a deep breath.

“It was me, sir.”

Mr Winter looked at Lux. “You?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mr Winter studied the carving. “You’ve clearly been spending too much time with this one.” He nodded at Maya. “I’d have expected it from her, but not you.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Mmm . . .” Mr Winter chewed his lip absently as he considered

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what to do. “Well, seeing as it’s a one-off, I’ll let you off a detention. But if I see anything like this again, you’ll be in big trouble. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“Get some sandpaper out of my desk drawer. You’re not going anywhere until all that’s gone.”

Mr Winter fixed Lux with a final, disappointed stare and continued down the line of tables. Lux breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank you,” said Maya.

“You owe me,” said Lux irritably. “Why did you *do* that, anyway?” He ran his fingertips over the carving in the table leg. “You know what people think about Light around here.”

“I don’t care,” said Maya bluntly. “My friend’s uncle says he knew one of the Light Hunters. He said they were never as bad as everyone says. I think the whole hating Light Hunters thing’s baloney anyway. Maybe if we weren’t so mean and horrible to them in this town, and we let them defend us, we wouldn’t have to keep doing Monster drills every ten minutes. Speaking of which,” Maya tapped her watch impatiently, “class ended ten minutes ago.”

“Be happy you’re not here all night.”

Maya elbowed Lux in the ribs, but he didn’t feel it. His attention was focussed on the words she’d carved into the table. He traced them in his mind, recalling everything he’d learned about the Light Hunters from the secret books he kept in his wardrobe, and he smiled.



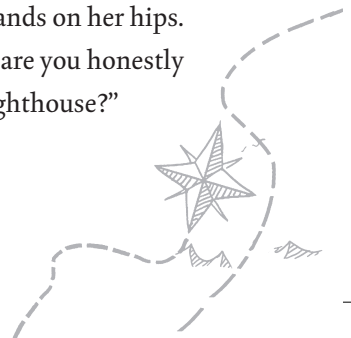
## • CHAPTER 2 •



When Mr Winter finally let them go, Lux said a hurried goodbye to Maya and rushed back to the clock repair shop where he lived with his grandpa. Gathering up everything he'd need for their mission that evening, he scoffed a quick dinner of scrambled eggs on toast and raced to the harbour. He found a quiet spot away from the early evening strollers and spent the next hour rehearsing his plan, waiting for Maya. He spotted her balancing on a narrow wall by the promenade.

“Get down.”

“All right,” said Maya defensively, “you’re as bad as Mr Winter.” She hopped off the low wall and stood with her hands on her hips. “Before we start, I want to get one thing straight: are you honestly telling me – *honestly* – there’s a Gauntlet in the lighthouse?”



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“Yes.” Lux crossed his fingers behind his back.

“A real Light Hunter one?”

“Yes.”

“The magic-wielding, Monster-killing Light Hunters?”

“Yes!”

Maya eyed Lux as if he were having her on and shook her head in disbelief.

Lux knew there was no Gauntlet, but the lie was necessary. Maya’s gullibility, and her love of gadgets and technology, meant that when Lux was deciding who to take with him on his mission, the answer had been obvious. Pretend there was a Light Hunter Gauntlet in the lighthouse – that most iconic of Hunter gadgets – and just like that he’d created an offer too good for Maya to turn down.

“I brought binoculars,” she said helpfully, pulling them out of her bag.

“Nice one.”

“And . . .” Maya reached into her leather satchel, “I also brought a compass and a lamp, and I’ve got this amazing . . .”

Lux tuned out. He was studying the moonlit tower through the binoculars. The lighthouse had been converted to a library nine years earlier. Had it still been a lighthouse, Lux would have found it duller than school on Maths day. But as a library, with its corkscrew of bookshelves, it contained something extremely important. And after two long weeks of planning, Lux was finally about to lay his hands on it.

The lighthouse stood at the end of a rocky pier on the outskirts

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of town. The moon cast a silver glow that brought to mind creepy stories Lux's grandpa had told him. Between the tower and their position on the promenade was the harbour, jammed with boats and fishing nets. It smelled of seaweed and salt. Every so often, the silence was broken by a loud *plop* as one of the townspeople walking the pier looped a stone into the water.

Maya handed Lux a black jumper and started to wriggle into her own. "Do we really have to swim?"

"No," said Lux, "we can just walk down the pier."

"Really?"

"Definitely. Then someone will see you and go tell Mrs Piper you're not really performing in the school play, and that you're actually about to break into the lighthouse with Lux Dowd. She'd love that."

"I suppose not," said Maya thoughtfully.

"I've told you, this little outing needs to stay secret. If anyone sees us we'll be in big trouble."

"But I get the Gauntlet, yes?"

Lux clasped his belt and strapped on a pair of swimming goggles. "Yes, you get the Gauntlet."

Down the promenade, five large, stone statues commemorated the handful of Monster attacks that Lux's hometown, Daven, had suffered over the past century. Every town had a similar memorial. Closest to Lux was the multi-headed Cerberus that had smashed Daven when Lux was two, killing his family and half the town's residents. Lux climbed so he was standing on one of the statue's three heads and traced a path across the busy harbour to a narrow

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staircase that led to the pier. From there, they would approach the lighthouse, smash the first-floor window and slip inside.

“Are you absolutely sure it’s going to be there?” asked Maya dubiously.

“The Gauntlet?”

“Your book.”

“I hope so.”

“What if it’s not?”

Lux shot Maya a fiery glance. He jumped down to the water, took off his socks and dipped a foot. So cold. He almost pulled it straight out again, but thoughts of his ill grandpa forced him to keep it under. He dunked his other foot quickly, then his legs and finally his head. He resurfaced, teeth chattering.

“Well,” he said to Maya, “are you coming?”



## • CHAPTER 3 •

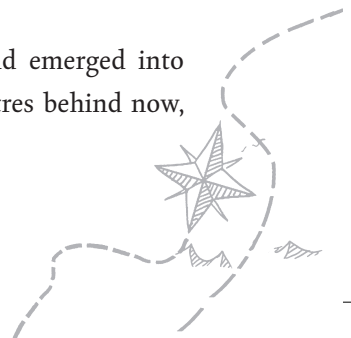


Maya's question reminded Lux of an evening six months before, when his grandpa had first informed Lux he was dying. Lux didn't know whether the antique book in the library would contain what he needed to cure his grandpa, but he wasn't just going to sit there like everyone else, hoping for a miracle. Lux had already lost his parents and sister. He wasn't going to lose his grandpa too.

Maya slid silently into the water behind him and together they swam between the boats. The silvery moonlight was bright enough to see the ships' names, Lux's favourite being a scruffy fishing trawler called '*Fraid Knot.*' *I must remember to tell grandpa that one when I get back,* he thought.

They cleared the tangled mess of crafts and emerged into the harbour. The promenade lay a hundred metres behind now,

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the lighthouse an equal distance ahead. Lux had spent many summers with his grandpa swimming in lakes around Daven. Maya, despite promising that afternoon she'd beat him in a race to the lighthouse, was not a strong swimmer. Lux stopped to get his bearings and noticed she was a good distance behind, kicking and splashing noisily as she fought to keep afloat.

"Shh!" he said, looking anxiously at the people on the pier.

"I can't," cried Maya. "I'm carrying all the stuff."

She had a point. Lux swam back to take some of the weight. He allowed her to lean on him and catch her breath.

"How much longer?" she asked.

"Five minutes," said Lux. "Maybe ten."

"Ten!" Maya exclaimed. On the pier, a couple walking hand in hand looked in their direction.

"Five," whispered Lux. "Definitely five."

The water in the middle of the harbour was much colder than near the promenade. Lux's fingers and toes had all gone numb, and he swam faster to warm them. How had he forgotten it would be this cold? The previous winter, a boy at Lux's school had gotten into trouble falling through ice on the canal. Lux intended to avoid such a fate. He pushed Maya away and motioned for them to continue.

Now they were approaching the lighthouse, Lux had a decent view of it for the first time. He went over the plan again in his head – how they'd climb the pier steps without being seen and locate the best window to get inside. In his hurry to get to the harbour from his grandpa's workshop, Lux had forgotten to bring a hammer. *Oh well*, he thought, *I guess that's what rocks are for.*

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The book Lux was searching for he'd learned about after writing to Professor Medela, expert in Light-healing at faraway Lindhelm University. Lux had requested the professor's help with his grandpa's illness and had received a brief reply two weeks later:

Dear Lux,

Whilst I admire your tenacity, I really must inform you that there is nothing I can do for your grandpa. I am unsure if you know this, but everything in our world is made up of Light – people, the chair I am sitting on, this pen I am writing with. And yet, in spite of its ubiquity, our comprehension of Light is such that we are not even close to understanding it well enough to cure a long-term illness – despite what so-called experts in Light-healing might have you believe.

I hope you find something to help you soon. Whatever you do, I must ask that you refrain from contacting me again. Twelve letters are plenty.

Sincerely,

Professor Majeson Medela.

P.S. If you must persist in your search, try looking up a book called *Investigations into Light and Healing* by the former Light Hunter Amanda Sedgewick. Amanda has come closest to unravelling your particular puzzle, even if her secrets will not solve it.

Lux had rushed to the lighthouse the next day to take out the book but had struggled to find it on the overstuffed shelves and

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Mrs Henderton, the grumpy, eagle-eyed librarian, had scowled at him when he'd asked. Refusing to give up, Lux had narrowed the book down to a locked chamber at the top of the lighthouse where Mrs Henderton kept an ever-expanding collection of objectionable books. Those about the Light Hunters, and particularly Lux's book about Light-healing, certainly fit into that category.

Lux had travelled three-quarters of the way to the lighthouse when he realised he'd heard nothing of Maya for a while. Happy she'd finally worked out how to swim quietly, he turned to give her a thumbs up.

But Maya was gone.

Lux peered into the darkness. Where was she? He took off his goggles and wheeled around, searching. Panic wrenched his stomach, and he swam quickly back to where he'd last seen her. He listened for her breathing. Nothing. He whispered her name – at first quietly, and then more urgently. “Maya. Maya!”

A thousand thoughts assaulted Lux all at once. Had she gone back? Or had she swum ahead? Had she been thrown off course? Or had she . . . drowned? He winced at this last horrible notion, feeling suddenly guilty for lying to her.

No sooner had this thought entered his mind than it was knocked forcefully aside by another, this one significantly more frightening. Just ahead, poking out of the water, was a large shark fin. Lux floated, both paralysed and amused at the same time. The very idea of a shark as far north as cold, wintry Daven made him laugh, despite his racing pulse. Only when the fin rose, revealing the glistening torso, spiked head and razor-sharp teeth

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of a large creature, did Lux realise he wasn't looking at a shark at all. It was something much, much worse.

It was a Monster.