
THE
LIGHT
HUNTERS



Also by Dan Walker

SKY THIEVES
DESERT THIEVES





DAN WALKER

uclanpublishing

For Charlie, Maddie and Ivy



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Set in 10/16pt Kingfisher by Becky Chilcott

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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."

"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 slavering, 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,

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."

Numpty, more like, thought Lux affectionately.

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

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.

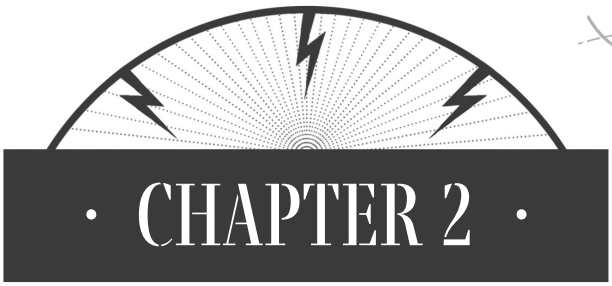
"Thank you," said Maya.

"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?"

"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

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

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?"