



DAN WALKER

uclanpublishing

*For Frankie, the beanpole.*



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Set in 10/16pt Kingfisher by Nicky Borowiec.

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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

It all began with a cat.

It was a black, fluffy cat, with orange patches that made it look like a bear that had fallen into a jar of marmalade. The cat was high in an enormous oak tree, in the middle of a gloomy, Light-projected wood, right in the centre of Dawnstar's training wing.

Below, were the three younger members of Squad Juno – Lux Dowd, Brace James and Fera Lanceheart III. Brace, a tall, buck-toothed boy with more enthusiasm than sense, whispered so that their squad leader, Ester Nova, wouldn't hear.

“What do we think her trick will be, then?”

“I think it'll turn into a Monster and attack,” said Fera, her face lit by silver moonlight.

“No way, she did that the other week.”

Lux, Squad Juno's Healer, watched the cat closely, its edges flickering where they touched the air. Since Dawnstar's chief

Inventor, Tesla, had installed his latest device in the training wing – a Light-projector capable of recreating any environment – Lux, Fera and Brace had suffered training sessions in all sorts of places. Throwing Light-casts underwater had been difficult, but nowhere near as hard as throwing them while jumping between clouds in a storm.

Today's session was different again. A cat up a tree. Simple. But, like all of Ester's easier training drills, there would be a catch.

"I think it'll jump when we try to grab it," said Brace decisively. "That'll be her trick. It jumps and we fall on our faces."

The cat jumping probably was Ester's most likely plan, but it wasn't one Lux liked the sound of. He'd have to throw a Light-cast to catch whoever climbed to fetch it. And the absolute *last* thing he wanted to do at that moment was throw Light.

"Maybe the trick is that there is no trick," he suggested hopefully.

Brace and Fera looked at him like he'd just told them to eat their socks.

Lux knew his idea made no sense. But his friends could throw Light as easily as they brushed their teeth. It wasn't so easy for him anymore. Not after the previous year in Kofi, when he'd lost his grandpa; when that new, powerful purple energy had exploded out of him.

"You're worrying again, aren't you?" asked Fera, watching Lux play nervously with the sleeves of his Light Hunter uniform.

"I'm not."

"You are," added Brace. "You've got your *I'm a scared mouse* look."

## THE LAST MONSTER

"All right, I'm worried," Lux admitted. "But you're not the one who keeps leaking weird purple energy."

Brace and Fera exchanged a meaningful glance. "No, but we *are* the ones who keep saying we trust you," said Fera. "We know you won't hurt us."

"Again," said Lux.

A breeze shook the trees, causing the black cat to hunker against the branch. Ester, sitting on a nearby log, tapped her dark metal Gauntlet. "Three minutes. Not that I'm trying to hurry you or anything."

"Come on, Lux," whispered Fera. "If we're going with the plan that the cat'll jump . . . we are going with that, aren't we?"

The boys nodded.

"Then we need you one hundred percent focussed, not worrying about purple energy and exploding. Besides, nothing's happened for months now."

This, at least, was true. The first few weeks after his explosion, Lux's new powers had leaked out of him like water from a tap. But the last few months had been better. Maybe it *would* be all right.

"Oh, okay," he said reluctantly.

"Woohoo!" cried Brace. "I vote Fera climbs the tree while I set up a little staircase of Light-arrows. Lux, you have your *Catch* ready for when she jumps."

"Why am *I* climbing the tree?" Fera demanded.

Brace looked nervously at the gnarled oak, which was as tall as a house. "Well, you know . . ."

"He hates heights," Lux reminded her.

“I hate his jokes, doesn’t mean I can avoid them.” But Fera shook her head grumpily, giving in. “If any of your Light-arrows slip, I’ll cook your backside with a *Flame*,” she told Brace.

The three young Light Hunters moved into position beneath the tree, ignoring Ester, who was watching them carefully, an amused twinkle in her eye.

It was Brace who threw his Light first, conjuring his bow in a bright blue flash and firing a staircase of arrows, which fizzed where they bit into the bark.

“I’m going out on the branch,” said Fera. “If we’re right, it’ll leap out about . . .” She cast around, choosing the right spot. “Here.”

A nervous bubble popped in Lux’s stomach, but he did his best to ignore it.

Hugging the tree, Fera climbed using Brace’s Light-arrows. The archer cheered her on, only once firing a shot past her ear as a joke.

Soon, she was level with the cat, which was clearly wondering why one of the humans was up its tree. The wind picked up slightly, bending the branches. Then, suddenly, a great rush made Fera lose her footing.

“Oi!” Brace shouted at Ester.

“I never said I’d make it easy.” She sat back on her log, looking satisfied.

The wind continued to blow as Fera shifted carefully onto the branch, her body throwing a long, lean shadow.

“You ready?” Brace asked Lux.

Was he? He knew how to throw a *Catch*, of course. He’d been



## THE LAST MONSTER

doing that long before he joined the Light Hunters. But his new powers . . . that purple energy . . . if it came, there was nothing he could do.

*Think positive*, he thought.

Fera was just a yard from the cat now. She turned her head ever so slightly, showing Lux she was ready. Then she pounced.

The cat sprang away instantly, soaring into the air with a bright blue flash. Fera pushed herself off the branch, following the light.

Adrenaline burned through Lux. He joined his fingers, ready to cast the *Catch*. But instead of a blue crackle of Light, he heard a soft throbbing noise, and saw purple threads creeping along his arms. He felt hot and cold at once.

*No, no, no*, he thought, panicking.

Fera was about four metres high now, over the ground. Her expression changed to one of terror as she saw the purple energy pouring out of Lux, and she reached frantically for something to hold onto. Brace conjured his Light-bow, aiming it at her, but realised there was nothing he could do. Ester, too, leapt up, preparing her Gauntlet, but she had nothing that could break Fera's fall.

It was all down to Lux.

Pressing on a rising sickness, he joined his fingers again, concentrating hard on his *Catch*, imagining Fera bouncing off it like a cloud. He breathed, willing everything he had into his Light.

But it was no good.

The purple energy grew.

DAN WALKER

Lux met Fera's eyes as gravity pulled her down and he watched in horror as she fell, fell, fell, landing with a muted *thud* on the sodden floor.