

THE
LIGHT
THAT WENT
THIN

The Dusklight Keepers
Book One

ISAAC J BURNS

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First published in 2026 by Seamlight Press

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ISBN 978-1-0668829-0-8 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-1-0668829-1-5 (Hardback)

First edition

I

The Night the Light Went Thin



The lantern on top of Dusk Keep had burned every single night for a thousand years, which is exactly why nobody watched it any more. It was just there, the way the moon is there, the way Tuesdays are there.

So Olwen was the only one looking up when it flickered.

Boo, everyone called her. Boo since before she could walk, and Princess Olwen only when she was announcing herself, which was most of the time. She was standing on the cold top step of the North Tower in her nightie and one

welly. She'd been halfway through the other welly when she heard it and had decided on the spot that a strange noise mattered more than shoes. On the way up she skipped the loose step out of habit, the one Dad had been meaning to fix since spring and would definitely see to next weekend.

Dusk Keep was home before it was anything else. Mum and Dad slept beneath the North Tower. Farther round inside the wall were Meemee's warm kitchen and Grandad's shed, which was not safe at any hour. Boo knew every stair between them.

This stair led to the light.

The sound she heard was this: The Dusklight had gone quiet.

She didn't know how a light could go quiet, but this one had. All her life it had hummed, a warm, thick hum you felt in your teeth if you stood close. Now the hum had thinned to a whisper. The great flame had shrunk from a bonfire to a birthday candle, and it leaned and guttered; it looked like something trying very hard not to go out. Around it the old iron cage stood, furred with rust, its shutters clamped shut the way they always had been.

'JAX,' she bellowed down the stairs, in the enormous voice she saved for emergencies and for annoying her brothers, which were often the same thing. 'JAX. THE LIGHT'S GONE POORLY.'

A thump, a pause, and Jarek appeared. Jax to everyone. Fully dressed, because Jax did nothing by halves, least of all being woken up. Marbles in one hand. He always had his marbles.

He looked at the flame for a long moment. ‘It’s three shades down,’ he said, in his careful counting voice. ‘Maybe four.’ His thumb had already begun rolling the marbles around his palm. Click, click, click.

‘Three shades down from what?’ said Boo.

‘From how it always is. It’s never not how it always is.’

Which was true, and was the whole trouble, really.

Behind them, without a sound, Leofric came up the stairs. Leo. The youngest sibling, at four years old, in the dragon pyjamas he refused to take off even in summer. Nobody had called him. Nobody ever needed to.

On his way past the top step, he paused, tilted his head, and said something soft and unbothered up into the dark of the night. A word, maybe two, the way you’d answer someone standing a step above you. Then he crossed to the great arched window, put both hands flat on the cold sill, and watched the night as though it owed him an explanation.

Boo and Jax looked at each other. Neither of them had caught who Leo had been talking to. Neither of them ever did.

For one small moment, nothing else happened.

The house continued beneath them.

A pipe knocked once behind the wall. Dad turned over in the room below. Somewhere farther round the Keep, Meemee shut an oven door because Meemee was still baking at an hour when sensible people had stopped. The loose stair gave its usual tiny complaint under nobody’s foot.

All of it was ordinary.

Only the sound above them was missing.

Jax looked up again. His face tightened, strained as he tilted his head to regain the missing sound.

Leo pressed one hand to the cold sill. His other hand remained open at his side.

The three of them heard it then.

Not an unfamiliar noise.

The place where the old one should have been.

Then, from very close, a shriek.

A panicked shriek: the sound of a thing that had just done something it very much did not mean to. Out of the thin light a small black shape came tumbling over the top of the wall, missed the tower, clipped the flagpole with a bong, spun twice, and landed in a heap of wings and knees in the middle of the floor.

A dragon. A small one, smaller than Leo. Sooty-black, wings like a bat's, nose like a startled dog's, and shaking so hard its claws rattled on the stone.

It had come over the wall. The wall that had never, ever let anything over before.

‘Right,’ said Boo, and stepped towards it.

‘Boo—’ Jax caught the back of her nightie. ‘We should get Mum. We should get a grown-up—’

‘We should ask it why it’s crying,’ said Boo. She shook him off, marched up to the shaking little dragon, crouched, and said in her clearest and most princessly voice: ‘Excuse me. Why are you crying?’

The dragon blinked one enormous orange eye at her. Then the other. Then it opened its mouth to answer, and hiccuped a burp of soot instead, all over her nightie. It smelled of campfire ash, the type that sits in the basin a day after the fire.

The black smudge sat on her nightie, powder still falling from it. Then back up at the little dragon.

‘Rude,’ she said, delighted.

‘Get Mum,’ said Jax again, already backing towards the stairs. ‘Mum’ll know what to—’

‘Your mum,’ said an unfamiliar voice, ‘will see a nice bright light and put you all back to bed.’

Something dropped from the ceiling in a flurry and swung down onto the flagpole. It was a bat: fat, cross, important-looking, hanging upside down and somehow pointing at all of them at once.

‘Which is the problem,’ it went on. ‘It’s happening, it’s happening. Oh, I said it would. Well. I didn’t say it to anyone; I’ve been snoozing for twenty years. But I thought it loudly—’

‘Who,’ said Boo, ‘are you?’

The bat drew itself up, which upside down meant it drew itself down. ‘I am Bartleby. Loremaster of Dusk Keep, Keeper of the Records, Rememberer of the Great Rememberings. And you are three children, two in pyjamas, one of them wearing wellies.’

‘Just the one,’ said Boo. ‘I was busy.’

Jax wasn’t having it, however. ‘Our mum’s three floors down. She knows every room in this Keep. She’ll—’

‘She’ll look up at that light and see it burning as bright as the day she was born.’ Bartleby’s voice had gone gentler. ‘Grown-ups can’t see the dusk straight on any more. Not the light going thin, not the wall going soft, not this little idiot,’—he flapped a wing at the dragon. ‘And the Keep looks after its own. On the nights its Keepers are needed, it keeps the grown-ups sleeping—settles them back down before they quite surface. Kind of it, really. Saves a great deal of explaining.’

Three floors below, where the North Tower opened into the family rooms, Mum sat bolt upright in the dark.

She padded to the window in bare feet and looked up.

From there, the Dusklight looked as it always had: big, steady, and bright enough to read by.

Mum stood with one hand on the sill, frowning at a flame that was three shades from going out.

After a while, she rubbed her arms, pulled the curtain closed and went back to bed.

Beside her, Dad shifted against the pillow. ‘Start...beginning,’ he murmured. Then, after a pause, something that was almost certainly next weekend. He slept on.

Up in the tower, Bartleby sagged on his flagpole.

‘That is why there are no Keepers. The previous ones grew old. Their sight went out of them like a candle, and they forgot the wall needed keeping. Its light has been thinning ever since, with no one left who could even tell.’ He paused. ‘There is rarely only one, mind. A Keep this size should have had more.’ One claw tightened around the

flagpole, then eased. ‘But when I try to count them, the number comes out wrong, and I cannot say why.’ He added, more slowly, ‘That is how I remember it happening. And I remember everything...’

Jax had gone quiet. Really quiet. The marbles stopped.

‘So Mum can’t help,’ he said slowly, considering the impact. ‘Nobody can. Because nobody can see it.’

‘Nobody grown,’ said Bartleby. ‘The light knows that. That’s why it woke you. It thinned itself down to the last thread, and it called, and the only ones who can still hear a light call are small.’ He looked from one to the next to the next, and there was nothing important left in his voice at all. ‘You three can see it. The light called to you. That makes you the Keepers now. I’m terribly sorry. It has chosen its Keepers.’



For a moment, nobody said anything. The thin flame leaned overhead.

Then Leo, who had not said a word this whole time, walked calmly past all of them, sat down on the floor beside the shaking little dragon, and laid a hand on its sooty back.

The dragon went still. It looked at Leo. Leo looked at it. Something passed between them that none of the others could hear, and the dragon shuffled close, tucked its head under his arm, and let out a long, rattly, relieved breath.

‘Him name Sootpip,’ said Leo.

Three words. Everyone stared. Leo did not give away words for free, and never to strangers, and the bat was still a stranger.

‘How d’you know that?’ whispered Boo.

Leo didn’t look up. ‘Him told me.’

Boo crouched down beside him. There was something she’d been meaning to ask for a while, something burning behind her teeth begging to be let out, and a tower at midnight with a bat and a dragon in it felt like the right sort of place for strange questions.

‘Leo,’ she said. ‘Who do you talk to? On the stairs. We hear you sometimes.’

Leo kept his hand on Sootpip. ‘Isaac,’ he said.

The word seemed to freeze the air right in front of them. Bartleby tightened his paws around the flagpole.

‘Isaac?’

Boo went silent. Everyone knew Isaac: the eldest, the brother who came first and went on ahead, the name the family always kept gently, the one Mum looked for in the sky.

‘You talked to Isaac?’

Leo nodded, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. ‘Him biggest. Him went first.’

He lifted a hand and pointed up past the thin flame and out through the arch of the window, to the one star that sat over the Keep and never moved.

‘Him hold light,’ said Leo. ‘Far side. Not dark both ends.’

Boo looked at the star. She had seen it every single night of her life and never once counted it as a person. It sat where it always sat, steady and unhurried, while the rest of the sky wheeled slowly around it.

‘Him told light our names,’ said Leo, with a small shrug, the obvious kind. ‘Him keeps them.’

And, softer, into Sootpip’s back: ‘Him waiting. Till us hear.’

Bartleby looked up at the fixed star. ‘The Keeper Ahead,’ he whispered to himself as if repeating it forced the name into his memory.

Boo rose from Leo’s side. Soot on her nightie. One welly on her foot. A dying light overhead. A bat, a dragon, and a brother keeping watch from the far side of the sky.

‘Then that’s it,’ she said. ‘The light called us. We heard it. Grown-ups can’t see it. And something came over the wall.’

She looked at Jax. Then Leo. Then the thin flame above them.

‘We’re the Keepers.’

Bartleby looked at the three of them: Jax gripping his marbles, Leo curled around a dragon, and Boo standing in a soot-marked nightie with one welly planted firmly on the stone.

‘Yes,’ he said. For once, there was no fuss or importance in him. ‘You are.’

‘I’m five and a half,’ replied Boo, with tremendous dignity.

Bartleby looked at the single welly. ‘That is enormously reassuring.’

Jax was already looking up at the failing flame, marbles turning again, building the problem into something he could hold.

‘If it’s going slowly, we’ve got time to work out how to keep it lit,’ he said. ‘There’ll be a way. There’s always a-’

He stopped.

Because Leo had gone still. Not the easy stillness of a boy with a sleepy dragon under his arm. The other kind. The kind that meant watch what I’m watching. He was at the window again, both hands on the sill, staring past the wall into the black of the Night-wilds.

Boo traced his gaze into the night; her face paled when she saw it.

Sootpip had been small. Sootpip had been frightened. Sootpip had come over the wall like a dropped sock.

Whatever was moving out there now was neither.

It came slowly, and it came low, and it was so large that as it moved, it blotted out the stars behind it one by one, in a long, unhurried line. Every star except the one over the keep. That one held. And the shape was heading, in no hurry at all, straight for the thin and failing light on top of Dusk Keep.

Sootpip whimpered.

‘Bartleby,’ said Boo, her voice gone tiny. ‘What’s that?’

And for once, the extremely important bat had absolutely nothing to say.

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