

Praise for *Mia and the Lightcasters*:

SHORTLISTED – JHALAK PRIZE

SHORTLISTED – THE WEEK JUNIOR BOOK AWARDS

LONGLISTED – THE BRANFORD BOASE AWARD

‘Thrilling . . . with feelings of Pokémon and Final Fantasy.’

L. D. Lapinski, author of *The Strangeworlds Travel Agency*

‘Exciting . . . will keep readers on the edge of their seats.’

Books for Keeps, Book of the Year

‘I absolutely loved it. I can’t wait for the next instalment.’

Tolá Okogwu, author of *Onyeka and the Academy of the Sun*

‘A fast paced and dark fantasy . . . very fun.’

Book Riot

‘A magical world that video game fanatics will devour.’

Aisha Bushby, author of *A Flash of Fireflies*

‘Incredibly easy to get lost in!’

Armadillo Magazine

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Kieran Larwood, author of *The Legend of Podkin One-Ear*

‘A thrilling adventure . . . captivating.’

The Bookseller

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janelle McCurdy is an author and fully fledged gamer. After graduating from Royal Holloway University with a Criminology and Sociology degree, Janelle moved back home to London, and began writing middle grade fantasy. In her free time, you can find her holed up in her room, gaming and watching anime, or attending numerous comic cons and gaming events. Her FAB Prize winning story, *Mia and the Lightcasters*, was acquired by Faber in a major auction.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Ana Latese is an illustrator based in North Carolina. She has illustrated *Boys Don't Cry* by Malorie Blackman, as well as working with editorial clients including *The Washington Post*. When she's not illustrating, she enjoys playing video games, bundling up with her dogs and watching *Criminal Minds* 24/7.

To my Nan, my beautiful star in the sky.

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A large, stylized starburst graphic composed of numerous small, dark, irregular shapes radiating from a central point, resembling a star or a cluster of galaxies. The graphic is positioned at the top of the page, framing the title.

MIA

AND THE

TRAITOR OF NUBIS

JANELLE MCCURDY

ILLUSTRATED BY ANA LATESE

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Lunis





CHAPTER ONE

Screams pierce the air and flames crackle around me. In the alleyway, I crouch behind some bins with my little brother Lucas close by my side. His tiny hand clutches mine and I squeeze it back. *I won't let anything happen to you. I promise.*

The hot stench of garbage invades my nose and thick black smoke burns the back of my throat, making it hard to breathe. Behind us, at the other end of the dark alleyway, children scream and cry for help as they're snatched away by men and women dressed in huge red cloaks that flap in the wind. With sinister grins, the adults thrust shadowy smoke from their hands in front of the children's faces, like monstrous beings that only belong in the Spirit Plain. Reapers.

My grip on Lucas's hand tightens. *We've gotta get out of here!* I go to run but stop myself and clap a hand

over Lucas's mouth as a gutterslug red-cloak steps in our path in front of the alleyway, his back to us. In the distance something clangs loudly, coming closer and closer, like metal chains or iron bars banging against each other.

'Stay close,' I whisper to Lucas. He nods and I slowly remove my hand from his mouth. Black, shadowy snakelike creatures skitter past on giant spider legs. Beasts made of shadow and stars: umbra. They search the area with their blood-red eyes and I pull Lucas down. His tiny hand shakes in my grasp, and I gently kiss his head. *I'm gonna protect you no matter what.*

A huge cage slams against the concrete in front of us, and we jump. My breath hitches in my throat and my hands feel clammy. I look ahead and freeze. Trapped within the metal cage like animals are the protectors of our city. The tamers. The very people who fight against the Darkness of the Reaper King, and all the other dangers out in the Nightmare Plains. Their shadowy umbra, with sparkly golden eyes, are pinned to the ground by strange blue spiked collars chained around their necks. *What the flip is happening?*

Within the cage, oh-too familiar hazel eyes connect with mine, and my gut twists into a knot. *Mum.*

She grasps at the metal bars and quickly turns to whisper something to Dad. He nods and slinks away into the crowd of prisoners. Loud bangs sound from the other side of the cage and the red-cloaked guard cusses under his breath and moves to investigate. *Now!*

I tug Lucas's hand and we quickly, carefully, make our way over to Mum. Her hands shoot through the bars to caress our faces.

'My babies.' Her eyes fill with pain and mine sting with tears. Her palm is cold against my burning hot cheek, and I rack my brain trying to think of a way to get her and everyone out. Lucas snuffles and rubs his cheek against her other hand.

'Listen to me,' Mum whispers. 'You need to go. He's coming for you.'

What? I shake my head. *What's she talking about?* The way she holds us feels so familiar, yet something feels wrong. So wrong.

'You're a lightcaster, Mia, and you need to master your powers! You'll never be safe until you do. Take Lucas and go! Now!' Mum yells, but it doesn't sound like her voice. What's going on? She pushes us away and I let go of Lucas's hand.

'Mum, what are you talking about?' I grab the

bars but I'm yanked back, snatched from her. I look down and scream at the skeleton fingers latched on to my arms.

'Mum! Help!'

A sinister chuckle and a venomous voice seeps into my mind.

'I'm coming to find you.'

Don't turn around. Don't turn around.

'You can't hide.'

'Mimi . . .' I hear a small voice call out from behind me. 'Mimi . . . Help.'

I look over my shoulder and the bony hands that grip me crumble to dust.

A few feet away, Lucas stands with his little fists pressed against his eyes.

'Lu-Lu?' I walk over to him cautiously. The flames around us flare higher with every step I take. I crouch down and place my hand softly on his head. 'Lu-Lu, we have to—'

His face changes, halting my words. Blackened eyes stare back at me and ink-stained tears streak his cheeks. A bright shark-tooth smile spreads across his lips. 'Mimi . . .'

I stumble back, crashing against the floor. 'No!'

'MIMI!' He sprints towards me, grinning like a monster and I scream.

'NO!'

'Mouse!'

I jerk awake and gasp. The flames and Lucas's distorted face vanish into thin air as soft moonlight shines through the curtains. I heave, trying to catch my breath. My clothes stick to my sweaty back and I shiver.

'Another nightmare?' Nox asks from the floor.

My eyes snap to the shadowy creatures that shimmer like stars in the forever night. One black and one white. My umbra, Nox and Lux. Their worried golden eyes stare from foxlike faces. I nod and bury my face into my knees.

'You may think it is nothing, young one, but perhaps you should speak with your parents. These nightmares have been non-stop since the attack.'

Yeah, non-stop for three months and fourteen sky connects. That's how long it's been since my whole life changed, and definitely not for the better. Three months and fourteen sky connects ago me, Lucas, TJ, and Jada escaped Nubis and arrived at the City of Light with the weight of Mum, Dad, and hundreds of

other people's lives on our shoulders. I still remember the warmth of the sun on my skin for the first time ever. And even though there's been no sign of the Reaper King since, I can't stop counting the days and wondering if that victory is just temporary. Despite making that gutterslug king eat dirt, and knowing his Elite minions are locked up, bad memories still haunt my dreams and they're getting worse.

'So, what happened this time?' Lux asks. *'Or am I going to have to dig in your mind and find out.'*

I scrunch my nose in protest. Since Lux and Nox came home with me, we made a promise not to access each other's minds without permission unless we think the other is in danger. They slip up sometimes, but for the most part it's been OK, and it's nice having my mind to myself again.

'It was pretty intense,' I say, rubbing my clammy cheeks. *'It was about the day the Elite first attacked and caged all the tamers. But it was different too. Mum was saying things she didn't say, and it didn't even sound like her voice at one point.'*

'Nightmares are often warped versions of old memories from traumatic events. Best to keep an eye on them though, given what you are,' Nox says.

Yeah . . . A lightcaster. I sigh and lean against the wall. A child born with the powers of the moon and the sun, with a light like no other. Yet so far it feels like only negative things have come from it. Powers that have chained and shackled me and Lucas to a fate we didn't ask for. A fate that potentially endangers us for the rest of our lives if the Reaper King isn't really gone.

I grit my teeth at the thought. Even without the Reaper King, there's no way me and Lucas can control these powers if we don't know what we're capable of. Especially with the way everyone's been acting since the news came out in the city. We've been standing out like an extra moon in the sky.

The only clue we have is that these powers began, or at least are connected to, the founders of our kingdom and two special crystals. That's what Mum said from what little she and Dad translated from the *Legends of the Lightcasters* book they have.

'All I've flippin' done is monitor these nightmares. I wish they would bog off already,' I say with another sigh.

'Still, you should probably stop being stubborn and tell your parents about them,' Lux says.

I roll my eyes. *'And have them even more worried'*

than they already are? Forget it. They're just nightmares,' I say.

Right now, Mum and Dad need to stay focused on what they're going to do with all the Elite that are currently locked up in the hold. Not to mention, I've got bigger problems. I flex my hand open and closed. *Like figuring out how to stop these stinkin' powers of mine from flaring up at the wrong moment, making me look like even more of a freak.*

Then there's Miles . . .

I grip my bed covers harder. He's still out there somewhere, my old best friend who disappeared almost as quickly as he came back into my life.

'You're still thinking about that Elite brat, aren't you?' Lux asks. I sigh and nod.

'Where do you think he went?' Nox asks.

I shrug. 'Who knows. Maybe he needed space to clear his head in the Nightmare Plains, or maybe he went home to Astaroth.' *I just wish he'd come back already.*

I throw myself into the comfort of my pillows and pull the covers over my head. My bed shifts and I peek out to see Nox settling down by my feet, wrapping his long busy tail around himself. Even in his baby form,

he takes up almost half the bed with his black deer-like body. I smile and stroke his head.

'Goodnight, young one.'

'Try not to make us jump with your nightmares,' Lux huffs from his spot on the floor. His white shadowy fur glows like a little lamp in the room and a chuckle almost bubbles up, but I swallow it.

'Sorry. I'll try my best,' I say.

Lux harrumphs, but I catch him checking on me one last time before laying his head down.

Next time I wake I catch the last of the silver line that joins the stars for sky connect. The start of a new day. Nox shakes his shadowy body and jumps to the floor.

'No nightmares?' he asks.

'None,' I confirm. *Thank Lunis.*

'Good. Then it's time to get ready for class, young one.'

I grimace. 'Don't remind me.'

But I force myself up and roll my shoulders back. I throw off my hair bonnet and walk to the bathroom to splash my face with cold water. *Today'll be a good day. You got this, girl.* I stare at my reflection and nod.

I get changed into a white blouse with black shorts and leggings. Nox brings me my butterfly hairband.

I take it from his mouth and tie my dark curly hair back into a low ponytail with bangs. I wrap my purple hoodie around my waist and head towards the door.

I stop with my hand on the door handle, spotting something on my desk, and I can't help smiling when I realise what it is. I run over, scoop up the small butterfly-shaped note and read it:

Have a good day, Baby-girl. You'll smash
your classes as always. You're a star,
Love Dad x

I look back at Lux and Nox. 'I bet you guys saw him leave this one, huh?'

'Yes, it was just after you fell asleep,' Lux muses.

Ever since the battle against the Elite and the Reaper King, Dad's been leaving these cute little notes for me to find in the morning. I'm glad he didn't come in when I was having that nightmare.

'All right, let's head to breakfast. I bet Lucas is already waiting for us,' I say.

We step into the hall and immediately Lucas's door clicks open. He stands in the doorway in his blue PJs,

yawning. 'Morning, Mimi. Morning, Luxy, Morning, Noxy.'

'Morning, tiny human,' Lux greets. Even in his baby form, Lux still towers over my little brother. Nox walks over to Lucas and licks his cheek. He smiles and strokes Nox's head.

'Morning Lu-Lu. You ready for breakfast?' I ask.

'Yeah.' He rubs his eyes and walks with me downstairs.

Every sky connect, Lucas has been getting up the exact same time as me. Apparently it's his attempt at being a 'big boy'. Not sure I understand why it's so important to him, since he's only four, but I don't question him about it either. *Whatever floats his boat.*

We walk into the kitchen, passing Mum's lab coat hanging by the front door, and the smell of chocolate cinnamon buns hits my nose. A bright smile spreads across my face and through the kitchen window I see Spike and Bolt chilling in the garden, enjoying the moonlight. Lux and Nox go out to join them, and a warmth swirls around my heart. They've been getting along so well with Mum and Dad's umbra. I'm glad everything seems to be fitting together, at least at home.

I go to help Lucas on the chair, but he does it himself

and Mum watches him a little longer than normal. She doesn't say what she's thinking, but her eyes do. She's worried about how he's been since the battle. Honestly, sometimes I worry too. He hasn't talked about what happened, but he always wants to do everything by himself now, and sorta feels more distant.

'Where's Dad?' I ask, biting into a toasted cinnamon bun.

'At the hold. He's questioning the Elite again. Particularly the ones who left during the Blood Moon,' Mum says, placing a tray of chopped fruit on the table. 'We need to know whether they left the city willingly or by force, and if by force, then how.'

'Daddy is saving us from the bad guys ...' Lucas murmurs, biting into his bun.

'The bad guys are locked up so we don't need saving any more, honey. Daddy's just making sure nothing else bad happens,' Mum says. She shares a glance with me and sits down at the table with us. Lucas frowns and doesn't look at her. I slide the fruit tray to him. He pushes it away. I lightly flick his cheek.

'Stop, Mimi!' he complains, swatting my hand.

'Stop being grouchy. Big boys eat fruit too, ya know,' I tell him. He scrunches up his face.

'You eat it then.'

I pull a face. 'I'm good, thanks.'

I could've sworn I saw a flicker of a smile, but it's gone the second it appears.

After breakfast I call Lux and Nox back inside. 'We're gonna head out to class now,' I say to Mum and Lucas, grabbing my bo staff by the back door. A gift from the queen to help fight the Reaper King. It shines at my touch and I give it a twirl, then attach it to my thigh strap. I wonder if she's gonna want it back? Too bad, I guess.

Mum smiles and clears the table. 'All right, sweetheart. Have a good day.'

I ruffle Lucas's hair on the way out of the kitchen. My stomach lurches as I stare at the front door.

'You guys ready?'

'*Of course,*' Lux and Nox say together. There's a bright flash as they transform into their adult forms. I take a deep breath, preparing myself. *I got this. I GOT THIS!* I exhale and push the door open, walking out into my sparkling forever-night city.

The moment I step outside, the feeling of a thousand eyes on me hits me like a gut punch. Adults whisper to each other as they walk past. Some make an effort to

smile at me, while others stare like I'm a freaky science experiment. One woman hurries her kid away. I grit my teeth and step out on to the road – only to be yanked back by Nox as a travel pod shoots past, beeping. The shock sends a giant beam of light blasting from my palms, knocking back a lamp post and barely missing a second travel pod. My heart pounds against my rib cage.

'Young one, you need to be careful,' Nox says, letting go.

The head of the lamp post squeaks back and forth, barely clinging on by a single wire. I stare at the damage, and gaze down at my hands, lip trembling. A woman I hadn't noticed before gasps and clutches at her chest. The fear in her eyes is as clear as the stars in the sky. Shame washes over me, knowing exactly what she thinks. I'm a monster. And she's not wrong.

'We should go,' Lux says, growling at a man who shoots me a dirty look.

'Yeah ...' I mutter.

We start moving again, dodging between strangers. In the space of a few months, our cosy little city has turned into a big, bustling one, apparently like it was before I was born, before the Darkness took over. Before *he* attacked us.

I rub the back of my neck and realise my hand is shaking. Lux taps my head with his horn. *'Just concentrate, and stick to the pavements.'*

I shoot him a look, rubbing the spot he hit, but do as he says with a sigh. Nubis has changed. A lot. And so have I.

Colourful fairy lights and glow bugs light the streets like normal, but new lunar road lamps shine for the self-driving travel pods that hover along the road. I keep forgetting about the travel pods. People skate in their own lane on weird shoe skates to reach their destinations, too. All of it technology from Stella, the City of Light, and the capital city of our kingdom, Lunis, where Queen Katiya lives.

Since the attack, many people from Stella have moved here to Nubis. They were curious about the umbra and how we co-exist with them while living in the forever dark. It's all pretty rich if you ask me. They were giving Lux, Nox and Ruby, Jada's umbra, dirty looks when we were in their city. I could understand the fear, but not the disgust. Guess I shouldn't be a hypocrite though. It took me long enough to warm to my umbra at first too.

I cross the road with Lux and Nox, making a point

to look both ways twice. As we reach the other side, a lady purposely crosses the road away from me. I sigh and force my hands in my hoodie pockets.

‘Let’s get going,’ I say, marching past the new hovering city-news board.

Mum, Dad and the other tamers agreed to exchange their tips and techniques for surviving the Darkness for information on Stella’s technology. Hence all the self-driving travel pods and skates. Stella’s technology and science was always years ahead of ours, but they never wanted to share it before. They and the stinkin’ queen were selfish and still are in my opinion. But at least she gave me her staff.

Mum and the other scientists in Nubis didn’t just want the blueprints to their technology though, they want to master it and share it with the only other lit city, Nexus, and hopefully bring back the other cities that have fallen to the Darkness at the hands of the Reaper King.

I run and playfully do an aerial cartwheel in front of the huge city entrance gate to help shake off the weirdness of the morning. The walls sparkle with the extra moon crystals reinforcing the concrete to protect the city, an extra safety precaution that

hopefully won’t be necessary, but better to be safe than sorry.

As always, I examine the ancient engravings on the walls, the images telling the story of old Queen Lucina fighting the Reaper King before originally sealing him away are still clear as the stars in the sky.

Nox nudges me with his nose. I smile and stroke his head. Him and Lux were the only good thing to come out of this mess . . . And seeing Miles again. That meant the world.

I walk past Mum’s lab and my heart tugs. They’re trying to find out what happened to Nan and Grandad, who still haven’t woken up. They were attacked in the Nightmare Plains on the way to Nubis. Mum had them transferred to the newly built medi-centre in Nubis. I just wish there was something I could do to help.

I clench and flex my fingers, and little sparks of energy zap up my arm. I shake them away and carry on walking. Somehow these lightcaster powers and the umbra are all linked in a giant story far beyond anyone’s knowledge, connected to the founders of Lunis. It doesn’t help me wake up Nan and Grandad though.

Beside me, Lux nips at Nox and the black shadowy umbra growls back. I laugh. It’s a good distraction from