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can rule
forever.

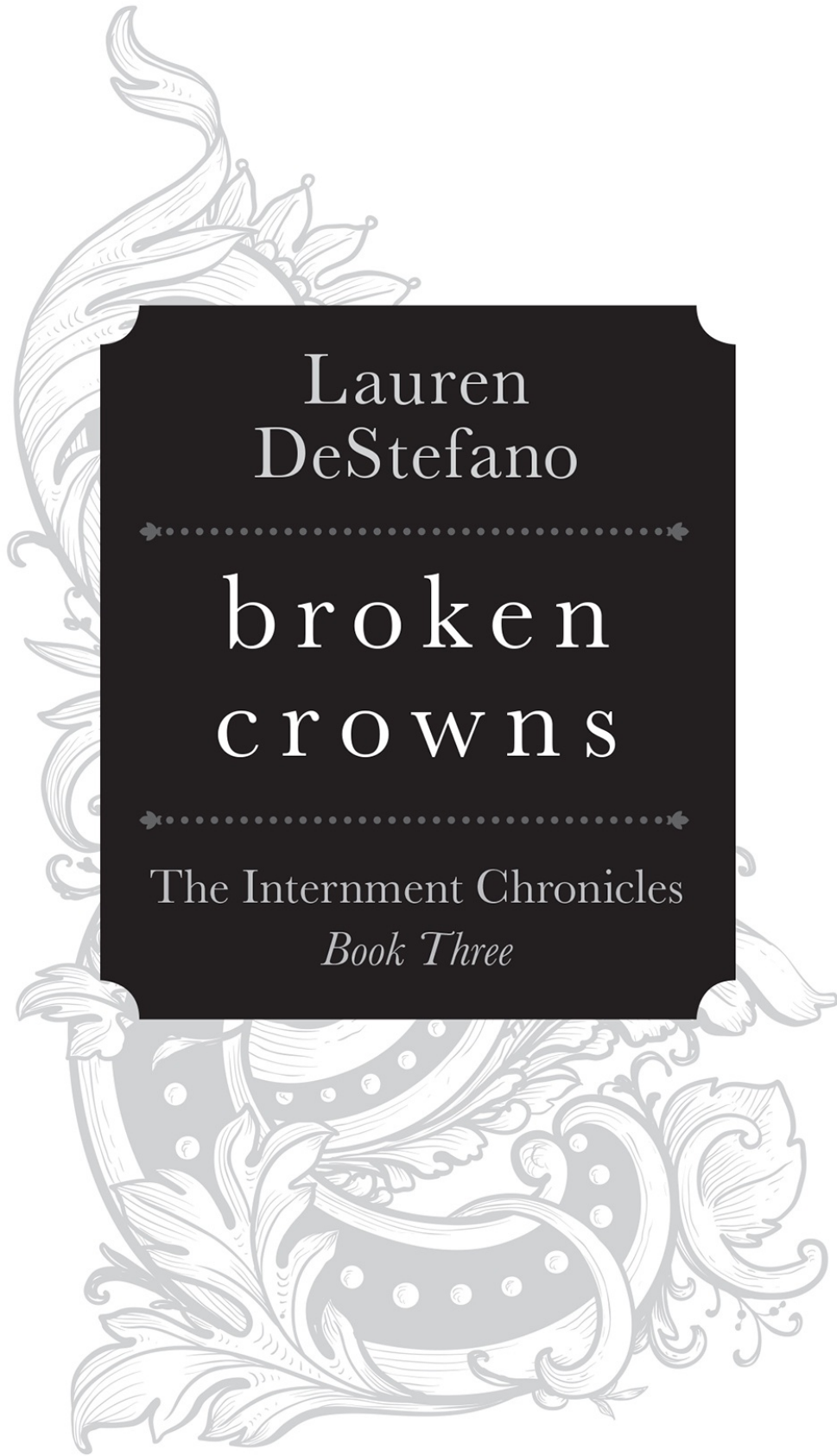
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crowns

Lauren DeStefano

New York Times bestselling author
of the Chemical Garden Trilogy



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DeStefano



broken
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The Internment Chronicles
Book Three

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acknowledgments

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We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

—*T. S. Eliot*



“The city is falling out of the sky,” Professor Leander said. They were his last words. The medicine of the ground was not enough to cure an old man of the sun disease. He refused most of the efforts anyway. He told me that he’d already accomplished what no one else had been able to do. He’d gotten us to the ground. He was quite curious, he said, to know if his spirit would be taken to the tributary, or if he’d go to whatever afterlife the ground believed in, or if there was nothing at all.

Amy was with him when he died, and she called it a peaceful death. A fitting death.

Down a labyrinthine set of hallways in the same hospital, Gertrude Piper opened her eyes after a month of sleep. It was as though the two gods had made an even trade—the life of a man from the sky in exchange for the life of a girl on the ground.

Before that, we all thought that Birdie Piper would die. After I landed in Havalais at the dawn of winter, she was the most vibrant thing in her strange world. She offered her friendship to Pe and me without question; she snuck us through our bedroom window and showed us the wonders of Havalais. The mermaids in the sea. The glittering lights cast upon the water at night. The spinning metal rides in her family’s amusement park.

And then the cold war between Havalais and its neighboring kingdom of Dastor advanced on us all at once, in the middle of the spring festival. I watched as an explosion swallowed Birdie. I saw her body, broken and bleeding and burnt, being kept alive by some coppery machine. Even worse than my brother had been when he’d come too close to the edge.

But nothing is certain, not even death when it’s hovering over a girl. Not in my world, and not in this one. Birdie came back slowly. It took a month for her to open her eyes, and even longer for her to speak, serene in her delirium.

She told us about a spirit that would come into her room late at night to sing to her and to tend to the flowers on the table by the window.

When she had faded back to sleep, Nim slouched forward in his chair and rubbed his temples and anguished. “It wasn’t a spirit,” he told us. “Our mother’s been here.”

Mrs. Piper disappeared some years earlier to see the world. The same madness that brings so many to the edge of Internment haunts the people on the ground as well. One place is not even enough for anyone, it seems.

It’s August now, and Birdie no longer talks about her spirit. Instead she has returned to soli-

ground along with the rest of us. She asks her brother about the war. She wants to visit the grave of her other brother, Riles. She is getting well and she is ready to face the grimness that often comes with being awake. She doesn't wallow in her despair, and does not mind that her soft face has been forever scarred.

Pen is different. She doesn't seem ready to face anything these days. It has been months since King Ingram left for Internment, taking Princess Celeste with him, and in that time, Pen has been prone to more and more moments of distance. Jack Piper's guards surround the premises and we are scarcely permitted to leave unescorted. Not until King Ingram returns with his instructions for us. But every week, Pen gives Nimble a new list of books she'd like from the library. Physics. Calculus. Philosophy. She is drowning in pages and pages of things she never shares with any of us. And that's when she isn't off someplace where none of us can find her, even within the confines.

The sun is starting to set, and after nearly an hour of searching, I find her at the amusement park. It would normally be thriving in August, the Pipers have told us, if not for the king's absence and the war. Now it's locked. But Pen and I sneak in sometimes.

"Pen?" I step onto one of the metal bars, preparing to climb over the locked fence.

She's standing high up on the platform with the telescopes that face Internment, and she turns to me.

"What are you doing?" I say.

She shrugs. She presses a piece of paper against the telescope and writes something down, then tucks the paper into her dress. "Nothing. Don't climb up. I was just leaving."

She descends the staircase, the steps reverberating under her stacked leather heels that make her taller than me. A girl our age would never be permitted to wear such things back home.

She comes to the fence and grips the bars and leans close, so that her forehead is almost touching mine.

"What are you doing all the way out here?" she says.

"Looking for you. You didn't come in for dinner."

"Who can eat?" she says, and hands me her shoes and hoists herself up over the fence. "The food in this place is nauseating. A different animal a night. I'd rather chew on grass." She lands on her feet with a thud, and goes about straightening her skirt. She takes the shoes but doesn't bother putting them back on.

I hate myself for trying to smell the tonic on her breath, but it must be done. She finds ways to steal gulps of it. We've fallen into an unspoken understanding that I will dispose of anything she tries to hide, and it will never be mentioned.

But if she's had anything to drink, I can't tell. Her eyes seem bright and alert when she looks at me. "Has Thomas been trying to find me?"

"Isn't he always?" I say.

She tugs my hand. "I don't want to go back inside just yet. Let's go to the water. Maybe there are mermaids."

Birdie told us that the mermaids never come close to the shore. They prefer to stay where the water is deep, where they cannot easily be captured or get their hair ensnared on a fishing line. But I don't mind pretending we'll spot one. I try to keep pace with her as she runs.

With my other hand I hold my hat to my head. But eventually I let it go, and it escapes. When I'm with Pen, it seems I must always leave some small thing behind.

We are in a valley of green, with shy bright flowers poking their way through. In the wind

see dotted lines. I see red lines and blue lines. I see the maps that my best friend is always drawing as she moves, as she thinks.

“Maybe if we hold our arms out, the wind will carry us up,” she says, and I think she believes it to be true.

Eventually we stop to catch our breaths somewhere along the ocean’s shore. Pen rests her elbow on my shoulder and laughs at my wheezing. I have never been a match for her.

The wind is so loud that I can scarcely hear her laughter.

She drops onto the grass and pulls me down after her. Once I’ve caught my breath, she leans back on her elbows and looks at me. “What is it?” she says. “What’s that worried look for?”

“I don’t like all this wind,” I say, over a roar of it. “It doesn’t feel right.” This time of year is so mellow on Internment. It is surely beautiful back home, the pathways all traced with bright flowers.

“A lot of the breeze comes from the sea,” Pen says. “That’s all.”

“I know.”

“Morgan, we aren’t on Internment. Things are bound to be different. We’ve been here for months. We survived all that snow; this is just a little wind.”

“I know.” What I don’t say is that I’m afraid she’ll be swallowed whole by this whirling sky. This world already tried to kill her once, and Pen is fearless and foolish enough to let it try again.

A flock of birds flies high above us, in a uniform formation. Pen stretches her arms straight up over her head, her fingers arranged like a frame. I rest my head next to hers and try to see through that frame from her perspective.

After the birds have gone, she says, “Suppose Internment were to fall out of the sky.”

“What?” I say.

“Suppose it couldn’t stay afloat any longer and it came down all at once, hard and fast. I think it would coast at an angle, rather than straight down. I’ve been looking at the way the birds come down from the sky, and it’s sort of a sixty degree angle most times.”

“I don’t give it any thought,” I say.

She turns her head in the grass to look at me. “You’ve never thought about Internment falling from the sky before?”

“I have, I suppose.” I stare up at the graying sky, where shades of pink and gold still cling to the sparse clouds. “But more as a nightmare, not something that will happen. I don’t weigh the probability or try to picture what it would look like.”

Pen stares up at the sky again.

“I think it would fall on King Ingram’s castle,” she says. “I think it would kill him and all his men. But the impact would destroy Internment, too. The foundations for all the buildings would shift. They’d likely collapse.”

“Internment won’t fall out of the sky,” I say. I am gentle with her, but firm. I have heard Amos wonder about Internment coming down. I wondered myself, as a child. But Pen is different. She gets ideas like these in her head and they become real to her. She forgets what’s in front of her and sees only what’s in her mind, and just like that she’s lost.

A mechanical growling from somewhere high above us disturbs the tranquil gray sky, and I flinch. Not even the largest beast on Internment could make a sound like that. The sound comes from the king’s jet, descending from Internment for its monthly fuel delivery.

At the start of each month, the king’s jet returns to Havalais to deliver more phosane that has mined from Internment’s soil. A refinery was built in Havalais to process that soil into fuel.

In the mornings when I step outside, I can see the plumes of black smoke billowing out into the air, and sometimes I can smell it, too—like compost and metal.

But in six months, King Ingram has yet to return with his men, and after the delivery is made the jet flies back to Internment for more. It's a wonder there is any city left up there at all.

The warring kingdom of Dastor has seen the jet's comings and goings. Nimble tells us that the war has moved to the home front. Boys even younger than he is are being recruited to fight. Dastor means to have Internment and its fuel source, it will have to take ownership of Havalais itself.

"It won't happen," he's told us. "Havalais is bigger, more advanced."

I'm not so certain. I see nothing of the war from the confines of this sheltered world where Jack Piper raised his children, but sometimes when the air is still, I think I hear gunfire.

Pen puts her hand over mine, and I realize that I've been holding my breath. I know she's trying to keep me calm. She has heard me tossing and turning in my bed at night as I worry when the news this king will bring when he returns from Internment. Only, I don't feel worry now. I don't feel anything, not even the dread that King Ingram usually ignites in me.

"We should go back and tell the others," I say.

Pen gnaws her lip, and even as she sits up, her face is still angled skyward. "It's probably just another delivery," she says, and she is likely right. Five times before this, the jet has returned and five times we have all waited in silence for word of the king's arrival, and it never comes.

I pull Pen to her feet, and we make our way back to the hotel, both of us looking over our shoulders as the jet moves at an angle. Like a bird. Like a city falling from the sky.



Basil and Thomas arrive at the front steps moments before Pen and I do. Back on Internment, Pen's and my friendship was the only bond between them, but since coming here they've forged something like an independent friendship of their own, perhaps because if nothing else they have home in common.

They wouldn't have been able to go very far. Jack Piper has forbidden us to leave the grounds for our own protection, all on the king's orders that we are to be kept away from anyone who may have sinister intentions for us now that it's revealed that we come from the magical floating island above this world. Though, the people of Havalais have more cause to distrust their king than to harm us.

Truth be told, I don't mind the restriction half the time. It makes me feel safe. Reminds me of the train tracks that surrounded me back home.

Other times, my wanderer's spirit comes out for a visit and I wonder at when this will all be over.

"We were walking back from the theme park when we saw the jet," Thomas says. "Did you see it?"

"Yes," I say.

Princess Celeste became a pawn when King Ingram needed access to Internment. King Furlow up in his sky has only two weaknesses, and those weaknesses are his children. He would allow King Ingram to have anything he asked for in exchange for Celeste's safe return.

I have worried for her in silence. Pen would be angry if I so much as brought her name up. But I do hope that she's well, and that her decision making abilities have improved.

Basil's standing close. His eyes are on me, and whether or not he knows it, he still sets my stomach fluttering.

Another gust of wind comes, and even the fearless Pen hugs her arms across her stomach and shivers.

Thomas frowns at her. "I've been looking all over for you."

"Not all over, clearly, or you'd have found me," she says.

He stands at a pace's distance from her, and I can see the worry in his eyes. I can see that he's trying to get a whiff of tonic on her breath. When he can't find one, he looks to me, and when Pen isn't watching I give a slight shake of my head. She's sober.

The jet has quit rumbling in the sky; presumably it has landed.

"Come on," I say to Pen, and hold the door open. "Let's see if we can find something in the kitchen you're willing to eat."

She follows me into the house, past the smallest Piper children, who are playing a war game in the living room. Annie is a soldier whose legs were blown off in an explosion, and Marjorie is a nurse applying a tourniquet. I have seen them play this game a dozen times, and it is anyone's guess whether Annie will survive her wounds. Last time, an explosion hit their pretend medical tent and all the nurses and soldiers were killed.

I hate this game, but I think it makes them feel closer to Riles.

Up at the top of the stairs, Amy watches them from between the bars of the railing, not quite ready for human interaction. She has been quiet since her grandfather's death, and she's added another cloth around her wrist beside the one meant to symbolize her sister.

"Let's say I lost my arm too," Annie says.

"Which one?" Marjorie asks.

"The left."

"Would you girls like to help me in the garden?" Alice calls down from the top of the stairs. She cannot bear this game of theirs.

Annie sits up from her deathbed on the hearth. "Why do you tend to the garden? We have a gardener."

"It just makes me happy, I suppose," Alice says. She reaches the bottom step and holds her hands out to them, and they forget their game and happily follow her outside.

In the kitchen, Pen and I sit at the small table reserved for the maids, and Pen bites into a raw carrot from the cold box.

"I wish you'd stop looking so worried," she says.

"I can't play it as cool as you, I suppose."

She stares at me for a long moment, and then she says, "You're not the only one who has nightmares about what's happening back home. Just because I don't talk about it doesn't mean I don't care."

"I know that you care. That's what's so frustrating," I say. "We've hardly spoken in months."

"What are you going on about 'we've hardly spoken'? We share a room. We speak every day. We're speaking right now."

"You know what I mean."

She takes another bite of the carrot, with a crunch I swear is meant to be pointed. "You'll forgive me if I don't entirely trust you with my secrets these days."

I know just what she means. It has been a source of contention that's never fully gone away these past several months. She discovered that Internment's soil contains the very fuel source

King Ingram wants for his kingdom, and she confided this secret to me. But after she nearly drowned, I told the princess everything, hoping an alliance could be forged between Internment and Havalais, giving us all a chance to return home.

Instead, King Ingram used the princess as a hostage and has been depleting Internment of its soil as he pleases.

I don't know the enormity of what's already happened and what's to come, but even so I wouldn't take back what I did. I'm still holding out hope that I'll be able to return Pen home to her family, to the city that she loves so much that she's been going to pieces without it.

So I say nothing, and Pen can see that she's wounded me. "Nim says Birdie has had her leg surgery, and can come home soon," she says to change the subject. "She'll still be confined to her wheelchair, but I doubt that will last for long."

I push my chair away from the table. "I'm going to make some tea for Lex."

"Oh, Morgan, don't be cross. I didn't mean it. I'm just on edge because of that bloody jet."

"I know," I say softly.

I hope that this time the king has returned, and the princess as well, alive and safe. Whatever news they bring will surely be better than all this wondering and fear.



I don't know what sort of mood Lex will be in when I reach the top of the stairs, but he's been especially sour lately. He's running low on paper for his transcriber, and soon he will no longer be able to spend his days hiding in his fictional worlds.

I knock when I reach his door.

"Alice?" he says.

"No, it's me." Back home he always knew when I was the one approaching him, but something about this house and its noises disorients him. "I've brought some tea."

"Oh," he says, rather unenthusiastically. "Come in."

He's sitting in a wing chair near the open window, and the worry on his face mirrors my own from earlier. He doesn't care for the wind; perhaps it reminds him too much of the edge. "The weather down here takes some getting used to," I say. I press the teacup into his hand, not letting go until I'm sure he's got a grip on it.

"I have a bad feeling," he says.

"Me too."

I hesitate, standing before him, debating with myself whether to tell him what I saw in the sky.

But in the end I'm not given a choice. Even without his sight, Lex is clever at sensing when anything is wrong. "What is it, Little Sister? What's happened?"

I wring my skirt in my hands. "We saw the jet about an hour ago. Pen, Basil, Thomas, and I. We've been waiting for someone to come home and tell us what it means."

Lex is silent for a long moment. "I heard." He takes a sip of his tea and then with minimal fumbling he sets it on the window ledge. "So it begins," he says.

"There's no need to be so theatrical," I say. "It may be good news."

"A greedy king in a wasteland of wealth holds a princess hostage so that he may invade a tiny floating city, and you still think he may return with good news. My sister the optimist."

I am tired of being called an optimist as though it were a bad thing. Pen has used this word

against me as well. "I'm merely trying not to panic, Lex." I hold myself back from saying anything too combative. I don't want to fight, and it has taken me so long to stop hating my brother for lying to me about our father being dead. I would like for us to be reasonable with each other.

"Where is Alice?" he asks. Maybe he wants to avoid an argument too.

"She's in the garden."

"And she knows about the jet?"

"I told her when we came back inside. We're all waiting now. Drink your tea, all right? Alice will be up to check on you in a bit."

As I cross the threshold, he says, "Morgan?"

I turn.

"Be careful."

"I'm only going downstairs."

"I never know what mad and wild adventures you'll get off to on a whim."

I can't help but smile at the thought. Mad and wild adventures. It's not something he even would have accused me of back home, when I was tucked safely in our little floating world.



They never exhale, the trees. It was the same on Internment; on a very windy day, the trees rustle and inhale, and then the leaves and the branches all tremble as though something were trying to strangle the life from them. The dark sky watches on, filled with anticipation, wondering if this will be a great night, or a horrible night, or the last night of the world.

“Morgan.” Basil’s voice pulls me out of my trance. He joins me at the window, and when his arm brushes mine, my skin swells with tiny bumps. “You’ve been standing here for an hour.”

My body releases some of its tension and I lean my head toward his. “I have a bad feeling. Leland does too. Like something big is about to happen.”

“Suppose something is about to happen,” he says. “Then what?”

I shake my head. “I’m tired of being driven mad by the ‘what if’ game. I just want to know. I want King Ingram to come back and tell us what’s happening. Good or bad. So all the wondering can stop.”

Basil is quiet for a few seconds, and then with some difficulty he says, “I’ve been playing the same game, wondering about my parents and Leland.”

I look at him.

“I think they must be okay,” he says, and nods straight ahead at the sky, where our floating city is hiding somewhere in that darkness beyond our sullen reflections. “They would follow the king’s orders. They’ve always been smart about that.”

“Which king’s orders?” I say.

“Whichever king is in charge these days,” he says.

“Maybe King Ingram and King Furlow really are forming some sort of alliance,” I say. “Maybe there will be good news.”

He glances sidelong at me, and a smile comes to his lips. “I’ve always loved your optimistic side.”

“You’re the only one. Everyone else seems to think I’m foolish for harboring it.”

He puts his arm around my back, and the last of the tension in me dies. I rest my temple against his shoulder. “I’m tired, Basil. And so worried that the decisions I’ve made were the wrong ones.”

“The wrong decisions have been made by these kings,” he says. “And for what it’s worth, I would have done the same thing you did. If I’d known about the phosane, I would have told.”

“Really?”

“If what’s happening to Pen had been happening to you, if I’d thought this world were killing you, yes. I’d do anything it took to bring you back home.”

“You’ve always understood me, Basil.”

His arm tightens around me and I close my eyes. The anxiety feels so distant when he’s around. Farther away and smaller in the sky than our long-lost floating city.

Then I hear the front door open, and my stomach drops.

The younger Pipers have long since gone to bed, and everyone else has been in the lobby for hours, waiting for word. All eyes are at the front door when Nimble steps inside, his shoulders slumped, his eyes weary. He is always the first to run to the tarmac when the jet returns, hoping for word about Celeste. And he is always heartsick when no word comes.

We all wait in silence. Nim raises his head and looks at each of us, settling on me. “King Ingram has returned. My father is with him now. I don’t know what any of this means yet. I’m sorry.”

He moves toward his bedroom, and by the heaviness of his steps I can suspect what the answer will be. But still I have to ask, “Was Celeste with him?”

He pauses, his back to me. “No,” he says. “My father told me only that the king has brought a special visitor, but it isn’t her.” He takes a deep breath, and his voice is so tight, I think he may be fighting tears. “I doubt my father will be back tonight. You might as well all go to bed.”

He can’t get away from us fast enough.

Pen is standing by the couch, Thomas at her side. She’s staring worriedly after Nimble, but she doesn’t hear Thomas until the third or fourth time he’s said her name. “Pen?” She flinches, startled.

“We’ll know more tomorrow, surely,” Basil says.



The hotel falls into its nightly silence. I soak in the tub long after everyone else has gone to bed. The mornings in this place can be so noisy, with the Piper children running about, shrieking with laughter as they play their games, most of which involve explosions. And footsteps going this way and that, and voices, and silverware on plates.

But the nights are still. I can feel everyone’s silence just as surely as I can hear their voices during the day.

Someone knocks at the door. “Morgan?” Pen’s voice. “Are you all right? You’ve been in there forever.”

“I thought you were in bed,” I say.

“I couldn’t sleep, and I wanted to make sure you hadn’t drowned.”

“I’ll be out in a minute.” The water’s gone cold anyway. I wring out my wet hair, dry off, and slip into my nightgown.

When I open the door, Pen is waiting in the hallway, holding a lantern. Its orange glow picks up the bags under her eyes, and I can see all at once how troubled she’s been, despite her best efforts to conceal it.

“I’m not tired,” she whispers. “Are you?”

“No,” I say, although it’s a lie. I will stay awake all night if there’s a chance she’ll finally be honest with me. She is much more likely to reveal her secrets at night, when the sleeping world

will be undisturbed by her whispering voice.

She smiles. "Do you want to go for a midnight walk?"

We don't bother with our shoes. We tiptoe barefoot down the steps and through the front door.

Unlike earlier, the night's wind is mellow and warm. The moon outshines our lantern, nearly full and bright white.

As soon as we've stepped into the grass, I can feel the cool earth under my feet, astounding like the ground back home. Pen moves forward, and when I don't follow, she turns to face me. "Aren't you coming?"

I wriggle my bare toes in the grass and stare down at it. I have never seen the heaps of soil being flown down from Internment. I've only heard about it from Nim. I imagine Internment filled with craters so wide that you could look through them and see the ground below.

"I was just thinking about home," I say. "About what King Ingram is going to tell us, if he plans to tell us anything at all."

Pen takes my hand, leads me away from the hotel. "Come on. There's something I want to show you."

She leads me to the amusement park, and I climb the fence after her without question, happy to see whatever it is she wants to show me. Maybe it will be something other than tonic this time. Maybe it will give me some insight into this distance she's built between herself and everyone else in this world.

I expect her to lead me to the telescopes. That's where I find her sometimes. But instead she leads me to the giant teacups, sitting inanimate in the moonlight. She is still clutching the lantern when she kneels beside one of the saucers—chipped but still bright green—and reaches beneath it, somewhere in the mechanism that would cause it to spin.

Eventually she finds what she was looking for: several pieces of paper folded together. Whatever is on those pages must be important, if she would keep them all the way out here.

Is this because I discovered her request paper all those months ago? Does she think I'll be rifling through her things when she's not in our room? I haven't. I would never. But sometimes when I hear her tossing and turning, muttering through her nightmares about the harbor, I would do anything to know what is happening in her mind.

"Here." She hands me the lantern, and then she swings one leg over the teacup's rim, then the other. She takes the lantern back so I can climb in after her.

Inside the teacup is a metal wraparound bench, and she sits so close to me that my wet hair dampens her shoulder.

She spreads the papers open on the small table before us—the one that we would twist if we wanted the teacup to spin. "Now that the king is back, we have to find a way to stop him," she says. Her eyes are on the pages. "If we don't, I think we're in real trouble."

I stare at the pages, lit up by the moon and the lantern, and as always, I don't understand. I see Pen's steadily drawn lines. I see a circle and a small floating silhouette that could be Internment. I see numbers drifting around it like birds.

Pen shuffles through the pages like a madman. "I've been reading up on the sunsets. The sun goes down about a minute earlier every day, except about once a week or so when it goes down two minutes earlier."

She looks at me to be sure I'm following along. "Okay," I say. I've never paid too much attention to the sunset, but I know that we're at the time of year when we lose a bit of light each

day. "So?"

"So," she says. "For the past few months, I've been keeping a grid of where Internment sits in the sky, and where the sun should be. Every day I look through the same telescope at the same angle."

She points to Internment's shape on each of the pages before us, as though I should know what we're looking at.

"I don't understand."

She looks at me, and I can see how tired her face is, how worried. But her eyes are bright, the way they always are when she's onto something important. "Internment is sinking. Not very much, but a bit each month. Enough that it's bound to be a problem if this keeps up."

I can only stare at the pages as these words sink in. In her ever steady hand Pen has drawn the outline of the clock tower, protruding above the mass of apartment buildings. Scraggly roots jut from the torn underbelly of the floating city. The sun, a perfect circle, is at a distance, held in the pure white sky by tiny equations I can't decipher.

There are two versions of Pen. There is the silly, spontaneous, and brutally blunt girl I know and then there is the side of her that can ingeniously solve these mysteries. It is frightening when she is capable of.

"Can you be sure?" I say.

"The professor helped me with the algorithm." She gnaws on her lower lip guiltily. "I'd been visiting him before he died."

I suppose she expects me to feel betrayed. And I do, in a way, but I am also relieved. I knew she was off somewhere; I'm only grateful it wasn't with a bottle.

"It must be all the mining," I say. "We don't know how much soil King Ingram's men bring back on each shipment."

"It would have to be a lot of soil to affect Internment's weight," Pen says. "More soil than could possibly be fitting into those jets. Internment is thousands of times their size. I don't think it's that."

"What, then?"

Pen shuffles through the papers until she finds a full-page drawing of Internment. The accuracy and scale is stunning, as though she'd sat in the sky and sketched its likeness. She has drawn a bubble around the city in rough overlapping lines.

"When your brother went to the edge, it was the wind that threw him back. The wind was moving sideways, like a current around the city. Have you ever noticed the way clouds that get too close to Internment seem to zip past us?"

"Those clouds get caught up in the wind that surrounds the city," I say. "And you think that wind is part of what's keeping Internment afloat?"

"I have several theories about what keeps Internment afloat, but I do think the wind is a big factor," Pen says. "When we left the city in the metal bird, we went under the city, through the dirt. But King Ingram's jet lands and departs from the surface."

"It flies through the wind," I say, understanding.

She nods eagerly. "And disrupts it. Maybe even weakens it. It's a slight change for now, but over the course of years, it could knock Internment from the sky completely."

Her voice is excited, the way it always is when she is explaining things. But in the silence that follows, she remembers the magnitude of what she's said, and I feel it too. Internment is not only being ravaged by this world's greedy king; it could be knocked right out of the sky.

“King Ingram wouldn’t care if he knew,” I say.

“No. ~~Why should he? He’ll have what he wants. Even if Internment crashed right in~~ Havalais, he’d stand clear and let people die like he did at the harbor.”

I look at Pen. “How do we stop it?”

She shrugs. “I say we kill King Ingram.”

“Be serious.”

“I am, rather.”

“Yes, okay,” I say. “We’ll just walk right up to his castle, and we’ll knock on the door, and then we’ll stab him with the knife you keep under your pillow. I can’t find any fault in that. But suppose we come up with a backup plan.”

“There’s only one person I trust who has access to the king,” Pen says. “And I’d trust him with a secret, too. After all, he’s lived his entire life never letting anyone know he’s third in line to the throne.”

“Nimble?” I say. One night after too much drinking, Birdie confided in us that her father was the king’s secret bastard, and that she and her siblings were princes and princesses. Later when she was comatose after the bombings, Nim confirmed it.

“He hates King Ingram as much as I do,” Pen says. “The king is the reason his brother is dead. The king is the reason the princess was taken away from him. He has no reason to care about Internment, but he cares about her, and she’s up there. He’ll want to help us.”

A light breeze coasts along the ground, bringing the salt of the endless ocean, rustling the grass and causing some rusted metal thing within the park to squeak.

The papers rattle, and Pen organizes them with affection and folds them along their crease.

“Should we talk to him tomorrow?” I say.

“We won’t have to wait until then.” Pen nods up at the telescope at a distance. In the moonlight I can just see a dark outline clutching one of the telescopes aimed at Internment. “He comes here every night and drops coin after coin into that thing so he can stare up at the city. He would never be able to see her, though. At best those lenses make a blurry faraway view bigger and blurrier.”

I feel a pain in my chest, watching him. He lives in this vast world that goes on forever until it wraps around to where it started again. There are trains and biplanes and ferries and elegors that can take him anywhere. But he cannot reach the girl he loves up in her kingdom in the sky.

“I hear him sneaking out sometimes at night,” Pen says. “The poor fool.” She heaves a deep breath then blows out the lantern.

We climb one after the other from the teacup, through the man-made labyrinth of gears and metal pieces until we reach the stairway to the telescopes.

It is here that we hesitate. As pressing as the matter is, neither of us wants to interrupt this intimate sadness.

But we don’t have to. He heard us approach, and after a few seconds, when the telescope music have expired, he comes to the top of the staircase and looks down at us.

“Bit late for a stroll, isn’t it, girls?” he says in his breezy Havalais accent.

Pen is clutching the papers to her chest. “We have something to tell you,” she says.



We sit on the wooden planks beside the telescopes, Pen’s drawings spread out between the three

of us like a deck of morbid cards.

Throughout Pen's explanation, Nimble said nothing and asked no questions. He only stared with that pensive expression he gives when his father is discussing politics. Now he reaches forward to touch Internment's outline on one of the sketches. "So much detail," he says. "There must be an atlas in your head. It must be so exhausting."

He looks up at us, smiling grimly. "Celeste and I predicted something like this happening. Not exactly this, per se, but that King Ingram's greed about the phosane would make him reckless. We knew Internment was in jeopardy."

"We already have the riddle, then," I say. "What's the answer?"

"You girls aren't the only ones unhappy with King Ingram," Nim says. "It isn't just the people of Internment who have cause to hate him. There's been a lot of unrest down here since the bombing at the harbor. I have a boy who works as one of the king's guards who has been feeding me intelligence. His niece was killed in the bombing."

"That's awful," I say.

"What kind of intelligence?" Pen says.

"So far it's all just been a lot of angry chatter," Nim says. "The refinery has caused some people in the heart of the city to become sick. Water comes out of the pipes smelling like sulfur. After the bombings, this phosane was supposed to make everything better, and it has only caused more problems. King Ingram has the phosane, but he doesn't know what to do with it. He's a politician, not a scientist. The scientist who initially discovered its usefulness is dead now, and there's speculation that Dastor would know a thing or two about refining it, but as for our kingdom, Havalais has yet to see this miracle fuel in action and they're beginning to doubt it exists."

"It exists," Pen says. "Down here you call it phosane, but up on Internment we call it sunstone, and it's a powerful fuel source if it's refined properly." She sits up straight, stricken with a new thought. "What if the engineers on Internment are refusing to help them refine it? Or what if they're giving faulty instructions?" She looks between Nim and me, giddy and proud. "What if they're up there fighting?"

I struggle to suppress my smile. It's bad luck to hope for such a thing, but I could believe it. I do believe it. "If that's true," I say, "King Ingram needs Internment. He can't just take all the resources and then dispose of its people. It took decades for our engineers to perfect the glassland and harness our fuel. Your king may have all the riches to build and employ a refinery, and all the raw materials, but if he doesn't know how to use them, it's all for nothing."

"Clever little city," Nim says, looking up. He does not share in our joy, though. "If that's true, it's surely an ugly scene up there right now. Think torture. Think homes being burnt down. Your people can be as stubborn as you please, but no one down here can hear them scream from up there."

Pen shakes her head wildly. "It doesn't matter. Don't you see? Being tortured, deprived—it's the lesser evil. Our people would withstand anything to keep the city afloat."

"She's right," I say. "Down here, if you don't like where you live, you can pick up and leave. If you don't like the weather, or your children—you can just go. But on Internment, our home is all we have."

The people of Internment are resilient if we have to be. We don't value property or money the way they do down here; often our secrets are the only things of worth to us. I think of, but don't say aloud, the time the prince and princess held us hostage in their clock tower's dungeon. A

they wanted was a way to the metal bird, and proof that it existed, but I would have died before I'd have let them have it.

“Your king underestimated Internment,” I say. “But that’s good. Isn’t it? We can work with that. We can—I don’t know.”

I look at Pen, hoping she’ll blurt out a solution. But she foolishly expects the solution to come from me. “Go on,” she says.

“We can try to get sent to Internment, and then we’ll know for sure what’s happening up there. If they’re not telling King Ingram how to refine the phosane, maybe there’s a rebellion being organized.”

“If that’s true, there’s plenty of intelligence here on the ground that would be of use to them,” Nimble says. “There are men in King Ingram’s court who are disgruntled enough to help. It’s just a matter of finding who to trust, and I know those boys. You could leave that to me.”

“How would we get ourselves sent back to Internment, though?” Pen says.

“We could go to King Ingram and pretend we’d like to help him,” I say. “We can make him think that he can use us the way he used Celeste. As leverage or a sort of hostage. And he’ll send us back home.” I look at Nim. “Do you think he would do that?”

Pen laughs and grabs my face in her hands and kisses my temple. “Brilliant,” she says.

“Really?”

“Really,” Nim says. “That might work.” The hope in his eyes is too much to take. I don’t tell him that if the people of Internment are as stubborn as we’re hoping, King Ingram may have gotten desperate and gone for the jugular. And there are only two things on Internment that could be taken from King Furlow that are of any value: his children. Prince Azure, and Prince Celeste. They may already be dead.



Pen is not ready to divulge her findings to Thomas or the others, but she understands when I insist on telling Basil. If I'm going to attempt to return to Internment, he deserves to know.

In the morning I meet him in his room as everyone else is going to breakfast. I close the door behind me. We sit on his bed and I tell him everything in a hushed tone. Through it all, he doesn't say a word, listening patiently to my eager, harried rambling.

When I get to the end, it takes all my willpower not to look away from him when I say, "And Pen and I want to convince King Ingram to send us back. If we make him think we're on his side and that we want to try to talk the engineers back home into helping him, we're hoping he'll go along with it."

He is the first to break our gaze. He looks down at my hand as he covers it with his own and then he looks back at me. "When we were back home, your mind wandered toward the ground. But now that we're on the ground, your mind wanders back home. Sometimes I think what you want is to be away from wherever it is you're standing."

"Maybe there's some truth to that," I admit.

"I think about home, too." He speaks with great caution. "Not just my parents and Leland but the life I had there. The sounds. The future I might have had." He shakes his head. "It was enough for me, staying there. I didn't mind it. But for as long as I can remember, there has been this current leading me away. You," he says.

"I tried, Basil. I tried to stay within the train tracks, to do what was expected of me."

"I know you did. I was there with you."

I stare down at our hands. "I didn't want to be the current pulling you away from all the things that you loved."

"Morgan," he says, in that practical way of his. "You were the thing I loved."

The words feel both wonderful and painful at the same time. "The truth is that I had to pull you along with me," I say. "I couldn't untangle myself from you if I tried. We've always just sort've gone together. It's as though someone mixed us up until we were a secondary color, and there's no way to tell which one of us started out which color."

I am terrible with words. My brother's the writer. I'm only clumsily trying to come up with words for things I'll never have the skill to say.

Basil laughs, but he isn't making fun of me. I know he understands.

~~"I am going to live my life worrying about you,"~~ he says. ~~"But I do think you're right that~~ there is unrest on Internment. It's a peaceful city. It has nothing to protect itself against a kingdom like Havalais, much less the ground itself. If nothing is done, and Pen's calculations are correct, Internment will crash-land on the ground before King Ingram ever has a way to refine his phosane."

"A lose-lose," I say.

"If you were to go back home, you would need something that would give Internment a fighting chance against King Ingram. Do you have anything like that?"

"Nim thinks he can get us some allies on the ground. A lot of King Ingram's men are disgruntled after the bombing. And on Internment we'll have an ally in Princess Celeste. If she's still alive."

"She'll be alive," Basil assures me. "If King Ingram wants something from Internment, I won't go killing King Furlow's children before he has it."

"I hope you're right."

"What if I go with you?" Basil says. "No matter what information or power you may be able to gather, the fact remains that both Havalais and Internment are patriarchies."

Pen would hate him for saying it, but I know that he's right. Kings are more reasonable with men than they are with girls. King Ingram is more likely to believe that Basil could influence the engineers.

"But is that what you want?" I say.

"I could never sit idly by while you disappear into the clouds, leaving me to wonder if you're alive each day," he says, and despite everything, I can't help but indulge in that beautiful thing he's just said to me. He goes on, "I also don't want Internment to come crashing down on our heads, killing us all and my family too."

"Nim is hoping to get an audience with the king this afternoon," I say. "Let's hope he can come through. Oh, and, Basil, about all this. Pen doesn't want Thomas to know about it."

He frowns. "It isn't our business to get involved, then. But I do wish she'd be more forthcoming about things. It would be healthier for her."

"You and me both," I say. "But for now I think it's best we keep this to ourselves until we know more."

"Agreed," he says.



Nim is gone after lunchtime, off to King Ingram's castle to play the good son to Jack Piper for once, in an attempt to stay in his graces.

Pen and Thomas are playing a board game. They're leaning toward each other on opposite sides of the coffee table, the crowns of their blond heads almost touching.

It's a beautiful day, and Alice has taken Amy and the youngest Pipers outside. Through an open window I can hear them laughing in the garden. This Havalais air has had a positive effect on Amy; she hasn't had one of her fits in months.

Basil is trying to engage me in a game of cards. The decks they use on the ground are similar to our own, and with a bit of compromise we can duplicate most of the games we played back home. But I am having the hardest time sitting still. My leg shakes anxiously. My mind

spinning out dozens of scenarios about Nim's efforts at the castle.

Should I tell Judas and Amy any of this?

The thought of Judas brings a rush of heat to my cheeks. We've barely spoken in weeks, and don't see him anywhere now, but somehow I feel his presence hiding nearby, as always, just out of frame. We have scarcely spoken since our kiss, save for a few benign polite exchanges—*good morning; yes, please; thank you*—but time has done nothing to extinguish my curiosity about him. Time has not assuaged my guilt, and the sight of him still confuses me. I do not know what it will take to rid myself of that kiss, but I would pay any price to undo it. I would pay any price to stop wanting another.

Basil lays his stack of cards on the table and then gently takes the cards from my hands too. I blink dumbly at him.

"Would a walk help take your mind off it?" he says.

I shake my head. "I don't want to be gone when Nim gets back."

"We won't go far," he says. "Come on. The air will do you some good."

He's right. As soon as we've stepped outside, I feel less anxious. There's some comfort in hearing the living things in the grass and in the sky. A blue bird shoots from one tree to the next, and I wish I could capture a perfect image of him to take back home. There are no birds of Internment, only speculation as to what they must be like.

Basil and I walk a lap around the hotel, past the charred altar where Nim burnt his beloved child in offering so that his sister might live. Whether or not it was an answered prayer, Birdie did push through. It makes me wonder if their god is real. It makes me wonder if any god is real, or if it's only easier to believe in that than in the arbitrary series of events that make up all our lives.

"What do you think it's like back home?" I say, to break the silence.

Basil is not one to lie about the way of things. "Ugly. I wonder what King Furlow is doing to reassure everyone. If he's able to do anything at all."

"I never realized how small Internment was until we came here," I say. "From down here it just looks like a big clot of dirt in the sky. If I had lived down here all my life, I would never have suspected there was any life up there. I would think it a mistake of nature, something small enough to fit into my palm if only I could reach out and take it."

How strange that I've lived so much of my life on a clump of dirt in an infinite sky. After a few of these months, I can feel myself starting to forget how alive it was up there, how bright and cheerful.

We've stopped walking, and as I shield my eyes and stare up at Internment, I can feel Basil watching me. My heart is fluttering in my chest, anxious and frightened and strangely thrilled. It is an act of bravery for me to look at him when he makes me feel this way.

"I was wrong, all those times I said your eyes might be the same color as the sea down here," he says.

"No?"

"No," he says. "They're still the brightest blue I've ever seen."

I look at the ground, flustered, smiling. Without looking at him, I can feel his victorious smirk.

"You're being too kind," I say.

"Ridiculous accusation. When have you ever known me to be kind?"

"It's true; you're a real beast most days. Flat-out tyrannical."

He laughs. Somehow my arm ends up around his back, and his around my shoulder.

squeezing me close. The sun burns the crown of my hair, and despite the warmth, my blood running chills up and down my spine.

I want to tell him everything. About Judas kissing me in the grass, and the way he still haunts my thoughts even though he is surely using me to quell his loneliness. I want to tell Basil that I'm sorry, that I've made a mess of everything, that I'm scared.

But here beside him, insects hopping around our feet, all the worlds have gone still. The planet has stopped rotating around its sun. Everything is calm. We're safe here. We'll be okay.



After dinner, I help Alice with the dishes. For security purposes, Jack Piper has dismissed most of the hotel's staff, and chores like these are supposed to fall to his children, but Alice always gets to them first. Years of being married to my brother have left her restless and with an endless desire to make things clean.

She hands me a clean white plate, and I go over it with the dishrag. "Do you want to go back home?" I say.

She shakes her head. "I couldn't leave your brother, and he's told me he won't return. Not after what the king did to your parents, and especially to you."

"I didn't ask you what Lex wants. I asked what you want."

She smiles. It is a kind, wistful smile. "Should there be any difference?"

"What a thing to say. Of course there's a difference."

She hands me another dish. "After your brother jumped, one afternoon while he was still in the hospital, I came home to tend to the plants, and there was a letter waiting for me at the door from my parents. I was welcome to return home if I estranged myself from Lex. But if not, they felt it best for me not to associate with them anymore."

I suspected as much. Alice's parents stopped coming around, and jumpers carry a stigma. With the exception of Pen and Basil, I lost virtually all my friends. Still, to hear it said out loud disgusts me. There is no one kinder than Alice, and no one who deserves kindness more.

"That's the thing about marriage, love. You hope you won't ever have to choose, but if there is a choice to be made, it's the one whose blood is in your ring. It doesn't matter how many worlds there are; our place is with each other."

"Lex doesn't deserve you," I say. "Truly."

She smiles. "But there is nothing left for me up there," she adds. "Since you asked. Everything I need is here."

I don't know that there's much left on Internment for me either. I tell myself that my father is still alive up there, and that I'll be reunited with him. But when that happens, will he want to leave Internment behind? He risked his life trying to do just that.

After Alice and I have finished with the dishes, I slip outside unnoticed, and I walk to the ocean's edge, where the boats bob along lengths of rope. This place is asleep, like all of Havalai, lying in wait for a solution to this war. I lie in the sand for what feels like hours, fixated on the

dark shadow of earth in the sky.



Long after the sun has set, Nim still hasn't returned. The smallest Pipers are asleep.

I lie in bed while Pen reads one of Birdie's catalogs by candlelight. She's got a drawing pad resting on her knee, and she keeps returning to a sketch she started earlier this evening of Ehco, a divinity that lives in the sea and contains all the world's sadness. It's Birdie's favorite story from *The Text*, and I suppose the drawing will be a gift for Birdie when she returns home.

"Pen?"

I can hear the rapid strokes of the pencil on the page. "Mm? Sorry, am I keeping you awake?"

"No." I turn onto my side so I'm facing her. "It's just that you've been so guarded with your secrets lately. Why did you tell me your theory about Internment sinking?"

She goes on sketching. "It wasn't the right time before now. No sense making you panic until King Ingram was back and we could do something about it."

"It's just . . . After I told Celeste about the phosane, and she went to the king, I thought you hadn't forgiven me. I thought I'd been locked out of your head."

The pencil stills in her hand. She stares down at the page as she speaks, with difficulty. "I thought about everything," she says in a soft voice. "I thought about what it would have done for me to pull you out of the water, with you the one not breathing. I . . ." She draws a line on the page, feebly. "I saw it all very clearly, and I understood why you did it. I can't say I'd have done something different if the tables had been turned."

She clears her throat. "And besides, you could strike a match and set Internment on fire. You could lose your wits and destroy it all. I'd still be here. There's nothing in the worlds that couldn't forgive you for."

The words are so sincere and candid that I'd like to get up and embrace her. But I don't move for fear of breaking this fragile moment between us. I have known Pen since before we were old enough to speak, and perhaps that is why so much of our friendship is built on what goes unsaid. But it feels so good to hear her say those words.

"I could never turn my back on you, either," I tell her.

"I know what I'm like, Morgan. I know it's not easy."

"So it's not easy," I say. "What is?"

She smiles briefly, and then allows herself to be distracted anew by her drawing.

I close my eyes, and eventually I feel myself fading into sleep, soothed by the sound of pencil on paper and catalog pages turning.

But it isn't a very sound sleep, because when there's a knock on the door, I'm startled awake.

"You girls awake?" Nim whispers through the door.

Pen is still sitting up by the candle. "Come in," she says.

I comb my fingers through my hair and wipe away the drool in the corner of my mouth, hastily trying to make myself presentable.

Nim opens the door and peeks his head in. "I didn't see the king. Or my father. I wasn't permitted into any of the meetings. My father isn't exactly happy with me these days."

"But you were gone all day," Pen says. "What were you doing?"

Nim smirks. "I was speaking with a few of the king's men. You remember how I said they were unhappy with things since the harbor? One of the men is assigned to guard King Ingram

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