

# THE CRACK beneath the WORLDS

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MOONRISE

*To*  
Sophie, Xander  
*and the*  
Third Edition

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Before you begin reading,  
be warned: In our world,  
too, there is a Crack  
Beneath the Worlds, and it is  
said that the more you think  
about the Crack, the more  
you will be drawn to it. Those  
who fall into it—below all  
worlds—run the risk of  
never returning.

Do you wish to take the risk?



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WHAT MR. MOON SAW  
THROUGH HIS TELESCOPE

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# Chapter 1

## VOICES IN THE CLOUD

*F*inally!” Jerick kicked hard against the propane tank of the hot-air balloon. “Why didn’t this darned thing turn off earlier?”

“And why did we have to climb in here at all? This was the dumbest idea you’ve ever had.” Naomi clung to the side of the basket, which was suspended a hundred feet above ground. And rising fast.

Even for Jerick, hijacking a hot-air balloon belonged to the category of Exceptionally Rare Achievements. An ordinary day in the life of Jerick Faust might include carrying a gun replica through a security check, accidentally erasing all of his father’s work from his computer, or lighting firecrackers in his room and almost burning down the whole house. But not hijacking a balloon.

The feat was all the greater in that he managed to drag his little sister along, Naomi, who would not even steal a cookie without asking their mother.

Naomi was so tiny she wore little kids’ clothes instead of proper outfits for a girl her age. Today’s shirt was pink-purple bearing the

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One day, Jerick and Naomi’s parents took them to a hot-air balloon festival where

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picture of a doll stroller, complete with a smiley doll waving its chubby hand and the words “My Doll Is All I Need” printed on top. Needless to say, Naomi never wore the shirt at school.

“What are we gonna do now?” Naomi asked. She stood up on her toes and stretched herself to be able to put her button nose over the rim of the basket. Her face was wet from crying.

“What we’re gonna do?” said Jerick, oblivious to her tears. “I’m gonna land this baby, of course. What else?”

“Yeah, like you can actually do that.”

“Of course I can. I’m a balloon expert.” He put on his best patronizing smirk and stroked his reddish-blond spikes, which were completely unlike Naomi’s straight dark hair. All in all the two looked so different that few people believed they were siblings.

“See, this thing here is called a *burner*,” Jerick pointed to the metal object underneath the opening of the balloon. “It turns propane into fire and blasts the heat into the mouth of the so-called *envelope* to make the balloon rise. Now that the thing has finally turned off, all I have to do is pull on this control line here, which opens a flap at the top of the balloon for a moment, and *voilà!*—we’ll start going down.”

“And why couldn’t you have just pulled the line while the burner was still on? Wouldn’t that have worked too?”

“Um.” Jerick opened his mouth like a fish and shut it again. “I, well ...”

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hundreds and hundreds of balloons had gathered. Jerick and Naomi felt like ants

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Before Jerick could come up with a far-fetched explanation, a wet cloud appeared out of nowhere and enveloped the balloon.

“Where on earth did that come from?” Jerick cried. “I thought it was a clear day. Did *you* see any clouds?”

Naomi said nothing.

“OK, well, I’m gonna pull the line anyway, I’m sure we’ll get out of the cloud then, and—”

A shrill voice echoed through the cloud, and it wasn’t Naomi’s. After a short pause, another voice answered, and then a third joined in. The voices sounded as if they were incantations in a foreign language, half singing, half commanding, like the pronouncement of a spell.

Jerick looked left and right, turned in a circle, bent over the edge of the basket and peered down. Nothing. Nothing but the gray cloud. “You hear that too?”

Naomi nodded.

“Seems like they’re right here in this cloud—whatever they are,” Jerick said.

The incantations grew louder. They moved all around them now, as if a whole choir of invisible witches dwelt in the cloud.

Naomi crawled into a corner of the basket and squatted down.

Jerick held his breath. An icy shiver coursed up and down his spine.

All at once, the cloud rent open and the warmth of the sun

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in a gigantic flower bed: Around and above them cluttered balloons of all colors

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engulfed the wet faces of the children.

The voices were gone. The children exhaled.

“What was that?” Naomi asked.

“I don’t know, but we’re out of it now. Time to bring this thing down.”

But when Jerick looked toward the ground to see where to land the balloon, he froze.

“I can’t believe this,” he said. “Nomers!”

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Ever since Naomi was five, Jerick had been calling her “Nomers,” even though she couldn’t stand the nickname. It sounded too much like a mathematical equation to her, not at all like a reflection of her inner being. She thought things should have names that befitted their character. Like a lullaby, or a golden chalice. *Lullaby* sounded calming, and a *golden chalice* sounded precious. Or the word *lovely*. *Lovely* truly sounded lovely, she thought. And *crunchy* sounded like you could bite it with a crunch. *Nomers*, on the other hand, didn’t sound like the person she was at all.

At the moment, though, she was much too afraid to think about that. So all she said was, “Yes?”

“Come here.”

Naomi got up to stand beside Jerick. And then she, too, held her breath. “W-where are we?”

“I don’t know.”

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and shapes imaginable. There were red balloons and yellow balloons and blue

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A lump swelled in Naomi’s throat. Down there, far underneath them, as far as the eye could see, shimmered the deep blue of an ocean. There was no land in sight. “There aren’t any oceans close to the festival grounds, are there?”

“No, not for miles around. We’re in the middle of the country, or at least that’s where we *should* be. I’ve got no idea where we actually are.”

“Oh Jerick!” Naomi began to sob. “How awful! What’s happened to us? Oh, I wish I’d stayed with Mom and Dad. And . . . and I wish I hadn’t followed you into this stupid balloon!”

Jerick looked as if he was close to tears himself, but he’d of course never cry in front of Naomi. He turned away from her, bent his head over the edge of the basket, and looked straight down. Naomi suspected that he wanted to wipe a few tears from his eyes without her noticing.

He barely had time to do so. “A SHIP! Look! There’s a ship!” he shouted and pointed at the water.

*A ship?* Naomi pulled herself up on the rim of the basket, her feet dangling in the air. She craned her head forward and peeked down—cautiously, because she was afraid she might fall out. Yes, Jerick was right. Directly underneath the balloon, an old-fashioned sailing ship glided through the water. Her bow cut through the gushing waves and her stern left a trail of white foam behind. Looks like a Viking ship, Naomi thought.

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balloons. There were striped balloons and dotted balloons and checked balloons.

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This day was getting more confusing with every minute. What was she to make of a Viking ship in an unknown ocean?

A quick whizzing sound and a *thump* cut through her musings. After a brief pause, trying to figure out what had happened, she let go of the rim, stumbled onto the bottom of the basket, and screamed. An arrowhead stuck through the cane only a hand's breadth away from where she had been hanging!

*Order Now!*

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One balloon looked like a kind old man with a round bald head. Another one

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