
HAVEN
FALL
SARA
HOLLAND
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *EVERLESS*
BLOOMSBURY



SARA
HOLLAND

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY YA
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY YA and the Diana logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the USA in 2020 by Bloomsbury YA
First published in Great Britain in 2020 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Glasstown Entertainment, 2020

Glasstown Entertainment has asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system,
without prior permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5266-2286-0; PB: 978-1-5266-1488-9; eBook: 978-1-5266-1486-5

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Book design by John Candell
Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE ADJACENT REALMS

Fiordenkill

Most of Fiordenkill is encased in ice and frost. Ethereal in its beauty, Fiordenkill sparkles with ice bridges and palaces of packed snow. It seldom sees the sun, but the sky is bright with auroras and thousands of stars. Soldiers ride on wolves and great bears roam the woods; enchanted fruit grows on the trees, immune to the frost encasing their bright skins.

Compared to people of other worlds, Fiordens are thought to be noble and stoic and sometimes secretive. Fiordenkill magic can heal flesh and make plants grow.

Byrn

The massive world of Byrn swelters under the heat of two suns and three moons. Enormous, long-lived storms batter the deserts, the roiling seas, and the lightning plains, so that the ground seems to shift constantly beneath one's feet. Millennia of elemental magic, unleashed

without care for the consequences, have ravaged the world and left most of it uninhabitable to Byrnisians.

Years ago, the Silver Prince used his immense magic to tame the storms and erect a wall around his city-state, Oasis. Ever since, he has ruled in peace, keeping the storms at bay. Almost everyone living in Byrn resides within the city walls, having agreed to cease all elemental wielding—except for the nomads who remain outside and brave the lightning, hurricanes, and burning wind to keep their magic.

Solaria

Little is known about Solaria, a tiny, sealed-off world that is a hotbed of powerful, highly volatile magic. It's thought that the people of Solaria are largely responsible for our world's mythologies around djinni, demons, and vampires. Some call them soul-devourers. It's been said that Solaria has no visible sun but instead has a blazing golden sky. Though Solarians can take many shapes, their beast forms all bleed dark blue blood.

The doorway to Solaria was sealed off years ago after a deadly incident that took place at Havenfall. Solarians are no longer welcome at the inn and they are not part of the Peace Treaty alliance of the Last Remaining Adjacent Realms. There are rumors that Solarians snuck into the other realms before the door was closed, and that they still roam the worlds.

Haven

Haven is what we know as the human world. It is the only realm without natural magic, which is why the people of other realms call

it Haven—a safe place, a neutral place. The existence of other worlds have been kept secret from humankind. This is the number one rule that all the Realms must abide by. Humans can't live in the other Realms. Their biology prevents them from surviving conditions outside of Haven for more than a few hours.

Omphalos: The Inn at Havenfall

All the realms intersect at Havenfall, through a series of doorways connected by tunnels hidden beneath the Rocky Mountains. These doorways have been guarded by us Innkeepers for as long as anyone can remember. There is a radius around the doorways within which people from all realms can breathe safely and not sicken, as people usually do in worlds not their own.

The Inn at Havenfall was built on this spot as was the town of Haven—so named because, to the people of the realms, the town and the inn represent our whole world.

There used to be many more worlds accessible from the inn, but over the centuries some doorways have closed due to the inscrutable forces that govern the realms. Only the doorway to Solaria has been sealed shut on purpose, for the protection of the Last Remaining Adjacent Realms.

The Annual Peace Summit

On the longest day of our year, Fiordens witness a blazing, multicolored aurora in their dark sky and Byrn undergoes a simultaneous eclipse of its three moons. This is the solstice. On this day every summer, travelers can pass safely through the doorways into the Inn at Havenfall—the neutral realm that serves as host to them all.

During this special time, the inn holds its annual peace summit, where delegates from all the realms negotiate trade and political agreements by day and dance in the ballroom by night to celebrate the diversity and unity of all the inn's guests.

PROLOGUE

THE FIRST BREATH OF AIR Marcus takes in another realm feels like lightning. Human lungs aren't built for this world, for Byrn. He doesn't know how long he has before they give up and he needs to stagger back through the shining doorway to Haven.

But every new Innkeeper is duty-bound to visit all the remaining worlds, if only once—that's what his great-grandmother, Annabelle, who ran the Inn at Havenfall for almost a century, told him before she died. So Marcus doesn't flinch, not with twenty nobles of Byrn lined up in a semicircle around the portal, waiting with scaled cheekbones glittering in the orange light. All of them are gathered, curious to hear the new portal-keeper speak. Behind them, clusters of metallic buildings shimmer against a sky the color of flame.

Havenfall is all celebration, all pomp and ritual and freely flowing spirits, in stark contrast to this intense formality. Now is Marcus's time. The book he brought with him is heavy in his hands.

He will only read one page. There is more to the peace treaty that he won't have time to recite: the names of the delegates who died at the inn when the Solarians rioted; the decree to forever seal the gateway to Solaria with old magic; Havenfall's promise to hunt down all of those who escaped. A reminder to Haven, Fiordenkill, and Byrn that even after nearly a hundred years, rogue Solarians still roam their realms.

Some still blame humans, blame Haven, for the bloodshed. Marcus knows that. It's now his responsibility, as the portal-keeper, to keep everyone safe. Not just the Byrnisians and Fiordens, but his beloved Graylin; Marcus's sister, Sylvia; and her children—who will one day inherit the Inn at Havenfall and all that comes with it.

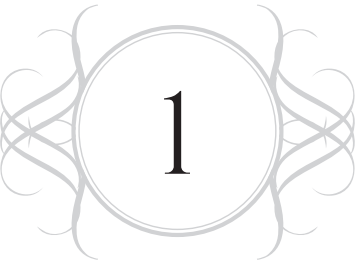
He must remind everyone of their promises to one another. So he lifts the book, the only time this leather-bound volume has ever left the inn's library, and begins to read aloud from its old, crumbling pages—to tell the waiting crowd that Havenfall remembers.

BYRN, FIORDENKILL, AND HAVEN
WITH THIS INSTRUMENT ENTER TOGETHER
IN ACCORD.

Let it be known that the representatives of Byrn, Fiordenkill, and Haven are allied in peace and hereby set themselves against the warlike land and denizens of Solaria.

Access, trade, and political or civilian interaction between Solaria and any of the other connected realms, including Haven, are forbidden; any infraction of this law is considered treasonous and punishable as such; as agreed to by the newly Allied Realms of Byrn, Fiordenkill, and Haven, otherwise known as the Last Remaining Adjacent Realms.





1

THE BUS DEPOT IN DENVER smells like gasoline and asphalt, unwashed bodies and stale coffee. It's loud with the creak and huff of buses outside, an old speaker system announcing arrival times in between bursts of static, the thud of footsteps as people run to catch their buses. Everything blurs together into white noise, and as long as I see the mountains out the window, gilded in the afternoon sun, I can imagine I'm somewhere else. The lightning plains of Byrn, or the white deserts the Fiorden delegates have told me about, where the earthquakes are so constant that the land heaves and ripples like a pale sea.

And even without imagining, this decrepit station, for all its bustle and noise, is better than where I was half an hour ago.

Better than the sterile chemical smell and hollow, ringing silence of the maximum-security prison where they've kept my mother for more than ten years now.

I stop in front of the arrivals board and hoist my duffel bag higher on my shoulder. I look at the aged screen to try to push the images out of my head. Mom's face behind the scratched plexiglass, the flat darkness of her eyes. It's like she doesn't care, can't be bothered about what's going to happen next.

I blink hard, focus on the places and times flickering above me. *Omaha, 2:25*.

That's the bus I'm *supposed* to take. The plan is to stay with Grandma Ellen, my dad's mom, for the summer, and intern at the insurance company she runs. Dad doesn't want me at the Inn at Havenfall—not now and not ever again. He didn't understand Mom's attachment to the place, and he doesn't get mine either. It's like he can sense the glimmer of magic clinging to me when I return, and it makes him suspicious. He says I should be doing something I can put on a college application next year.

And it's true that Havenfall doesn't exactly appear in an online search. My working at the inn won't earn me internship credits anywhere. But these summers are all I have. I've been going to the inn for summers since I was six. And the older I get, the more important it is to show Uncle Marcus what I can do, that I can be useful. If all goes well, this time next summer I'll be traveling to the mountains with more than just a summer bag. Marcus will name me as his inheritor, and I'll move into the inn for good.

So, no. Clearly I'm not going to Omaha. A sparkling insurance-sales career is not in my future.

My insides feel tense, brittle somehow, and my eyes keep drifting back to the blue smudges of mountains outside the windows. Like I'll fall to pieces if I'm not among them soon. I look back at the arrivals board and scan a few lines down, past Boise and Laramie and Salt Lake City to Haven. *3:50*. Gate 8, the last one, at the dusty far end of the depot.

I glance around the room, where sunlight bounces off the high ceilings. There are only two other people in the waiting area now, a young guy in a hoodie sleeping across four chairs and a middle-aged man with thinning blond hair reading a yellowed newspaper. I go to the far side and sit against the wall on the dingy carpet, next to the outlet that I know from experience is the only one that works, and plug in my phone to let it charge for the long ride.

I should text Marcus and let him know I'm coming. But when I start to type, a sense of dread fills me. What if he tells me not to come? To listen to my dad? Just the thought is almost unbearable. I lock my screen and put it on the floor facedown, then dig my fingers into my palms. If I just show up, he can't turn me away. Soon I'll be there, in my room overlooking the valley, dancing in the ballroom, with Brekken under the stars.

Going up into the mountains always feels like I'm leaving the rest of the world behind. In the thinner air, it's as if I'm someone else. I'm Maddie Morrow, Marcus's trusted niece and maybe inheritor of the Inn at Havenfall, if I play my cards right and impress the delegates from the Adjacent Realms. Not Maddie Morrow, the girl with the dead older brother, the girl with the mom on death row.

Shit. I didn't let myself remember those words until now. I got all the way out of Sterling Correctional's visiting hall, onto the bus on the county road, to the depot, and into this corner before I thought about them. And now the memories flood back in with a rush of nausea. The stares and whispers that follow me everywhere: in the halls at school, at the grocery store, even at home, Dad and his wife, Marla, trailing me with their eyes like any second I might snap, like whatever sickness Mom has lives in me too.

But Mom is the worst part of it. Her apathy. When the death sentence was first handed down, I thought maybe, just maybe, this would

shock her into admitting the truth. That she didn't kill Nathan eleven years ago. And even if no one but me really believed her, it would be enough to keep her alive.

But when I sat across from her this morning, the plexiglass between us, she was the same blank face she's been for eleven years. She just blinked, slowly, when I told her for the thousandth time—*I was there. I saw the thing in our house. It came in through the window; I saw the glass on the floor.*

She replied the same as always, too, slow and soft. *You were imagining it. We see what we want to see, love, but there are no monsters, just people who do horrible things. I was unbalanced, and I did a horrible thing. Don't go looking for answers where there are none.*

But that's not what happened. I know what I saw that night, even if it was only through the crack between two cupboard doors. Before the overhead light shattered, leaving us in shadows, I saw the monstrous dark shape vaulting toward my brother. Heard the roaring sound that filled the kitchen. Then all at once, the screaming stopped and my brother was gone, the kitchen floor slick with blood.

My mother wasn't responsible for Nathan's death; it was a beast from a banished world. And someone, or something, pressured her into taking the blame. Maybe she feared what might happen to Havenfall if she were ever to reveal the truth.

And what could I do? Because the thing is, you can't tell people a monster killed your brother. People will start to talk about you. *Freak. Liar. Crazy.*

But at Havenfall, people believe me. I've only told a few people, but they believe me. I have to hold on to that. It's all I have.

I check my phone reflexively, half-afraid that Dad will somehow sense I'm not on the way to Omaha. I'll update him when it's too late to turn back. I have only one bar of service, and that's likely to blink

out once we reach the mountains, but it doesn't matter. All the people I actually want to talk to are up ahead, at the summit in Havenfall. I'll see them soon, and besides, no one there even knows what a phone is. To them it's just a strange, glimmering, blinking artifact.

I grin as a memory from last summer surfaces. I finally wheedled Dad into getting me a smartphone, and my first night at Havenfall, Brekken and I snuck out to the barn and I introduced him to Candy Crush. I wish I had a video of him—serious Brekken, with his soldier's bearing and noble manners and literally otherworldly cheekbones—hunched over the screen with the tips of his jeweled ears turning red, hissing Fiorden curses whenever he lost a life. I've never taken a picture of Brekken, of course. While Marcus doesn't subject me to the no-phones-on-inn-grounds rule like he does every other human who enters Havenfall, he trusts me not to be stupid. A leaked video could be disastrous, and I'd never endanger my safe place. My birthright. My home.

Anyway, I don't need a picture. I'll see Brekken soon in the flesh.

At 3:55, the bus to Haven finally pulls up. It looks older than the others, with scratches and rust gathering around the wheels. But my heart still lifts as I climb on board. The driver, a slight, wrinkled man, smiles warmly at me.

"How you doing today, miss?"

"Great," I say with a returning smile as I drop my duffel and slide in a few seats behind him, and I mean it. There's a smattering of people on the bus—an old woman in the back, bundled up as though it's winter and not June, a young mother cradling a wailing infant, and the two men from the depot. The engine rattles loudly, and the metal roof above me is dented with what looks like the marks of hailstones.

It takes us four hours to reach the mountains, and I let myself doze off against the window, sinking into troubled half dreams. I dream Mom and Nate are on the bus beside me, just as they were when we visited

Havenfall as kids, my brother fiddling with the silver jacks Marcus gave him when he was born. And my heart leaps for joy.

But when I say Nathan's name and they both turn to me, I see the prisoner version of Mom, with her baggy tan jumpsuit and listless expression. My brother's eyes are wide, and I see something reflected in them, a monstrous shadow—

I'm shaken, grateful when a pothole in the road jars me awake. The sun starts its descent just as we begin to climb into the mountains, painting everything gold. The narrow road hugs a mountainside; to our right are the carved-away stone walls, sometimes covered over with avalanche nets, and to our left, out my window, green pines blanket the valley. In contrast to the sprawl and shine of Denver and its suburbs, the mountains seem like a formidable force against humans, and signs of civilization dwindle rapidly until all we pass are old, half-crumbling mining towns. Decrepit houses and listing trailers are tucked in between the boulders and pines.

The dream lingers, but I breathe out, imagining it leaving me like smog from my lungs. I crack the window, put on my headphones, and focus on the bite of cool mountain air. Crowns of ice gleam in the sun, and the sky somehow feels bigger framed by the jagged peaks. On the horizon, I can see the translucent curtains of rainfall.

We're getting close now.

Omphalos, I think. A Greek word Marcus taught me. It means navel, technically. The center of everything. Where it all starts. Where it all connects.

The roads get steep, and the bus sputters and creaks. My music blocks out the worst of it, but I can still feel the bus vibrating around me, like a panting beast of burden, as it climbs up these twisty roads. The metal frame shudders in a way that the worn polyester seat cushion can't disguise. It doesn't help that the only thing separating us from dropping

off the mountain is a metal railing that doesn't look like it would withstand a strong gust of wind. For a second, I imagine what it would be like to lose control. To hurtle through the misty air, plunging past the soft blanket of fog and into the yawning forest of darkness below.

To shatter like glass.

I blink again and pull out my phone—it's time to text Uncle Marcus now that we're getting close. The text goes through, and I hope he sees it amid the bustle of Havenfall's summit—an annual celebration which is just about to begin that marks the peace between our three worlds.

"What's that frown for?"

A gravelly voice to my right snakes through my music. I half-turn away, hoping that it's not me being addressed, but the man across the aisle, the one with the newspaper, is looking at me, lips split to show cigarette-stained teeth. Reluctantly, I take off my headphones.

This guy must be from Haven. He's wearing a necklace with a teardrop-shaped pendant of the same odd, pearlescent silver that supposedly comes only from the old mines surrounding the town. But I've never seen him there before.

I give him a bare, polite smile. "Just happy we're almost there."

He rubs the pendant between his fingers. He has sun-weathered skin and pale eyes. "You going to Haven?"

"Yep." I can't help popping my lips slightly on the *P*. It's a stupid question—that's the only stop left, which this guy surely knows. "Going to visit my uncle."

"You from there? You look familiar."

Wariness curls around my heart, but I push it down and shake my head. Haven has less than a thousand people, and it's tucked away so high, inaccessible but for twisty county highways. It's possible the man might remember me from seeing me around town. But he

wouldn't—couldn't—have remembered me from the inn; Havenfall protects against that.

"Like I said, just visiting family."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," I lie, reluctantly shaking the hand he sticks across the aisle. His hand is clammy, his grip too tight. When he smiles, I notice several fillings made from the same pale silver as the pendant.

To my relief, he doesn't ask further questions once I turn back toward the window. We're climbing higher and higher as the sun sets, the air thinning and my ears popping. Clouds creep in from the west, covering the orange sky and casting the craggy mountains in shadow. The driver goes slower as the wind picks up. The towns are almost nonexistent now: the only signs of human habitation are the odd cabin or broken-down car. But the landscape gets more beautiful, even under the gathering blanket of storm clouds. Fog creeps down over the mountainsides, wrapping around the trees and spilling tendrils over the road, but the effect is almost comforting, like we're the only people in the world.

Another oddity about Haven: the weather is strange around here. Locals know it, and it keeps outsiders away. There are other measures, too, other precautions meant to keep this place secret and safe. As we pass the faded road sign that says Welcome to the Inn at Havenfall, I look at the trees on either side. My uncle employs a dozen people to keep watch outside town year-round. I know I won't see them—they're stationed deep in the woods, in cabins or converted deer blinds. There to make sure that no magic escapes the boundaries of the town.

It hasn't happened in years, and when it does, it's usually easily explained—a maid sneaking out a bottle of Fiorden wine without realizing the power it holds, or a bored noble taking a ride through the woods that ranges too far. But once every few years a delegate will decide

to try to smuggle magic out for profit. I don't know what the punishment is for that, but I've never seen any of the offending delegates again.

The clouds finally crack and rain drizzles down as we round the mountain and see the town of Haven up ahead, a smattering of buildings clinging for dear life to the mountainside, encroached upon by the trees and the mist. A bright river snakes down across the mountain before disappearing into the valley below us. And my heart leaps to see it, because Havenfall is just beyond the next ridge. The fog sparkles like a mirage. I glance behind me and see all my fellow passengers glued to the window, even the baby, looking out with round blue eyes.

We reach the crossroads just outside town, the place where Marcus usually picks me up in his jeep. Ahead is the general store, a big log building with a generous wraparound porch, spilling welcoming yellow light from inside. Two women chatting in rocking chairs on the porch look when the bus stops and the passengers file off. I'm relieved when Silver Teeth Man exits, his fillings flashing as he gives me one more broad smile, and then disappears into the store. But then the anxiety slides back in. Maybe Marcus didn't get my text. He isn't here.

When the door closes, the driver meets my eyes in the mirror. "Someone coming to pick you up?"

I nod, holding on to the feeling of anticipation. No, it's not anticipation. It's need. Havenfall, my uncle and friends, Brekken—all less than a mile away now.

"We can wait a few minutes, but I can't take this thing any farther up these damn roads." The driver slaps the dashboard with a mixture of exasperation and affection. "And . . ."

He lifts a hand, pointing at the dark clouds coming in from the north, the curtains of rain in the distance. Even if he doesn't know why, he knows that the weather gets more freakish the closer we are to Havenfall.

"Sorry about this." My voice catches as I shift in my seat, trying to call Marcus again. But I don't have service here. It's dead air. "My uncle should be here in a few minutes."

But a few minutes pass, and then a few more. No one comes.

The general store's lights have gone out; the doors are closed. And the storm is near, the scraggly pine trees around us stirring in the wind. My mouth is dry, my stomach heavy. The idling bus grumbles beneath me.

I'm used to being forgotten—it beats the smirks and stares that usually come with being noticed. When you're the loner, the weirdo, the daughter of the Goodwin Lane Killer, it's better to not be seen at all. It's different with Marcus, though. He's always had a place for me at Havenfall. He's never failed to be here at the crossroads when the bus has come in.

At least, not before now.

I dig through my backpack until I find my umbrella, then get up and thread through the aisle toward the driver, wishing I'd thought to pack a raincoat. "I'll just walk into town a little ways," I tell him. "I usually get service once I'm higher up." This isn't true, but I'm suddenly anxious to get off this bus, despite the rain. He must have places to be. As do I.

His brow crinkles again. "Are you sure, dear? I don't want you out when the lightning starts." He gestures at the road. "There's a diner about a half mile up the road that stays open all night. Ask Annie to let you use the phone—"

"Okay." I cut him off without meaning to, but the idea of spending another moment away from Havenfall puts a pit in my stomach. I lift my umbrella. "I'll be fine, I promise."

The driver doesn't look happy about this, but he pulls the lever to open the doors. Cool, pine-and-rain-scented air pushes into the bus,

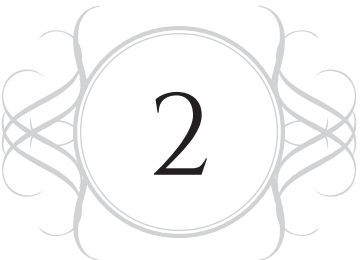
raising bumps on my spine. The smell of Havenfall. But tendrils of anxiety wiggle through me.

"Be careful," the driver reminds me as I stop on the stairs to open my umbrella. "If there's lightning, knock on someone's door, or find a ditch and hunker down."

"Thank you. Will do." I smile at him, meaning the thank-you but not the rest of it. I'll walk all night if I have to.

He stays idling there as I walk up the deserted, darkening Main Street, my old Converse squelching in the mud. The incline here is so steep I can see it, and I internally groan thinking of the hike ahead. My duffel strap is already cutting into my shoulder, and this dollar-store umbrella won't hold up against Haven weather.

But I lift my hand, giving the driver one last smile and wave. Then I start the long trek up to Havenfall. A little walk, a little rain won't stop me from getting to the one place where I actually belong.



2

MOST OF THE TOWNSFOLK OF Haven don't know the truth, I think, about Havenfall and the Adjacent Realms and the Accords that we commemorate every summer with a summit. But everyone knows there's something special about this place—an undercurrent, a breath of wind from another world.

A few different stories float around town, passed along when you're getting your hair cut, in line at the general store, chatting on sagging front porches. That a tiny village once here disappeared from the face of the earth, and no one knows where everyone went. That a cult leader during a camp meeting walked a group of devout followers off a cliff. That Lewis and Clark types came here a little later in the nineteenth century, trying to map the Rockies, only to all vanish. People say the mountain has a will of its own. It can be magnanimous or cruel. If you come here with ill intentions, you'll find yourself beset by rain, hail, and

wind strong enough to dislodge rocks above and send them tumbling onto your path. But if you come here for refuge, the fog will swallow you up like a protective blanket and hide you from whatever you're running from.

The point is, people know that this is a place where you can vanish, even if they don't know why. We're hardly in Briar County, Colorado, anymore. We're *elsewhere*.

Giving up on keeping my feet dry, I look up from the ground and take in what's around me as I walk through town. The other bus passengers have dispersed, and I pass a handful of clapboard houses built right into the mountainside, with flimsy wood porches overlooking the valley. Faces appear in windows as I go by. Then there's the post office with its yellowed newspaper notices. That's where gossip is traded, where to go if you want to know the stories about this town. There's a sharp-eyed clerk there, Debbie, who's run the place as long as I can remember. She always greets me by name and asks after Marcus when I stop by to pick up packages.

There's Dr. Abram's house, the doctor-slash-veterinarian who almost certainly isn't licensed but who everyone trusts anyway. There's the shell of an overturned livestock truck that went into a ditch years ago and no one has ever picked up, which now seems to be home to a family of coyotes. I catch a glimpse of a skinny tail disappearing behind a ragged metal panel as I plod by.

The town is diminished, as is Havenfall itself. The inn used to be the crossroads to uncountable realms, each behind its own door, and all but two have been sealed magically shut. There are only three worlds left—Byrn, Fiordenkill, and Haven, which is what everyone from the Adjacent Realms calls Earth; that's how the town got its name. But even though neither the town nor the inn is what it once was, the air still

feels laden with possibilities. Havenfall is the neutral zone between all the worlds, a peaceful, magical crossroads.

I pass the long, low brick diner, where I'm supposed to call Marcus. I'm pretty sure it used to be some sort of factory, but now the steamed-up windows illuminate a smattering of people eating in red-vinyl booths. I try to see if there's anyone I know. Sometimes guests from Fiordenkill and Byrn will venture out if they need to have a conversation too controversial for the inn, or if they're curious about the human world. But I don't recognize anyone, so I keep walking.

And besides, I don't want to be out once dark really falls. Even though I know the doors to Solaria have been sealed off since the post-war treaty over a hundred years ago, worry burns through me like a live wire when I remember that we are never fully safe. That plenty of Solarians crossed through into our world before the treaty, and not all of them were found. They're shapeshifters, capable of adapting and living among us—of living in any of the realms. They wear monstrous forms when they're hungry, using teeth and claws to hunt us and devour our souls, but the rest of the time they can look like whatever they choose. Can look human, can breathe our air indefinitely.

The rest of us—humans and people from the other Adjacent Realms—can't make it more than a few days, or a few weeks for the strongest of constitutions, in a realm other than our own before gasping and flapping like fish out of water. We are not meant to travel between realms. Except at Havenfall.

That's why the inn is so special. Its magic makes it different—makes it safe. It is truly the one place everyone can intermingle.

I shudder and walk faster, passing the ancient motel with windows too dusty to see inside, which for some reason has never been knocked down or repurposed, even though Haven types are usually all about

resourcefulness and reinvention in order to avoid having to interact with the outside world. A busted car becomes a chicken coop, the skeleton of a burned-down miner's cabin becomes an illicit playground, an old bomb shelter becomes a bar. (Where, as Brekken and I have discovered, they don't card.)

The rain slackens enough for me to close my umbrella as I leave town behind and trudge up toward Havenfall—good weather always seems to wrap the inn like a bubble, no matter what's happening in town. But it's rapidly getting darker even as the clouds slide away, and here's the part of my plan I wish I'd thought more about. There are no streetlamps, and the whispering pines block any light from the inn above or the town below. It's twilight now, but soon I'm going to have nothing to guide me but the moon and stars.

I've been walking on the side of the road for half an hour, squinting at the ground to make sure I don't misstep, when an engine sound from down the road makes me look up.

A motorcycle's headed right at me.

I leap back just as the bike roars around the bend.

My chest jackhammers as I watch the driver swerve, tires skidding over the dirt road, the bike going out from under him. The rider tumbles into the road, rolling over, while the bike shoots across the gravel, the motor sputtering out, and tangles in the brush between the trees.

My duffel is on the ground, my hands over my mouth. I run to the driver, who pushes unsteadily to stand. "Are you okay?"

He's wearing a helmet—one of those shiny black ones that make you look like a Martian—and a leather jacket. He pulls off the helmet and oh—not a *he*, I realize as two dirty-blond braids tumble on either side of a pale, heart-shaped face.

"No thanks to you."

She's pretty, with a thin, wide mouth. A white scar runs down her

chin, like this isn't her first fall. Dark circles beneath her blazing, dark eyes. She swipes the back of her hand across her mouth.

"What the hell were you doing in the middle of the road?" She reaches up and touches a silver locket around her throat, as if to make sure it's still there.

"I'm sorry, the fog—" I start to say something about how she could have taken it easy on the turns, but then I register the smear of red across her cheek. "Shit, you're bleeding."

Panic speeds my heart. I yank out my phone, not sure if I should call Marcus or 911. If she's really hurt, could an ambulance even get up here?

Her hand shoots out and grabs my wrist before I decide. Her grip is hot, too tight.

"Don't. I'm fine. Just bit my tongue." She lets me go and spits blood onto the road, then troops off toward her bike, fists clenched. "This bike is my everything, though, so you better hope it still runs."

"Sorry," I mumble, at a loss for what to do. A second ago I was panicked, then mad, and now guilt fills me as I trail after her. "Are you from around here?" I call out. "Is there someone you could call to—I really don't think you should try to ride that thing right now."

She glares at me as she drags her bike from the underbrush back onto the road. Besides the left rearview mirror being cocked at a funny angle, the bike looks fine to me, but then it's not like I know anything about motorcycles, and the way she took that fall . . .

Once her bike's back on the road, she props it on the kickstand and turns to me, crossing her arms. "Worry about yourself," she says. "The real question here is why the hell are you wandering around in the dark?"

Around us, the chorus of frogs and crickets slowly starts up again. I didn't realize they'd stopped singing.

I lift my head, trying to match her manner, though I can't imagine

I'm all that intimidating with my damp clothes and sagging umbrella. "I'm headed to the Inn at Havenfall."

"What a coincidence, me too."

"What for?"

Marcus always hires all sorts of people to work at the inn every year during the summer summit; the meetings, parties, and events require extra maids and stable hands, cooks and attendants. But I can't picture this girl blending into the background like a staffer is meant to. Besides, all the new staff was supposed to arrive last week, a few days before the delegates, to get ready.

"I saw an ad in the paper for a landscaper." She lifts one shoulder in a shrug. "Seemed like a good deal."

"You're late," I snap. Then realize I didn't mean to say it like that, but the adrenaline from a moment ago broke down my filters. "I mean, it's okay. I'm sure it doesn't matter." I feel myself blushing, and quickly bend down to pick up my duffel bag.

Her eyes are narrow. "I would be less late if you hadn't been walking in the middle of the road."

"If you hadn't been taking that bend like a madman—" I stop myself. Becoming irritated won't help things. "You know what, arguing about it isn't going to get us there any faster."

Havenfall's got to be less than half a mile away now, and I can feel it, an insistent tugging like a balloon string tied to my breastbone. I don't want to fight with this girl. I just want to get there, and I offer an olive branch. "I'm Maddie."

"Taya," she says. But she doesn't take my outstretched hand. Dark, unreadable eyes examine my face, and the scrutiny freezes me, makes me want to shrink away. It brings me back to my home in Sterling and the constant stares of everyone there, where I keep my head down and walk fast, hoping to stay under the radar.

But that's not who I am here, not in the mountains and not at Havenfall. So I hold my ground and meet her eyes, even if something about her gaze feels dangerous. In Havenfall, I am brave. I must be, if I want to prove myself worthy of preserving the peace we celebrate with every summit, protecting the portals to the world's lost realms of magic. The *omphalos*.

And in the long run, it's not like she'll remember any of this. Marcus always sees to that. No one ever remembers—except me.

Eventually, Taya turns away with a shrug. She throws a leg over her motorcycle, then looks back at me. "Well?" she says after a moment. "Are you coming?"

Surprise freezes me in place. A few moments ago, I'd have said I'd never be caught dead on a motorcycle, but I'm ever more conscious of how dark it is and how far I have to go. I glance at the motorcycle, and Taya must be able to read the hesitation on my face, because she grins.

"I'm a good driver. I swear. But if you're worried, you can wear my helmet."

"There's no need—" I begin, but Taya has already lifted the helmet and plunked it down over my ears. I cock my head, a little charmed and a little indignant, as she turns and strides back toward her bike, seeming to assume I'll follow.

She pauses and looks over her shoulder at me, lifting one eyebrow. "Unless you'd rather walk. Alone. In the dark. With coyotes."

Unable to think of a way to reply to that, I trail after her. "So, do I just, um . . ."

Taya already has her leg over the bike, and it kicks to life with a growl. "Get on behind me and hold on."

I do as she says, nervous but trying not to hold her too tight. I don't remember the last time I've gotten this close to, well, anyone. But Taya is easy, comfortable as she grabs my hands and situates them so they're

wrapped around her, not resting on her sides. I need to scoot up, my chest pressing against her back.

"Sorry," I mumble, glad she can't see me blushing.

"It's fine," she replies distractedly, kicking the bike into gear. Then it leaps forward, and under the roar of the engine I hear her *oof*, because I've instinctively squeezed her tight as the unpaved road spools away beneath us. "Mind loosening your death grip?"

"Sorry," I call again, adjusting my hold and trying to breathe normally. Taya drives us up the road, and I know we aren't going that fast from the leisurely way trees slide by, but it feels like we are. The motorcycle rumbles beneath me.

"So how did you hear about this place?" Taya shouts as she takes us smoothly around the curve of a switchback. The fresh, damp air whips past, and the last of the clouds are scudding away in the sky, revealing a few stars starting to blink through the gathering dark.

"My uncle." I have to try the words twice, because the first time the wind steals them away.

"Think you can put in a good word for me?" Taya asks.

A little flame of pride curls in my chest. "I'll think about it." I risk taking my hand off her waist to point up ahead, where a ridge juts up dark against the sky. "Focus till we get over there."

Taya half-turns her head to glance at me. "What's there?"

"You'll see."

Not much longer. The mountains seem bigger now than they did on the bus. The air is chilly and sharp with scents of pine and wildflowers. More stars are winking into existence above us. And—

We crest the ridge. Even over the rumble of the engine, I hear Taya gasp.

Mirror Lake is laid out before us, a silver crescent slash in the landscape, reflecting the night sky perfectly beneath the black line of the

bridge. The water looks like indigo silk sprinkled with diamonds, the round moon's reflection—floating right in the lake's center—seeming to give off its own light. And on the other side, lit by the pale rays of the twin moons and by gold light spilling from inside:

Havenfall.

My uncle has told me that this place has been rebuilt hundreds of times over the centuries, and of course I know it's true—the portals in their caves have been here longer than humans, longer than memory. The caves, and the structures the portal-keepers have built on top of them, have been buried by avalanches, burned down in fires, and twice destroyed in wars spilling over from other worlds—Fiordenkill, Byrn, Solaria, and the countless others that at one point or another opened up in the caves beneath these mountains. The inn that currently stands was built by my great-great-grandmother after the ranch house that stood here before burned down. At least that's what we can tell from the journals she left and the stories Marcus remembers from when he was a child. We don't know who came before her, or why whoever it was chose her.

Still, it's hard to believe the inn hasn't been here forever—it looks so timeless, so natural. The inn is massive, built right into the side of the mountain so it looks almost like it's growing from the earth. A sprawling creation of cedar and slate, girded by staircases and balconies. A waterfall behind the inn turns into a winding stream that circles the inn like a silver ribbon before feeding into Mirror Lake. A wide paved drive in front holds a mixture of cars and horse-drawn carriages, cherry paint and polished wood, chrome fenders and the flanks of horses standing side by side.

Haven—not the town, but the world, Earth—doesn't have its own magic, obviously. That's why the other realms see it as neutral territory. But the spark that lights up in my chest as we crest the ridge is a kind of magic too, I can't help but think.

We coast down the slope toward the lake. Taya's spine is rigid, her knuckles tight on the handlebars. She stops the bike before we reach the bridge and kicks out a foot to hold us upright.

"What's wrong?" I ask. My voice comes out embarrassingly high and breathy. I want to leap off the bike and run. All my tiredness seems to have evaporated. But Taya is still.

"That's a lot of water," I hear her say, quietly.

"We don't have to swim across it. There's a bridge."

"I see that." She turns back to give me an irritated glance, and one of her braids hits the side of my helmet. She swings off the bike, forcing me to grab the handlebars to stay on. Something in her voice lets a chill seep in. I dismount too and pull off the helmet, my legs cramping and my heart beating fast from the ride.

It's easier to look at Taya when she's glaring at Mirror Lake and not at me. She's smaller than I originally thought, shorter than me and slight beneath the bulk of the jacket. Her face is closed off, expressionless.

"It's safe," I say. "Look, all those cars got across it fine."

"You can go ahead if you want," she says, standing stiffly beside the bike. "I'm walking, so I'll be slower."

My stomach twists. She did me a solid, taking me here after I made her crash, even if it was 50 percent her fault. It feels wrong to just leave her now. "I'll come with you."

Her mouth turns down, but she nods, and we walk over the water, Taya wheeling the bike in neutral along the bridge and me trailing behind. She flinches when the old wood creaks beneath us. If she notices how the ground is dry here—despite the all-consuming rain in Haven—she doesn't comment on it.

Halfway across, a gust of wind sweeps down the mountain, making the trees and the bridge sway, and Taya freezes. I almost run into her.

"Sorry," she whispers.

"It's okay." I mean it this time, because I know what it's like to have seemingly irrational fears.

"We're blocking the bridge," she says.

"It's late. I doubt anyone else is coming tonight." But my words don't seem to land. Taya is staring straight ahead with a lost expression marring her face. I think of something to distract her. If she's going to be here all summer, maybe it doesn't matter if I tell her a secret or two.

"My uncle says this water shows you as your best self," I say, drifting to the wooden railing to my right. "Do you want to take a look?"

A harsh laugh escapes her. "Not really," she says, but puts down the kickstand and joins me anyway.

As our images form in the water below, I almost wish she hadn't.

I'd forgotten why I always avoided this lake when I ran around the grounds as a kid with Brekken. His reflection matches him perfectly, but for me, Mirror Lake seems to reflect something other than real life and nothing I could ever aspire to be. The Maddie in the water looks serene and happy. Even without a smile this Maddie looks ethereal, like nothing anyone says—nothing the world can do—can touch her.

And that's not me. Not the girl who feels constantly scraped raw by the cruel words that have sunk through my skin and nestled in my heart, braiding with the poisoned strands of lingering memories to create something heavy, dense, and thorny. The Maddie in the water is just another bit of Havenfall magic. A fantasy.

I glance over at Taya, the ease of earlier having vanished, hoping she isn't looking at my reflection. She's not. She looks troubled, her brow furrowed and lips flattened into a line, even though her reflection seems to more or less match what I see.

Before I can think of something to say, she crouches down, picks up a pebble stuck in between the planks of the bridge, and splashes it

into the water. It sounds like breaking glass, and I flinch. The water ripples, silver and black, sending our reflections to the depths.

"My parents died in a car crash going off a bridge," she says evenly, without looking at me. "In case you were wondering why."

I wish I had a better response than "That's horrible. I'm sorry."

She shrugs. "I'm fine now. Just not a fan of big bodies of water." Gripping the railing tight, she looks over at me with those uncanny eyes. Sorrow curls in my stomach, heavy and cold. "What about you?" she asks. "Why are you here and not home working, or partying, or whatever it is normal people do with their summers?"

I feel my walls going up, my wariness rising. She's shared a secret and now she wants one in return. Maybe the near-death experience we had earlier has pushed Taya to trust, but not me.

"I feel like myself here," I say, a half truth.

What happened to her family is no one's fault. Mine, though—those secrets are ugly. And looking down at the water, at who I could be, I know I want none of those memories at Havenfall. They are my past, but this place is my future.

It has to be.