

AN EXCERPT FROM HAVENFALL

The dark is coming down fast, the rain intensifying as I start my long walk up the mountain. 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. 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 are what they once were, the air still feels laden with possibilities. Havenfall is the neutral zone between all the worlds, a peaceful, magical crossroads.

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 them. 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. “Sh*t, 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 hadn’t realized 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 imagine 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 fly 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.

ORIGINAL LINK: <https://www.sarahollandwrites.com/havenfall>