



# PHOENIX FLAME

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SARA  
HOLLAND

BLOOMSBURY

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BLOOMSBURY YA  
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To Grammy—thank you for believing in me  
from the very beginning

## 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 fruits grow on the trees, immune to the frost encasing their bright skins.

But beauty can hide secrets, and Fiordenkill is no different, its darkness concealed beneath the glittering ice, in the shadows where the brilliant starlight doesn't reach.

### — 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. For a time, he ruled in peace, keeping the storms at bay. But now the lightning, hurricanes, and burning wind batter at the wall, and the people grow discontented. So the Prince has begun to cast his sights elsewhere . . . to Havenfall and all the other worlds to which it connects.

## — Solaria —

Little is known about Solaria, a tiny, sealed-off world that is a hot-bed of powerful, highly volatile magic with a blazing golden sky. Solarians can take many shapes, and they can walk in any world without sickening. But one of their powers—the ability to bind magic to matter—has been weaponized against them. A magical trade has sprung up, with Solarians held captive and forced to use their magic to enchant objects for trade. Each enchantment strips away a bit of a Solarian's soul, which is then trapped in the object alongside the magic.

The doorway to Solaria remains closed, but with the soul trade now out in the open, many believe its people should no longer be considered enemies at Havenfall.

## — 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 has been kept secret from humankind. Humans can't live in the other Realms; their biology prevents them from surviving conditions outside of Haven.

## — *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 a long lineage of Innkeepers dating back as far 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.





THE KNIGHT TRAVELER  
A FIORDEN FAIRY TALE



*ONCE IN THE LAND OF Myr in the world of Fiordenkill, there lived a knight and a lady who fell in love and promised to never part. The knight was often in danger, defending the capital from the beasts that roamed the forest. So his lady gave him a pendant of ice and stone imbued with healing magic.*

*After that, though he crossed sword with claw countless times and suffered many injuries, the pendant healed him and sustained him, so that as long as he wore it he would never fall.*

*One day a great plague swept through the city, and the lady fell ill while her beloved was fighting beasts in the woods. Having poured all her magic into the pendant, she had none left to heal herself and perished.*

*Without her, the knight was heartbroken, lost. Every street in the city was awash in memories, every tree in the forest freighted with grief.*

*Upon hearing their story, sadness filled the gods. One—the bird-shaped*

*god of death and flight—cried tears of bright metal over the pair's lost love. They couldn't bring the lady back, but they could offer escape. This metal—called phoenix flame—was said to allow passage between the worlds. From the tears, the knight forged a suit of armor.*

*Armed with the pendant and the phoenix flame armor, the knight left Myr, left Fiordenkill, and vowed never to let harm come to anyone under his care ever again. He wandered through all the worlds, and he slayed monsters and protected the innocent in every one. But he never came back to Fiordenkill.*

*Whether he died in another Realm or found new life there, no one knows. But wherever he trod, the fabric of the world grew thin and weak, a wound in the world.*

# 1

## HAVENFALL IS MY HOME.

I test the words out, whispering them to myself as I walk slowly down the grand staircase toward the ballroom. My high heels sink into the gleaming red carpet; my painted fingertips glide smoothly against the polished oak of the railing. Music—the strange, otherworldly strains of the Elemental Orchestra, sounds shaped of metal and wind and flame—floats up from the ballroom, muffled and mixed with laughter and the clinking of glasses. A smoky-sweet smell suffuses the air from the candles clustered on top of every flat surface, the same candles throwing nets of dancing light up onto the paneled walls. Their warm gold glimmer contrasts with the velvety dark night outside. No moon, but so many stars that they look like salt grains spilled across indigo silk. The mountaintops all around us are faintly visible against the sky, craggy peaks of even deeper darkness.

Tonight, the magic of Havenfall is almost tangible in the air. Willow has pulled out all the stops to signal to the delegates that this will be a night to remember, the night the new peace treaty—one that doesn't carve Solaria out as the enemy—is to be signed. This is what the Inn at Havenfall is meant to be, a place of peace and togetherness. Connection.

*Omphalos.*

I come to a halt at the landing overlooking the first floor, my hands subconsciously tracing the subtle carvings of trees and wolves and mountains set into the banister. Below, the open door of the ballroom spills yellow light and smiling, tipsy delegates. Music floats up to the rafters.

For the first time in what seems like a lifetime, the mood inside the Inn at Havenfall is jubilant. We defeated the Silver Prince. We're safe. The Silver Prince is gone—we beat back his attempt to wrest Havenfall from my hands. Marcus has woken up and seems to be doing better every day, even if he's not totally back to his old self. Brekken is here at Havenfall, safe. He made it back from Fiordenkill. At last, things are starting to go according to plan.

Yet I don't feel safe, not yet. Looking down at the ballroom, at the people laughing and dancing, my skin feels itchy, my heart unsettled. This place, the *omphalos*, represents so much: the peace summit that's happened every summer for centuries; safety for people from every world; and a home for me. A future.

"Peace at Havenfall," I whisper to myself, trying to inject confidence into the words I don't really feel. That's the goal. That's why I need to succeed tonight. It's been a long couple of days of meetings with the delegates of Fiordenkill and Byrn, nailing down the language of the peace treaty which will bring Solaria—at least officially—into the fold with the other allied Adjacent Realms. It took a lot of talking

and frustration, but we finally landed on language that everyone could agree to. Then Marcus wrote it all out in his elegant handwriting on a sheet of creamy, gilt-edged paper. That paper is now tucked into a velvet folio in a slim leather case at my side. All it needs is signatures, twenty delegates each from Fiordenkill and Byrn.

Ideally, we'd be getting Solarian signatures too—any Solarian input at all, really. But there are no Solarians here, except for Sura, the girl we rescued from the antique shop, who's only a child. And of course the dead Solarian, Bram—if that was even his real name—buried out in the woods beyond the glittering windows. We had Taya up until a few days ago, but by the time she figured out that she wasn't human, the Silver Prince had captured her. And now she's gone, in Solaria.

But I push away that line of thinking before it can drag me down. The Fiorden and Byrnisian delegates have agreed, at least in theory, to make peace with Solaria. Even if the treaty isn't perfect or complete without being able to contact Solaria, it's necessary—Marcus and I will need all the delegates' support once we start making moves against the soul trade in order to save the Solarians victimized by it.

I pull the folio from my bag and open it to read the words of the treaty. Although the last few days of meetings have drilled them well enough into my memory, it's reassuring to read them again.

*Byrn, Fiordenkill, Haven, and Solaria, if its people should wish it, with this instrument enter together in accord. The previous Accords, presided over by Annabelle of Havenfall and signed by the representatives of Byrn and Fiordenkill, is hereby revoked.*

*Let it be known that the people of Solaria are once again welcome at the Inn, and that Solaria is to be considered a peaceful Adjacent Realm alongside Byrn, Fiordenkill, Haven, and any other peace-seeking world as may yet be discovered.*

It's time.

As my foot steps off the staircase, the noise and warmth of the ballroom immediately wraps around me, waking up my senses, pulling me in. Even without two-thirds of the summer workers—we sent the humans home after the Silver Prince's attack, dosed with forgetting-wine, for their own safety, in case he struck again—the ballroom is sparkling clean, and the Fiorden and Byrnisian staff is darting around proffering platters of hors d'oeuvres and refilling goblets.

Everyone is wearing their very finest clothes—the Byrnisians in light, airy creations of silk and metal, baring skin in inventive places; while the Fiordens wear angular jackets or sweeping cloaks, rich velvet accented with fur and lace. Willow even talked me into wearing a dress, and I have to admit it's gorgeous—midnight blue satin, with a skirt that hits at my knees in the front and dips low in the back. It swishes, smooth against my legs as I finally gather my courage and head down the stairs, feeling grateful that I insisted on wearing high-heeled boots rather than the strappy heels Willow tried to foist on me.

And jewelry. Everyone wears jewelry, from the traditional gems that the Fiordens stack in the shells of their ears—a unique color sequence for each family—to the Byrnisians' stacked bangles and dangling necklaces of iron, gold, obsidian. Silver. It all flashes around me as I ease into the heat and press of the crowd, like the stars outside have sunk down and settled on our skin.

Which reminds me of my other mission, the one I haven't told even Marcus about. Though I know my first order of business has to be the treaty, tonight also seems like the perfect opportunity to fish for leads about the soul trade, while the delegates are in a good mood fueled by liquor and relief. Relief to be free of the Silver Prince, and to be done with negotiations about the new treaty. Maybe they'll be loose—maybe someone will let something slip.

I weave through the crowd, walking fast and with purpose so no one stops me. Until I find the Heiress waiting at our prearranged spot, beneath the huge antique mirror that spans one whole wall of the ballroom. She grins at me as I approach, drawing something out of the pocket of her black velvet gown.

As usual, she looks regal, like a queen of some far country who is only deigning to grace us with her presence here for the night. She is one of the few people—alongside Marcus and Graylin, Willow, and our head of security, Sal—who is in permanent residence at Havenfall. I'm not even sure what Realm she's from—she doesn't have the scaled cheekbones of a Byrnisian, or the willowy build typical of Fiordens. But I can't imagine she's human either, seeing as she never seems to age. For most of my life, I thought her merely an eccentric historian. She told everyone that she was at Havenfall to write a history of the Realms that never seemed to materialize.

But now I know there's more to her. She unearthed evidence of the soul trade all on her own, and she decided to fight it. There were gaps in her knowledge, yes—she thought the enchanted silver objects circulating through the Realms contained only stolen magic, not stolen souls—but she saw that Havenfall was in danger and took steps to fight the threat, even though she thought it meant going up against Marcus. She even recruited Brekken to help her. She was the one who approached me with a plan for tonight—the idea to squeeze more information out of the delegates. Now she's giving me the means to do so.

“You look lovely tonight, dear,” she says, putting a soft hand to my cheek and nodding approvingly. “You ought to let Willow take a crack at you more often.”

I blush. “Yeah, I know.” But impatience gnaws at my insides. Normally, I'd love to bask in her compliments, but right now isn't the time. “Do you have it?”

The Heiress nods, her hands dropping down to mine so she can press something into my palm. I look down to see a small crystalline vial, stoppered with a cork and containing a clear liquid tinted the faint green of grass. A kind of truth serum, the Heiress told me, an old kind of magic from Tural, one of the former Adjacent Realms whose doorway closed long ago. I haven't the faintest idea how the Heiress came to have this, and she wouldn't tell me. Only how to use it.

"It's not perfect," she tells me now, withdrawing her hand from mine, leaving the vial in my palm. "It will simply make those who partake of it more forthcoming, and they will find it more difficult to construct a lie. But it will not cause them to offer up what they would otherwise keep to themselves. You still need to ask the right questions and coax them to share."

She must see the trepidation on my face, because she pats my shoulder. "You'll do fine. The delegates respect you."

Do they, though? After the fiasco that was Havenfall under my watch, I wouldn't count on that. I held on to the inn, but just barely. I guess the fact that the Silver Prince didn't take over can be counted as a victory, but in the meantime I let half the Fiorden delegation return to their realm early, destabilizing the doors; I heightened tensions between Fiordenkill and Byrn.

The unsigned peace treaty weighs momentarily heavier at my side as the Heiress grips my arm—gentle, but firm—and turns me around so I face the crowd.

"Go."

I take a deep breath and go.

In summers past, this moment—the one where I merge with the crowd of delegates, join the dance—has always been one of lightness and joy.



Still, it's hard to feel too morose amidst all this merrymaking. Music and laughter and the scents of fruit and wine wrap around me as I push deeper into the crowd. The Elemental Orchestra is playing a rearranged version of *The Rite of Spring*, with minor-key Byrnisian flourishes woven into Stravinsky's arrangements. Delegates swirl around the floor, creating a maelstrom of different colors and textures. With everyone moving like this, you could fail to notice that our ranks have thinned at all. You could think that everything was all right.

My uncle, Marcus, is at the bar, chatting up the delegates as he passes out glasses of wine and champagne. I don't think he's fully recovered from being in a coma after the Silver Prince's attack, but right now you wouldn't know it from looking at him. He's animated, handsome, happy. Graylin, his husband, even convinced him to wear a tuxedo. He looks smart—not a wrinkle.

Staying out of his sight line, I lurk by the bar until Marcus steps away, at which point I quickly duck behind the counter, put together a tray of glasses filled with fruit-studded wine, and spike each of them with a dash of truth serum. Straightening up, almost immediately, I fix my eyes on someone who could be my first target. Saber Cancarnette. He's respected among the Fiorden delegation, and his signature on the treaty will carry real weight. Plus, as a fur trader who works closely with the gem miners of Byrn, it seems possible he might know something about the soul-silver.

I stride up to Cancarnette with determination. The Fiorden lord looks slightly taken aback by my approach. His ice-pale cheeks are tinted pink with the influence of wine. Good. Hopefully that'll give me a head start. I smile and proffer my tray carefully.

"Another drink, Sir Cancarnette?" I ask with a bright tone. "Willow and I are trying out new recipes."

Let him think, let them all think, that now that Marcus is recovered I'm back to my previous role, sidelined, a child with nothing to do with the real affairs of Havenfall. It will make it easier to find the truth.

Cancarnette doesn't hesitate to accept one of the spiked glasses. As soon as he does, one of the staff materializes and whisks the tray away, leaving my hands free. I clink my own serum-free glass against Cancarnette's and increase the wattage of my smile.

"To the new peace treaty."

The lord hesitates a moment, his brow wrinkling in confusion or concern, I'm not sure. But then he returns my toast and echoes my words. "To the treaty."

So he's not completely prejudiced against Solarians, then. That's good. I was afraid that the delegates might flat-out refuse to acknowledge the treaty, even as ineffectual as it is now. That gives me hope enough to ask my next question, once Cancarnette's throat has moved to swallow the wine—and the truth serum—down.

"That's a lovely pendant," I say after I've tilted my own glass back. I gesture to the ornament hanging on Cancarnette's chest, a delicate figurine of a bird of prey, an eagle, carved out of pale, marble-like stone, white with blue veins. "Is it a family heirloom?"

I know he is a lover of jewels and precious things, or at least a connoisseur. When Marcus was comatose, one of the first Innkeeper duties I carried out in my uncle's stead was overseeing a trade negotiation between Cancarnette and a Byrnisian merchant—Fiorden furs in exchange for Byrnisian jewels. Most of their talk went right over my head, as scared and overwhelmed as I was. But I remember the hunger in Cancarnette's eyes when he looked over Mima's spread of jewels.

The lord reaches up to trace the amulet with long fingers. "Indeed." Pride colors his voice. "It belonged to my mother before me, and her

father before her. Furs are my father's trade, but my mother and grandfather raised eagles for a living."

I'm momentarily distracted as I imagine a Fiorden eagle. All the animals in the great forest of Myr—the Fiordenkill country on the other side of the door—are many times larger than their counterparts on Earth. What must it be like, to face down an eagle with a wingspan as long as a car? To know that it'll come when you call?

"The piece is beautiful," I say admiringly. "You know, Brekken told me a story once about a knight whose beloved gave him a pendant enchanted with her healing magic. And after that, no matter what opponents he crossed or how they wounded him, the pendant healed him and sustained him so that as long as he wore it, he would never fall."

I lift my hand up as if to touch Cancarnette's pendant, and then let it go, weaving wistfulness into my voice. "Do you think such a thing could ever be?"

Cancarnette smiles. "Magic belongs to people, Miss Morrow. The wild gods granted it to us; it runs through our blood. To enchant a lifeless object, no matter how beautiful, would be blasphemy."

My heart speeds, as I notice that he's said it's wrong, not that it can't be done. "Of course. Naturally."

"I remember that story," Cancarnette goes on. "But perhaps your soldier left out the part about how while the knight was adventuring, his lover fell ill. Having poured all her magic into the pendant, she had none left for herself and died alone."

I feel myself flinch. "I hadn't heard that part." He's right, Brekken never told me.

"Even had the knight returned the pendant to her, it wouldn't have saved her," Cancarnette goes on, his raised voice showing annoyance. "Once magic is torn from you, it cannot be reintegrated, not in the same way. Of course, that doesn't stop the magpies."

He takes a sip of wine, his eyes bright and hazy. I edge closer as the dance swirls all around us, my heart beating fast. Even cloaked in riddles and fables, this is more than I've gotten out of any of the other delegates. "Magpies?"

"Collectors," Cancarnette clarifies, the scorn clear in his voice. "There are some who hoard such objects, believing themselves above the corruption."

"Like who?" I ask eagerly.

The haziness clears for a second from Cancarnette's eyes, and he looks me over skeptically.

"No one you need concern yourself with," he says with a scoff. "Princess Enetta would never grant them a token to come to Havenfall."

"But—" I bite my tongue, frustration mounting. "If binding magic is blasphemous, where do the objects come from?"

I should have phrased it in a more diplomatic, less pointed way, but I sense the Fiorden lord is growing bored with me, with this conversation. My time is running out. And if he knows something . . .

But I've let myself be sidetracked. There are plenty of people from whom I might learn something about the soul trade, but I need Cancarnette's signature on the treaty. I fumble to take it out with the hand not holding my glass, too flustered to think of a smooth transition. "Could I get your signature on the treaty?" I ask, hoping I at least sound winning.

Cancarnette takes the folio. I can see his eyes roving, searching for loopholes or catches.

When he's done, Cancarnette arches one eyebrow. "Isn't that a little premature?" His eyes skate around the room. "How are we to execute a treaty between four parties, when only three are present?"

I resist the urge to remind him that we talked about this in the meetings, if he had bothered to attend. Instead, I point to the line on the

page where it says Solaria will become part of the Adjacent Realms *if its people should wish it*. “Marcus accounted for that.”

“Well, if the Innkeeper says so.” He takes my pen and smiles indulgently as he signs. As he passes the treaty back to me—his signature bold and looping at the bottom—I’m bothered by the sense he isn’t taking this, taking *me*, seriously.

At least he didn’t refuse outright. I feared that might be the case, seeing as lots of the Fiorden and Byrnisian delegates probably still hate Solarians. They’re governed—as I was until recently—by stories of soul-devouring, shapeshifter monsters, fiery-eyed and sharp-clawed creatures who would tear you limb from limb just for the joy of it. Two weeks ago, we were hunting my friend Taya in the woods with knives and guns. But she saved me . . . us . . . Havenfall from the Silver Prince. I admit I was hoping for a little more enthusiasm from Cancarnette.

Still, Cancarnette isn’t wrong. This is a hollow treaty, tonight a hollow celebration, seeing as we don’t have any actual Solarians here. Not since Taya disappeared into the golden light of the Solarian doorway and the door sealed closed behind her, leaving only a blank wall of stone.

I have no way to reach her, no way to know if she’s even alive. There’s nothing I can do to help her—nothing at all, except to do my best to make this world safe for when she comes back.

She has to come back, right?

I can’t think about that now, or I’ll lose heart. I blink and focus on my surroundings, trying to get the image of her face in my mind—her radiant, powerful expression in the moment before she slipped through the door to Solaria—to recede.

But it doesn’t, and I feel suddenly claustrophobic, suffocated. Everything is color and music and light and laughter now, but suddenly I feel the aches and pains left over in my muscles from the fight with the Silver Prince. The Prince himself might be gone, but he’s taken with him

the unconditional trust and happiness I once felt within these walls. Now I know it's possible for enemies to enter here, and everything feels a little warped, a little off, tainted.

It's impossible to know for sure that everyone in this room means us well. I learned my lesson about blind trust, and it came at a cost.

A decorative chapter number '2' centered on the page. The number is enclosed in a circular frame with intricate, symmetrical scrollwork and flourishes extending outwards from the top, bottom, and sides.

THE NIGHT HAS ONLY JUST started, but I need a breather. Before I can think too much about it, I hurry from the ballroom, walking fast but aimlessly down the hall until the noise from the dancing recedes. A moment ago I was nervous but confident; now I feel raw, panicked, like the task facing me is impossible. And the last thing I need is for the delegates to see me freak out. I don't want to go all the way back up to my room, but I think I need to be alone. Fortunately, Marcus gave me a copy of all the inn's keys.

In the small, secure room that Marcus calls the armory, silver glitters all around me, and I feel the weight of souls in the air. A tiny window set close to the ceiling lets in orange sunset light, but only a little. The air is chilly and smells like pine, and it's blissfully silent.

But as soon as the door closes behind me, I realize I chose the wrong place to calm my nerves. It's usually empty in here, but now silver objects

stacked on shelves all around me catch and refract the sunlight, turning it strange and cold.

Jewelry—rings and necklaces and bracelets, earrings dripping with jewels, goblets and coins, vases and candlesticks and any other small precious thing you could think of—all of it is here. Once, I would have thought the pearlescent silver beautiful. It still is, but I can never look at the pieces the same way again, now that I know what they're used for. Now that I know the truth beneath the surface . . . that they're black market soul-silver. I can't look at any of it without feeling an overwhelming knot of guilt and dread in my stomach.

I only learned about the silver trade—the soul trade—a few weeks ago. I'd always been taught the same thing about the Adjacent Realms that Cancarnette said a few minutes ago—that only people can possess magic, not objects. But it turns out that isn't entirely true. Someone has been capturing Solarians and binding slivers of their souls, like pieces of string, to silver. The metal can then become enchanted with bits of magic—like Fiorden healing magic, or Byrnian fire-wielding powers.

It seems silly now that I thought I could find anything out about the soul trade with a few indirect questions tossed casually to the delegates. While we know of some of the human buyers—the Heiress got their names when she was working with them and pretending to be one of them—there are no records of who brought the objects in or out of the other Realms.

Turning around in this small room, I meet the worried gaze of a hundred warped reflections. I want to believe that my beloved Havenfall wasn't the focal point, that the stolen souls didn't pass through here. But if the traders come from Fiordenkill or Byrn, the inn is the only place they can exist outside of their own respective worlds. Byrnians and Fiordens have been known to leave the safety of the inn's walls and



walk into the town of Haven for short periods of time, but they can't go farther than that without getting sick. If the soul traders aren't smuggling silver through the inn or town, they must have access to the Realms somewhere else in order to smuggle the magic between worlds.

Could it really be possible? That there are other ways to enter other Realms? Marcus thinks that the world used to have more doorways, that Havenfall wasn't always the only one. When I was a kid, that possibility seemed wondrous, and I often wished that I would stumble upon a doorway in a janitor's closet at school or in the fallow fields behind my mom's house. But now the idea makes me sick with worry. There's just so much, and we don't know about all of it.

Music drifts in through the closed door. The Elemental Orchestra has started playing a merry jaunt. I should be headed back already. I have a job to do tonight. I can't let myself get derailed so easily going forward.

I take a deep breath and remind myself that this, what I'm doing, is in service to the captive souls. We need to know how the objects are being made, how they are getting into Havenfall, and who's doing it. Maybe it's someone in the ballroom right now.

I reach up to touch a silver vase, not really for courage, more as a reminder of what I have to do. Why tonight is important. Why I have to succeed.

Then I arrange my face into a smile and slip from the armory, pulling my shoulders back as I stride down the hall and back toward the ballroom.

The first thing I notice upon reentering is that *Brekken is here*. He stands by the entrance just inside the ballroom, as if he is waiting for me. I witness the moment he notices me, watch the sweet, startled smile unfurl across his face.

Seeing him is strange—it quiets and amplifies my nerves at the same

time. Makes my heart feel light, but also makes it beat faster and unevenly. He looks amazing in a short velvet cape hanging smartly off his sharply angled shoulders—finery he hasn't worn since that first night he arrived at Havenfall. His copper hair is combed back to accentuate his handsome face and brilliant blue eyes.

He smiles softly at me as I get close, pushing away from the wall. "I was just looking for you. I thought you'd be here by now." He must see something off in my expression, because his brow creases in concern. "You all right?"

I nod. "Just needed a minute." Looking into the ballroom, though, I don't know if my few minutes in the armory with the silver objects has helped or hurt my calm. The responsibility—both to execute the peace treaty and to do everything I can to free the Solarians trapped in the silver—feels all the heavier now.

Brekken's hand finds mine. "You can do this."

Startled, I look up at him. "I don't know." The words fall out unbidden.

Brekken steps closer to me. Something has shifted between us in the days since he came back from Fiordenkill, where he'd fled after witnessing the Silver Prince murder his own servant, Bram—the chain of events that set everything off, all the ill events of this summer. I had been angry with Brekken, not knowing where he went or why, even harboring a suspicion—before the Silver Prince's guilt came to light—that Brekken was the traitor. Even though we're safe now and I know the truth that he was trying to help, the weight of that suspicion hasn't entirely dissipated.

Brekken has been careful with me, not like the easy familiarity we had as kids. But the way he's holding my hand—well, that's different from how we were as kids too. He looks at me like he has utter faith in me. It's almost enough to give me faith in myself. Almost.

“Just be your charming self,” Brekken says now, raising my hand to brush my knuckles with his lips.

It’s a courtly gesture, one that probably means nothing to him, but it still makes my pulse even more erratic.

“Charming, yeah, that’s me,” I say jokingly, but I don’t think the sarcasm comes across with my voice all breathy and trembly.

Brekken squeezes my hand gently before letting it fall. “Shall we?”

I nod, and we make our way side by side deeper into the ballroom. The high spirits of the party guests sweep us up right away. It feels easier to be a part of it, now that Brekken is by my side. I retrieve my tray of spiked wine from the credenza where it was stashed and throw myself back into the politicking.

With Brekken near, his presence drawing me out, I feel bolder approaching two Byrnisian delegates, Lonan and Mima. They break off their conversation—gossip about who was rumored to be slipping into the gardens with whom and which buyers are angling for which bargains—and listen curiously as I give my pitch.

They agree to sign as well, but like Cancarnette, seem to regard it as some kind of amusement. Not real, not binding. But that doesn’t matter. All that matters is the signatures on the page.

Three down. Then four, five. The more signatures I get, the easier it is to obtain each successive one, as the delegates see their peers are willing to align with Solarians again.

They’ll understand the importance of it once Solarians return to Havenfall, once we start taking down the soul trade. It’s been just a few weeks since everything at Havenfall has both turned upside down and clicked into place, hardly any time at all. I feel ashamed that I ever thought Solarians were evil—now that I know they’re just people, and many are victims, hunted for their ability to capture magic in exchange for pieces of their soul. The delegates haven’t seen the things I’ve seen.

They don't truly know Solarians like Taya or Nate.

Nate . . . My brother's face flashes across my mind, but I push it away. Last week, I realized everything I thought I knew about Nate was untrue. The boy I thought was my biological brother was actually a Solarian, rescued from the soul trade by Marcus and raised by my mom as one of us. Nate was—is?—Taya's blood brother. And he was not killed by my mother or an intruder ten years ago. He was kidnapped, presumably into the silver trade.

This is another reason why I must find out more about the traders. There's no guarantee Nate's still alive after all these years. I have only seen the tiniest corner of the soul trade, and I don't know how survivable it is. But knowing that he was taken, when I was sure beyond a doubt he was dead, is enough to plant the seed of hope.

He could be out there.

I could find him.

And if there's any way to find him, it will surely be through the soul trade—following the corruption as deep and wide as it goes. Hoping that it hasn't destroyed my brother.

But while I'm occupied scanning the room for another suitably influential delegate to go after, Brekken suddenly leans down and kisses my cheek.

I look up, surprised, to see his face abnormally bright and open, flushed in a way I've almost never seen him. Not since a few weeks ago in the hayloft, his body against mine, his face inches from mine, millimeters . . . I feel heat flood my own face at the memory.

"Brekken," I say, startled, and that's when I see a tumbler of fruity wine in his hand that matches the others on my tray—my tray that I realize now is one glass lighter. Crap. I never told him about the wine.

"I just wanted to dance with you," he says with a grin.

Any other time I'd be thrilled at the prospect, but I have signatures

to gather. And I feel bad that he accidentally drank the truth serum. And yet . . . His eyes are shining. And I feel both frustration and worry melt away, bubbly excitement rising in me like champagne. Surely one song couldn't hurt.

I let him sweep me into a dance as the next song starts. It's easy, since his movements are so graceful and self-assured. I let him lead me. Let the fears swirl in my wake like so many dead leaves at the end of the summer.

Brekken leads me into the thick of the dance. Silk and velvet rustle around us, music and perfume and laughter melding in a delirious aura. When we reach a pocket of space on the floor, he claims it, turning and wrapping his arms around me. He's still grinning like he just won the freaking lottery.

"Brekken." I have to stand up and speak close to his ear to be heard, not wanting to shout. Sometimes his skin is cool to the touch, but somehow, wrapped up in him like this—my hands on his shoulders, his around my waist—I'm warm all over. "I'm really sorry. There was a truth serum in that wine. I didn't mean for you to have it . . ."

But I guess I'm not loud enough, because Brekken tilts his head, eyes crinkling with confusion. "What?"

"I—" But then the music kicks up into a faster, lively section, and my words are lost in the cheer that goes up from the crowd of delegates. I give up. "Never mind," I say, loud enough for Brekken to hear. This conversation is better suited for another time anyway, sometime when I have the space and quiet to explain myself.

He grins at me, lifting me off my feet, and we dance; and my worries ebb away again. I'm usually no good at this—which is why I usually park myself behind the bar during Havenfall's nightly dancing. Maybe it's the couple of glasses of wine in me, or the feeling that I finally got somewhere with Cancarnette and the magpies he mentioned. It's not

much of a lead, but it's better than nothing. Whatever the case, I feel slightly lighter.

As the gravity of the music swirls us around the ballroom—somehow slow and fast at the same time, other dancers coming together then making way for us like it's all been choreographed—I catch a glimpse of Marcus holding a tall glass of ice, sitting next to Graylin in one of the golden carved chairs lining the sides of the room. Marcus isn't dancing or schmoozing at the bar anymore, and he looks tired, but at least he's here and upright. Marcus has been getting better slowly but surely since the Silver Prince forced open the door to Solaria and threw the inn into imbalance. He's not the same as before, that much is clear, but at least we have him back.

The truth of the matter is that none of us are the same, really. At the beginning of the summer, my uncle took me to task for my closeness with Brekken, now that he was a soldier. He said that paying too much attention to him could look like favoritism, and Innkeepers are meant to be impartial. The delegates at Havenfall have stuck around through chaos and fear and upheaval. I doubt seeing me dance with Brekken is going to faze them, and if it does, well, in all my summers here I've seen them do a lot more embarrassing things with the help of wine.

By the time the song is over, the currents of the dance floor have taken Brekken and me to a corner of the room. Relative quiet falls as the band takes a breather and a sip of wine—normal wine this time. I drop my hands from Brekken's shoulders, self-conscious. But he grabs them before they fall all the way to my sides, and holds them between us.

I feel heat rise to my face and hope I'm not tomato red as his fingers fold around mine. What the Heiress told me floats back into my mind. That the serum only brings out impulses, and truths, that were already there.

“Brekken . . .” I start, trying to figure out how to break it to him, when he leans forward and cuts off my words with his lips.

My breath catches. Suddenly it seems like all my senses have been dialed up to eleven; and yet, somehow, the world has fallen quiet. My eyes flutter shut, but I still hear everything: the Elemental Orchestra launching into a new, slower, aching song; the low threads of conversation crisscrossing the room like spider silk. The fizz of champagne in glasses, and the late summer wind whispering outside the walls.

And Brekken. Everywhere, Brekken. His hands on my waist, polite and chaste but burning hot and trembling a little. The solidness of his shoulders under my hands, muscles shifting beneath cloth. The scent of him, like an ice wind. And his lips, warm on mine, moving gently at first and then more urgently.

People must be looking, I think. I can feel the weight of eyes on my back. But I don’t care. I can’t bring myself to care. Brekken’s taking over everything—until he breaks away to take a breath, and we realize at the same time that we’re surrounded by a circle of onlookers, some smiling indulgently, some looking scandalized. A different kind of heat, one I like much less, rises to my cheeks. I grab Brekken’s hands and lift them from my sides.

“Let’s take this somewhere else, shall we?” I ask with a smile.

As we head out, I accidentally meet Marcus’s gaze across the room, and he doesn’t look happy.

Guilt slides in . . . but then it dissipates. I hold my uncle’s stare. Without me, the inn would be in chaos right now. Who’s to say we would even be here, dancing, if the Silver Prince had gotten his way? We’re not safe yet, not by a long shot, but I think I’ve earned a little bit of freedom. I hold my head high and square my shoulders as I lead Brekken out of the ballroom. Not embarrassed, not scurrying as I once might have.

Let them look. Who I kiss is none of their business. There's only two weeks left in the summit anyway.

Outside, we automatically meander past the gardens and find ourselves skirting the edge of the woods. We don't speak, but we don't need to; the silence is a comfortable one, built up like layers of lacquer by years of friendship.

My breath hitches only when we pass a spot where the undergrowth is slightly trampled, some of the leaves and branches indented. Brekken doesn't know it, no one would even notice unless they were looking closely, but this is the path Graylin and I cut to the clearing where we buried Bram.

Unbidden, a memory sneaks in of Taya, her face in the dark as I emerged from the woods. I tense a little, and Brekken looks down at me, his hand tightening around mine.

"Are you sure you're all right?" His voice is soft, languid.

"I'm fine."

*Shake it off.* Thinking about Taya when I'm holding hands with Brekken makes me feel guilty. Both of them have claimed a part of my heart. I've loved Brekken since I was a kid, but earlier this summer I thought Brekken had double-crossed me and Havenfall. Marcus was sick, and I had no idea who I could trust. Taya was the only one who seemed to understand. Not to mention those dark eyes, her motorcycle jacket and crooked smile. Of course I caught feelings for her.

When I look at Brekken, though, I can't quell a low, wild excitement deep in my chest—that how he's looking at me now, with tenderness and longing and not a little hunger, is how he really feels. And part of me feels that way about him too.

I tug his hand onward until we're past the woods, away from the inn. We come to a stop at the edge of Mirror Lake. It spreads out before



us, reflecting the purple dusk sky. For a moment, we stand side by side in silence, watching the stars slowly make themselves known overhead.

“Did you learn anything from Cancarnette?” Brekken asks at length. The music from the Havenfall ballroom reaches us faintly, spilled from open windows and floating through the twilight, now backed up by a chorus of crickets and frogs.

“A little,” I say. “I told him that story you told me when we were little, about the knight and the princess with her healing pendant. But you left out the ending, Brekken.” I speak lightly, finishing with a laugh, but the space between us suddenly feels a little denser.

“Did I?” Brekken says. His voice is similarly light, but when I glance at him, his eyes are serious. “Well, who could blame me?” He turns his body toward mine, and I find myself automatically doing the same, like a magnet responding to a lode. “I want to make everything perfect for you.”

“Perfect doesn’t exist,” I say, grinning.

But he doesn’t grin back. He looks intently at me. “I disagree.”

And he leans down to kiss me again.

This time, without our audience of delegates, things get heated quickly. His hands roam over my back and sides; my tongue slips out to taste his lips, sugar and frost and mulled wine. That reminds me of the truth serum, and the guilt slices through the dizzy want. I turn my face to the side—just a little, our bodies still pressed together—and gasp the words into his ear.

“Brekken, wait.”

He freezes immediately, then steps back, concern creasing his face. The evening air that rushes into the space between us feels extra cold, and I reach after him.

“No, don’t go, I’m fine—”

“Then what’s wrong?” His voice is husky, his cheeks pink and eyes hazy bright.

I don’t remember running my hands through his hair, but I must have, because his usually tidy copper locks are messy and wild. He lets me grab the lapels of his jacket and pull him back close to me, but all he does is rest his hands cautiously on my waist.

“That wine,” I say, shame and happiness running circles inside me. “It had a truth serum in it. I just wanted to find out if the delegates knew about the soul trade—”

“A serum?” Brekken says. But instead of the shock and indignation I expect, his words carry the edge of laughter. He blinks and smiles at me. “Maddie, I knew that.”

The relief that hits me is profound and immediate. “You did?”

“I mean, not before I drank it,” Brekken clarifies. “But after that it was fairly obvious.”

“And . . .” I wait for him to go on, to reprimand me, but he doesn’t. “You’re not mad?”

“About using it on me or on the delegates?”

“Either,” I say. “Both?”

He shakes his head, his face growing serious. “Once I might have been. But that was before I found out about the soul trade. Now I know we have to end this however we can.”

I think of my brother, Nate. A sense of resolve and relief fills me, relief that Brekken feels the same way. “I agree.”

He leans in and kisses me again. It’s not so wild this time, but tender and slow and serious. Like a promise. I kiss him back, winding my arms around his neck, playing with the impossibly soft hairs at the nape of his neck. I feel like I’m falling through space, but gently somehow. There’s no fear in it. Suddenly I know that whatever I decide to do next,

Brekken will be behind me, and that makes me feel so much braver. Like maybe I can actually do this.

“Did Cancarnette tell you what happened to the knight in the story?” Brekken whispers after a few minutes, low and close to my ear.

For a moment I don't want to hear any more. I want to tell him I only want to know if there's a happy ending. But I stop myself. Surely, after everything, I can handle a story. “Just that the lady died from an illness.”

“After the lady died, the heartbroken knight wandered through all the worlds,” Brekken says. “There were more Realms then, more than we even remember. He traveled them all, and he slayed monsters and protected the innocent in every one. But he never came back to Fiordenkill. Either he perished in one of the other realms or he decided to stay away.”

I pull back and stare. “That's a terrible ending,” I say, indignant.

Brekken blinks, like he's been caught up in a dream and I just pulled him out of it. “Is it?” he says. “I always thought it bittersweet. How even without his lady, he found life again in new worlds. Perhaps he even found a new love in one of them.”

“But it doesn't make sense,” I press. “How could he have traveled to other worlds without getting sick?”

Brekken shrugs. “Supposedly he had some talisman that let him pass through. I don't remember exactly. But, Maddie, lots of them have just such a traveler.” His hands tighten around mine. “Maybe it's possible. Maybe we've just forgotten how.”

“You're drunk,” I say, giggling despite the spike of sadness that's just gone through me.

“No, I've had truth serum. And whose fault is that?”

His lips graze my temple, my cheek, and a thrilling, bone-deep want rolls through me.

But . . . I still have a job to do. I can't make out with Brekken here by the lake all night. Even if at the moment, I want badly to do just that. I stop his lips with a finger before they can find mine again.

"I have to get the rest of the signatures," I say breathlessly, hoarsely. "On the peace treaty."

Brekken sighs; cool air brushes my fingers. "All right, then." He steps away from me with a heavy, regretful sigh. "Can I help you?"

"Sure." I try to sound businesslike, even though my body aches like a part of me has been torn away now that he's not touching me anymore. "Talk it up to the Fiorden delegation, so that they're willing to sign when I come round. And . . ." I hesitate, then go on. "I've been trying to dig up information about the soul trade, how the objects got through Havenfall without us noticing. So if you hear anything about collectors, or silver merchants, or magpies, listen close."

With the mention of the soul trade, the lightness drains out of the moment, both of us remembering what we have to do. Our responsibility. Brekken straightens up and combs his fingers through his hair, making it fall back into place. I touch my mouth with my fingertip, hoping my lip stain isn't smeared.

Brekken reaches out to cradle my cheek for one more moment, then lets his hand fall. "All right," he says, turning back toward the inn, his eyes fixing on the golden lights of its windows. "Onward."