

Song of Trails Bonus Chapter

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: Two years after the events of the book

Haiden

Haiden hoisted his rucksack up on his shoulder, glancing behind him. He felt foolish, sneaking out like a thief in the night. Foolish, and a little cowardly. But he'd left a letter for his sister. It wasn't as though she'd be left wondering what had happened to him.

He just couldn't face the inevitable goodbye. In the two years since they'd come to live in Vallen, Gisela had become infinitely better at letting him take charge of his own life. But she still wouldn't approve of his plan. And he didn't want to try to convince her that he hadn't lost his mind. He wanted to follow his nose, even if it was reckless, even if it led him into trouble.

One thing he was determined on. If it did lead him into trouble, he'd get himself out. He wouldn't look to his now-royal sister for assistance. Not ever. She didn't deserve to be burdened with a demanding, foolhardy little brother, and frankly he didn't want to rely on her for rescue.

He knew she'd say he was too young to go off on his own, and her husband would probably agree. Otto was an excellent sort, and Haiden felt nothing but warmth for his brother-in-law. But the prince was cautious by nature, an attribute Haiden couldn't relate to. He wanted to explore, to discover.

And after all, seventeen wasn't so young, he argued mentally with his absent sister. He'd done two full years at the Academy of Song now. His understanding of magic and his singing capabilities were improved beyond all recognition since his days of living isolated in the forest. He felt confident to face any threat that came his way. He wasn't a fool—he knew there was plenty more to learn. It was tempting to take the offered senior apprenticeship at the academy. But that would mean two more years in the capital, and he felt too restless for that. Prior to coming to Terenford, he hadn't lived in a stationary home since he was a small child. Everything in him told him it was time to move, time to find a new sanctuary, time to discover the next corner of his world.

Haiden didn't deny to himself that part of his motivation in leaving was Gisela's royal status. Not that he begrudged it for a moment. On the contrary, he felt more at peace about leaving his sister behind knowing that she was not only well provided for but genuinely happy in her new life. Her husband was her world, and he had no doubt that their family would grow before long. He was happy for her, but he felt none of the connection that now tied her to the castle and the capital. And being the brother of the commonborn princess put him in a strange and not entirely comfortable position. It was hard to find his place in Terenford, and he wasn't sure he wanted to. He hated the diplomatic dance of the court, but his visibility made him feel ill-at-ease among the regular townsfolk.

In short, he didn't want to spend his whole life living in Gisela's shadow and benefiting from her elevated circumstances.

Perhaps that last part was childish, Haiden reflected, as he moved through the sleeping city, but it was the truth. And why deny the truth to himself? He'd expressed it more gracefully in the letter he'd left for Gisela, and he could only hope that she'd understand. She'd worry, he knew that. Try as she might not to be that way, after a lifetime of protecting him, she couldn't help herself.

But he didn't want to be protected from this adventure. He'd had this plan since they first came to Terenford, and it seemed to him that it was well and truly time to put it into motion. He intended to travel east across Teren and into Frossenland. In fact, he wanted to cross the whole kingdom of Frossenland and continue into Vadolis, exploring as he went.

He actually wanted to go even further east than that, but he certainly hadn't admitted as much to anyone. He didn't think a single person would approve of his intention to try to sail eastward from Vadolis to see if he could reach the Reviled Lands. Just as not a single person seemed able to understand his need to know more about the land which Providore had cut off from all contact generations ago.

Everyone said it was impossible to reach the Reviled Lands. Apparently it would only lead to death. But Haiden wasn't satisfied with this answer. It sounded to him like the kind of vague and ominous bedtime story people told children when they wanted to scare them into following the rules.

And those had never been very effective on him. If they had, maybe he would have stayed in his bed that fateful night, and never received Asivah's prophecy.

He reflected on that thought as he left the city, cutting across country under the light of a nearly full moon. In spite of all that had passed, he didn't think he regretted that decision. He certainly didn't regret learning of his singing ability. It was such a part of him, he couldn't imagine being without it. He wouldn't feel like himself.

Asivah's prophecy, on the other hand, he could probably have lived without. Gisela spoke of it as if it was a great triumph of Haiden's, that he'd overcome the seemingly dark nature of it, and in so doing revealed both his own good heart and the true, more honorable, nature of the prophecy.

Haiden didn't quite see it that way.

Much as he wanted to believe that Gisela was right, both that the prophecy had ultimately been a testament to the strength of his character and that it was now over, Haiden couldn't be confident of it.

He couldn't shake the memory of the moment when he and Gisela had discovered that their mother's death would free them from the curse trapping them in the Forest of Ilgal. Their mother, in a pitiful state, had said that it might be best for her life to end. Gisela, tender-hearted as she was under all her tough exterior, had been instant in repudiating the suggestion.

Haiden wished he could say the same. But the terrible truth was that he'd thought about it. For a moment, he'd wanted it. He'd felt the savage surge of justice in the thought that his mother might die as she'd tried to leave him to die when only a small child.

He'd overcome the urge, of course. To the outward eye, he would have seemed to barely hesitate before agreeing with Gisela that they'd never considering taking their mother's life to gain their freedom. But in his heart...the question lingered. If Gisela hadn't been there, and the choice had been up to him alone...

Part of him didn't want to know the answer to the unfinished question.

And part of him desperately needed to know. He needed to know who he was without Gisela. He needed to know if he was really a good person, a strong person, when removed from his sister's

protection and constant determination to see the best in him. He'd never known life without her, and with her drastic rise in position, he knew now that he never would unless he took big steps to separate himself from her.

Perhaps that was why he didn't feel as though the prophecy had fully let go of its hold on him.

Or perhaps, whispered an unnerving voice in the back of his mind, you feel that way because it isn't done. Perhaps you feel that way because the prophecy is still active, still controlling your future the way it controlled your past.

He tried to shake the thought off, unnerved as he always was when it reared its head. He had no logical reason to think that Asivah's prophecy still lingered magically around him, influencing his decisions and his path. But he also had no proof that it didn't. And the fact that the question persisted so strongly in his mind sometimes seemed proof enough that it wasn't fully over.

But he wasn't running away from it, he told himself defensively as he moved silently over the moonlit fields. He wasn't running away from anything. He was moving toward something, and doing it of his own free will.

At least, that was the plan. He would find his freedom, even if he had to cross continents to do it. And he would do it without help from anyone.

Look out for my upcoming novella featuring Haiden in his own story. More details to come.