

PART ONE OF DELETED SCENE FROM ISLAND OF SECRETS AND SACRIFICE

by Deborah Grace White

(Set immediately after Chapter Eleven)

Haiden slipped quietly from the hut, but not before making sure that his protective enchantments were still in place. Once he was satisfied that no one would be able to reach Ember in his absence, he strode off into the trees. In spite of Ember's deep sleep, the night was very young. By the time he reached Arville, the tavern's evening business was only just beginning.

The appearance of the monster in the doorway of the establishment brought an instant hush, which Haiden ignored. He was used to the way people responded to him. It didn't really even bother him anymore. And although it had been some time since his last visit to town, his presence was known enough for the shocked silence to quickly subside. Murmurs and whispers took its place, and soon the volume of the room was restored, although most eyes still rested on his ghastly form.

"Come for a drink, lad?" The barkeep looked him over with a shrewd eye. It was endearing that he still spoke to Haiden as if he was that hotheaded—and very human—seventeen-year-old who'd run into trouble in this very tavern five years ago.

"Sure," said Haiden. "A tankard of whatever the house is serving." He slapped a few coins onto the bar. "I'm also after some information."

"Of course you are," the barkeep said indulgently, pulling out a passably clean tankard.

"Three men came into my clearing this morning," Haiden said. "They were armed and looking for trouble. And they weren't from town."

"Ah." The man nodded wisely as he pushed Haiden's ale toward him. "There was a group passed through here the other day. Asking for work down the wharf, from what I heard."

"Aye," chipped in a man sitting at the bar. Haiden vaguely recognized him as a local fisherman. "Had a very unsavory look about them, though. They were moved along pretty quickly. Like as not they wanted to steal from us, not work for us."

Haiden grunted. "Any idea who they were?"

The man shook his head as he took a pull from his own tankard. "How should I, boar-man? I never seen them before."

"Heard anything about someone hiring them to do a bit of dirty work?" Haiden pressed, disregarding the less-than-polite mode of address.

"Nah." The man didn't seem particularly invested in the conversation. Or maybe he just didn't want to look at Haiden's unnatural features. "I keep my head down, mostly. Sometimes it *pays* not to know things I don't strictly need to know."

With a sigh, Haiden took the hint, sliding a coin across the bar. The fisherman whisked it into his pocket in a movement so smooth, Haiden's eyes barely caught it.

"I don't know who hired them, if anyone," the man said. "I'm pretty sure it wasn't any of the sailors." He put down his empty tankard. "But the talk down the wharf at the moment is about that elf."

"The elf?" Haiden asked sharply. "The one who's been hanging around Arville for years?"

The fisherman nodded. "Yeah, him. Been seen down the wharf a lot lately. Asking lots of questions."

“Questions about what?” Haiden demanded.

At a suggestive look, he slid another coin over to his informant.

“About a girl some of the men picked up in a little fishing vessel not long ago. She was adrift out on the sea, dunno where she came from. But she gave them the boat in exchange for their help, and they said it’s not of a design they’ve seen before. General opinion is that she didn’t come from down the coast, but from somewhere further out.”

A man sitting at the nearest table snorted, apparently having been listening to the conversation. “You think some girl floated all the way here from the Reviled Lands in a rowboat?”

“I didn’t say the Reviled Lands, did I?” the fishermen said in irritation. “I just said not from down our coast.”

“When was the elf last at the wharf?” Haiden asked, cutting across their argument.

The fisherman shrugged, standing up and grabbing his coat from the stool beside him. “Yesterday was the last time I heard. But I was out on the water most of today, so who knows?”

With the words, he walked out, no doubt pleased to have had his evening’s repast at the tavern paid for. Haiden turned to the barkeep.

“Do you know where I can find the elf?”

The barkeep flipped his drying cloth over one shoulder so as to raise both hands in a gesture of defense.

“Don’t look to me, lad. I’m not getting involved.”

Haiden narrowed his eyes, wondering how hard to push for information. Before he could formulate a strategy, however, a theatrical gasp drew his attention to the stairway that led up to the tavern’s few rooms.

“You!”

It took Haiden a moment to place the girl who’d spoken in such disgusted tones. Her eyes were wide and reproachful as they rested on him, her hair pulled back into a sleek blond braid.

Ah, yes. His latest visitor. Well, prior to Ember, that was. And the three hired attackers, if they counted as visitors. Not to mention whoever had unleashed the magic from that talisman, also targeted at Ember.

It had really been a busy week in his hermit clearing.

“What are you still doing here?” Haiden asked, his eyes flicking to the young man descending the stairs behind her.

“Me?” she said, sounding affronted. “What are *you* doing here? I’m a paying customer.”

Haiden grunted. “As long as you stay away from my clearing.”

She didn’t answer at once, a calculating look creeping into her eyes as they swept over the scene. Haiden’s heart sank. He could almost see his efforts in presenting an uncivilized image and convincing her he wasn’t worth the trouble crumble before the sight of him sitting in the tavern speaking with other men like he was human.

“Where’s the other girl?”

Haiden stiffened, then cursed himself for the telling reaction. “What other girl?”

“The one who came in here full of airs, acting horrified that you were a singer, but also trying to defend your honor,” the girl said with a sniff. “She disappeared.”

Haiden hid a smile, and not just because it was hard to imagine that between the two young women in question, Ember had been the one *full of airs*. What had she said in defense of him back then? She'd still thought him a murderous monster.

"I don't know who you're talking about," he lied smoothly. It wasn't part of his plan to reveal Ember's whereabouts to anyone.

"She went back to you, didn't she?" the girl said, as if he hadn't spoken. Her eyes were narrowed. "Don't tell me you let her stay!"

"So Ember's the girl who the elf was asking about, then?" the barkeep interjected, his tone satisfied. "I thought as much. Where did she come from on that boat?"

Haiden wanted to groan. The barkeep knew her name? It was already too much information.

"Thanks for the drink," he said, draining the rest of the tankard and thudding it onto the wooden counter. Aware that every eye in the place was once again on him, he strode for the door.

It was a stroke of bad luck that the blond girl had turned up and exposed his connection to Ember in front of everyone. No doubt that information would spread like an unchecked fire throughout the little town. And that could only put Ember in danger. Not that it made much difference in terms of the attempts on her life. Haiden was now convinced the elf was behind them, and the creature clearly already knew where to find her.

Haiden would have liked to have tracked down the elf's whereabouts, but he would have to pursue that through other means. It felt too risky to leave Ember alone for any longer than he already had, especially if everyone knew where she was.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so eager to reach home.

Any home.

PART TWO OF DELETED SCENE FROM ISLAND OF SECRETS AND SACRIFICE (Set during Chapter Twelve as an alternative sequence of events after the shaving scene)

"I'll give you some space to finish up," Ember said emotionlessly, turning away from Haiden.

He didn't stop her, and she continued all the way outside. Her thoughts were disordered, to say the least. She'd never felt anything like what she'd felt when Haiden came so close to her. She'd certainly never felt that way for Gil. In fact, she felt absolutely sure it would never have been possible to feel that way for Gil. Someone like Noani might. But Ember had always sensed that there was no one in the small island community who could understand her enough to make her want to let them in like that.

Well, there could be no doubt that there was no one on the island like Haiden. Was there anyone anywhere like Haiden?

Ember felt her song stirring inside her, and she raised her voice without a thought. Once she'd discovered how to follow the impulse, it felt unnatural to deny it. She thought she'd like to spend her whole life singing, if it was practical.

But the song that emerged from her now was unlike any she'd sung the day before. The melody was low and sad, expressing her complicated emotions better than speech ever could. And with the song came power, magic that Ember drew inside her and then released. She didn't know how to do much with it yet, but she managed to direct it into a breeze that swirled the leaves of the nearest tree. It was an outlet for her pent up tension more than anything else.

In his willingness to train her in songcraft, Haiden had been kinder than she had any right to expect. But instead of feeling grateful, she found herself dissatisfied. She didn't want to think his interest in her was purely because of her singing ability.

Would it be so wrong if it was? she argued reasonably with herself. *You're drawn to him because you sense something alike in your spirit and his. Is the shared songcraft so different?*

Yes. Yes, it was different.

"I knew it."

Ember swirled at the words, alarmed that she wasn't alone, as she'd thought. But her unease changed quickly to irritation when she saw who was standing at the edge of the tree line.

"You," she said, the greeting unenthusiastic as she looked over the blond girl from the tavern. "What are you doing here?"

"I knew you were with him." The girl's eyes were narrowed. "And you're a singer, are you? Is that how you convinced him to let you stay?" She sniffed. "Pathetic."

"I'm pathetic?" Ember said incredulously. "You're the one who keeps crawling back here, not able to accept that he doesn't want you around."

The girl tossed her braid angrily. "You think you've won, but you're wrong. I don't give up easily."

"It's not a competition!" Ember said, irritated by the intruder's stupidity.

"It's always a competition," the other girl said shortly. "And I intend to win." She narrowed her eyes. "What have you tried already? Did you kiss him?" She didn't quite manage to repress a shudder as she said it.

"What?" Ember's mouth fell open, genuinely shocked by the question. The girl couldn't possibly know what had just passed between her and Haiden, could she?

"Are you telling me you didn't even think of that strategy?" the girl asked pityingly. "You've probably never even heard of true love's kiss breaking curses."

Ember crossed her arms, unimpressed. "No, I haven't heard of it," she said. "And it sounds like nonsense to me." Even as she said it, though, a part of her wondered. Was there any chance there was truth to such a foolish story? Could that be why Haiden had pulled back?

"I don't blame you for not wanting to kiss that hideous monster," the blond girl said. "You might not be willing to go that far, but I am. So you may as well admit defeat now and leave him to me."

"That's not happening," said Ember flatly.

The other girl stepped forward, her voice dropping to an agitated hum. "If you're a singer, you have your own way to access magic. Some of us don't have that luxury. This is my only chance to win a magical reward." Determination flashed over her face. "I won't spend my life as a poor, anonymous nobody like my parents."

Very much to her own resentment, Ember felt a flash of fellow feeling with the girl. She could understand not wanting the life your parents had lived. But that didn't make the other girl's methods any less ridiculous.

"Then make something different of your life," she said. "Do it yourself, not by trying to manipulate someone else's misfortunes into your boon. Besides, from what I can tell, there really is no reward for breaking Haiden's curse." She scowled. "And he doesn't want help breaking it, anyway."

The girl sniffed. "Of course you would say that. Do you take me for a fool?"

"Yes," Ember said promptly, unable to resist. "Very much so."

Before the other girl could give the hot retort clearly rising on her lips, the door to the hut opened. The monstrous boar-form of Haiden strode out, stopping dead at the sight of the two of them.

Instantly the visitor's demeanor changed. Her stormy brow became a bashful smile, and she lowered her eyes demurely.

Ember let out a snort, but even that didn't goad the stranger into breaking her role.

"I'm glad I found you here," she said to Haiden. "I feel we suffered from a misunderstanding last night. I could barely sleep for thinking of it, and was determined to make it right."

"Last night?" Ember repeated, startled.

To her chagrin, she saw a smug look flash across the blond girl's face before her modest expression quickly resettled. Ember was seething. She knew she shouldn't give her opponent the satisfaction of showing a reaction, but how and when had this girl been with Haiden last night? Had he left when she was sleeping?

She didn't like that thought. It made her feel...vulnerable.

"I don't think there was any misunderstanding," Haiden said shortly, seeming just as uncomfortable as Ember felt. "I thought I was perfectly clear when I told you to stay away from my clearing."

"You had every right to be frustrated, Haiden," said the girl, once again causing Ember to bristle. She hadn't even known his name until Ember said it. She hadn't cared enough to find out. "I was too forward with my approach last time. Demanding, even. But I promise you, that isn't me." Her voice caught, the performance too theatrical to be convincing, in Ember's opinion. "It was my brother. He was pressuring me to say what I said. He's very unkind to me, and I've always been afraid of him." She raised her head defiantly. "But this morning I stood up to him, and ran from him. He's very angry, but I'm determined to be free of his influence. Only..." The hesitance in her voice was quite touching, Ember thought sardonically. "Only, now I have nowhere to go."

"That's your problem to solve," said Haiden. To Ember's relief, he didn't seem in the least convinced by this tale. "I can't see what it has to do with me."

A look of frustration crossed the girl's face. It was quickly banished, but there remained a hint of resentment in her eyes as they flicked to Ember then away. It suddenly struck Ember that the tale the girl had concocted was irritatingly similar to Ember's own situation. She must have remembered Ember's claim that Haiden was the one to bind her wounds, and had obviously realized that he'd taken her in when she had nowhere to go. Obviously she thought Haiden was more likely to respond to a damsel in distress than to an offer of help.

The thought was deeply annoying. Had Ember seemed this pathetic when she first stumbled into Haiden's clearing? She remembered how injured she'd been, how lost and helpless, demanding he answer for crimes she could never have hoped to make him pay for, before collapsing unconscious on the ground.

More pathetic, probably, she thought dolefully.

"I'm sure you can't mean that," the girl tried again, tears standing in her eyes.

Ember watched in fascination. How did she summon them at will like that? It was quite a skill.

"There's nothing for you to gain by this," Haiden said impatiently. "I told you, I'm not some prince in hiding. I don't want help from you, and even if I did, there would be no reward involved."

The blond girl approached Haiden, her tone hesitant as she looked pleadingly up into his hideous face. "I don't care about your past or your status," she told him. "I don't care about a reward."

Ember let out a snort, which the girl ignored as she went on, a little sob in her voice.

"Without your help, I could die out here." She raised a hand, not quite able to hide her reluctance to touch him as her fingers stretched toward his false face.

To Ember's surprise and annoyance, Haiden didn't push the intruder away. He just stood like stone as the girl's outstretched hand neared him. Did he *want* her to touch him, and discover as Ember had done that his boar features weren't his true ones?

"That's quite enough of that," Ember said, deciding the charade had gone far enough. "You should be ashamed of yourself, carrying on like that. He told you to stay away, now you need to leave."

The girl turned narrowed eyes on Ember. "This singer has bewitched you, Haiden. Or she's trying to. You need to be on your guard. Not everyone is as honest as I am."

"Of all the ridiculous—" Ember started in irritation, but Haiden's harsh barking laugh cut across her outrage. She narrowed his eyes at him. "What's so funny?"

"The idea of you being proficient enough in songcraft to enchant me," he said.

"You know, she's right about one thing," said Ember with dignity, gesturing toward the outsider. "You could do with learning a bit more chivalry."

"Monsters aren't chivalrous," Haiden pointed out.

"She doesn't even try to hide her contempt for you," the blond girl interjected, trying valiantly to recapture the conversation. "Clearly she's using you for her own gain. Can't you see that? Can't you see through her pathetic act, pretending she washed up on shore without a friend, appealing to your good nature, imposing on you?"

Ember knew she should know better, but the words hit a nerve. She had imposed on Haiden since the moment she arrived in his clearing, and she knew it. And much as she sometimes forgot it when they were having a moment of connection, the knowledge of it came rushing back to him every time he pulled back from her or became surly again.

"Enough," she said shortly. "It's time for you to leave."

She was under no illusion that her words would make the other girl give up. She was fully ready to take a more active hand. Responding to the urge that was constantly inside her now, she raised her voice in a song. Perhaps more responsive to her heightened emotion, power rushed into

her from the ground in plentiful supply. She urged it outward in a stronger version of the pointless little trick she'd done earlier. Instead of a gentle breeze, she whipped up a steady wind, one that grew in intensity as her song rose.

At Ember's direction, the wind rushed around the clearing, gathering momentum before speeding toward the other girl. It hit her with enough force to send her staggering back from Haiden.

But Ember wasn't satisfied with that. She continued her song, sending the wind whipping at the stranger's becoming skirts, and causing her braid to whip her across the face.

Smirking at the sight, Ember urged the wind onward, watching as it drove the girl bodily across the clearing. She shrieked as she went, the sound muffled by the roaring of Ember's wind. On the whole, Ember was quite pleased with herself. She was certainly getting better at manipulating power.

When the girl had been pushed back past the tree line, Ember let her song die down, the wind dropping with it. She waited for a moment, but it didn't look like her opponent was going to re-emerge. She must be aware that she could hardly do so with any dignity.

"Well. That was fun." Ember turned a beaming smile on Haiden. "You're welcome, by the way."

"What did you do that for?" Haiden's scowl was so fierce it was discernible even on his boar features. "Am I supposed to thank you?"

Ember's smile dropped, confusion taking its place. Why was he so angry? Surely he hadn't welcomed the girl's advances? He'd told her to stay away.

"I was just trying to help," she said defensively.

"I don't need your help!" Haiden's anger was reminiscent of his reaction to her assisting him with shaving, but much more potent. "Why do you think I didn't ask for it?"

"But—" Ember started, only to be instantly cut off.

"Do you think I can't deal with one annoying girl by myself?" Haiden raged. "I've been getting rid of them for years, without help from you or anyone!" He narrowed his eyes. "With one exception, clearly."

Ember was stung by this reference to herself, but she was determined not to get offended. Haiden's overreaction was so bizarre, it had to be fueled by something other than the situation before them. She would much rather understand what was happening inside him than defend herself.

She stepped closer to him, her expression earnest. "Haiden, there's nothing wrong with letting people help you. Accepting help doesn't mean you're weak."

"I don't need your help," he growled again.

"Accepting help doesn't even mean you need help," she insisted. "Sometimes it's just...nice to let someone help you."

Haiden stepped forward and grabbed her shoulders, the sudden movement startling her. His grip, so tight it was almost painful, was as human as ever, and she could have sworn she saw his real face flicker momentarily into sight as he leaned toward her.

"How many times do I have to tell you—I didn't ask for your help, and I don't want it!"

"Haiden," she said, rattled by the strength of his reaction. "It's all right."

Tentatively, feeling foolish for the similarity of the gesture to the blond girl's display, she raised her hand to what looked like the monster's neck. Her questing fingers found the face she'd come to know. She stretched her fingertips lightly across his features, feeling how hard he was breathing.

"It's all right to be afraid," she whispered. "You haven't had to be human with anyone for so long. But you can trust me." When he didn't answer, she persisted. "You've let yourself believe you're a monster—that you deserve the face you wear. But your heart is good. I know it is."

For a pregnant moment Haiden was silent, his features tense and his eyelids flickering shut against her touch. Then he pulled abruptly back from her, his voice savage.

"You don't know anything. And I'm not afraid."

Before Ember could catch her breath, he'd turned. She could only watch as he strode across the clearing, his steps agitated. He disappeared into the trees in the opposite direction to where her wind had pushed the troublesome visitor, leaving Ember feeling foolish and more alone than she had since the first moment she laid eyes on Haiden.