

## Dark Triumph – Deleted Scene

When the cart stops moving, I open my eyes and see the boat; suddenly, I know exactly what is happening. The hedge priest has tricked Old Nonne and is not taking me to safety as he promised. Instead, he has delivered me to one of the night rowers, one of the desolate, bound sailors who must carry away the forsaken souls whom God and the church have deemed unworthy.

“No!” I scream, certain there has been a mistake. It is my father who has committed evil, not I. My mind is sluggish and thick, like a heavy fog, and those memories disappear beneath the weight of it. But I am certain I do not want to get in that boat and be ferried across the Passage de L’Enfer to where I will have to reside in hell.

I throw off the heavy weight of the blankets that hold me down, and sit up. The world tilts alarmingly and my stomach heaves, trying to cast out whatever potion they have been pouring down my throat. Even so, I lurch to my feet, but before I can climb out of the cart the hedge priest and the sailor are there. With callused hands they hold me still and try to soothe me with their deep, clumsy voices. “It’s no use,” the old sailor grumbles at last. “We’ll have to tie her up or she’ll tip us all over.”

The hedge priest gives a curt nod, and as if by sorcery the sailor produces rough hempen ropes, which he uses to bind my wrists and feet. I thrash and call for help. “Hush her, before she calls every busybody around.”

Mumbling an apology, the hedge priest places a scrap of filthy cloth in my mouth and binds it around the lower half of my face. I panic, not able to draw a full breath. The entire world

tilts dizzily as the sailor takes my feet and the hedge priest my shoulders and I am lifted into the boat. They place me on the damp wooden hull, where the smell of salt and old fish fills my senses. I fear I will gag, and if so I will surely suffocate. I concentrate all my will on trying to calm myself and think.

I feel a gliding motion as the boat slips out from between jagged rocks and into the dark blue water. We move soundlessly through the waves, as if Death Himself has silenced our movements so none will know of our passage.

My heart thuds against the wooden hull under my breast and I twist and flex my hands until my wrists are raw, but the cords hold tight. After a while, my heart calms somewhat, matching itself to the steady sounds of the slap of the water and the creak of the oars.

A while later—I have no idea if it is moments or hours—there is a crunch followed by a jarring sensation as the boat runs up against a rocky shore. A voice calls out—a woman’s voice, for of course, as the priests have warned us all, hell is filled with women. “What have you brought us, Father Guillame?”

“A wild, devil-cursed vixen, that’s what,” the priest says as he grabs ahold of my shoulders. His words infuriate me, for what have I done to earn such a title? I twist and buck, trying to escape his big thick hands as they grab my shoulders. “Don’t stand there, you old fool. Get the other end.”

The old sailor mutters, but does as he is instructed. The world is a tumble of sharp blue sky and round grayish rock as I am hauled from the boat.

“Why have you bound her?” the gentle voice asks sharply.

Before the priest can answer, another voice—this one full of command—cuts in. “Put her down before you drop her.”

I am hastily set onto the rocky beach. I blink, trying to make sense of what I see before me, for although the voices I hear are women's, before me stands a flock of tall black robes. *Shades of the unshriven dead* is my first thought, until two of them step forward to kneel at my side and I finally recognize that their black robes are habits. I have been delivered to a nunnery.

"Shhh," one of the nuns whispers. "You're safe now." Her face is as pale as marble, with strong arched brows. A few wisps of dark blond hair have escaped from under her wimple. Someone touches my ankles and I try to whip my feet out of reach.

"Now, now," another voice says, this one less melodious and more matter-of-fact. "None of that. We're not the ones who've wronged you." And while what she says is true, it does not comfort me as much as she seems to think it should.

"That's all I'm required do," the old sailor says, and I can see him backing away toward the boat. "Bring 'em across."

"Indeed. You've performed your duties most admirably, both of you." The sarcasm in the nun's voice warms me to her, just a little.

The matter-of-fact voice is back. "I'm going to touch you again, but only so I can untie the cords. You don't want us to have to carry you liked a trussed goose, do you?"

"If you turn and look out toward the sea," the melodious-voiced nun says, "I will untie the gag."

After a moment's hesitation, I do as she instructs, craning my neck to give her better access. By the time she has finished with the gag, the rope is off my wrists and ankles. I stagger to my feet and take in great big gulps of air—air that is not tainted by the smell of fish or salt or the reek of ungentle men.

I also get a good look at my captors. Caretakers? I have no idea what to call them as I peer through the limp, salt-encrusted strands of my hair to study the solemn black figures that surround me. Their faces are kind and full of a quiet understanding. Inside, a thick red stone of anger rises up. What do they know of me and what I have gone through? They are in their sheltered cloister here, far away from the ugly world of men. I whip my head around and stare back longingly at the sea. It calls to me, promising a quiet, dark oblivion.

“You don’t really want to do that,” a quiet voice says, and then a firm hand takes my arm and begins to lead me up the beach. “Not when we have so very much to teach you.”

*Teach me?* So my future is to be filled with days full of prayer and scripture and chanting. Not to mention that any saint worth his salt would reject me and my tainted soul. The very idea of it makes me want to scream. Besides, I must get back—there is something lurking in the recesses of my mind, something important I must do.

I jerk my arm out of the guiding hand and make a break for the water. But the rocks are uneven and my limbs are weak from days of disuse. Something hard and solid hits me on the back of the legs. I only have time to register that the nun with the matter-of-fact voice has just tackled me. Then my chin connects solidly with one of the stones and everything goes black.