

The original scene where Aiden and Eileen meet. It came across the opposite of what I'd intended, so I rewrote it. The new scene can be found in my updated version of my book.

~Deleted Scene: The Mysterious Stranger in the Forest~
(Original Scene)

I remained hidden for several minutes before I slowly released my pent-up breath. Huddling here wasn't leading me any closer to the Forest's border, which was where I now desperately wanted to be. I slowly stepped away from the tree and gasped sharply, my sketchbook slipping from my hand.

A man stood in front of me, blocking my path.

My heart skittered to a stop. So there *had* been someone following me, a stranger dressed in red velvet trimmed with gold to showcase his noble rank and who wore a hardened, rather sinister expression, as if he meant to hurt me.

He leaned leisurely against an aspen, staring at me with large, ebony eyes, which widened when he saw my face. For a moment, neither of us spoke as we warily surveyed the other. A foreign, pleasant warmth loosened the fear tightening my chest as I studied the stranger's face, lingering on the chestnut curl dangling across his forehead.

He stirred first, blinking rapidly, before he snapped his gaping mouth shut. His expression hardened again. "What are you doing in my Forest?"

Chills rippled over me as my mind scrambled to find an explanation for this man's presence. I warily eyed the sword strapped to his waist. The treacherous Forest had betrayed me by luring me into this stranger's snare. This clearing would undoubtedly be my gravesite, and the story of my demise would become another cautionary tale parents whispered to their children about what happened to those who wandered in places they weren't supposed to.

Those overdramatic thoughts were exactly what Rosie would think in this situation. I shook my head to clear it. I couldn't think about that now. Escape. I needed to escape, but the man's eyes held me captive as if they were chains, binding me to him. He straightened and slowly approached. I backed into a tree and pressed myself against the trunk until its bark embedded into my back.

He loomed over me. "Who are you?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't. My voice had been swallowed up by the fear pounding through my bloodstream with every frantic beat of my heart.

The man's jaw tightened. "Answer me. I expect a response when I ask a question."

His hand hovered over his gold sword encrusted with blood-red rubies. My breath caught. Did he mean to murder me? Fear seized my pounding heart in a tight clamp, but thankfully he made no move to draw his sword.

Instead, he frowned. "Ah, you're afraid I might use this? You believe me a man capable of hurting an innocent maiden? It appears I'm making a rather poor first impression." He studied my features, the hardened lines of his own softening with his perusal.

I finally found my voice. "Please don't hurt me."

He stroked the hilt of his sword with long, slender fingers. "Who said anything about hurting you? I would, however, appreciate an introduction."

I tightened my jaw and shook my head. Disappointment filled his eyes, as if I'd denied him something precious. He continued to stare, his gaze lingering on my hair. He reached out a hesitant hand to stroke a loose strand.

My hair slipped from his fingers as I jerked back, glaring. "Don't touch me."

He blinked, as if emerging from a stupor. "I meant no harm. If you won't tell me your name, can you at least grant me a token to remember our meeting? It's not every day I encounter such a fair maiden in the woods."

He drew a dagger and carefully placed it against the same strand of hair resting against my neck. My breath hitched. I jolted away and the blade nicked my flesh. I winced at the sharp, biting pain. Blood trickled down my neck, staining my pale skin with dark splotches.

The stranger flinched, as if my pain had been his own, and watched the blood dribble down, seeming unsure what to do. Crimson stained his cheeks as he yanked his gaze away. I gingerly touched my neck and withdrew my fingers, gaping at the blood staining them.

"You cut me."

He cleared his throat, shifting awkwardly as he determinedly looked at his feet. "My apologies, I didn't mean to hurt you." He bit his lip in remorse.

I stared at him in disbelief. I could still feel the shadow of his cold blade as I stroked the wound on my neck, sticky with blood. How could I have met such a hardened man in my beloved Forest, a place I'd believed harbored safety? The betrayal was sharp.

"I only wanted a lock of your hair." He withdrew a handkerchief and held it out to me. I made no move to take it. "I'm sorry. I just—I'm sorry." He made another attempt to hand me his handkerchief. When I still refused it, he dabbed at my cut himself and sighed when I flinched away. "Won't you allow me to play the part of a gentleman?"

"Do you see a gentleman here?"

Despite the blush still staining his cheeks, his lips quirked into a smile. He tilted his head to study me, as if I were a complicated riddle he was desperate to solve. "You're unlike anyone I've ever met. I must have your name."

"I don't share my identity with sadistic strangers."

His eyebrows rose. "What did I do to deserve such an insult when we've only just met and I'm attempting to tend to your wound?"

"A wound *you* inflicted," I snapped. "You don't appreciate it when your prey bites back? Perhaps you thought you'd caught a sheep when, in reality, I'm a fierce cobra."

"Undoubtedly, with a venomous tongue like yours."

Amusement had replaced the fierceness previously filling his eyes. Great, I'd stumbled onto a predator who enjoyed playing with his food. I folded my arms and gave him my most skewering glare; by the way his lips twitched, it didn't seem very effective. His black gaze searched mine as if looking for an answer to a great secret.

"Won't you tell me your name?"

"Do you honestly believe you can convince me after I've already adamantly refused?"

"Considering I outrank you and I asked nicely, yes, I do."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm sure that, as a noble, you're used to everyone groveling at your feet, but I refuse to obey you."

His jaw tightened. "Is this the game you want to play? Because if so, it's only fair to warn you that in every game I participate in, there's only one outcome: I *always* get my way."

"Except for now, because I'm not inclined to give it to you, no matter how much you try to persuade me."

He frowned. "Stubborn, aren't you? But I refuse to concede until I've obtained my objective." He glanced around the clearing, as if searching for something. "The Forest led me to this area for a particular reason, and I need to know why. If it was to meet you, then I cannot leave without your name. Will you tell me if I say please?"

"No."

The stranger's brows furrowed. "Why not?"

"You truly expect my cooperation after the friendly reception you've given me?"

He closed the distance between us. "Despite your resistances in giving me what I want, I find your spunk thoroughly enchanting."

For some inexplicable reason, I found myself lost in his ebony gaze. "Is this how you toy with all your victims?"

"No, this honor befalls only you." He leaned closer and I turned my head, shuddering as his breath caressed my skin. "Please tell me your name."

I shook my head, unable to speak through the strange sensations I was feeling. It pushed against my fear—warm, fluttery, and strangely appealing. What was this emotion?

"Please." Longing filled his voice. "You don't understand. I have to know."

"Then brace yourself for disappointment, because I refuse to give you my name after the way you've treated me."

He sighed as he withdrew. "Seems fair."

I raised my eyebrows and he smirked.

"Despite your belief to the contrary, I won't force you to do anything...although I do hope to persuade you. I find the longer our interaction goes, the more anxious I am to know your identity."

I sighed. "Why are you so desperate to learn it?"

He tilted his head to study me once more. "You're like no one I've ever met before. I can't quite put my finger on what it is that's..."

"...getting beneath your skin?"

He smiled wryly. "Something like that."

I smirked, satisfied that I'd riled him, my revenge for his sinister presence invading my sanctuary. "Good, then you've gotten what you deserve."

He frowned. "You believe I'm a bad person?"

"I believe you're choosing to be something sinister for the sole purpose of your amusement."

His frown deepened and once more he studied me closely. "Why do you think that?"

I didn't answer. He waited patiently for a moment before his lips twitched.

"Uncooperative. It makes me even more curious as to what brings you to my Forest."

His Forest? "The Forest belongs to no one, but if my presence bothers you, I'll happily humor you by leaving."

He bowed and motioned towards the edge of the clearing. "Be my guest. There's no need for you to linger if you don't want to. However, there is one small problem..."

His dark eyes lit up and my stomach knotted. Whatever idea had just occurred to him, it probably wouldn't be one I liked.

"What's the problem?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Problem? There's no problem. It'd be impolite for me to keep you here longer than you desire to remain."

I narrowed my eyes. "You claim to have the power to keep me here? This Forest doesn't belong to you; thus, you can't entrap me in it like some prisoner."

I spun on my heels and stomped towards the edge of the clearing, but the stranger darted in front of me, blocking me. "Please don't leave yet."

My glare sharpened. "Excuse me? Do you need to toy with me further in order to stroke your inflated ego?"

His lips twitched again and amusement danced in his dark eyes. It made him seem almost human, and I didn't like it. "I really want to know your name."

"There's no reason for you to know it, not when we're never going to see one another again."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that."

I tightened my jaw and attempted to dart around him, but he was too quick for me. I took another step forward but he didn't get out of my way; he took a step back, matching my movements with his in order to keep me in his line of sight. My gradually abating fear returned, clawing at my heart.

"Whatever game you're playing, please stop."

"A game? Is that what this is?" He stroked his chin before nodding to himself. "If it's a game you want, then allow me to enlighten you on how this particular one is played."

A shiver rippled over me. I wrapped my arms around myself to try to mask it. "What's the game?"

"A riddle." He offered a boyish grin. "I enjoy riddles. If you can solve mine, I'll tell you which path will lead you back to Arador."

"How do you know which village I live in?"

He smirked up at the Forest's swaying branches, as if he and the trees were sharing a private joke. "A lucky guess."

I eyed his smirk. "You think you're so clever, but you're not the only one. I know these trees and thus don't need your help finding my way out of—" My words became trapped in my throat as I glanced around the clearing. No...I slowly turned in a circle, searching, my heartbeat escalating when I couldn't find what I was looking for. "Where did the pathways go?"

"Ah, that's the problem I mentioned earlier."

I stared at the lack of pathways in disbelief, unable to comprehend what I was seeing. No matter where the Forest had led me in the past, a path had always existed to guide me back home. It was part of the Forest's promise it'd given me when I first breached its trees.

Heart in my throat, I spun on the stranger, who watched my reaction with far too much amusement for my liking. "What did you do?"

"You believe I'm responsible for the Forest's tendency to shift its pathways?"

My heart pounded in my ears, making it difficult to think. "You keep calling this Forest *yours*; if you're conceited enough to assert ownership of it, you must claim responsibility for its mischief."

"I make no such claims. The Forest is its own master; I'm simply on excellent terms with it."

"As am I."

"Apparently, your relationship with it isn't as good as mine, else it'd be listening to you now rather than me."

Obviously. *Curses*. I gritted my teeth. "What did you do with the pathways?"

The stranger lazily examined the tip of his blade with too innocent of an air. "I may or may not have told them to disappear for a bit."

"And the Forest listened to you?"

"Rank has its advantages."

"But the Forest listens to no one."

He shrugged. "Believe that if you will, but even you can see that the pathways have vanished, just as I hoped for our little game."

I scanned the thicket of trees again, feebly hoping for the path that had led me here to reappear. It didn't. "Where did it go?"

"Not to worry, it's not completely gone; there's always a path, even if it's merely hidden. Oh look, there are two now."

As if the Forest was the silent servant of this mysterious man, two paths appeared several yards away, each snaking off in opposite directions. He rested his chin on a fist, studying them a bit too theatrically.

"But now you have a new problem: there are two. Which one is the correct one?"

I scowled. "You know, don't you?" Somehow he did, even though his knowledge should have been impossible.

"You seem to have a habit of making mistaken assumptions, don't you? No, I haven't the faintest idea which path you need to take. But the Forest does. If you answer my riddle correctly, it'll lead you to where you need to go."

Which was as far away from this man as possible. "I don't believe I trust the Forest anymore; it seemed overly eager to lead me to you today."

His eyes widened at that. "Interesting. As I mentioned earlier, it led me to you today, too. Perhaps it thought I could use some humbling from having a feisty commoner put me in my place."

I smirked at that success. "Assuming the Forest reveals a path, how will I know it's the right one?"

"I suppose you won't until you reach the end of it, but I don't think you need to worry; it seems to like you."

"Not as well as you, obviously."

He chuckled—a surprisingly warm sound—and reached out to give the nearest tree an affectionate pat. "Everyone likes me."

"Well, not me."

“Unsurprising. You and everyone else seem not to.”

My forehead furrowed at that complete contradiction. A challenging look glistened in his eyes, as if he desired me to call him out on it, but since he wanted it, I naturally wouldn't humor him.

I folded my arms across my chest as if the gesture could protect me from whatever came next. “As thrilling as this unpleasant exchange is, I very much want to leave. What's the riddle?”

“Before I give it to you, might we discuss payment?”

I sighed impatiently. “Payment?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Surprised? Everything comes at a price, and this is no exception. So in exchange for helping you find the correct path, I want your name.”

This elaborate scheme was all for my name? My identity truly meant so much to him? “Will you uphold your end of the bargain if I give it to you?”

“I'm a man of honor.” And he bowed.

I searched his eyes for any sign of deceit, but they were like dark, endless tunnels, stretching too deep for me to detect any emotion. I sighed. There seemed to be no other choice but to trust him, even though he obviously didn't deserve it.

“Very well, I'll share my name in exchange for this riddle of yours.”

He leaned closer, his previously emotionless eyes now undeniably eager.

I took a deep, steadying breath. “My name is Eileen.”

“*Eileen.*”

A strange thrill rippled over me as he said it in his honey-smooth voice. He studied me a moment before smiling. It completely transformed his face and caused my stomach to give the strangest flip-flop.

“Your name fits you.”

“And what's yours?”

“Ah, my identity wasn't part of our bargain. Now, are you ready for your riddle?” At my nod, he motioned towards the two paths disappearing into the woods. “As you can see, you're standing at a fork with two paths—one that leads towards the unknown, the other towards your desired destination of home. Because you cannot distinguish between the two paths, you must seek guidance. Luckily for you, the two trees heading them will offer the solution; unfortunately, you can only appeal to one for help. But beware: one tree only tells truths and the other only lies. You only have a single

question to ask one of the trees and must therefore carefully determine which question will guarantee you discover the path you seek.”

For the first time in our encounter, I smiled. “A clever puzzle.”

“Indeed. It’s a favorite of mine.”

Despite his still-hardened countenance, light filled his eyes. He was getting far too much amusement from this.

“Are you like one of the trees in the riddle? Do you always tell truths or do you always tell lies?”

“A bit of both,” he said.

“Then tell me: now that you have your desired payment, will you let me go whether or not I answer your riddle correctly?”

He offered a small smile, my answer. Perhaps this man wasn’t as sinister as I’d initially believed.

“So this riddle is unnecessary,” I said. “You’ll let me go regardless of whether or not I solve it. But I’ll still humor you and play.” I turned to the two paths, nibbling my lip in thought. “I’d simply ask one tree what the other would say.”

“And how would that help you?”

“If I asked the lying tree what answer the other would give me, it would naturally tell me the opposite of the truth. If the correct pathway is the one on the right, it would know the honest tree would tell me so and thus say it’s the left one. If I asked the honest tree what the lying one would say, knowing the other tree would lie, its honesty would give me the same answer—to take the left. Whether the tree I ask is lying or telling the truth, the answer is the same, and thus I would know the left path is the wrong one and would take the right.”

Admiration glistened in his eyes. “Surprisingly clever...and rather fun, especially considering I got what I wanted. Let’s see if the Forest likes your answer.”

Together we watched the paths merge into one, which I had no doubt would take me to my desired destination. “That one leads to Arador,” I said confidently.

“Perhaps it does, perhaps it doesn’t. That’s the funny thing about paths; you can’t see where they lead unless you walk them.” He bowed with a flourish and motioned towards the single pathway, which twisted into the dense trees.

I frowned at the stranger. “Where’s your path?”

"Unfortunately, it's different from yours, but I'm hoping our paths cross again some day."

Well, *I* didn't hope for such a thing. "You're not going to follow me, are you?"

"Only if you want me to."

I most certainly didn't. I warily eyed the single path. Although it was currently being deceptively obedient by not moving, it'd already breached my trust enough that I wouldn't discount the possibility of it becoming rebellious the moment I set foot on it.

I glared back at the stranger, needing to make one thing clear before departing. "We're never going to see one another ever again."

With that, I turned and bolted. Branches scratched my flesh as I crashed through the trees, going wherever the Forest led me despite now being unsure it'd really guide me to safety, not after its suspicious obedience to the bidding of that mysterious man. I strained my ears for his pursuit, but the only sounds were my crashing through the trees, my sharp breaths, and my heartbeat throbbing in my ears.

Thunder shook the sky, and after several toying rumbles, a tumult of rain broke from the heavens, soaking me to the skin and filling the trail with mud. I struggled to lift my feet, and twice I tripped.

Through the torrents of rain, I finally glimpsed the edge of the woods just up ahead. Moments later, I burst from the trees and collapsed in a panting heap, waiting... for surely the stranger would emerge, his eyes bright from the thrill of watching my flight.

Any moment now...

But the Forest remained still, the trees solemn sentries harboring the dark stranger within.