

The revised scene where Aiden and Eileen meet, which can be found in my updated book.

~Revised Scene: The Mysterious Stranger in the Forest~

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, an outfit which clearly showcased his noble rank. 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, my gaze lingering on the chestnut curl dangling across his forehead.

He stirred first, blinking rapidly, before his expression hardened. "What are you doing in my Forest?"

My skin prickled at the coldness in his voice and panic scrambled my thoughts, save for one: *I'm alone with a strange man in the Forest*. This couldn't possibly end well.

"I—" I couldn't speak; my voice had been swallowed up by the fear pounding through my bloodstream with every frantic beat of my heart.

The stranger straightened and slowly approached. I hastily backed into a tree and pressed myself against the trunk until its bark embedded into my back.

His approach faltered and his brow furrowed as he eyed my tension. "Am I frightening you? I assure you that's not my intention."

"Intention or not, I'm frightened all the same."

He advanced another step closer. "You must forgive me then. You startled me; this is the first time I've ever encountered anyone in my Forest. Who are you?" His jaw tightened when I remained silent. "Answer me. I expect a response when I ask a question."

His hand hovered over a gold sword encrusted with blood-red rubies strapped to his waist. My breath caught. Had the treacherous Forest betrayed me by luring me into a trap? Did he mean to murder me? Terror seized my pounding heart in a tight clamp before I forced myself to take a calming breath. Those overdramatic thoughts were exactly what Rosie would think in this situation. I couldn't dwell on them. Instead I needed to focus on escaping, but I remained frozen, the man's eyes holding me captive.

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?" He frowned down at his sword. "Ah, you're afraid I might use this? You believe I'm 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 have no intention of hurting you. I would, however, appreciate an introduction."

He wanted an introduction? I wasn't so naive as to give him *that*. I shook my head. Disappointment filled his eyes.

"I mean you no harm, I just want to know who you are." He stepped forward and I darted away—right into a low-hanging branch, hitting it at the perfect angle for it to dig into my neck. My breath hitched at the sharp, biting pain.

The stranger flinched, as if my pain had been his own, and watched the blood trickle down my throat. I gingerly touched my neck and withdrew my fingers, gaping at the blood staining them. A tree from my Forest had scratched me. Had it tried to stop me from escaping this stranger? I glared at the treacherous tree and was satisfied when it rustled guiltily before slowly withdrawing its offending branch, but the damage had been done.

A blush stained the stranger's cheeks. "Are you alright? I'm sorry, if I hadn't startled you—" He cleared his throat, shifting awkwardly before looking determinedly at his feet.

I stared at him as I rubbed the wound on my neck, sticky with blood. 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?"

Rather than being offended by my insult, he merely tilted his head and studied 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 strangers."

His eyebrows rose before his lips quirked into a smile. "If we were properly introduced, I wouldn't be a stranger any longer."

I folded my arms and gave him my most skewering glare; by the way his mouth twitched, it clearly wasn't very effective.

"Won't you tell me your name?" Amusement filled his ebony gaze as he searched mine as if looking for an answer to a great secret.

"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. Besides, what need would a nobleman have in knowing the identity of a simple peasant girl?"

He frowned. "Stubborn, aren't you? But I refuse to concede until I've obtained my objective." He glanced around the clearing. "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 as he closed the distance between us. "Although I'm rather frustrated by your resistance in giving me what I want, I admit I find your spunk thoroughly enchanting; I'm not used to being spoken to in such a manner by those of your station."

I frowned. "You're rather bold."

He cocked an eyebrow. "I was going to say the same thing about you."

The man was exasperating. "Is this how you interact with every maiden you encounter?"

"No, this honor befalls only you." He leaned closer and I shuddered as his breath caressed my skin. "All I'm asking for is your name. Won't you tell me?"

I shook my head, unable to speak through the strange sensation I was suddenly feeling. It pushed against my fear—warm, fluttery, and strangely appealing. What was this emotion? Horror seized my breast as I recognized what it was—*attraction*. I hastily squelched it before it could take root. No, I refused to be attracted to a man I'd barely met, and such an aggravating one at that.

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

"Then brace yourself for disappointment, because I refuse to give you what you want."

He sighed as he withdrew. "Very well."

I raised my eyebrows in a silent question.

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

The man certainly was persistent. I wasn't sure whether to be flattered or annoyed. "Why are you so desperate to learn it?"

He tilted his head to study me once more, not in an improper way, but an unsettling one nonetheless. "The Forest is rather selective in whom it allows to explore it, and the longer I'm with you, the more I want to get to know you and discover its reasoning. You're unlike anyone 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. He eyed my smug smile with a mixture of curiosity and bemusement.

"Strangely, I find your lack of cooperation endearing. It's not every day I encounter such a fair maiden in the woods. It makes me even more curious as to what brings you to my Forest."

His Forest? It was the third time he'd claimed this. "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..."

My stomach knotted at the way his dark eyes lit up. Whatever idea had just occurred to him, it probably wouldn't be one I liked. "What's the problem?"

"You'll discover it shortly."

I sighed. I was tired of this strange game. I spun on my heels and stomped towards the edge of the clearing, but the stranger darted in front of me, blocking me.

"Wait. While you're free to choose to leave, might you accept my invitation to stay a while longer?"

My glare sharpened. "Why? Do you want 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 endearing, and I didn't like it. "I just want to give you one last chance to give me your name."

Of course he did. I rolled my eyes. "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; instead he took a step back, keeping his distance but 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 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 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. "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 opened up 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 enjoyment 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 signet ring adorning his hand 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 want 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 by 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 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 a strange flip.

"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.