

~~I make a decision and~~Making my decision, I step out from behind my horse as the stable master approaches. The stable master jolts, then half bows. “Sire!” He nods to me, scratching at his greyed beard, the skin around his eyes wrinkling even more as he glances back toward the entrance. “The king was looking for you—”

Luck is not on my side today, it would seem. I dart past the man before he can finish, and grab my saddle from its place on the wall, snatching the bridle and draping it over my shoulder to free my hands. Normally I’d have a servant do this for me, but there’s no time to waste now. I twist back to my horse.

“Your Highness,” the stable master protests as I hastily saddle the chestnut. “The king said—”

“I don’t care,” I snap, ~~cutting him off~~. Saddle tightened and bridle fitted, I loop the reins over the horse’s neck and urge him out of the stall with a nudge on his shoulder. “If anyone asks, tell them I have urgent business to attend to.”

“But, sire—”

I swing into the saddle and dig my heels into my mount’s sides. “Ha!”

The stable master stumbles back just in time as the horse ~~responds eagerly to my shout and~~ breaks into an easy canter, bursting past the man and clattering out into the courtyard. I squint against the sunlight as it reflects off the pale stone of the castle walls surrounding me, glinting off the polished black statues of dragons guarding the main keep entrance stairs and sending rainbows scattering from the stained-glass windows of the chapel.

“Prince [REDACTED]!” The shout ~~hails comes~~ from my right, ~~toward near~~ the palace steps, and a flurry of red tunics runs ~~for at~~ me between the crouched statues. King’s guard.

Commented [JS1]: “Cutting him off” is implied by the interruption of dialogue and the use of “snap”.

Commented [JS2]: Lovely little description here.

Commented [JS3]: Is there a way you can work in the Prince’s name a bit sooner? E.g., he recalls his father saying, “Now, [REDACTED], I told you...”

Commented [JS4]: To increase the tension/drama, could you make another comment here about the King’s guard? Why is the Prince wanting to run away from them? What will they do to him if he stays? Are some of them sympathetic? Or are they merely the King’s lackeys/brainless thugs? 😊

~~I wheel toward the gates~~ and ~~Wheeling toward the gates,~~ I ~~urging~~ my mount faster, Clattering hooves drown out most of the shouts from behind, and wind catches my cloak and tugs it out behind me. The guards at the gate ~~don't have time to stop me before~~ I'm past them, then, ~~with-in~~ a few more strides, ~~I'm~~ skimming beneath the raised portcullis, and out into the upper part of the town clustered around the castle walls.

Commented [JS5]: First person POV is often easier to read when paragraphs don't begin with "I".

Commented [JS6]: This could be stronger... does the cloak billow? Or unfurl? Or snap in the wind?

Commented [JS7]: Rephrase

My laugh trails back over my shoulder and I crouch low over my horse's neck, urging him faster. Drably ~~-~~dressed figures scatter ~~in front of~~~~before~~ me, shouts of warning ~~swarming~~ ahead as the peasants move out of my path. I keep to the clearest roads and don't look back. Father's soldiers are probably at my heels, but in a larger group they'll be slower through these streets.

Commented [JS8]: This seems like a bit of an odd description... maybe ringing?

I have a head start, and the element of surprise on my side. I slap the ~~end of the~~ reins against the horse's neck and he surges forward. ~~W-as we~~ burst through the city gates, over the river bridge, and out into the countryside beyond. The green slopes ~~tumble away~~ ahead for a good sprint. To my left, trees ~~tighten and~~ huddle together ~~into~~ the eves of the forest, and to the right, the river ~~widens fans~~ out into the sparkling sea.

Commented [JS9]: Rephrase

Commented [JS10]: Again, this seems a bit odd. Do trees tighten?

The river flows past the ~~city,~~ near enough to the ocean harbour that small boats make their way inland to a port near the walls to trade their cargo. One of these boats is halfway to the dock now, and the rugged sailors turn to watch as I canter past, arrowing for the mouth of the river and the shoreline. The distance between the city walls and the ocean gives us protection against raiding pirates or invaders from the sea. For now, the rugged stretch of grass is my freedom. I know I'll have to stop eventually, but for now I lean deep into my mount's neck and let that thought slip away in the rush of pounding hooves and breaking waves.

Commented [JS11]: You've just said that the river flows out into the sea... which part of the river flows past the city? You might want to describe things a bit more clearly here 😊

Commented [JS12]: Good bit of description! Also nice insight into his motivations here...

Until the pounding hooves are definitely not just one horse.

I twist in the saddle and curse. The king's guard are almost upon me, close enough that I can see the pained look of exasperation on the captain's face. I turn my back again and scowl. The light reflecting off the white-capped waves, just a stone's throw away, is suddenly too bright and too glaring, and the thundering hooves throb in my skull like a steady headache. I can't escape. Of course.

Commented [JS13]: If it's throbbing, it's probably not "steady"... maybe pulsating headache? Blinding headache?

I rein in my horse, wheeling away from the water and ~~coming slowing~~ to a trot as we circle back toward the castle again. The guards fall in around me, ~~hugging close to my horse's flanks~~. I glare at the captain, but his gaze is fixed resolutely ahead.

Commented [JS14]: This is implied...

This isn't the first time we've done this, but it always ends the same way. You'd think the prince would get to have his own way a little more often. That he'd have some freedom in his own kingdom. Not so, for me. I have to be a slave to Father's traditions, and one of these days, it's going to be the death of me.

Commented [JS15]: I like this! Once again, we're getting to see a bit of the Prince's motivations.

I'm going to die of sheer boredom.

I keep my chin set stubbornly as we wind back up through the Ellsmere streets and ~~back return~~ to the castle. I don't care what the commoners think seeing me escorted by my own guards like this. It's not the first time they've seen this either. They're only peasants anyway, what does it matter?

Commented [JS16]: Have you introduced Ellsmere before this? Is that the city?

Commented [JS17]: Nice little hint of character.

The guards at the castle gates stand back as we pass through, and I narrow my eyes at one man as he looks away and covers his face a little too quickly. That looked suspiciously like a laugh. I dismount more stiffly than usual, but almost as soon as my feet touch the courtyard cobbles, two guards grasp my upper arms.

I jerk against them, heat flushing up the back of my neck. “What do you think you’re doing?” ~~I demanded.~~

“Following orders,” the captain says. He meets my glare with a stern furrow between his brows.

Oh, come on. First I’m chased down by guards, now I have to be physically escorted to the king? I would spit on the captain’s feet if I didn’t know how much worse that’d make this for me. I almost do it anyway.

Commented [JS18]: Fantastic!

The soldiers nudge me forward and I stalk toward the castle between them, anger stewing deep in my chest. Am I a prisoner in my own castle now? The guards’ grips remain firm all the way to the first floor, through the reception hall, and until we arrive stiffly at the door of Father’s private study. The captain steps forward and raps his knuckles on the carved wood door, and it swings open immediately.

I stiffen. Mother stands on the other side ~~in a, her gown,~~ simple but elegant gown, ~~and~~ the corners of her eyes creased with worry. Worry about what? It’s not like anything interesting ever happens around here that would be worth getting concerned about. Except for the concerning lack of respect these guards have for me.

“Your Majesty.” The captain bows and steps aside, and Queen Avianna moves back to make room.

The other two guards push me forward, ~~releasing and release~~ my arms. I stumble, but manage to catch myself and straighten ~~wrathfully,~~ turning my wrath on the men. “How dare—”

“██████.” Mother’s hand rests on my arm and I bite down on my words, glaring at the men.

The captain ~~meets~~ looks at me almost lazily, so I turn my ire on the other two. As one, their gazes drop and they shuffle backward. I take a little solace in that, but the queen draws me ~~farther~~ deeper into the room before I ~~can properly~~ ~~’m done~~ enjoying their awkwardness.

“Thank you, sirs,” she says to the guards, then, dismissing them, turns her focus on me again. “Come, ██████, let’s sit down,” she murmurs, her gentle hand guiding me toward the reclining couches to ~~one~~ the side of the study.

I free myself from her delicate grasp and slump into the blue and gold brocade cushions. The fabric perfectly matches our family colours, specially imported from Belmadar in exchange for our fine wool and dragon scales. I shut my eyes and press the heel of my hand hard against my temples, wishing I could shove the useless information out of my brain. I release a long sigh ~~of breath~~ and look up.

Mother sits comfortably on the couch opposite mine, her light brown hair curling around her shoulders as she watches me with her head ~~tilted~~ slightly to one side.

I can’t stand the silence for more than a minute. “*What?*” I shove myself upright, swinging my legs over the side of the couch, riding boots mucky against the ornate tapestry of the rug over the wooden floor. “Don’t you give me that look, too, I get it enough from Father.” I drag my hands through my hair, elbows propped on my knees.

“I’m not giving you any look, ██████, and you know it.” The queen shifts slightly, her skirts rustling as she picks a stray piece of hair from her dress. “If there’s anyone bothering you, it’s yourself, I’ll warrant.”

Commented [JS19]: Would a queen address her guards as “sirs”?

Commented [JS20]: Nice little bit of worldbuilding here. They have dragons? I’m in!

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Commented [JS21]: Isn’t he already sitting down?

I scoff. “Myself? It’s Father, and *you* know it,” I ~~double-use~~ her own phrase ~~back~~
~~o~~against her.