

Sample #1

The prince's departure left me trapped in the icy darkness of my prison, causing whatever semblance of bravery I'd struggled to cling to throughout our confrontation to slip away, leaving despair as my only companion.

Failure pressed heavily as I rested my forehead against the cold iron bars, a cage the result of my foolishness. My desperation and impulsivity to acquire the Relic of Abundance had caused me to recklessly venture into Meridia alone, and now I found myself imprisoned by the enemy. I'd likely die trapped within this darkness.

How cruel a fate to be imprisoned when the Relic of Abundance resided somewhere within the castle's walls. ~~It~~ ~~it~~ taunted me with its nearness yet would remain forever out of reach, a constant reminder that my subjects would suffer the consequences of my failure to acquire it. If the cold prince didn't kill me, my sense of failure would.

I gave the bars a feeble shake before releasing them to pace the length of my cell, wide enough for only a few steps in each direction. It was absent of any furniture, even a bed of straw to rest on, so when I grew ~~tired~~ ~~tired~~, I made do with the stone floor. I curled my legs against my chest, but the gesture did little to warm me from the surrounding chilly, stale air—a cold made more acute with my clothes still damp from the snow.

If only I had a candle to penetrate the thick darkness—and not just the heavy, suffocating blackness surrounding me but the darkness seeping deep into my heart as my despair deepened.

Suddenly a bubble of light warmed my throat as my candle pendant began to glow, emanating a faint white light that chased away the shadows filling the empty cell. It not only illuminated my surroundings but struck a match within my mind, providing enough light for me to access one of the buried memories I'd forgotten:

Every cell within the Meridian palace dungeons has access to the secret passageways.

The words returned to me not just as a thought but as a physical voice, one that sounded far away, as if from the distant past, struggling to cross the vast distance of time to reach me. I strained to hear it again, intrigued not only by the message but by the voice itself. It sounded very familiar...

Every cell within the Meridian palace dungeons has access to the secret passageways.

The candle pendant glowed brighter, illuminating my understanding so that this time I recognized the voice.

It belonged to Prince Xander.

I squinted through the faint glow cast by my pendant to search for him, for it'd be just like the cold prince to taunt me from my prison's shadows....but he wasn't in the dungeon. The voice had come from my thoughts, as if it'd been....a memory.

But such a conclusion made little sense. When would the ice prince have had the opportunity or motive to impart such information?

Commented [cb1]: Earlier you called him the cold prince. Just checking that "ice prince" and "cold prince" are meant to coexist here.

Now that it'd relayed its message, I felt the memory receding. I tried to snatch it so I could better examine it in hopes of discovering the answer to the myriad of questions it'd brought along with it...and it echoed in my mind once more: *Every cell within the Meridian palace dungeons has access to the secret passageways.*

Considering the words had come from my enemy...I had little reason to trust them...and yet...I found myself frantically combing the walls of my cell in search of any hidden knobs, working by the glistening white light shining from my candle pendant.

"Where would a secret panel be hidden?" I murmured as my fingers grazed the smooth stone, but no matter how thoroughly I searched, I discovered no hidden notches.

The necklace warmed again, bringing with it another memory, one I recognized as a continuation of the one that had previously visited:

I gaped incredulously at Xander. "The dungeon contains secret passageways? Why would such a feature be part of its design?"

Xander laughed, a warm sound that lit up his green eyes. "The Meridian king who built this palace had many enemies and a shaky claim to the throne, so he created a hidden passage—the only one within the palace that doesn't require a key—in case an attempted coup confined him to the dungeon so he'd have a means to escape."

"Is there a reason you're sharing this interesting history lesson?" I asked.

Xander's expression sobered. "I'm hoping you'll never have need of such information, but just in case you find yourself trapped within one of our dungeons, each cell is connected to a secret passage, which not only provides access to the other rooms of the palace but leads to the forest. Should you ever need to escape, you can access them by pushing the leftmost stone near the floor within each cell."

The memory slipped away, leaving me even more confused than I'd been before. The memory had been so vivid, yet it went against everything I knew about my enemy. The prince in my recollections had been warm and kind, so unlike the cold one who'd trapped me.

I closed my eyes and allowed my mind to recapture more of the memory, particularly the sound of Xander's laugh, the way it lit up his eyes, how it caused my heart to twinge, filling in some of the hollowness that had been a constant part of me this past year, leaving me with an aching sense of loss without it.

Could *he* have been what I'd lost?

I hastily dismissed the thought to focus on the issue at hand. I knelt down and tentatively pushed the stone my memory had guided me to, fully expecting it not to work...and didn't find myself disappointed, for no matter how hard I pushed it, the stone remained firmly stuck.

I chided myself for believing such a strange and clearly false memory. I straightened with a frustrated sigh and gave the stone in question ~~stone-in-question~~ a rather satisfying kick as the perfect means to vent my frustration.

The wall shuddered before sliding quietly open.

I stared in astonishment, and though I was eager to escape the confines of the dungeon, I hesitated, still unconvinced the passage would lead me to safety rather than danger. The pendant gave a reassuring flicker, and with its encouragement, I gathered my resolve and stepped inside.

The darkness within the passage was thick and musty, but my necklace produced enough feeble light for me to fumble my way along the narrow corridor. Like the rest of the castle, the passage possessed a sense of familiarity.

I suspected the dungeon was near the exit, but rather than taking the path that sloped toward ~~s~~ it, I found myself moving in the opposite direction, guided along this route by a ~~long forgotten~~~~long-forgotten~~ memory that left me feeling as if I'd traversed this passage once before.

After many twists and turns, I found myself standing outside a panel I instinctively knew led to the gallery containing all of Meridia's past relics. Their magic was so close, just beyond the wall, an opportunity I'd been desperately searching for to aid my suffering kingdom...but leaving the safety of the passages would risk capture should Prince Xander discover me, or worse, the king...

Fear cinched my chest at the thought, but my desire to help my people crowded it out until my determination was stronger than my fear. If I escaped without the relic, my conscience would forever haunt me knowing I'd had the opportunity to help my people but had instead chosen my own life above theirs. Such cowardice would be a permanent stain on my reign; I'd rather die attempting to save Analasia than face such a future.

With a steadying breath, I emerged from the passage. Night had fallen while I'd been in the dungeon, leaving the gallery dark, abandoned, and cold, as if everything in this palace was frozen.

I was greeted by dozens of pedestals, each bearing a relic. I walked the length of each row several times, carefully searching, but the Relic of Abundance wasn't amongst them. For a brief moment, I thought I'd glimpsed it...but it must have been a trick of the light, for upon closer examination, the relic in question wasn't the golden laurel wreath I was searching for but nothing more than a silver sphere.

Though deep down I knew the cold prince was too clever to have hidden the relic in so obvious a place, I was still left disappointed not to have found it, but this failure wasn't enough to lessen my determination.

I spent several long, chilly hours searching the castle, pushing through the cold and exhaustion that grew heavier with each passing hour. I searched half a dozen rooms without success, and didn't find anything interesting until I was rummaging through a desk in the prince's study around dawn.

I paused when I noticed a piece of parchment sticking out from a book of relics. I had no reason to be interested in the prince's correspondence...yet the letter beckoned me. I abandoned my search through the drawers and flipped the book open to a bookmarked section containing information about the Relic of Abundance. But that wasn't what captured my attention.

My breath caught at the sight of my own handwriting ~~scrawling~~ Xander's name across the front. Heart pounding, I seized the letter and hastily unfolded it. Words seemed to leap from the page, all written by

Commented [cb2]: *This verb form makes it sound like the name is actively being written. It may be clearer to say "My breath caught at the sight of Xander's name scrawled in my own handwriting across the front."

my hand despite my having no recollection of writing them: *Your letter brought me great comfort, but it's nothing to your presence. If only this feud would end. I miss you more than words can convey.*

I gaped in disbelief, my mind scrambling to sort out the puzzle of how such words had come to be written to the ice prince.

But I had little time to work out the mystery. I stilled as footsteps suddenly sounded from the hallway. Horror rendered me frozen for a moment; before I hastily stuffed the letter in my cloak and frantically looked around for somewhere to hide, but the only places I could find were only suitable for a child's game of hide-and-seek, not for someone hiding for her life from her greatest enemy.

Commented [cb3]: Again, "ice prince" not "cold prince."
Just checking that the author has both of these titles intentionally.