

Viewing Scenes as Mini Stories

By Azalea Dabill

A scene is a story in miniature. Every scene should have a beginning hook, action and reaction, a climax, and a resolution. Resolution can range from no resolution to full resolution. It is important to end your scene with a new problem/obstacle posed, or a transition hook to your next scene, depending on the degree of your resolution.

In James Scott Bell's *Revision and Self-editing*, he says: "What [must] a scene do? ...one or more of the following:

- move the story through action
- characterize through reaction
- set up essential scenes to come
- sprinkle in some spice

There *are* action scenes and reaction scenes containing less, quote, "action." *Every* scene, in the middle of the story's action or not, portrays an object of desire, an obstacle, and a reaction to that obstacle that involves conflict and/or resolution. The results of the emotions, analysis, or decisions of the characters within the scene.

In this scene from *Princess Academy* by Shannon Hale, see if you can find the beginning hook, etc. Answers are listed after.

"Soldiers." . . .

"We've come to collect your girls," said the older soldier. He checked a thin wood board burned with marks that Miri did not understand. "Marda and Miri."

Marda was standing on the other side of their pa now. He put his arms around both their shoulders.

The soldier squinted at Miri. "How old are you, girl?"

"Fourteen," she said, glaring.

"Are you certain? You look—"

"I'm fourteen."

The young soldier smirked at his companion. "Must be the thin mountain air."

"And what about you?" The older soldier turned his doubtful gaze to Marda.

"I'll be eighteen in the third month."

He smacked his lips together. “Just missed it then. The prince will be eighteen in the fifth month of this year and no girl older than the prince is allowed. We’ll just be taking Miri.”

The soldiers shifted their feet in the rock debris. Miri looked up at her pa.

“No,” Pa said at last.

The younger soldier snorted and looked at his companion.

“I thought you were joking when you said they might resist. ‘No’ he says, as though it’s his choice.” He leaned forward and laughed.

Miri laughed back loudly in the young soldier’s face, surprising him into silence. She could not stand to have a lowlander mock her pa.

“What a good joke, a boy pretending to be a soldier,” said Miri. “But isn’t it awfully early for you to be away from your ma?”

He glared. “I’m seventeen and—”

“Are you really? That muggy lowlander air does stunt a thing, doesn’t it?”

The young soldier started forward as if he would strike Miri, but her pa stepped in front of her, and the older soldier knocked back his companion and whispered angrily into his ear. Miri had enjoyed returning the insult, but now she felt cold and tired. She leaned closer to her pa and hoped she would not cry.

“Sir,” said the older soldier courteously, “we are here to escort the girls safely to the academy. These are the king’s orders. We mean no harm, but I do have instructions to take any resisters directly to the capital.”

Miri stared, wishing the soldier would take it back. “Pa, I don’t want you arrested,” she whispered.

“Laren!” one of the village men, Os, called out to their father. “Come on, we’re meeting.”

“Soldiers” is the beginning hook, “we’ve come to collect your girls”, is an action. The reaction is their pa putting his arms around their shoulders. More action and reaction follows, with the climax coming with the threat of arrest. Partial resolution for Miri, the main character, happens when she says, “Pa, I don’t want you arrested.” The ending hook that draws the reader into the next scene is Os calling their father to a meeting.

I recommend James Scott Bell’s book, Revision and Self-Editing, and Sol Stein’s, Stein on Writing, for further insight into scenes.

In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.