

This is an unedited sample

A Trial of Magic SAMPLE

By K. M. Shea

Kitty, here! I said sample and I MEANT it! This is a true behind-the-scenes-sneek-peek because I haven't edited it or fact checked anything. That means you get to see how I mark up my manuscripts when I don't know a fact or I need to double check how a name is spelled. Good luck forging through the story, but I hope you enjoy this sample regardless of how much work it needs. 😊

Angelique, enchantress-in-training and still technically a mere apprentice, sat on the back of Pegasus—the *constellation*—and wondered when her life had taken such an unexpected turn that she came to be arguing with a magic horse.

“I know it’s still early in the day,” she said patiently. “But I don’t want to push on any farther—I want to stop at Alabaster Forest, and we’re a short walk from the border.”

Pegasus snorted and tossed his head.

He didn’t say anything—the legendary equine of the sky had only spoken to her once, and it had made a...*lasting* impression on her. But based on the way he pranced and the muscles in his neck bulged, making some of the stars shining in his coat twinkle, it was pretty clear he was unhappy with this response.

“I know the original plan was to go home to Torrens,” Angelique said, keeping her voice pleasant—it wouldn’t do to further upset Pegasus. “But that was before the black mage from Zancara jumped me.”

To be precise, the mage had planned an ambush for her on the road, using soldiers as a distraction while he attacked her.

Angelique had beaten him off by releasing her deadly core magic—which was a strain of war magic that came in the flavor of the ability to control anything with an edge. But to her frustration, the mage had still gotten away, and to her horror, Angelique had almost lost control of her tantalizing and terrifying magic.

It was bad enough to have proof that she was a monster due to her incredibly powerful magic, but what was just as bad was the black mage knew the location of Lord Enchanter Evariste—Angelique’s teacher and friend, whom she’d been separated from for years, and whom she’d been traveling the continent in search of—and she never got him to say where Evariste was.

Angelique ignored the sudden lump in her throat and fussed with the black cloak she’d put on for the sake of covering up the bright, ever-changing colors of her charmed dress. The last thing she wanted was to attract attention just now—with her luck she’d stumble on someone with some kind of curse that involved love for the umpteenth time.

She twitched the cloak again and focused on Pegasus.

He was gnashing his teeth with obvious irritation, his ears pinned.

“Yes, I know you’re mad about missing that fight. But it couldn’t be helped. I didn’t have the time to call for you.” Angelique sank her fingers into his coat, ignoring the odd sensation his hair produced.

As Pegasus was a constellation and not a true horse, his body was almost ethereal. His mane and tail consisted of flickering blue flames, and his body looked like night sky molded into

the shape of a fearsome horse. Stars dotted his body, and a shooting star twitched across his cheek as he snorted red embers.

“But that’s why I want to stop here instead of going home,” Angelique continued.

Pegasus tucked his head so he could nibble on Angelique’s silk slipper poking out of the saddle stirrup.

“I want to stick around the border of Alabaster Forest for a few days and see if I can catch sight of any elves.”

If Angelique thought her reasoning might persuade Pegasus that stopping was for the best, she was sorely mistaken.

Every muscle in his body tightened, and for a moment she worried he meant to rear and throw her when his back hunched oddly.

But when he struck the dirt road with a hoof, producing a deafening thunderclap, she realized he meant to bolt from the area—with her still in the saddle on his back!

A runaway horse might not be able to go very far, but Pegasus was no mere horse.

He could cover great distances in mere minutes. A two-week trip by horseback would take just a few days when riding him.

The flames of his mane burned brighter, and he snorted.

Angelique hurriedly kicked her feet free of the stirrups and flung herself off his back before he could bolt.

She flipped midair and tumbled, letting her shoulder take the brunt of the landing so she could roll with her momentum and pop to her feet. The roll was less inglorious than it would have been if was only wearing trousers and a shirt—the thick layers of her gorgeous dress, and the flapping of her cloak skewed her balance a little.

She untwisted the black cloak from her skirts so it fell into place, hooking at her shoulder, and turned around to face Pegasus.

He snorted at her and reared. His eerie trumpet was high pitched and more musical than a horse’s neigh, and blue fire engulfed his hooves as he declared his anger.

Angelique scowled and put her hands on her hips. “I can see you’re upset, but I don’t understand why!”

Pegasus tossed his head and snorted red sparks.

“Yes, Odette is supposed to come in a few weeks for a delivery and I could see them then, but when I agreed to wait it was before the black mage attacked me!”

Pegasus trumpeted again and pranced a few steps south, towards Torrens, towards home.

Angelique rubbed her face. “I just want to wait around for a few days to see if I can find anyone. Why is that so offensive? Do you need to return to the skies?”

Pegasus pawed at the ground. The flames engulfing his hooves singed the grass around him, but thankfully didn’t start a fire. He then turned his rear to Angelique so he pointed in the direction of Torrens.

Angelique changed her posture so she mulishly folded her arms across her chest. “I don’t care what you want, I’m *not* going home tonight!”

Pegasus whipped around faster than Angelique’s eyes could track.

Usually, she was particularly bad at sensing magic. But now, Angelique could feel the dark, ancient magical presence she had felt only once before, when Pegasus had spoken to her.

She froze, dwarfed by the sheer immensity of the power he allowed himself to radiate. He seemed bigger, and the area around him seemed to grow darker.

As it surrounded her, Angelique had the dim feeling that Pegasus' magic was old as the foundations of the earth. She wasn't certain, but she could feel it easing through her, and into her bones.

She inhaled shakily, and that seemed to break the spell.

Pegasus planted his hindquarters and pivoted, then charged off down the dirt road, his hoofbeats creating deafening crashes as he left her behind, alone.

Angelique rubbed her face as he left, and tried to fight off the sensation of being abandoned.

He'll come back once he lets off some steam. He didn't go back to the sky, so he's still hanging around. The first human he contacts will make him wrinkle his muzzle and he'll come back.

She was certain of this. Mostly.

Angelique sighed. "Looks like I'll have plenty of time to sit at the border of Alabaster Forest and hope one of the elves feels my magic and is able to come..."

She trudged down the road, deciding to follow it a little longer before making the turn off for the magical white woods.

The king of the elves, Themerysaldi****(WHY DO I CHOSE NAMES THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO SPELL!?!? AHHHHH) had been a close friend of Evariste. Angelique had tried contacting him shortly after Evariste had been taken by the Chosen—the long-lived band of black magic users who had tried to kidnap Angelique and had gotten Evariste instead when he stepped in front of the spell meant for her.

King Emerys hadn't answered Angelique's call for help, even though she'd screamed herself hoarse at the Alabaster Forest's borders, unable to venture into elven territory without Evariste—and his status as an elf-friend that allowed him in.

Angelique now knew it was because he and all of his people had been cursed—Odette had told her as much.

But even though it was weeks before she was supposed to meet Odette, who made occasional deliveries for the elves and was allowed in the woods during those scheduled times, Angelique couldn't help but hope she'd be able to reach the elves.

She didn't know what else to do.

She was frustrated that the black mage had slipped through her fingers, and worried that perhaps everyone was right about her magic after all. It had reacted so smoothly, and the power she felt when wielding it was intoxicating.

What she really wanted was to talk to Evariste. She missed him so much—she'd been missing him for years. But right now she'd have given anything to see his warm smile and his musical voice as he soothed her while she told him all the horrible things she'd been through the past few years.

But I can't, because he's captured, and I keep failing to find him, she stiffly reminded herself.

King Themerysaldi**** was no Evariste. He had the temperament of a donkey, and lacked the usual social sense and polite manners of his kinsmen. But if he was freed of his curse, he'd be able to find Evariste. He was the king of the elves—one of the most powerful beings on the continent!

So even though she was—hopefully—just a few weeks short of seeing him to ask him for his help and to see what could be done about his curse, Angelique couldn't help but try one last time to establish contact with the elves.

She kicked a rock down the road and flipped her hood to cover up her hair, mindful that her magic-sparked looks were almost as eye-catching as her dress.

She could have put on a cloaking spell to ensure she didn't catch anyone's eye, but somehow that felt like cheating. Enchantresses—and enchanters—were supposed to help those in need.

It was just that Angelique had encountered *so many* in need, she was two reeds shy of becoming a basket case.

She had altered Prince Severin's curse—which had given him the body and mind of a beast—fought a witch named Clotilde in the country of Arcainia, encountered a nightmare and its rider when it had tracked her the craftmage Rumpelstiltskin—her close friend whom she and Evariste had found as a child and taken to the *****school place thing*** to be schooled in the ways of his magic—faced down the mad King Torgan****, and that wasn't even half of everything she'd done.

Most recently—besides fighting the black mage—she'd been involved in a massive fight against a rogue mage named Carabosso, who'd been threatening Princess Rosalinda of Sole.

He'd been captured—the one bright spot in all of this as it was very likely Carabosso—who was a member of the Chosen—knew where Evariste was.

She kept walking down the dirt road, and just when she was contemplating turning off, the ground erupted in front of her.

Angelique leaped into the grassy ditch beside the road, her silver magic gathering at her fingertips as she formed a spell.

A green plant popped out of the ground. It swayed in the breeze before budding a paper flower.

The paper flower fell off the plant stalk, which promptly withered and died.

Angelique scooped the flower up, wrinkles spreading across her forehead. She recognized this magical method of message delivery. It was one of the most secure ways—the message trundled along underground until it found the person it was meant for—but it wasn't used often because it required an exorbitant amount of magic to craft.

What could be so important that it required absolute secrecy?

Angelique reluctantly unfolded the folder, revealing a slanted script she recognized as belonging to Clovicus—Evariste's one-time teacher, who frequently helped Angelique and acted as a liaison for her at the Veneno Conclave.

She tugged at the corners of the paper, straightening the creases as best as she could.

Angelique,

Terrible news—Carabosso escaped.

Angelique's heart stopped in her chest, and her fingers turned so numb she almost dropped the letter.

A quick scan of the paper revealed the full story.

Carabosso had escaped custody of the Veneno Conclave mages charged with transporting him back to the conclave fortress when they were two days from the stronghold. Somehow he'd undone the spells binding him and overpowered the war mage on watch duty before escaping into the night.

Angelique read it three times before the full meaning sank in.

Carabosso had escaped...before the Veneno Conclave had the chance to question him on Evariste's whereabouts.

He was free and running around, again. And they had lost their only lead on Evariste and his kidnappers.

Angelique's legs gave out, unable to hold her up against the bleak news. She fell face first into the dusty, half-dead grass that was generously covered with leaves.

**** years. **** *years* he'd been gone. She'd thought this time they'd finally uncover his location!

Angelique closed her eyes and dug her fingers into the dying grass as all her anguish pushed down on her back like a troll and this new failure threatened to rip her apart from within.

I should have gone with the mages transporting Carabosso. No matter how nervous I make Blanche, or how much Rein dislikes me, I should have gone...

Dimly, Angelique was aware that the Sole Royal family was going to be furious—the mages had taken custody of Carabosso in order to make up for their negligence and failure to help Sole earlier.

But she didn't care.

She didn't care *at all*.

It was too much. She'd gone through too much and had half-killed herself in the process of trying desperately to hold the continent together while the fearful leadership of the Veneno Conclave hid in their fortress and refused to dispatch more magic users to help.

They needed Evariste. *She* needed him!

And now they were back to no leads, and no hope of finding him again!

Why does this keep happening? No matter what I do, I can't seem to save him.

A dangerous sort of numb feeling spread through Angelique's extremities. Vaguely, she wondered if she could just stay collapsed on the side of the road. No matter how she fought, she couldn't free Evariste. Did any of it really matter anymore? Who would even care that she was gone?

Scratch that. As soon as a royal family needed something done they'd miss me—or rather, they'd miss using me as their personal magic user.

Angelique clenched her eyes shut as the ever-present feeling of helplessness threatened to drown her.

With her face mashed into the ground as it was, she felt the faint thud of horse hooves before she heard the animal.

She knew it wasn't Pegasus—the strides were too small and light.

I'll just lay here. They'll pass by without noticing me. No one sees me when I need help, only when they need my aid.

Angelique listlessly lay spread out, her eyes still closed as the horse slowed to a trot. The clip-clop of its hooves grew louder as it rounded the bend in the road.

She waited for the sound to pass her and move along, but the horse abruptly stopped, and there was a thud of someone—the rider, most likely—landing on the ground.

“Hail there!” The rider was a woman—there was no mistaking that in her voice.

I guess I'm not going to get ignored after all. What are the chances the horse—or rider—is cursed?

Angelique reluctantly pushed herself to her knees.

“Are you all right, grandmother?” The rider asked as she trotted closer.

Confused by the title, Angelique peered up at the rider as she tugged the hood off, releasing her thick mess of hair that was tamed only by the use of magic. She felt her magic to

make sure the illusion that colored over her eyes blue instead of their natural silver was working, and squinted up at the rider. “Grandmother?”

The rider skid to a stop a few steps short of Angelique and seamlessly stepped into a bow. “My apology. Please forgive me for my grievous mistake.”

The rider was quite pretty with her blonde hair pulled back in an orderly braid, kind eyes, and lips that were quick to form a smile.

Her straight posture said she’d received some kind of combat training—Angelique, a recipient of similar training, could recognize the stance anywhere—and she was quite tall in her suede boots and clothes—including trousers—that were the same muted browns and greens as the forest.

She peered anxiously at Angelique, obviously concerned she had offended her.

Still fighting off some of her disappointment, Angelique chose to plop in the dead leaves rather than stand and look demure as her station would usually require. “Your guess is not far off. I feel about as well as an infirm old woman.”

“Are you injured?” The rider openly scanned her, searching for injuries. “You weren’t attacked, were you?”

Angelique impatiently pushed back the front panel of her cloak—it had belonged to Stil, originally, and he’d always gone for flashy stuff, which Angelique was coming to learn didn’t necessarily mean practical and easy to wear. “No, no. I’m fine. I was just investigating the woods and happened to trip,” she lied. She stood up and flicked a few dead leaves off her cloak and figured she better round her story out with a truth. “It’s embarrassing to admit, but I merely felt too weary to rise.”

“I am glad to hear you are unharmed.” The rider spoke with such sincerity, Angelique was glad she’d told half the truth, even if it tarnished her image as a serene and elegant enchantress. “If you’ll excuse my prying, you mentioned an investigation?”

Angelique sighed and let her shoulders stoop as she wondered how much she should reveal, and what new darkness the rider would tell her about that she’d be expected to fix. “Yes. I’m looking into a situation here in Farset that might involve dark magic.”

The rider nodded crisply, unshaken as she stood at attention. “I see. How can I help?”

Her response was so contrary to what Angelique expected, she almost bulged her eyes, but managed to forcibly blink instead. “I beg your pardon?”

The rider slightly tilted her head and the warmth in her kind eyes was almost more than Angelique could bear. “You are obviously on a mission of importance. I will do whatever I can to help.”

The relief her offer brought was so sharp it stabbed Angelique in the heart.

In all of her travels, in all of her battles, she couldn’t recall a moment where someone offered to help her, no strings attached.

She had bargained for help in searching for Evariste, and a few royals had offered to help her when she was seeing to a task they had requested, but no one had offered her help without expecting anything in return.

Angelique burst into deep, ugly sobs. The shuddering of her shoulders made it hard to breathe, and for a moment she thought she might fall to her knees again.

The rider took a step towards her, her hands extended as concern pinched her brow. “I apologize if I offended you...”

Angelique would have laughed if she wasn’t already half-suffocated by her sobs. The irony that this stranger had shown the most concern for Angelique than anyone else had in a long

while was both too heartbreaking and too funny. “No.” Angelique sat back down in her pile of dead leaves and rubbed her face, trying to stop the tears from coming. “It’s not you, it’s just...y-you’re the first person to ask how *you* can help *me* in months!”

To her embarrassment, Angelique started crying again.

The rider crouched down next to her and patted her back. “It sounds like you’ve had a difficult few months.”

Angelique tried to scoff, but she was still crying so it turned into a snort that cut off her air for a few moments. “Try years.” Angelique rummaged around the inner pockets of Rumpelstiltskin’s gifted cloak. She finally found a handkerchief and scrubbed at her face as she tried to gather her composure. “Ugh. I *hate* crying! It doesn’t accomplish anything at all.”

The rider whistled to her horse, which had been patiently waiting in the middle of the road. It perked its ears and obediently approached the rider, who retrieved a small waterskin that was attached to the horse’s saddle. “That’s not true,” the rider said. “It’s a proper release. If you never express yourself, you will only make yourself ill.” She offered the waterskin Angelique.

Angelique took it with a thankful nod and took a few sips. Instantly she felt a little better. The water helped ease the hot, sticky feeling crying always produced. “I don’t know that I agree, though I do feel a little better.” She felt more human and less...squashed than she had before the rider had found her. As she handed the waterskin back she shook her head and tried to regain her control. “I suppose I ought to introduce myself. I’m Angelique—an enchantress-in-training.”

There. Let’s see if that changes anything—or brings to light any curses lingering nearby. Of all the possible kinds of dark magic, why are the chosen so obsessed with curses?!

The rider reattached her waterskin, and Angelique could see the effect of her title on the woman as she awkwardly cleared her throat and bowed. “Well met, Lady Enchantress.”

Oh, no. No, no, no. I’m not having the first person kind enough to be concerned about me turning all stiff with formality.

Angelique tried to smile, and was happy to find it was easier than she’d thought it would be. “It’s just Angelique, please.” She chuckled a little and almost coughed when her throat constricted. “I haven’t earned the rank yet. Besides, using a title with me seems silly considering I just bawled my eyes out in front of you.”

The rider seemed conflicted for a moment, but she eventually nodded. “Angelique, then. Please allow me to renew my offer. I am Quinn of Midnight Lake. I’m a mere soldier in the Farset army, but I will help you in any way I can. Do you need transportation to the palace? A meeting with my officers? An escort?”

Angelique considered the rider—Quinn—who seemed to be growing more and more concerned the longer Angelique sat in her dead leaf pile. She sucked in a deep breath of air, then shook her head as she stood. “No. I’ve been in contact with Rider Nareena, but at the moment I would rather not alert anyone to my presence here. It is rather a shot in the dark, but I’m running out of ideas.”

She couldn’t quite meet Quinn’s steady gaze, so Angelique turned to stare into the shade of the forest and watched fallen leaves dance in the slight breeze. “I’m actually not here on Farset’s behalf—though at the Summit held to review the widespread calamities that have been hitting the continent, Rider Nareena did speak of the sudden increase of wraith and troll attacks. I’m here for the elves.”

“I see. I’m afraid I can help you even less, then,” Quinn said. “No one has seen much of the elves for over five years now.”

Angelique kept staring at the trees—it was strangely calming. “They’re cursed,” she said, almost as an afterthought.

Quinn’s smile dropped, and her eyebrows shot up. “What? How is that possible?”

Angelique wasn’t surprised she didn’t know—Angelique had only found out that the elves were cursed because of Odette.

She tucked some of her wild hair behind her ear to give her hands something to do. “I don’t know. I still haven’t spoken to them. I found out my information only because a friend of mine has made contact with them. She doesn’t know the particulars of their curse, for it seems they cannot speak freely of it.” She finally pulled her gaze from the forest and swiveled to face Quinn, unable to keep a grim frown off her lips. “I spoke of it to the Veneno Conclave, and they sent several representatives to the Alabaster Forest to inquire. They were not able to meet any elves, which meant they could not enter the woods. As the Alabaster Forest is the sovereign land of the elves, entering their home without their permission is considered an act of war.”

Quinn furrowed her eyebrows. “What will the Conclave do?”

“Not much. It seems there is not much they *can* do.” Angelique pursed her lips. “Politics has their hands tied. Any elf-friends may enter, of course, but those are unfortunately far and few between.”

This was the one spot where, unfortunately, the Veneno Conclave’s reluctance to act was acceptable, though she wished it were otherwise.

Quinn turned her face up slightly. “Except for your friend?”

“Ahh, yes.” Angelique squinted at Quinn and tried to figure out how much she could safely say. “Odette makes...deliveries for them.”

“Can you not meet the elves with her?”

“She does not meet them often and will not meet with them for several more weeks. I will wait until then if I must, but I rather hope not. By then it may be too late.” Angelique’s gaze wandered back to the trees as she felt the taunting tug of defeat pulling at her again. “Or perhaps it is already too late. Our enemy...the Chosen....”

The Chosen were a group of rogue mages who used magic for nefarious purposes. They had first popped up hundreds of years ago in Verglas, before the famed Snow Queen tore their forces apart and banished them. Since then the Chosen had bided their time and built up their forces.

Angelique shook her head and tried to dislodge the threat of despair. “But enough. As you can see, I’m afraid no one can help me except the elves themselves, and it seems they are in a position that makes them unable to respond.”

“I understand.” Quinn nodded. “I would still like to give you my contact information, as well as the name of my commanding officer, so you may find me should you need it.”

Angelique didn’t know if she should gape at the soldier or hug her. “You really are fearless. I give you all of that bleak information, and it doesn’t scare you off?”

Another smile bloomed on Quinn’s lips. “I am a soldier in the Farset army. We are trained differently than most forces.”

Differently? Most people would have bolted or started delegating more work on me at this point.

Angelique speculatively studied Quinn. “Prince Severin of Loire told me previously that the Farset army was very unique—and undefeatable in forests. But even with your training, I thought the threat of a curse would have spooked you.”

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Quinn's smile dimmed a little, but the long lines of her body remained relaxed. "Ah, perhaps that is because the Twelve Princesses of Farset have been under some strange sort of compulsion for a few years now. Most believe they, too, are cursed."

And there it is, there's a curse around here after all.

Angelique massaged her forehead, hoping to ward off the headache a curse was sure to bring. "I had nearly forgotten about them. By Pegasus' feathers—there are too many curses plaguing the lands."

"My army band and I have volunteered to investigate the princesses' curse."

"Have you?" Angelique waited, but Quinn didn't follow up with any kind of request for help. This, combined with the fact that Quinn offered to help *her*, elevated the soldier up to almost a saint-like state in Angelique's mind.

Naturally, this meant Angelique had to help her at least a little.

A person who is this good deserves it!