

Sample #2

Morning doves coo overhead as I move through the early morning streets of Arcoren. Banners of royal blue and green drape the lampposts and hang from the tallest buildings. They flutter softly in the breeze, which whispers a warm promise that summer is arriving.

At this time of morning, with the sky drifting from black to watercolor clouds, the only other person I have seen is the lamplighter carrying his pole to turn off the torches burning in the lamps. I chose this hour because I'm not likely to see many guards, if any, and I won't run into the hundreds of people who have flocked into the city. Even with a hammer and nail, I will only be a mild nuisance.

I stab my flier through the ~~already-existing~~ ~~already-existing~~ nail on the post, covering up someone else's ~~weather-worn~~ ~~weather-worn~~ poster with nearly indistinguishable print seeking a lost pet. I'm not likely to receive a ticket for noise. Not that hanging posters would warrant a ticket, but what is *on* them might: *Protest laws forcing expensive testing and licensing of magic users. Sunset at Torgen Meadow, Thursday. King Willard forces witches and wizards from Arcoren.*

Behind me, I hear ~~paper tear and bristle in anger~~ before turning to see who has just ripped off my flier.

A young man casually leans against the post with a half-eaten apple crumble muffin in one hand and my flier in the other. "You know you can get arrested for this, right?" he says without meeting my gaze.

The hood of his blue cloak obscures his features, but the polished pins on his green vest show he is a high rank of soldier. The buckle of his cloak is the royal shield, so he is also important enough to be near the royal family, though he isn't in the uniform of the king's guard.

"Hanging fliers isn't against the law," I point out, crossing to a horse post a few steps away and adding some distance between us. I still keep him in the corner of my vision.

He lifts his head just enough ~~that~~ the morning light shines on the lower half of his face, and the smirk on his lips. "Holding a rally intentionally challenging the laws of the king is."

"Maybe you should take the flier to your father so I wouldn't have to hold a rally at all."

"My father?"

At this, I am unable to restrain myself and do, in fact, roll my eyes. "Your boots." I hammer a nail through the next piece of paper onto the post. I glance back at him in time to see him looking at his feet, lifting the toes of his mud-covered boots.

"What do my boots have to do with anything?"

"Sure, they're worn and dirty, but they are made of the finest leather. Not to mention, the seams are in perfect shape." I give him a sickly sweet smile when he meets my gaze again. "Good morning, Prince Kaison."

He grunts, but I cannot tell if it is from amusement or annoyance. It's amazing how similarly those two emotions are emphasized in a grunt. He tugs his hood off, revealing the handsome face I haven't seen in a few months. His black, shoulder-length hair is clean and groomed, though a bit messy from wearing

Commented [cb1]: *This may be misinterpreted to say that the paper "bristled in anger." Consider rephrasing to say "I hear paper tear and I bristle in anger."

his hood. His copper eyes dart down and back up, looking me over, although I know he's clearly been following me.

"You look good. I like your dress. It's new, isn't it?"

I turn to fully face him, holding the remainder of my fliers against my chest. It's a great alternative to my sudden desire to strangle him. He has the audacity to comment on my looks right now? "You can come to the rally if you want to. Unless you plan on shutting it down."

His lips are parted in a response when the right corner lifts up slightly in a sort of bewildered scoffing smile. Prince Kai finally chooses to shrug off the post. "Why can't you just get your license like every other witch?"

I frown, the familiar ache in my chest quickly discarded. "We've been over this before."

"No one cares about your struggle with reading." He raises his brows in what I assume to be a gentle coaxing. "And you put together a good flier." He rattles it.

It may have been a ~~compliment~~ ~~complement~~ years ago, but now I can't help but feel his condescension. He lost all charm—and our friendship—a year ago when he not only arrested my mother but made sure she was sent to trial and imprisoned for practicing magic without a license. Not only did I lose my mother that day, but I lost my faith in the boy I'd trusted, the boy I had *almost* thought I loved. His reasons why matter little to me. That kind of betrayal can never be forgotten.

Or forgiven.

I straighten my spine, but he's still almost an entire head taller than me. "To enchant and make potions, I don't need to be able to read. I'm getting along fine."

"Stubborn as ever." He shakes his head. "El, every other wizard and witch and... whatever else uses magic has to attend university and take an exam. Did you ever consider that if you attended a university, maybe you'd be able to learn more than just how to read? Maybe you could be more powerful than you are."

I laugh. "You *want* me to become more powerful? Wow."

"El."

"Stop calling me that," I interrupt. "You lost that privilege." I turn away from him and storm down the street. I've done well avoiding him every chance I've had, but he's like a dandelion that just keeps popping up out of nowhere.

He cuts in front of me. "Elwyn, I just don't want you in prison too. That's all. This rally.... it's your final offence."

"Are you going to arrest me too?" I glare up at him.

His lips tighten.

I don't relent.

As usual, Kai is the first to cave. His shoulders drop, and he turns his face away. "I hate it when you look at me like that. I've been trying to run into you for a long time. You seem to never be home."

"I know." I try and step around him.

He grabs my arm, stopping me and he lowers his voice. "El, I can't help your mom or change any laws until I am king. You know this. Everything I've tried..." He sighs and finally turns his head to meet my furious glare again. "I can't make him change. I can't convince him of anything."

I know that Kai is right. His father is the most stubborn person I've ever heard of. Though I've never met King Willard myself—other than a small ~~run-in~~ when we were children and I was caught slipping over the back fence into the gardens to throw a mud pie at Kai. Kai has always had very few positive things to say about his father. After all, King Willard is the entire reason I even have to hold this rally in the first place. He despises magic. But his father's attitude is no excuse for Kai betraying me. For as many times as Kai has let me go, I expected he would do the same for the only person I have left in this world. I haven't even received a letter from my mother to know how she's doing.

"I can't afford to attend ~~u~~niversity," I mutter. "So what else am I supposed to do with my time? All I have to do is to help my mother. The only way to do that is to try ~~to~~and make the king change his laws. Magic users are just as capable as anyone else of finishing an apprenticeship and proving our worth by being trained by another user of magic. Why is it good enough for every other profession to have an apprenticeship but not those who use magic?"

Kai lowers his hand to his side, takes the final bite of his muffin, then wipes his hand on his pant leg. Through the muffin, he says, "If you bring that argument to my father, do you know what he's going to do?"

I tilt my head. "Find it valid like you?" I ask hopefully.

He swallows. "What my father would be most inclined to do is require the other occupations to take paid exams."

I frown. "Do you truly have no sway with your father?"

He blurts out a laugh and runs his fingers through his dark hair. "If ~~you think I have~~ had any sway with my father, I wouldn't be forced to marry a princess who requires fifty mattresses to sleep." He points his thumb back toward the castle.

My heart skips.

It's his wedding day.

I was so busy remembering my anger toward him, I forgot that he's supposed to be in the castle right now, preparing to merge our kingdoms in some sort of alliance. I look him up and down.

How could I forget?

No. I didn't forget. I am in denial.

The flapping banners and influx of people into the city are all for him.

“Might feel a little pity after all?” he asks, his tone playfully sad.

I clear my throat. “How did you even find fifty mattresses in the city?” I step up to the side of a building, withdraw a hammer and nail from the pouch on my hip, and hammer the flier into the side of the building. “Second, how does she even climb on top?”

He holds his hands out, palms up, and shrugs. “Slugs if I know. I can’t believe those are your questions right now.”

“It sounds better to start off with questions like that instead of ‘What is she like? Tell me all about her!’ when you clearly aren’t excited to be marrying her.”

We stand in an uncomfortable silence until Kai breaks it. Kai rests a hand on his hip and gestures his other toward his body. “Look how nicely I’m dressed. What makes you think I’m not excited?”

Normal friends would be happy for one another. I should be teasing him or helping him fix his hair. He was my best friend, one of the few people in the city who would play with me in spite of my purple eye and rumors that I was a witch. I’m tired of being alone after a year. But if he hadn’t arrested my mother, or even spoken up in her behalf during her trial, she wouldn’t be locked away for the next four years and I wouldn’t be alone in the first place.

Commented [cb2]: This sentence is a bit confusing. It could be interpreted that he DID speak up, and that’s why she’s locked up, or DIDN’T speak up and that’s why she’s locked up. A rephrase like “But if he hadn’t arrested my mother, or had spoken up in her behalf during her trial, she wouldn’t be locked away” **would be helpful.**