



*An Admirer*  
*Megan Derr*

*Less Than Three Press*

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By Megan Derr

Published by Less Than Three Press

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Edited by Samantha Derr  
Cover designed by Megan Derr

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Electronic Edition October 2010  
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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-936202-50-8

# *An Admirer*

*Megan Derr*

*Why* did it only ever rain when the day needed no further assistance in being rotten? Couldn't even the weather take pity on him?

He lingered as he reached the awning of the pottery shop, hoping the rain would shortly ease off into a drizzle. Days like this, he really hated that he lived on the opposite side of the city from the university. Halfway there, and he still had a mile to go.

At least his stuff was dry. It had cost him most of the meager coin with which he had arrived, three years ago, but it had been worth the expenditure to purchase a waterproofed satchel.

He winced as his newly set jewels throbbed, setting off the ache in his wrists all over again. They were covered in soft gauze that had been spell-treated to keep the jewels from all harm until they had properly fused and healed.

As with everything else in his life, the jewels had proven problematic. One mage in a hundred has a nasty reaction to the embedding process—and of course he had been that one. Recuperating in the healing ward had cost him three hours of study time.

Oh, well. It would hardly be the first time he had gone without a night of sleep.

Which reminded him that rent was due, though he'd scarcely forgotten. If he didn't have it, the landlady would be mysteriously out of tea and soup for his supper. Luckily, he did have it, though only barely.

The sound of laughter drew him from his thoughts, and he watched as a group of students wandered by the intersection not too far off. A couple of their faces looked familiar, and nearly all of them had gauze at their wrists and forehead.

Out celebrating their embedments, of course. It was, short of graduation and appointment as real mages, the moment all mages most anticipated. Stone embedding meant they could actually start doing the magic they had been learning for the past three years.

Tomorrow, nearly all the third years would wander in hung over or still drunk. Why shouldn't they? It was a true occasion for celebration. They were almost real mages.

Kaeck sighed as the students vanished, settled his satchel, and dove back out into the rain that showed no sign of ever slowing. His boots splashed in puddle, the water leaking in through holes in the soles to further drench his already soaked socks.

He trudged on, reassured only by the five coppers in his small purse. He'd been half afraid that Professor Wenton would not remember to show up today with his money, but he had, and so he had five coppers for the next week's rent, and three more for necessities and savings.

His steps slowed as he passed another tavern and glimpsed more students inside, bright and cheery in the warm orange light of the tavern lanterns. They passed platters of food back and forth, knocking together tankards of ale or glasses of wine.

Ducking his head, he sternly reminded himself that even if he had been invited out anywhere, he would have had to refuse for lack of coin.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the inn finally came into view. It wasn't much, the Merry Hearth, but it was his home here in the city. A simple little inn that catered mostly to wanders, tinkers, farmers, and others of that ilk.

Slipping around back, he slid beneath the roof covering the back stoop and shucked all his outer clothing, hanging it over the railing. Then he retrieved his satchel and went inside, dashing quickly up the back steps, all the way up to the attic where his little room was located. Once there, he fumbled around in his trunk for fresh clothes.

Removing his wet drawers, he hung them on a line strung from one end of the room to the other, and set the chamber pot to catch the dripping water. Then he scrambled into his dry clothes—just in time, as a sharp knock came at the door.

Kaeck rolled his eyes, and opened the door.

"There you are," Myla said with a smile that didn't really reach her eyes. "I was beginning to fear the weather might have had it in for ya."

"Not at all, just slowed me down a little," Kaeck murmured, then went to his satchel and drew out his purse, counting out five of his precious coppers.

She beamed as he dropped them into her hand. "You're a good lad. We're a bit busy tonight, if you want to help...?"

"Of course," he murmured obediently. Like he had a choice? Their arrangement was that in exchange for helping out around the inn, he got half off his rent. Why did she phrase it like a question or a request, when they both knew it was an order?

He followed her down the stairs, and after making certain the spelled gauze was still secure, bent to scrubbing and washing and sweeping and fetching, until she finally let him go three hours later.

She was obviously in a good mood, which was nice, because it meant she added a stale chunk of bread to the soup and tea on his supper tray. Bidding Myla a good night, he took his tray and fled before she thought of something else for him to do.

Lighting a candle, he set his supper tray on the rickety table that served as his desk, then fetched his satchel. Opening it, he pulled out all his books and notes, as well as the bundle of mail he'd remembered to pick up just before leaving campus for the night.

Not that fetching it had really been worth the trouble, but one could always hope his mail might contain something interesting. He flipped through it, but as expected, saw nothing worth note.

The two envelopes on top were from the university—one would be a perfunctory congratulations on receiving his jewels, and the other would be a reminder of how much tuition he still owed and how little time he had left to pay it.

Setting those aside, he looked at the final three envelopes. All were made from cheap paper, with even cheaper ink already blurring and smearing, so the words were barely legible. He sighed, knowing what they said, but that damned niggling hope made him open them rather than simply ignore them.

Three months after receiving their jewels, students put on a demonstration of their new abilities. It was one of the most important exams they faced while in school, but it was also a grand event at which they could show off three years of hard work to friends, family, and whoever else wanted to see the student doing well. Even the city got into the fanfare of the third year magic displays.

He had sent letters to his family, formal invitations, asking them to come.

The first letter he opened was from his parents—they were too busy with the shop to take the two months it would require to journey to the city, see him for all of five days, and then journey back. As usual, they did not fail to weight the words with implied displeasure at his 'gallivanting off to learn magic'.

He set it aside and opened the second, from his sister, who was five years older. She replied even more briefly than their parents, informing him that she had a husband, and children—real obligations and responsibilities, and she could not leave them for his nonsense.

The last letter was from his old mentor, the words written in his delicate, spidery hand. He hoped Kaeck was doing well, and wished his infirmities did not keep him from coming to see Kaeck's accomplishments. He'd also included a few small pence, which made Kaeck smile. It wasn't much, but it was enough to buy him some more candles, which he sorely needed.

Ah, well. It's not like he had thought his family would come, and he had only written to his mentor to tell him that his schooling was going well. He left out he was failing wretchedly at the rest of life.

He set the pile of letters aside, and only then noticed that there was one more, all the way at the bottom of the pile. Frowning, he picked it up, turning it over and over.

This couldn't belong to him. It was made of good, heavy paper, the kind that was more cloth than paper, really. Cream colored, soft and durable. Paper like this would cost him more than a year's rent, and possibly even two.

It was sealed with black wax, and a generic abstract crest. Perhaps the post had stuck it in the wrong box. They were always giving him the mail of the person below him. He flipped the letter over, expecting to see 102835, but saw instead 102385.

That was definitely his box number. It was written in a sharp, crisp hand. Bold strokes, but neat.

Burning with curiosity, he broke the wax seal and pulled out a single sheet of folded paper. The same neat handwriting filled the page with a long letter. Whoever the writer may be, he had a fine, well-trained hand.

He started reading, then stopped, staring dumbfounded. Then he started reading again, bits and pieces of the whole searing into his mind.

*Your smile brightens my day*

*Feel better simply by the sight of you.*

*Deepest congratulations on your jewels; you have certainly earned them thrice over.*

*Cannot wait to see how you do in the demonstration.*

*You outshine everyone in my eyes.*

*Yours truly,  
An Admirer*

An admirer?

Who would admire him? Why? The post must have gotten the box number wrong. Except, when he looked again, he saw it was still his number on the envelope. Setting the envelope down, he returned to the letter. It lacked a name, but every detail—such as they were—seemed to emphasize that he was the intended recipient.

Perhaps a jest, then? But why would someone play such a prank on him? He really only spoke to his teachers, unless 'excuse me' and 'thank you' counted as speaking. He tended to keep to himself, and he didn't think anyone even really knew his name. It could not be a joke, then, surely.

Which left...

His heart began to beat rapidly.

Surely not...someone...could it really be that someone...well...could it actually be that someone out there saw him, and admired him? Him?

He read the letter again, and again, looking for any indication of some mistake. Several read-through's later, however, he could find no sign of one.

He touched the paper gently, as though half-afraid it might vanish, and smiled cautiously.

An admirer...who? Who could it be? Who saw him, when most of the time he felt invisible and entirely alone?

Shaking his head, he set the letter aside and told himself he needed to get to work. Tomorrow was a full day of class and work, especially if he still hoped to buy nice robes for the demonstrations, and new boots before the weather turned ugly.

Especially as being a poor loner from an extremely remote village had obviously not added enough complications to his life. No, he had to add another by choosing to focus on the history and research of magic, rather than pursuing the more common path of a field mage.

He had no desire to go hunting beasts and monsters, and ensuring the Territories did not encroach on civilized land. No, his fascination lay with studying magic, improving it, adding to it. Given that his affinity was with the elements, he was perfectly suited to experimentation and research.

It also meant, though he tried not to think about it, that he would never have to worry about bonding. No soldier wanted to be bonded to a mage who intended to spend his days in libraries and laboratories and such.

One less worry on his mind.

Kaeck sighed softly and tried to focus on his studying, sipping his soup as he waded through one of many dry texts he would have to slog through that night.

He finally swore and gave up as he realized he had read the same page six times, and still had no idea what it said.

Setting down his soup bowl, he picked up the letter and read it again, worrying his lip with his teeth as he did so.

Why didn't his admirer simply talk to him? Someone wanting to talk to him, converse with him—now that would be a fine thing.

Did he really have an admirer? He tried not to let it excite him, for surely it was all someone's idea of amusement, but, well, he'd already worked his way through that logic.

He smiled hesitantly as he read it yet again, then folded it up and set it aside, and made himself focus on his studies.

By the time morning came around, he wished he could simply fall over dead—but he had a long day, and if he stayed on schedule, he could sneak a nap in the university library before his last bout of classes.

Yawning, drinking the last dregs of tea long gone cold, he dragged himself downstairs to help Myla with the morning chores. An hour later, he was allowed to go back upstairs with a bucket of hot water and a breakfast tray of bread, cheese, and fresh tea.

He ignored the food in favor of the hot water, stripping quickly and taking out a bar of soap, washing while the water still retained its heat, rinsing off with the portion he always carefully set aside before beginning.



The last of the water he used on his hair. It was nothing remarkable—black, fine, and he kept it as short as he could manage. Short hair was much easier to care for, even if it had become fashionable for mages to wear their hair long.

Clean, he dressed quickly and combed his fingers through his damp hair to get it as neat as he could.

Did his admirer like his hair? Well, that was a stupid thing to wonder. How could anyone like his hair? He chopped it off himself with his knife, one of the few things he'd brought from home. If he was lucky, he could occasionally find a reflective surface to help him do it neatly but it was probably painfully obvious he did it himself.

He had grown up in a small village, and he now spent his spare time doing grunt work for a handful of teachers, or chores for Myla. His skin was tanned and rough, and his hands were too calloused and marked to ever be mistaken for a noble's.

No one had ever described him as handsome, or striking, or anything else. He wasn't certain he'd ever been described, period. Except, of course, as a waste when he'd told his parents he was going to the city to study magic.

Shaking his head, he packed up his things, making certain he had everything he would need because once he was gone for the day, there would be no time to come back.

He hesitated over the letter, fingers touching it lightly, before finally tucking it into his satchel as well. Better to leave it, but he suspected Myla poked around his room from time to time and he didn't want her prying into this.

Slinging the bag over one shoulder so the straps crossed his chest, he checked that he hadn't forgotten anything, then departed.

Outside, the ground was still muddy from the night's rain, but the sky seemed clear. Always hard to tell when it was dark out, but he'd gotten a pretty good feel for it over the years. Hoping fervently that today was a good day, wondering if he would get another letter from his admirer, he began to make his way across the city.

The Royal University of Magic and Combat was the finest institution in the country—some said in the world. It was even older than the royal palace, which had been rebuilt after the old one burned down a hundred years ago. It was made of gray stone, and comprised of over two dozen buildings, apart from the cathedral and the main hall.

It was divided roughly in half, with the east side devoted to magic, and the west to combat. They overlapped in several places, and fourth and fifth year students of both spent more time together than apart, when they began to train together in anticipation of someday bonding.

Hopefully, with his emphasis on research, he would not have to endure more of the partner- and group-work than was strictly required to graduate.

By the time he reached the campus, it was just beginning to grow light. Crossing the Great Bridge, he darted through the entrance arch and down the main path, turning onto a smaller one halfway down.

That took him through the Small Garden, past the Hall of Fire, until he reached the courtyard that also served as a little café.

"Good morning," he greeted the women who worked through the morning, serving tea and other beverages to those who came through. Most of the drinks cost money, but the tea was free, and he accepted it gladly.

One of the women clucked in disapproval. "Kaeck, you don't eat enough. Too skinny." She placed a scone alongside his teacup. "Who are you working for this morning?"

"Thank you," Kaeck said, then added, "Professor Norda." The easiest of the three professors for whom he did work; all Norda required was some transcription work, as he had no time to transcribe his own notes, and his secretary had too much to do already. For Wenton he marked up first and second year papers, and Fest he helped with his library work at the end of every week. That was his favorite, because it gave him experience in research—but it also cut the most into his own time. Still, it was coppers he sorely needed.

Smiling at the women, thanking them again for the free scone, he moved to a table at the back of the little plaza, where he was tucked out of the way in the corner formed by two buildings. There was just enough light now that he could see well enough to study, which gave him two hours to work until his first class.

He looked up at the sound of several voices, surprised—usually the café was fairly empty until late morning. When he saw who was there, he was even more surprised.

Cathalta Reznor was the son of a local, wealthy merchant who had recently run for one of the six City Steward positions, and won. They were an affluent, popular family—though, to hear the rumors he occasionally picked up in the inn while working, not many of the 'lesser' citizens cared for the Reznor family much.

Still, that didn't mean much here. Within the University, Cathalta was beautiful, talented, and if he was also arrogant and annoying—well, weren't all the best mages intolerable in some way? And, really, Kaeck seemed to be the only one who found him irritating. The six men and women currently surrounding him were obviously enraptured. One would think they had never seen blonde hair and green eyes before, or a man that could have passed for a woman if he'd wanted.

In all fairness, Kaeck was a little biased—Cathalta's post box was the one right below his, and he was forever getting the man's mail. One day, the idiots at the post had given him the same wrong letter three different times.

He took a sip of tea, and ate the last bite of scone, then bent back to his work. At some point, the noise faded away. When he paused to stretch and give his hands a rest, he glanced around to see if they were really gone.

They were—but someone else had come along more quietly at some point.

Solitary as he was, Kaeck knew practically none of the faces he saw around campus. He did not even really know who was in the majority of his classes. He knew Cathalta because it was impossible not to,

and perhaps a dozen more faces by name, with another couple dozen that were vaguely familiar, all of them mages. He had no interest in the soldiers, and so knew none of them.

Except the man seated at the opposite end of the café, right at the edge where he would be in the throng of any crowd, visible to all passersby. As it should be, for Lord Jenohn's protégé deserved the attention he was always receiving.

Lord Jenohn was head of the Combat portion of the school, and Master Selsor head of the Magic half. They were the shining example of what it meant to bond, how to make a perfect team of soldier and mage.

To be Jenohn's protégé was no idle thing, yet by the end of his second year, Bellamy Fortestre had become precisely that. He was the envy of almost the entire Combat half of the campus, and probably a few mages who wished they had half as much favor with Master Selsor.

Unlike Cathalta, Bellamy would never be mistaken for a woman. He was slender, almost skinny, but there was definite muscle there, and rumor had it he could move like the wind. He wore the sword at his waist with ease, and his clothes were of good quality without being flashy, the deep blues matching his eyes, the brown leather of his breeches and jerkin only a shade darker than his wavy, nut-brown hair.

It was really no mystery that practically every mage burned to find himself bonded to Bellamy. If Kaeck were interested in bonding, or fieldwork at all, he'd probably hope for the same thing. His field was research, however, and no one would ever waste Bellamy on a non-combative mage.

Kaeck looked hastily down as Bellamy glanced up, and hoped fervently that he had not been caught staring. Draining the last dregs of his tea, he bent back to his work. If he could finish the transcriptions before his first class, he could drop it off between his first and second classes, which would free up more of his afternoon to have a slightly longer nap.

A shadow fell across his work, and he looked up expecting to see one of the women offering him another cup of tea. Instead, he saw Bellamy standing over him.

"Good morning," Bellamy said with a smile.

Kaeck stared in surprise, struck dumb briefly by Bellamy's accent. He had always assumed Bellamy was city bred. He had that...something to him, that Kaeck could never quite define, which he associated with city people. However, Bellamy's accent, while softened and faded, was definitely country.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your work, but I was wondering if you've seen a man come by here? He has blonde hair, on the tall side, uh—"

"Cathalta, you mean?" Kaeck asked, barely managing to avoid rolling his eyes. Even Bellamy was enamored of Cathalta? Maybe he was just missing something, then. It wouldn't surprise him. He seemed to miss a lot.

Bellamy smiled sheepishly. "Yes."

"You just missed him," Kaeck replied. "He was here shortly before you."

"Oh," Bellamy said, and sighed. "Well, thank you. I am sorry to bother you. I'm duly impressed you're able to do work this early. The last time I tried to do real work at this hour, it was an essay for my Tesis class. I wound up saying that the ambassador resembled a wet dog. Luckily, my professor let me revise it before giving me a final grade."

Kaeck laughed, then clapped a hand over his mouth as he realized what he'd done. "Professor Brea?"

"Yes, do you have her, as well?" Bellamy asked.

"No," Kaeck replied, shaking his head. "I tested out of the foreign language requirement."

Bellamy gaped at him. "Lucky bastard. What clever magic spell did you devise to manage that, and how much would it cost to get you to do it for me?"

Kaeck laughed again, unable not. "No spell. Uh, I'm from Winley."

"Ah," Bellamy said with immediate comprehension. "Where everyone in the village can speak Tesis and fish as well as their native tongue."

"I never got around to learning fish," Kaeck replied automatically, the joking reply second nature.

Bellamy grinned.

He really was pretty when he smiled, Kaeck thought, then scowled inwardly at himself. What was he doing thinking something so stupid? Bellamy was wasting time because he had missed a chance to fawn over Cathalta with everyone else.

"So you're obviously a third year," Bellamy continued, and Kaeck wished he could plod along with conversation half so easily. Every time the weight of one was left to him, conversation amounted to awkward silences. "Adjusting to your jewels? I heard some poor sod had a nasty reaction to the embedment."

Kaeck flushed and ducked his head, staring hard at the notes he should be transcribing.

Bellamy laughed gently. "Looks like I managed to strike the wrong notes on that one," he said. "I hope you are recovered? How are you up and about so soon? It happened to my great aunt, and my mother said she was in bed for two days straight."

"Classes," Kaeck replied with a shrug. "Professors, studying..."

"Oh, tell me about it," Bellamy said, and abruptly dropped down into one of the chairs at Kaeck's table. "They're all mad or mean, I swear. There was one day, I took injury doing some field training. Nasty little bugger sliced a good one on my thigh. Healers fixed me right up, but a wound like that itches and burns and aches for days after. Lord Jenohn was heartless; he told me if I didn't get to all my classes and show up for evening drills, he'd give me one to match on the other thigh. At least I don't have to worry about lightning; they say when Master Selsor gets angry, the skies go black and some poor mage gets zapped."

"I've never known him to zap anyone," Kaeck said, "but I don't really see him, either. He teaches exclusively honors fifth years." A rank he was struggling hard to reach, for being a research mage meant he would get no commissions, no rewards, none of the things which field mages received for their valiant efforts. Being the poor country boy that he was, only high marks and honors, along with a respectable measure of experience would get him grants and sponsors.

He hoped.

"Oh, my name is Bellamy. It's a pleasure to meet you...?"

Kaeck smiled briefly, because everyone knew Bellamy. "My name is Kaeck; it's an honor to meet you."

Bellamy grimaced. "I see you already knew me. Ah, well. So what classes do you have today?"

Kaeck shrugged. "First I've got Magical The—" He was drowned out as the bells began to toll, and squeaked in panic as he realized the time, and that he was going to be late. Grabbing up his stuff, he threw it into his satchel and leapt to his feet. "Umm—"

Bellamy grinned and waved him off. "It was nice to meet you. Maybe I'll see you around, sometime. Go, run, I know what happens when students are late."

"See you," Kaeck replied, though he very much doubted it. If Bellamy was fawning over Cathalta, he could not see why Bellamy would ever bother to see him around, again. Obviously he had been bored and disappointed. No one spoke to Kaeck because they wanted to.

Though, that suddenly reminded him of the letter in his satchel. Someone wanted to talk him. Who? A puzzle to solve later, though, and he picked up his pace as he dashed across the yard to the building where nearly all the upper level magic courses were held.

He bolted into the room just as the warning bells were ringing, and slid into a seat all the way at the top. Sighing in relief, he pulled his satchel from his shoulder and dug out all the things he would need.

Professor Weston clapped his hands briskly, calling the students to order. "First order of business, congratulations again to you, third years, on receiving your jewels." Weston's jewels glowed red in the morning light, bright pinpoints in the dusty, faded classroom. "Next order of business—as some of you have undoubtedly already heard..." He coughed as voices immediately began buzzing and murmuring.

Kaeck frowned. What on earth had he missed?

Weston finally clapped his hands again. "As I was saying," he growled, "Master Selsor has decided to take on an apprentice this year. That means extensive one-on-one training with the Master himself, until graduation—and even beyond, should Master Selsor so choose. As third years taking at least one advanced level course, you are all qualified to apply. In order to apply, you must submit a transcript of your schooling to date, an essay stating your reasons for wanting the apprenticeship, and three scholarly references. Deadline is end of month. Now, on to business. I believe we left off yesterday with the earliest theories of Fire Theory..."

The whole class groaned, but obediently pulled out their books and papers.

Kaeck almost smiled, and organized his own papers—class notes and book off to the left, with his transcription work to finish. He should pay closer attention, but magical theory really wasn't that hard, even at this level.

He fell to his work, absently jotting down notes as he needed, long used to doing at least two things at once. When the students abruptly began to move and jostle and leave, he blinked for several seconds before pulling himself away from his work enough to realize that class was over, and he needed to get moving.

A hand fell on his shoulder, and Weston's growly voice stopped him short. "Going to apply for the apprenticeship, Kaeck?"

"Why?" Kaeck asked, puzzled. To work with Master Selsor directly...any aspiring mage dreamed of that, of course. However, it was the sort of post that would go to someone like Cathalta. Positions like that didn't go to a poor country boy with barely five coppers to his name. "He used to be a field mage, right? Wouldn't he pick one of those to work with?"

Weston snorted in contempt, and cuffed him lightly. "Master Selsor is nearly sixty years old—he is well past any desire for gallivanting about slaying monsters. Magic is more than how it can be used in combat. Master Selsor will pick the most qualified student, and that's that. You will apply. I will write you up a reference, and I suggest getting the other two from Norda and Fest, hmm?"

"Yes, Professor," Kaeck replied dutifully, and wondered miserably where in the world he would find time to start writing an essay, and he could not recall now if official transcripts cost money or not.

There would be no nap that afternoon, he suspected, and that meant he needed to cut back across the yard to go snatch another cup of tea to drink while he slogged his way through his next class, an upper level course on the history of magic as it pertained to religion and government.

By the time he was finally finished with the entire day, without a nap, he was ready to fall down in the nearest unused space and sleep for a week. He really hated when he had no time to sleep. The whole world felt fuzzy, sort of far away, except for odd bursts where it was entirely too sharp.

He stumbled up the steps into the campus post building, ignoring the looks and sniggers of a few unkind students. Yawning while settling his satchel, he pushed his way inside and trudged to his post box. A minute later he pulled out two letters and a long, thin, white box.

His heart started to pound as he saw his box number written in an already familiar hand on a small, fancy, gold-trimmed envelope affixed to the dark red ribbon holding the box closed. Shoving the letters into his satchel, he clutched the box close and pushed his way back out through the crowded lobby of the post building.

The urge to open it *now* was strong, but he still had to get home, and then do chores, and opening it would be all the sweeter when he had real time to do it. Students were so excited about the announced apprenticeship, most professors had not bothered to assign much work today, and his last class had been an exam. So he would finish his work fairly quickly tonight, and be able to sleep—so he would have plenty of time to open the box later.

Still, it was damned hard to wait.

He got home just in time to help with the dinner rush, though he didn't get through it without stealing several gulps of strong tea where he could. By the time he was allowed to go upstairs with his dinner tray, thoughts of his bed had almost drowned out the gift.

When he stepped into his room, though, it was there on his desk. A bright, clean white against the drab brown walls and faded green quilt. He set his dinner tray aside, only just remembering he still held it, and picked up the box.

Moving to the bed, he sat down and simply stared at it for a moment. Then he slowly pulled the envelope free from the ribbon, and pulled out the small sheet of paper inside.

*Its beauty does not compare, but it made me think of you. I hope you like it.*

*~An Admirer*

Beauty? Kaeck laughed at the idea of being thought beautiful, but his cheeks flushed all the same. The letter smelled faintly of cologne, but he could not pick out the individual scents. Pretty, though. Setting it aside, he finally tugged the ribbon free and opened the box.

Nestled in soft linen was a single flower. Silk, he recognized. It was a silk flower; the city was famous for them. This one was made to resemble a yellow orchid. It was beautiful. He reached out to touch it, cringing at how his rough hands looked against the silk, which ranged in color from a rich cream to a lush gold. A Royal Orchid, he thought they were called. The stem was stiff, able to hold the flower's weight, as well as the delicate green leaves.

It was only as he started to lift it out that he saw there was a tiny little vase to go with it, made of delicately spun glass.

Swallowing, he shoved the box aside and set the vase and flower up on his table. Silly, to get flowers, but the silk orchid must have cost a great deal—that meant it was no prank, nor a mistake, for surely someone willing to spend such money must mean it?

Who admired him enough to send him silk flowers? If he sold it, he would not have to worry about money for the rest of the school year, and possibly part of next.

Yet the thought of parting with it made him recoil. He couldn't. Not once had he ever received such a...frivolous, he supposed was the word, gift. Holidays and birthdays earned him practical things, occasionally a bag of sweets. Not silk flowers.

He sat staring at it, wondering idly who his admirer could be—and his thoughts fluttered briefly to Bellamy, but that was silly. Bellamy had spoken to him out of boredom, and had obviously been besotted with Cathalta.

So, another student? Someone in his classes? Why didn't the admirer simply talk to him? Well, perhaps he'd step forward at some point. There was no point in such admiration, after all, unless one eventually hoped to have it returned.

He wished suddenly that he had a gift of his own to give, for the day he met his admirer. There was no chance of buying something even remotely close to a silk flower, but it would be nice to have *something...*

Well...he did have to go out soon, to buy more candles and see if he couldn't find some boots that he could both fit and afford. Maybe he could at least poke around some of the second hand shops for some ideas.

Maybe he should stop getting ahead of himself.

He reached out and lightly touched the delicate flower, then made himself get to work, sipping at his soup as he bent over a book, pausing occasionally to jot down notes.

The city bells chimed midnight shortly before he finished, and Kaeck put his things away with a groan of relief.

Giving the flower one last look and touch, smiling, he shucked his clothes and climbed into bed.

*Good* afternoon, Kaeck."

Kaeck jumped, hand jerking across the paper upon which he'd been writing. He scowled at the blemish, then looked up.

"Sorry," Bellamy said with a wince as he slid into a seat on the opposite side of the table Kaeck had taken, on the massive balcony of the library. "I seem to be developing a habit of interrupting your work. I can go, if you like. What are you working on?"

Kaeck shrugged, and set his quill aside. "It's an essay, actually, for the apprenticeship." He'd thought coming up with a believable reason for wanting it would be difficult, but it was proving to be remarkably easy.

All he had left to do was finish the draft, recopy it in final, then pick up his transcript and the last of his three references. Hopefully, he would be able to turn it in first thing in the morning, and be done with the entire affair.

Bellamy smiled. "All the mages are aflutter over it. Lord Jenohn didn't announce it quite that way. No one knew he was game for an apprentice until he pointed at me and said 'you'll do.' Personally, I think he just saw an easy mark." He winked.



"My professors are much the same," Kaeck replied. "Though instead of beatings, they just pile on the research and paper grading."

"Oh, ouch," Bellamy said with a sympathetic grimace. "I think I'd rather take another battle wound than grade papers. You study early in the morning *and* grade papers? You are a veritable saint, or going about suicide in entirely the wrong way."

Kaeck laughed. "I just want to keep my scholarship, and graduate with full honors." The scholarship, especially. It did not quite cover all his schooling, but it covered enough of it. Without that, he would be going back to his parents' shop to toil his days away spinning and sewing and never again doing magic.

"Yes," Bellamy agreed. "So what do you want to do when you graduate? Have a particular territory you want to clear out, near home maybe? Are you staying in the city?"

Why was Bellamy even speaking to him? Had he just missed Cathalta again? Was he waiting for him? Perhaps he was simply bored. "Research, actually," he finally replied, and braced himself for the usual derision.

"Oh, hey, that's pretty neat. My great uncle did research, though he used to chortle that he only did enough to get by, and caused trouble with all the free time. My great aunt—she's the actual blood relation, on my mother's side—helped him after she retired from fieldwork. I remember this one time, great uncle managed to fill his entire house with this bright blue smoke. I don't think he ever figured out what exactly caused it." He smiled a bit sadly. "They passed away about a year and a half ago; never did survive well without each other, after they finally married."

Kaeck nodded, not certain what he should say or do. "I'm sorry."

"Thanks," Bellamy said, smile brightening. "Magic runs strong in a lot of my family. My folks were sort of disappointed I think, when they realized I would have none, because neither of them has it. They got over it pretty quick though, when I proved extremely skilled with a sword. Everyone in my family is skinnier than me, if you can believe it. Totally hopeless with weapons or anything heavier than a book, really. You should see—"

He abruptly broke off, cheeks turning pink, and ducked his head in embarrassment. "Sorry," he muttered. "I normally only ramble to my poor, unfortunate family. Strangers and new acquaintances, I usually remember to cut it short."

Kaeck blinked, confused. "Um. You weren't bothering me. What does your family do?"

"We own a bookshop in Towsa."

"Towsa?" Kaeck asked, confused. Towsa was the third largest city in the country. Bellamy had a country accent, though.

Bellamy smiled. "My accent? People never believe me—"

"No," Kaeck blurted, horrified. "Not at all. I mean—I was just confused—I—no, I believe you. I'm sorry. It just—um—" He stared glumly at his stupid easy, feeling like the world's greatest idiot.

"Aw, I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to upset you. I could see you believed me, Kaeck. I was going to say that no one else ever did, so it was nice to see someone who was simply confused rather than disbelieving."

Kaeck nodded, and cautiously looked up again.

Bellamy smiled at him. Kaeck wondered wistfully what it might be like if Bellamy *was* his admirer. What it might be like if Bellamy thought him beautiful. If his day was brightened by seeing Kaeck. Gods knew he definitely, despite himself, enjoyed Bellamy's smiles.

He smiled back, shoving the fanciful thoughts aside with an effort. "I'm guessing your family moved to the city too late to save your accent?"

"Exactly," Bellamy said with a laugh. "An old, old friend of my father's fell ill and died. Mind you, at that point, he and my father hadn't seen each other in more than five years—but he left my dad everything, and he'd apparently gotten pretty wealthy in those five-plus years. I never thought I'd see my dad cry, but it totally tore him up to realize what his friend had done. After that, my dad decided he could give my mom and I a much better life in the city, and so we moved. A few months later, some old man wanted to leave, and he sold my dad his bookshop. My folks still run it, and I don't think they'll ever turn it completely over. Bit by bit, my other relatives have trickled in to join us, until the city is damn near overrun with people related to me. Very hard to get into mischief, when everyone you see is a cousin or an aunt or an in-law." He rolled his eyes.

Kaeck shook his head in wonder and envy. "Your family sounds amazing."

Bellamy nodded. "I love my family. What about yours? They must be proud as anything to have a real mage in the family, and one here on scholarship. Not to mention, good enough to apply for the apprenticeship."

"My family is pure village," he replied with a shrug. Meaning his family was extremely old-fashioned. Mages were necessary for keeping the people safe from the beasts lurking in the Territories, but they were an uncouth, wild lot not to be trusted, and spent more time avoiding honest labor than killing the beasts.

"Oh," Bellamy said with a wince. "I'm sorry."

Kaeck just shrugged again.

"They'll change their minds when you're famous, eh?" Bellamy said. "If you get the apprenticeship, I don't doubt they'll come running to beg forgiveness and lavish you with attention."

The ridiculousness of that image made Kaeck smile briefly. He had never known his parents to admit to a wrong in their lives, never mind apologize for something. "Probably," he agreed, because that was easier than trying to explain the reality to someone who ultimately did not care.

"If not, their loss, eh? I remember this one time—" He stopped as a flurry of noise and conversation came from behind Kaeck, meaning Bellamy faced it. His gaze immediately latched on to something.

Or, Kaeck thought with disappointment, *someone*.

He didn't even need to turn around; Cathalta's mocking laughter was all the confirmation he required.

The look on Bellamy's face answered another question, though he'd never allowed himself to ask it, even in his own head.

That look said that the moment Cathalta had appeared, Bellamy had forgotten everyone and everything else in the room. He was no longer really aware Kaeck was still there, or that they'd been talking.

It was stupid to feel disappointed, because he *did* have his admirer...

Still, no one else ever really talked to him, and he liked the way Bellamy could talk and talk with no signs of stopping, the way the words sounded in that softened country accent.

He summoned a smile as Bellamy recalled his presence. "It was nice talking to you again," Kaeck said with clear finality, giving Bellamy an easy escape. "Have a good evening."

Bellamy at least had the grace to look sheepish. "You too, Kaeck. I'll see you around."

Kaeck nodded, but could not help thinking bitterly that the only time he would see Bellamy was the next time Bellamy was bored and waiting for Cathalta, or had just missed Cathalta and had nothing better to do.

Sighing softly, thinking of the pretty silk flower on his desk at home, Kaeck resumed writing his essay.

The tolling of the school bells drew him from his work. He flexed his stiff, aching hand and thought briefly of the cream the village healers back home made.

His essay was five pages long; when he recopied it in the morning, he would try to pare it down to four. Professors hated long essays, barring the history department.

Gathering up his things, he let his fingers linger over the envelope tucked into a small front pocket. Knowing he would not have time to trek back across campus to the post building, he had grabbed his mail early in the day, disappointed that there probably would not yet be anything from his admirer.

There had been something, however. Another envelope, another letter—but this time, tucked into it was one of the pretty, nonsensical bookmarks so many students loved to collect and trade.

It was cream-colored silk over a thin piece of wood, on which someone had beautifully painted in watercolor a portion of the school—specifically the long stone path which curved around a number of trees and rosebushes before ending at the back of the main building for the magic half of the school.

On the back, delicate calligraphy spelled out *~From An Admirer*

He was afraid to use it, really, or even touch it. Carefully tucking it back into the envelope, and the envelope back into his bag, he headed off-campus and into the city to do his shopping before it got dark.

St. Martin and Lichon were the primary shopping districts in the city, with various other shops spilling from those main streets into smaller lanes.

Kaeck had never bothered going there, except on his first real shopping trip in the city, to look around, since that was the closest he would ever come to owning the beautiful things in the fancy shops.

His own shopping was always done on Tackett Street. 'Tack' street, more than a few people called it. They could afford to call it that.

Tackett was home to pawn shops, money lenders, second-hand shops, and he was fairly certain the 'apothecary' on the corner only cured ailments of the lusty sort, but could not say for certain.

He slipped into the first of the three second-hand shops he preferred. It was clean, didn't smell funny, and the clerks would actually look customers in the face and greet them.

Returning the called greeting absently, he headed straight to the back, where old boots were kept in a haphazard heap in a beat-up trunk.

Nearly half an hour of foraging later, he at last discovered a pair of boots that would do. They were only just a little too big, no holes in the places that mattered, and only cost thirty pence. Smiling in excitement over the modest victory, because he'd allotted up to fifty pence for new boots and the extra would cozen a sweet on his supper tray from Myla.

Usually, he passed right by the counter which held an assortment of jewels and trinkets that was on the way to the front counter, but today his admirer was still on his mind, and that compelled him to stop for once. Most of it, he skipped right over. He doubted he would ever see the day he would be able to buy anything containing a precious stone, even second-hand.

He couldn't even afford the ones that were paste.

Off to the right, however, were miscellaneous little bits. Pillboxes, mostly, made of everything from wood to precious jewels.

There was one in particular which immediately caught his eye. It was made of dark, red-tinted wood, with silver hinges and a delicate silver clasp. It was made to resemble a book, right down to the wooden sides being scored to resemble pages. The title was written in faded and mostly worn away tiny, gold script: *The Complete History of Magic*.

It made him laugh, because the real *Complete History* was a massively oversized book that was too cumbersome and heavy for anyone to actually lift. Students and teachers alike simply studied from the set of fifty volumes into which the *History* was broken down.

The pillbox was old, but in good condition, and the worn-away lettering only seemed to add to its charm. Students, and others besides, used pillboxes to hold everything except pills. Sweets, a place to store jewelry when classes required it come off, ointments and creams to quickly heal burns and scratches and whatever all else, small items that needed to be kept safe and dry—and simply to show off, much like the bookmark his admirer had give him.

Probably it was a silly gift.

He should really spend the three coppers being asked for it on something else.

Still, the title had made him laugh, would make any student laugh. Assuming his admirer was a student, and he could not imagine who or what else his admirer might be.

Sighing, calling himself an idiot who deserved to go without lunch the rest of the week—which is what the pillbox would cost him—he carried it to the counter along with the boots.

A few minutes later, he stamped his feet to settle the new boots properly, and lightly touched the pillbox where it was tucked into his tunic.

It had grown dark while he was shopping, but only just. Securing his satchel, he walked quickly the rest of the way home.

*His* jewels were bright in the sunlight, and Kaeck could not help but smile. The skin around them was still a little raw and red, even a full week later, but in a healthy, healing sort of way.

At the moment they were white, the color of new stones. When bonded, a mage's stones typically took on the color of his bonded's eyes. No one knew quite why—one of many things he could potentially research, though he knew a few professors on campus were already doing precisely that.

He would likely never have a bonded, in which case his stones would eventually take on the color of the magic he favored, which was fire.

One more week, and he and the other third years would begin to make real use of their stones. He could not wait, and knew his fellows were just as impatient. Smiling at the thought, and maybe at the memory of the admirer letters he continued to receive, he walked on, looking up as he realized he was wandering into an unexpected crowd—

Too late, as he crashed into someone's back. "Sorry," he muttered, pushing away and regaining his balance. He looked up at the person he'd unwittingly walked into, and cringed inwardly. "Sorry," he said again.

Cathalta glared at him. "Watch it, you hay-headed hick."

Kaeck ignored him, long inured to the witticisms of the high and mighty, and strode past, scowling at the crowd that would not let him pass. Why was the east field so packed?

In the next moment, he had his answer, as the crowd parted enough for him to see what was going on—a duel. Two of the combat students were dueling in the middle of the field. It was obviously a light-hearted affair; a spectacle rather than a heated fight.

One of them was Bellamy. The other Kaeck didn't recognize, though he could immediately see by the flashy clothes and hair that he was city bred—and the crest of his sleeve marked him an honors fifth year.

"They say that whoever wins Master Selsor's apprenticeship, will wind up bonded to Bellamy," said someone behind Kaeck. "Certainly worse-looking soldiers to be bonded to. What do you think Cathalta? Want to be bonded to that?"

"I think I can do better than a stone-faced country boy who looks perpetually half-starved and only caught Lord Jenohn's eye because he was an ignorant idiot running late." He laughed mockingly. "Makes me wonder just what he sort of *training* he really does for the old coot."

Kaeck fumed silently, but didn't turn around and yell as he would like. Instead, he did his best to block out the hideous conversation and focused solely on Bellamy. Cathalta might sneer and mock, but Kaeck could see even with his untrained eye why Bellamy was Lord Jenohn's protégé. It did not require an expert to see that Bellamy was, or soon would be, a true master of the art of combat.

He fought the fifth year easily, as though it were not even remotely a challenge. He moved fluidly, lightly, but with deadly accuracy and every movement and nuance was calculated. It was perfectly obvious that he was making the duel last, and that he could end it at any time.

Bellamy suddenly laughed, and called out a taunt to his opponent, and Kaeck could not understand why Cathalta had described him as stone-faced. The Bellamy he knew was anything but—all he ever did was smile and laugh, wince and grimace, and talk at a rapid, relentless pace until something forced him to stop.

Or until he saw Cathalta.

Kaeck didn't care *what* the rest of the campus thought—Cathalta was an obnoxious moron.

He cheered with everyone else as Bellamy finally took his victory, and the fifth year accepted defeat with a good-natured laugh. He scowled as they shook hands, and then kissed cheeks, in a formal show that the duel had been fair, well-fought, and no hard feelings lingered.

Bellamy waved as the fifth year then departed, then turned around to face where Kaeck stood.

Completely not seeing him, but focusing instead past his shoulder, where Kaeck knew Cathalta was.

Cathalta, who had already turned away, making more of his cruel jests that Kaeck fervently hoped Bellamy could not hear. Bellamy opened his mouth, likely to call out to Cathalta, then snapped it shut again without saying a word.

Kaeck frowned, confused.

Cathalta vanished, and Bellamy sighed—then he shifted the direction of his gaze, and saw Kaeck, and smiled. "Hello, Kaeck. How are you this afternoon?"

Why, Kaeck wondered miserably, was he only good enough to speak to when there was no one better around? Was he that unappealing? What made stupid Cathalta so special? "Fine," he replied, unable to muster a more enthusiastic reply. "You?" He reached up to irritably shove back an errant strand of hair which he apparently had not cut short enough.

"Well enough," Bellamy said. He reached out and snagged Kaeck's wrist, running a thumb over the jewel embedded there. "Your jewels look good."

Kaeck shivered at the unexpected touch, thoroughly unprepared for the way it jolted straight through him, and made it hard to breathe for a moment. He jerked his wrist away reflexively, and managed to draw a breath.

"Sorry!" Bellamy, and stepped back, head dropping with guilt, smile vanishing beneath an unhappy frown. "I completely forgot we're not supposed to do that."

"No," Kaeck replied, licking his suddenly dry lips. "You're fine. It just took me by surprise. I'm not really used to them yet."

"Good," Bellamy said with relief. "I was afraid I'd hurt you. I really should have known better, the professors beat knowledge of mages and how to treat them into our heads and flesh. If they'd seen me do that, it'd be like a thousand lashes in the yard."

Kaeck smiled reassuringly. "It's all right, really. If it makes you feel better, I'll undoubtedly breach some point of etiquette where soldiers are concerned. Then we'll be even. Um—I enjoyed your duel. That fifth-year never stood a chance, did he? It was a fine duel to see."

"Yeah?" Bellamy asked, and his smile almost looked shy. "My instructors see my duels and just tell me everything I do wrong, and decide to correct me then and there by knocking me around the practice ring for an hour or three."

Huh. It almost sounded like Bellamy never received praise. Surely countless students must fawn over him much like they fawned over Cathalta?

His thoughts must have shown on his face, for Bellamy's smile faded, and he gave a shrug to show he didn't care, which really only emphasized how much he did care. "Most of my fellows aren't pleased I wound up Lord Jenohn's 'pet.' Like I said the other day, it happened out of the blue. I was actually late to class—" He broke off abruptly, and sighed. "Sorry, I'm about to start rambling again, aren't I? For some reason, it's easy to do around you. I'm sorry."

Kaeck shook his head. "I really don't mind. I like listening." He hesitated, then spoke before he could think himself out of it. "Would you like to go sit in the café and get some tea?"

"Really?" Bellamy asked.

"That's where I was headed, anyway." Not true, but Bellamy looked...forlorn, and Kaeck hated that, though he wished miserably that he did not care.

Bellamy beamed. "That would be nice, then." He fell into step alongside Kaeck, and a few minutes later they had claimed a table at the mostly deserted café. Kaeck felt entirely too visible, despite their near-solitude, for Bellamy had chosen a table right in the middle. He looked with longing at his little corner table, then tried to focus on Bellamy.

Normally that wouldn't be hard, but he'd overslept and so missed breakfast, and had no spare coin for lunch—and Bellamy had purchased what looked to Kaeck like a feast. Two small savory pies, a sticky sweet roll, and two bright green apples.

Sipping his own dark, sweet tea, he said, "So no one likes you being Lord Jenohn's apprentice?"

Bellamy shook his head. "It's funny, sort of. It was the first day of Intro Swordsmanship, and I got to class at least ten minutes late. Being mostly from the country, and only in the past few years from Towsa, I didn't really know much that everyone here takes for granted. Unknown to me, the actual professor for the class had taken sick the night before. I thought the old man gleefully knocking us around that day was the professor." He winced at the memory.

"Anyway, he called me for my turn in the circle, and I sparred with him. Got my ass kicked around the ring, but I lasted twice as long as everyone else. After I managed to stand up again, and more or less see straight, he started barraging me with questions. At one point, I answered 'yes, professor'...and the entire class laughed at me. Positively howled." Bellamy sighed. "They were delighted I was such an idiot."

"One of them finally managed to stop laughing long enough to inform me that it was Lord, not professor. Lord Jenohn told him to never mind that, and started hitting me with questions again. Could I do this, would I be willing to do that, did I know this, could I learn that, was I prepared to be in a great deal of pain for the rest of my time at school, so on and so forth. Finally, he nodded, pointed, and said 'you'll do' and told me to report to his office when my classes were over for the day. I've been his favorite practice dummy ever since, but no one ever forgets I was the ignorant moron who ran late to class because he'd gotten lost in the armory."

Kaeck smiled. "An interesting way to gain an apprenticeship. Much easier than having to write essays and make professors hold still long enough to write references. He didn't hold your being late against you?"

"Oh, good grief, no. Ever been in the armory? It's the most hideous maze you'll ever find. Some first years go in, and never find their way out again, I swear. That day, I feared I'd be one of them."

Laughing, Kaeck motioned toward a tall, dark stone building some distance away. "You've never been in the archives, then. Even fifth-years are lost forever in there."

"Remind me never to go in the archives, then," Bellamy replied with a mock shudder.

"Your cruel master hasn't made you do that yet?" Kaeck teased, and then wondered when he had started teasing anyone.



Bellamy laughed. "No, and don't give him any ideas." He abruptly shoved one of his savory pies across the table. "Here's a bribe. Please do not suggest to my lord and master that I go into the archives to vanquish ghosts or skeletons or something."

Kaeck rolled his eyes. "You don't have to bribe me. Even if I wanted to tell him, I wouldn't know where to begin to find him."

Bellamy took a bite out of his remaining pie and chewed for a moment, before swallowing and replying, "This time of day, he's in the main conservatory having tea with Master Selsor. I would say it's cute, the way they bicker, but Master Selsor would no doubt sense I'd said such a thing and strike me down with a bolt of wrath."

"You seem a bit obsessed with Master Selsor and lightning," Kaeck said in amusement, struggling to ignore the tempting meat pie before him, because it wasn't really his.

"I've seen Lord Jenohn's scars," Bellamy replied. "Where Master Selsor struck him way back? Trust me, you never want to make that guy mad. Luckily, I'm a soldier, so my chances of even meeting him for more than five seconds are slim." He finished the rest of his pie, and pointed at the one he'd shoved toward Kaeck. "You should eat that before it gets cold. They always taste better hot."

"It's yours," Kaeck said.

"No," Bellamy replied, "I gave it to you as a bribe. You have to eat it, or I'll think you're going to discuss the archives with Lord Jenohn." He winked.

Kaeck wanted to argue some more, but pride was quickly overruled by the growling of his stomach. "Thank you," he said quietly, and picked it up.

Oh, so much better than porridge or soup. Venison, he thought, seasoned so perfectly, and utter bliss with the soft, flaky crust. He ate it slowly, savoring every bite and committing it to memory. When it was finally gone, he stifled an urge to sigh, and settled for licking juice and crumbs from his fingertips.

Finally finished with no trace remaining, he looked up to thank Bellamy again—and froze as he realized Bellamy was watching him with a funny expression on his face.

He flushed, suspecting he had looked incredibly stupid enjoying a simple pie so much. Mumbling another thank you to the tabletop, he wished that he could strike himself with lightning, or knew how to make Master Selsor do it.

Bellamy coughed, and when Kaeck finally managed to look up again, he was holding out an apple. "Want one?"

Kaeck frowned, irritated that Bellamy obviously realized he was hungry and was taking pity. "I'm fine," he said. "You don't have to feed me."

"No, no," Bellamy said. "I've been trying to get you to do me a favor. I've got my evening session in half an hour, and if I put too much food on my stomach, I'll wind up tossing it all. Trust me, I've learned the

hard way to either keep my meals light, or not eat at all." He shrugged. "It just looked so good. I think the hardest part of being Jenohn's slave is that all the practicing means I really do need to keep a careful watch on my eating habits."

"How often do you practice?" Kaeck asked, accepting the apple and taking a bite. It was almost as delicious as the meat pie.

"Oh, gods," Bellamy said. "I barely stop. My morning session with Jenohn begins two hours before sunup, and goes an hour past. Then my classes, and right now I'm in advanced strategy, melee combat, and advanced specialized weaponry. Also history, where I nap, and beginner bonding, where if I'm dumb enough to nap, the professor takes a switch to me and then tattles to Jenohn. Midday, right before lunch, I have another hour session with Jenohn, and another two hours after supper."

Kaeck could only stare. "I thought *my* schedule was exhausting."

Bellamy laughed. "I've seen how hard you work, the last few times I've come across you. I'm sure yours is—what is it?"

"Um—I help my landlady in the morning, then leave for school a little before dawn. Work here until first class, and have class or studying straight through 'til supper. Then I help my landlady again, and study afterward."

"All that studying would put me straight to sleep," Bellamy replied. "I'm impressed you can do it. I only passed my book courses for fear of more beatings. My poor backside can only take so much, you know?"

Kaeck had always assumed the talk of beatings was an exaggeration to emphasize the point—now he suddenly wondered. "Do they really beat you?"

"Oh, not badly. I've never had worse than bruises. There was this one idiot, he got caught cheating—he got the lash, sure enough. But, I mean, we're expected to defeat monsters to keep the villages and cities safe, and keep our mages alive while doing it. That's a serious matter, and if a few mild beatings gets that through thick heads, so be it." He shrugged, and polished off his apple in a few quick, neat bites.

The bells began to ring, and Kaeck stifled a sigh of disappointment, for he was really running late now. It was beginning to look as though there would be no sleep that night.

Bellamy stood, and smiled at him. "It was good to talk to you, Kaeck. I don't really talk to anyone much. Hope you have a good evening, I'll see you around. And you can have that," he added, motioning to the sweet roll before he stood jogged off across the plaza toward the combat half of the campus.

Kaeck watched him go, and wondered what was wrong with him that he thought more about Bellamy than the admirer sending him adoring letters and expensive gifts.

*It* was raining again, and threatening to storm, when he finally trudged into the post building to fetch his mail. The day was one more stretch of misery in what seemed the longest stretch yet.

Or maybe everything just seemed worse since he'd stopped running into Bellamy after their last encounter three weeks ago. Somehow, those brief interludes had made everything that much brighter. As much as he adored his odd admirer, letters and gifts didn't compare to conversation and someone smiling at you.

But, since their brief meal at the café, he had not seen Bellamy except from afar and only briefly. If he were more inclined toward paranoia, he would fear Bellamy was avoiding him. However, there was no logical reason for that. They'd parted pleasantly, and almost as though they were friends.

Sighing, Kaeck shoved back his wet hair and opened his post box, pulling out the single cream-colored envelope within. Huh. It seemed there was nothing more than paper inside. Not that he minded, the words meant more than the gifts, but he was surprised.

Normally, he waited until he was home to open his admirer letters, but right now he wanted a reason to smile and he wanted it now. Tearing the envelope open, he pulled out the letter—and almost dropped it in surprise.

*I find that even if I were, after all this time, to meet with failure—I would like at last to speak. I hope of course for success. If you are willing to meet, dearest beauty, how about tonight? Ten bells, at the Half Moon Tavern? The scrap of fabric is the color of the tunic I shall be wearing.*

*~A Hopeful Admirer*

He...it...his admirer finally wanted to reveal himself?

Kaeck smiled, then laughed, from both excitement and relief that the mystery would at last resolve.

That promptly reminded him that he was soaking wet, and at least an hour from home with the weather the way it was—and he would have to appease Myla somehow, if he wanted to leave again to go to dinner and not get stuck doing chores all night.

Unless...he bit his lip, and pondered. Unless he just went to a secondhand shop and bought something, which was probably a good idea anyway, since his school clothes were hardly the sort of thing one wore out to nice places.

Not that he could afford anything nice, nothing like the small scrap of midnight blue velvet he held. Still, surely he could manage a step up from his pitiful tunics and robe, which had all been let out and patched and repaired so many times that there was very little of the original fabric left.

He nodded to himself, decided, and tucked the letter away. Suddenly his long, miserable stretch was coming to an end—surely a much, much happier road was ahead. Someone who thought him beautiful, and liked his smile, and already *admired* him.

His heart beat furiously in his chest as he dashed from the post building and back into the rain, running as fast as he dared back across campus, carelessly splashing through puddles, dodging equally frantic people—laughing the whole while, because damn it, Bellamy might not think him good enough but *someone* did and tonight he would find out soon. Just a few more hours.

Plenty of time to make himself presentable, and he'd somehow made a habit of carrying around his silly little gift. He really hoped his admirer liked the trinket, though it could not begin to compare to silk flowers and bookmarks and earrings and satin ribbons...

The sound of horses drew him from his thoughts just in time to avoid running in front of a carriage, and he skidded to a stop in the middle of a particularly muddy pile. Grimacing at himself, pulling his head firmly from the clouds, Kaeck called an apology to the coachman and then hurried on his way to Tackett Street.

He skipped the first of the second-hand shops he favored, and went straight to the second one, a little further down the street. It was smaller, but had a better clothing selection.

"You look like a puppy that played in the mud, boy," said an amused voice.

Kaeck laughed. "It's raining more than a little bit, that's for certain."

"Wasn't expecting you for a while," said the woman at the counter. "You're not due another robe already, are you? Then again, look at the state of that tunic..." She shook her head mournfully and came around the counter to fuss over his clothing.

He shrugged sheepishly. "I'm looking for something...decent, I suppose."

She quirked a brow. "Decent? What the world is decent supposed to mean, boy?"

"Nice, Karla," Kaeck replied. "Uh. Someone asked me to dinner."

"Ah," she said, and smiled. "Try the shelves there, dear. You can afford them, I think, and they're nice enough."

"Thanks," Kaeck muttered, and went obediently as she went off to help someone else who had just stepped into the shop.

He explored the indicated shelves thoroughly, wistfully discarding the few real robes made of satin and velvet and finest lawn. Weighing his options, he finally settled on a simple shin-length tunic. It was, of course, old, and he could see the places where it had been carefully repaired...but the fabric otherwise was still in relatively good condition. A dark gold-brown, fairly close in color to his eyes, or so he thought. It was trimmed in slightly darker velvet ribbon at the sleeves and ends, and the belt he was presently wearing would match it fine. After some hesitation, he selected new hose to go beneath it.

Nodding, he took them to the counter before another glance at the price could convince him this was a bad idea. A few minutes later, he was dashing back to campus, where he could hide away in the library to study and fret and attempt to do something with his hair until dinner.

The Half Moon Tavern was well beyond his means, but he rather suspected that his admirer would be paying—and if not, well, he could always wash dishes and such until his debt was paid. He didn't care what he had to do, so long as he got to meet his admirer tonight.

Would he talk a lot? Was he a soldier, a mage? A townspeople—that was doubtful. What year? How had he watched Kaeck all this time without Kaeck ever noticing?

He sat down at his usual table in a remote corner of the vast library and pulled out his books, but several minutes later gave it up as a lost cause. There would be no studying right now, and he'd regret that later, but his mind was too much on his admirer.

Reaching into his satchel, he took out the small scrap of blue fabric.

And immediately thought of midnight blue eyes in an animated face that he hadn't seen for three weeks.

He scowled and shoved thoughts of Bellamy away—he had no business intruding, not when he obviously had better things to do and so was not bored enough to waste his time on Kaeck.

If that was a depressing thought, well, it served him right for daydreaming about Bellamy when he obviously had an ardent admirer.

Sighing, he shoved his schoolwork back into his bag and pulled out the little pillbox, carefully kept safe inside a small wooden box he'd nicked from Myla when she'd tossed it out. He'd even managed to find an old handkerchief, and wash it well, so that the paltry gift was at least wrapped properly.

Gods, was it ten bells yet?

The minutes felt like hours, and the hour like days, but finally—finally it was a quarter past nine and he ducked into a small study room to hastily change, drying off as best he could before pulling on the new hose and tunic. His wet stuff served to clean away the worst of the muck on his boots, and he combed fingers through his poorly shorn hair.

Nothing for it, though. He was as presentable as he would get. If his admirer had liked him thus far, logically he would like him still.

Still...

He shook his head, refusing to make himself sick with worry before he'd even gotten there. His wet clothes were wrapped in his cloak, before shoving the entire bundle into his satchel; hopefully the cloak would keep the clothes from ruining his books and all. Then he slung the bag over one shoulder, and holding the scrap of blue fabric tightly in one fist, he left the library, walked across campus, and into the city.

The Half Moon Tavern was on a street packed with inns, taverns and shops that were well to do, but not quite fancy enough for the noble classes. More, it was the province of wealthy merchants and others of that ilk.

He saw more than a few students as he walked, but paid them no mind, too busy trying to remember how to breathe as he finally reached the Half Moon Tavern and stepped inside.

It was warm and bright inside, candles glowing, light shining through the colored glass of decorative lamp shades. Linen on the tables, gleaming silverware, and patrons who could comfortably afford to eat here. It smelled like rich food and fine wine, mingled with cologne and perfume.

"Can I help you, boy?" A gruff voice asked.

He jumped, and shook his head nervously at the bartender. "No, sir. I'm waiting for a friend."

"Well, have a drink while you're waiting then," the bartender said, then startled Kaeck further by smiling at him. "You look like you could use it. Sit."

Nodding, too nervous to argue, he sat down at the bar and stared at the polished wood. He looked up when a tankard was set in front of him, and started to say he couldn't afford it—but the bartender had already gone off to tend someone else, and surely one drink wouldn't hurt?

He picked it up and took a tentative sip, and smiled as he then took a second and third. After that, he set it down, refusing to be even the slightest bit unsteady when his admirer showed up. Not having anything else to do, he took out his gift, and set it on the bar.

Then he wondered if that was all right, and set it in his lap instead, fingers stroking the cheap wood whenever they weren't occupied with the tankard.

Five minutes to go, roughly. Was he going to live that long? What happened if after all this, they did not actually get along? What if—

The bells over the door rang, and he turned to look—and felt his heart lodge in his throat.

Bellamy, oh it was Bellamy in dark blue. Kaeck couldn't remember how to speak, and really what could he possibly say even if he did know? Oh, why hadn't the idiot simply—so why all the fuss over Cathalta—oh, he really didn't care because Bellamy's tunic matched his scrap of fabric and it was really and truly *Bellamy*.

He smiled, fumbling nervously with the box still on his lap. "Bellamy."

"Kaeck," Bellamy said with a warm smile. "What are you doing here? Meeting someone as well?"

What? Kaeck frowned, confused. Was Bellamy teasing him? He didn't get a chance to ask, however, for Bellamy continued speaking.

"You haven't seen Cathalta, have you? I was supposed to meet him here at ten bells. I thought for certain he would show..."

A sick, horrible, wretched idea suddenly lodged in Kaeck's mind, and made the beer sour in his stomach.

It couldn't be, it just couldn't. That wasn't *fair*. But...now that he'd thought it, it made all too much sense. Still, he had to be certain, please gods don't be so cruel as to prove him correct...

Hand trembling slightly, he held out the scrap of blue fabric.

Bellamy frowned as he caught sight of it. "What are you doing with that, Kaeck?"

Kaeck wanted to cry. He stood up, paying no heed to the gift he'd brought as it fell to the floor and spilled open. "You're an idiot."

"Wha—"

"Cathalta's post box is 102835. *Mine* is 102385."

Bellamy's eye widened in horror, but Kaeck didn't stay to hear whatever he might say—nothing he said would fix it. Instead, he shoved past Bellamy and bolted, running out into the street and back toward the end of town that was more familiar to him.

By the time he was halfway home, his eyes were too blurry with tears to see. At some point, he'd thought he'd heard Bellamy call his name, and he heard it again now. Desperate to avoid being seen, he ducked into an alleyway and travelled down it until he came to an even smaller one. Hunching down, he buried his face in his folded arms and sobbed.

Stupid, stupid Bellamy. Gods, how could he have been stupid enough to think that someone might actually *admire* him—how could he be stupid enough to have believed for one moment that *Bellamy* had been that admirer?

Why hadn't it occurred to him someone other than the post workers might get the numbers wrong?

What sort of moron messed up the post box number of the man he supposedly admired?

He could not believe he'd been that gullible. Anyone, admire him! He should have listened to himself when he'd thought it too ridiculous to believe.

But those five seconds when he'd thought Bellamy was his admirer had been the best moment of his life.

Which just made him cry all the harder.

*He* pleaded sick for two days straight, wasting precious pence to send Myla's youngest to school to inform his advisor and fetch whatever work he needed.

The third day, however, he had no choice but to get up, help Myla, and then ready himself for school.

It was hour earlier than he usually left, but he had something to do and wanted to be as alone as possible. Shouldering his satchel, he moved to his table, where a medium sized box rested. Inside were all the letters and gifts which Bellamy had mistakenly given him.

He still cringed and wanted to hide every time he thought about how stupid and pathetic he must have looked—him, poor as dirt and glaringly out of place, sitting there because he had honestly believed he had an admirer. It meant Bellamy knew he'd fallen for all the nonsense—nonsense which had belonged to someone else.

Pathetic really was the only word for it.

Picking up the box, he left his little room and ventured out into the city, moving as quickly as he could make himself to reach campus. It was, as he had hoped it would be, still mercifully quiet when he arrived.

Sighing, he kept walking, all the way to the far end of campus where the post building lay. Climbing the stairs, he slipped inside and strode to the drop off section. Not knowing stupid Bellamy's box number, he had simply written his name and class, and trusted that the post clerks would find his number and see the box properly delivered.

He turned sharply away as soon as the deed was done, then hesitated. The very last thing he wanted to do was check his stupid box, but today was when Selsor would announce his choice of apprentice.

Probably he would pick odious Cathalta, and then stupid Bellamy would finally have the person he *really* admired.

Blinking furiously, because he refused to start crying again when he still had an entire day of school to suffer through, Kaeck finally just strode to his post box and unlocked it, pulling out the two envelopes inside.

One was from the school, marked with its seal on the front, and closed with Master Selsor's personal crest on the back. His rejection, of course. He couldn't see it being an acceptance.

The other was on familiar expensive, cream-colored paper, with the same neat, bold script. Except, this time, it was addressed to *Kaeck Delia*, #102385. How had the stupid idiot gotten his last name?

He didn't want to open it. Bellamy's words had already caused him enough pain. He didn't want to hear *I'm sorry* and other such nonsense. He wanted to hear Bellamy *admired* him, and that wasn't going to ever happen, so what point was there in listening to anything else Bellamy had to say?

But even as he finished the thought, he had the envelope open and was pulling out a piece of paper.



*Kaeck,*

*I don't know if you'll ever get this. I've looked everywhere for you, and asked around, but no one knows where you live or anything. Please, I want—need—to talk to you. That night, you have no idea—*

*Please? I'm begging you. If you read this, I'll wait every morning for you in front of the archives, and every evening after final bells.*

*~Bellamy*

There was no point in going. There wasn't. So why was he already walking toward the archives?

Why had Bellamy picked the archives?

He probably wasn't even there yet; it was still dark, and he didn't finish his session with Lord Jenohn until after sunrise, so it would probably be better to wait until evening...

Kaeck faltered to a halt as he saw Bellamy sitting on the archive steps, arms folded on his knees, as he stared miserably at his boots in the weak light of the torches kept burning through the night. Stay or go? Kaeck couldn't decide, though he knew the smart thing would be to leave.

Uncertain, not trusting the way nearly every part of him wanted to walk toward rather than away, he stepped back, then forward, then back again.

Some sound must have given him away, for Bellamy abruptly looked up. "Kaeck? Kaeck!" Bellamy bolted up and was running toward him even as Kaeck tried to flee.

This time, however, Bellamy was too quick, and got a hand around his wrist before Kaeck could get well away. His fingers touched Kaeck's jewel, and it zinged right through him, causing him to falter.

"Kaeck, gods, I'm sorry. So damn sorry I did that to you," Bellamy said, and before Kaeck could even recover his balance he was swept up in a tight embrace, face buried in Bellamy's chest, arms around him to hold him securely in place. Bellamy's voice was low and rough in his ear, and Kaeck wanted to hate him for feeling so good, but it took all he had not to give in to a stupid urge to hold tight.

Finally, finally, Bellamy drew back a bit, though Kaeck noticed he hadn't entirely let go. "Kaeck—I never meant—I'm such an idiot—"

"I returned your things," Kaeck choked out, because otherwise he'd say something stupid like *Tell me you love me, and I'd forgive you anything*. "So you can give them to st—Cathalta, like you wanted. Just get the post number right this time."

He tore away with a rough sound, hating that he couldn't be detached, couldn't manage not to care—how much more pathetic must he be before he was finally left to lick his wounds?

"I wish I'd given them to you on purpose," Bellamy said quietly, with just as much misery in his voice as Kaeck felt. "I just—damn it—"

"W-what do you mean?" Kaeck asked, stopping abruptly.

Bellamy raked a hand through his hair, then rubbed the back of his neck. "Look—when I arrived here, it was overwhelming. Towsa is a city, but it's a baby compared to this place. On top of that, I was without family for the first time in my life. Then, first day of class, I managed to make damn near everyone hate me, or hold me too much in awe to be my friend." He grimaced. "Have you ever done something completely stupid, but not realized until too late just how stupid it was?"

Kaeck nodded, though in fact his problem was that he tended to do things even knowing full well they were stupid.

"Cathalta's pretty, and adored, and it occurred to me a little while ago that he was also out of my reach," Bellamy said quietly to the grass. "If I had him, I wouldn't be so lonely. Except...a few weeks ago I met someone who felt like family, who was easy to talk to, and didn't seem to mind I never shut up. By the time I figured that out, however, I didn't know how to stop what I was doing with Cathalta—or if you were even interested in me. Everywhere I turned it seemed I'd just made one mistake after another."

He sighed. "So I figured I'd just end the admirer thing, since by that point I'd decided Cathalta was completely ignoring my gifts and letters. If he showed, well, I'd get myself out of the mess one way or another. I don't know. Obviously I'm only good with a sword."

It was incredibly petty of him, but he felt a little better seeing Bellamy look as wretched as he felt.

For about five seconds. Then he couldn't bear it, even if he still wanted to call him an idiot and zap him with lightning or something. "So—you didn't just always talk to me because you were bored and upset you'd missed Cathalta and had nothing better to do?"

"No," Bellamy said, clearly horrified. "Gods—I've messed this up start to finish, haven't I? No, Kaeck, talking to you was the best part of my day, those few times our paths crossed. Then I got confused, after that last day, and didn't know up from down or how to get myself out of the mess I'd made—I—"

He broke off with another sigh. "I don't expect you to forgive me, 'cause gods know I won't forgive myself, ever. That was an awful thing to do, though it was an honest mistake. I wish it hadn't been though, since obviously my time and effort was wasted on Cathalta." Bitterness laced his voice, and sadness.

Then he smiled faintly. "I was actually happy to see you, that night, except that I thought you were waiting for someone else. It was a relief that Cathalta never showed—then everything fell apart." He grimaced. "So, I'm sorry, Kaeck. Oh!" He abruptly turned away and bolted back to the stairs, then came jogging back with something in his hands.

A box, Kaeck realized. The stupid gift he'd dropped and left at the tavern.

Bellamy held it out. "You, uh, left this. I thought you'd want it back. If you didn't come see me soon, I would have left it in your post box."

Kaeck looked at it, but didn't take it back. He hesitated, then forced himself to meet Bellamy's eyes and said, "It's for you. Well—for—you know. It's for you, though it's not much." He dropped his gaze again.

"Me?" Bellamy repeated. "I don't think I deserve anything except a beating, which Jenohn already gave me for upsetting S—" He broke off, shaking his head, and opened the box.

He laughed in delight a moment later, and Kaeck slowly looked up again. Bellamy smiled. "I just lost mine, a few weeks ago. I think some of the students stole it—they do that periodically, you know? I'll tell them this one was a gift from you, and you put a curse on it against thieves, hmm? That'll keep them away from it."

Kaeck laughed, the sound a bit shaky, and wondered when Bellamy had moved closer. "I don't think that will deter them."

"Of course it will," Bellamy replied. "So, dare I hope you don't completely hate me?"

"I don't hate you," Kaeck said quietly. "I tried, and it didn't work. I just...don't want to compete with Cathalta. I'm not him. I never will be."

Bellamy tugged him gently forward. "You're a million times better than he'll ever be, and I'm sorry it took me so long and hurting you to realize that."

Kaeck smiled, and lightly touched his fingers to Bellamy's cheek. "Just get the right post box number from now on."

"I will," Bellamy replied softly, then closed the remaining space between them and kissed him deeply, and Kaeck felt the last of his misery drain away.

He reached up to bury a hand in Bellamy's hair, and only then realized he was still holding the letters he'd gotten from his post box that morning. Dropping them to the damp grass, he held fast to Bellamy and kissed him fervently back.

"As much as I would love to remain here and keep kissing you," Bellamy punctuated each word with another kiss, "if we both don't get where we're supposed to be, very soon, Jenohn will kill me—slowly."

Kaeck nodded, but didn't really protest when Bellamy gave him another long and thorough kiss. "How did you get out of practice?" he asked when finally they parted again.

Bellamy made a face. "I was too upset to do anything but get smacked around. Jenohn finally got the whole thing from me, and told me to get lost 'til I fixed it." He started as the bells began to ring. "Oh, fifth bell—I believe you're due somewhere very shortly." He grinned. "Though we still have time for tea and breakfast."

"My first class isn't until seven bells," Kaeck replied, confused.

"That's not what I meant," Bellamy replied. "You obviously got my letter this morning—didn't you get another with it?"

"No...yes..." Kaeck frowned, and looked down at where he'd dropped the letters in the grass. Reluctantly extracting himself from Bellamy's arms, he bent to retrieve them, wiping away the dew which had made them damp. "It's just a formal rejection for the apprenticeship."

Bellamy grinned. "Better check to be certain, hadn't you?"

"What..." Kaeck stared at him, then sighed and broke the seal on the envelope. He'd really much rather go back to kissing than read about being reje...

He dropped the letter in shock.

Bellamy laughed, and Kaeck looked up at him. "I got—I was accepted—" Something suddenly dawned on him. "You already knew!"

"I *am* Jenohn's slave," Bellamy said, and kissed his nose. "When I told him what I'd done, he wanted to know your name, and when I gave it...well, that got me another thrashing around the ring, because he recognized the name of the one Selsor had picked to enslave. So I was in double trouble. You're not going to learn how to zap me with lightning, are you?"

Kaeck laughed. "Idiot. Only a weather mage can do that—my affinity is fire."

"Oh, *that's* reassuring," Bellamy replied, but grinned and bent to kiss him again. "Shall we go get that breakfast? I'll take you to the Jolly Lady, they have the best sweet rolls in the city."

"You don't—" Kaeck scowled as a finger was laid over his lips.

Bellamy sniggered, and winked. "Now, now, I have a lot of making up to do, and you also need a proper congratulation on becoming Selsor's new slave. Sweet rolls at the Lady it is. Come on."

Kaeck rolled his eyes, but retrieved his papers and obediently went, far more excited by the way Bellamy took his hand than the paper informing him that he was to report at six bells to Master Selsor's office to begin his apprenticeship.

*Fin*