



an amelia march short story

conception

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imprint

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blurb

With Kit gone to the Greensward, Amelia March is content with her faked witchery, the ailments of her villagers and romance confined to a novel. She isn't pleased, therefore, to find her cousin darkening her doorway—her cousin with two feet, a belly, a sword of some distinction, a story, a young girl named Osprey, a beaming smile and an undying hatred for the elves. Still, Amelia thinks she can survive the chaos, at least until Kit announces a grand plan to start a school for divergent magicians...

Contains: a trans, demiromantic autistic who just wants to be alone with her cat; her trans, aromantic, autistic cousin set on upending her life; a mysterious weapon of mythical provenance; and a looming elfish threat.

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dedication

For Alan, who embodies the reason I put fingers to keyboard and is kind enough to let me know it.

content advisory

This short story contains references to and descriptions of elfish racism, ableism and eugenics (especially as it targets autistics) practiced by the Greensward, summarised in Kit's description of the lack of autistic elves and the dismissing and condescending way in which Kit is treated and used. It also references the abortion services Amelia provides as village witch and makes mention on how her work differs from the same options with which the elves pressured Kit (something that cannot be separated from Kit's identity as an autistic, disabled human). There is meant to be a heavy undercurrent of awful driving his and Amelia's conversation and conclusion, something little different to the awful underpinning research into the cause of autism.

Additionally, this story shows a few incidences of ableism. Amelia, in some distress, refers to Kit as "mad", which he rebuffs and critiques, for which she apologises. There's also general discussion of the alienation Amelia feels being a-spec and the alienation and ableism Amelia and Kit both feel and experience being autistic in allistic-centred worlds. Kit refers to himself as "crippled" in a way reflective of how he is seen, not in any way a reclamation.

Conception is very much about the creation of a community in response to dismissal and disprivilege, and hence references to these things run heavily throughout the story.

author's note

While *Conception* may be readable on its own, it will make more sense if the short story **Old Fashioned**—also about Amelia and Kit March—is read first, since some familiarity with both characters will be helpful. It is also a direct prequel to my web serial **The Unnatural Philosophy of Kit March** and can be read as a companion to the interlude piece **Resonance**.

In terms of timeline, this story takes place twenty-five years before **Certain Eldritch Artefacts**, in which Darius mentions that Amelia is a teacher at the College, and a year after **Old Fashioned**.

conception

As the sun reaches a cheerless noon on a cold spring Sunday, Amelia sits down in her rocking chair, rests her cup of tea on the stool she uses as a side table and reaches for her book. Midnight, appearing soundlessly out of nowhere, leaps up into her lap. She sighs—Midnight kneads her thighs before settling himself in a sprawl of black fur across her legs—and arranges her arms above the obstruction of oversized cat. Where was she? Something about the protagonists doing the song and dance of refusing to discuss the pertinent issues any reasonable person will immediately tell a prospective lover, but at least she hasn't had to skip past too many sex scenes. Besides, just sitting by the fire and frowning at a book is a treat, since she has spent the last week dealing with a sudden plague of—

A loud, rattling thump echoes from the door.

Midnight dives for the floor and streaks up the stairs.

“Blast,” she says, trying her hardest to make the ridiculous word sound like a proper curse. “Blast it all.” For some reason, while a village witch is expected to own a black cat, negotiate with accidentally-ensorcelled chickens, stitch wounds and wear a floppy hat with a wide brim, she isn't expected to know crude words in three languages. Better not to lapse, even if the knocker deserves the rough edge of her tongue. She stands and stomps towards the door, however, because she's had a terrible week and anyone inconsiderate enough to ruin the one Sunday

she's had in a month by getting themselves injured or sick can damn well know about it.

She grunts, sliding back the latch and pulling the heavy door open. It keeps out monsters and livestock well enough, but is rather less successful on the matter of fellow humans. "If this involves another plough I'll—*Kit, who have you been swiving?*"

She knows that the words are wrong, but Goddess, bloody *Goddess*, what else is she supposed to say?

Kit stands in the doorway, a stick held in his left hand, his right shoulder leaning against the doorframe: a small, broad-lipped man who makes Amelia look tall. Beaming, like the last time Amelia saw him—sitting in the back of a farm cart and purring endearments across at the man Amelia hired to accompany him on his quest. Nine months ago, that was, and not a single letter after the first did he bother to send about the Greensward. Yet now, she thinks, he's doing as he always does, appearing out of nowhere as though confident of a welcome despite Kit's regular disturbance of Amelia's life with the possession of some new disaster.

Usually, though, he isn't pregnant.

Six months, she guesses, based on size and the slight swelling of his hands. Kit being Kit, which is to say that he's incapable of doing anything without the maximum amount of ridiculousness, he stands with his right hand cradled under his belly in the pose that makes Amelia want to shake every parent-to-be who attempts it. He wears his coat unbuttoned with the lapels folded back, a sword belt—with a *sword* at his hip!—belted over all above the small bump. She recognises the coat as the one he wore the last time he knocked on her door, just less bloody, but the tunic and trousers he wears are made from a shimmery grey silk, looser than his wont. Even the small details of his person are wrong: he wears his black hair pulled back off his face and tied into a knot of curls by a trailing silver cord, and two thick silver earrings, both set with a green stone, pierce the lobes of each ear. Boots, made from a grey suede with leather soles, fit both feet, fashioned so well that Amelia can't tell any difference between the right or the left—

whatever he made, she thinks, fits the boot such that there's no way for the casual eye to distinguish it. But the sword!

It's a small sword, in fairness, somewhere between a large knife and an undersized sabre, housed in a plain scabbard marked by oil, water and blood. The lack of ornamentation doesn't make Kit look any less absurd. He isn't even a blood witch. He keeps a knife on his person, a work knife for cutting fruit and working out a splinter, but Kit is the first person to say that if he can't talk or write himself out of trouble, a sword won't do him any better.

He is, as he says at least once a day, a crow.

Behind him, a trembling brown youth in trousers, shirt and overcoat carries Kit's battered, still-overstuffed leather satchel. They're a gawky, angular figure standing a head taller than Amelia with reddish-brown hair, their limbs too long for the sleeves and legs of their clothes. Both arms wrap the case as though they cannot survive putting it down, their left-hand fingers drumming against the top flap, and they look at Amelia just the once before resting their gaze on Kit with a shiver-provoking intensity.

Too young for Kit, and Amelia knows the thought is unfair: an awful lot can be said about Kit's penchant to jump from bed to bed, but it is an honest jumping. Baffling, but honest.

"You're pregnant and you couldn't even write?" The words spill from her lips, gaining speed the more she speaks. "Don't you think this merits a letter? *Don't you?* How far are you? Have you had any complications? How did you even—come in, come in, sit, put your feet up. Are you sleeping? Dizzy at all? More than the usual pain? Have you had a magician or witch do a viewing? Don't stand there! *How* did this happen? What are you eating—"

"Amelia. Breathe." Kit grins up at her before pushing past her to make a beeline for her abandoned chair. "I'm fine. They're fine. Except for the snoring. Snoring, Amelia! As it turns out, when you block a contraceptive spell, it pays to specify whether the other participant is elfish or human." He moves in quick, unsteady steps, thumping the stick against the flagstones underfoot in a way Amelia suspects is meant

to distract from his weight placed his left foot and arm: Kit has always been the kind of man who overcompensates by rushing. “They’re human enough for cross-species reproduction, but also not human enough that working a spell under the assumption that one’s partner is human results in an ineffective line. Interesting, isn’t it?”

Elfish.

Grandmother won’t let death stop her from rapping on the front door and demanding an accounting.

“Human enough,” Amelia says, because she doesn’t know what else to say, because these kinds of mean-taken words don’t require the difficulty of trying to put together words that aren’t, “that you couldn’t resist swiving some pretty elf lord.”

She leans against the doorframe and draws a shuddering breath. Goddess, please let this be the only reason Kit is set on disturbing her Sunday. She can manage examinations and deliveries and advisory discussions about post-partum bleeding—although she hasn’t done enough of a job on the latter, given Kit’s horrifyingly blasé approach to accidental pregnancy. If this is all, though, why does a silent stranger clutching Kit’s satchel stand on her doorstep?

She waves the youth inside and closes the door behind them, but the youth positions themselves in front of the door, their eyes fixed on Kit, their fingertips drumming away like rain pattering on the roof.

“Lord?” Kit snorts and levers himself down into her rocking chair. “Lord?” He rests his feet on the ground, stills the chair, reaches for her mug and takes a sip. “Nice tea. Have you any bacon? I haven’t had meat in months. *Months*, Amelia. Why is there a glowing capsicum on your mantelpiece, anyway? No, I didn’t bed a lord.” He leans back into the chair, his stick resting against the armrest and the mug in one hand, and pauses long enough to rearrange the belt, the sword and the coat. None of them look as though they can possibly make any comfortable arrangement. “Why would I want to do that when I had the king, Surandil?” He pauses and says, too quickly, “They’re not pretty, the elves. They think they are, but they’re not. No more or less than anyone else.”

Books say otherwise, but Amelia knows that books lie about a great many things, so why not this?

It always pays to remember who writes the books—and why.

She walks over to the chair, grabs her novel, places it on the floor out of the way and drags the stool in front of the rocking chair. “Feet. Up.”

Kit sighs, but he raises both legs and lets Amelia slide the stool underneath his feet. “Why the capsicum?”

“It’s witchy. The villagers expect a witch’s house to be witchy. Diagnostic manuals and bone saws aren’t witchy.” Amelia scowls, stalks to her tiny dining table positioned by the window—it has a good view out onto her herb garden—and pulls out one of the chairs. It takes a jerk of her hand and a pointed look before the youth nods and sits, the satchel balanced on their lap, both palms resting on the top flap, their fingers tapping. They still look at Kit, paying her crooked bottle collection and her glowing mushroom lamp no mind. She worked hard on those mushrooms—the Goddess didn’t make them glow blue by nature! “And do you expect me to believe that you swived the king of the Greensward and now you’re here, wanting a bacon sandwich, with a royal elfish—meat? You haven’t eaten meat?”

“Spinach.” Kit shudders most theatrically. “I didn’t loathe spinach, but when you eat it day after day, you *yearn* for something butchered. Food, Amelia? Anything?”

She stands and stares at him, bewildered.

Kit has always been ... *unique*, she supposes, is the kindest word. Learning magic from books in the attic, conversing with water serpents each morning, listening to Grandmother’s stories about squabbling birds as though they’re magical instead of morality plays disguised by time and the mention of spirit creatures. He was gone, travelling, with no more protection or security than his wit, a few coins and a dictionary, by the time he was sixteen—an adventurer set on jumping from escapade to escapade, from bed to bed. Odd, yes, but Kit is odd in ways that let him get on with similar folk: he can talk. Wildly and ridiculously, true, but he likes people, and that liking gives him space and acceptance in a way that Amelia herself has never quite managed.

He treated Amelia like a sister, not a cousin, when she came to spend her childhood in a rambling old house, and his money got her to Siya, got her an education, got her, even indirectly, this little house, this position, this masquerade with black cats and chalk-scrawled pentagrams on doors. How is it inconceivable that he managed to appeal to an elf, even elf royalty? While she sits at home and shoos away the annoyingly romantic in favour of novels that have the supreme benefit of not being real?

Kit throws himself at the world without a thought for the consequences; she keeps the company of a cat who purrs on her lap and doesn't ask questions. He is a self-taught magician with skills enough to play in the wider world; she pretends more magic than she owns to do a job that seldom needs it. He crafts a foot hidden by his new boots; she playacts with embroidered cobwebs and glowing peppers. Yet, while a witch who names a black cat "Midnight" must fail at witchcraft, isn't she failing in the right way? Amelia is dangerous. Dangerous with a bone saw, dangerous with books, dangerous with a smattering of script magic, dangerous with a drop of blood magic. It's just hidden under a broad-brimmed hat and within the eldritch-seeming bottles of herbs and oils lining the walls of her kitchen nook—hidden in much the same way as Kit hides his danger behind a broad grin and, yes, a too-casual approach to talking of things frightening and life-changing.

Aren't they the same in that, two divergent people forced to become so good at hiding?

Last time, he turned up in the back of Lady Plumeria's carriage, as grey as a corpse yet prattling on about a basilisk and Plumeria's unlooked-for ability to wield an axe as though it touches him not at all, prattling until he passed out halfway between her front door and her surgery.

She might have hated him a little less, in the weeks that followed, if only he wept.

But he woke up, smiled at her, and, when he wasn't giving grand speeches on every other subject under the sun, instead announced a

plan to go to the Greensward and beg, borrow or steal a scrap of sung wood from the elves.

She folds her arms over her apron and exhales for as long as she can before inhaling and speaking. “Kit? What’s going on?”

“I had to leave—I hid the pregnancy, I’ve the magic for it, but the elves won’t take too kindly to the idea of one of their royal line tainted with human blood. I can’t give birth in the ‘Sward.” Kit scowls and shrugs. One hand holds the mug; he flings the other over his head, almost high enough to brush the bottom of the aprons hanging from the washing line Amelia strung along the ceiling. She hates hanging laundry inside the house, but she hates dirty aprons more than she does the disorder. “We have an agreement. Surandil will let us live and leave if we keep the sword.”

She doesn’t think that “we” and “us” refers to the stranger sitting at her table, and Amelia shivers. She crosses the room to the woodpile stashed in the corner. Kindling in a basket, split logs stacked head high along the wall: she keeps a ready supply in case of rain, but Amelia likes starting the day by taking an axe to seasoned wood. Wood doesn’t care if she swears at it. Wood doesn’t confuse or offer up complications. Wood does exactly what it is meant to when it splinters under the force of her swinging blade. She takes a good redgum piece in each hand and crouches in front of the fire; sparks fly as she gently lowers each into a pyramid over the burning wood.

We. Us. Kit cares for her, that Amelia can’t doubt, but she never imagined hearing him say such words about anyone else.

She sighs and rises, and if some part of her isn’t sure that the words are right, they need saying. “If I know ten different ways to make that kind of problem stop being one, the Greensward must have something.”

It’s the stock in trade of a witch. People burdened with the slow-growing realisation that their lives will change in unwanted ways in eight months or less end up on her doorstep, eyes fixed on the mat or the shelves of jars or anything, really, that isn’t Amelia’s face. Why it is that witches who attempt to palaver with wild demons are trusted over

doctors in these matters, she doesn't know: it's one of those curious things the villagers seem to take as a given.

It's the part of the job she likes least, because she never knows what to say or how to say it. It shouldn't be as simple as asking a few questions to make sure there's no pressuring parents or partners, getting the heartname of the recipient and blocking a spell, but how to make it properly complex, she doesn't know.

Her lack, for some reason, doesn't keep people from knocking on her door.

Kit tips his head upwards, his brown eyes fixed on the row of aprons. "Oh, they've several. Surandil's physician was quite enthusiastic, shall we say, in the suggestion that they be applied."

She winces. One day, Amelia will remember what lies underneath Kit at his most infuriating—that, in truth, he might be so infuriating only because of the horrors beneath it. She exhales again, staring down at the fireplace. Wisps of smoke curl up from underneath the new pieces of timber, the wood smouldering, and she glares, because the last thing she needs is the bother of a fire that won't catch. What to do? She doesn't know! She can fake magic spells, train a cat to sit on her shoulder, tell a ghost that it doesn't want to haunt the village well, and manage the illnesses and ailments of a small farming village. She can tell the lovelorn to go away, scold Kit and deal with even his giving birth to an unexpected child, but elves or the nightmare of having them insist that a human man shouldn't keep a child sired by one ... no, she doesn't know elves, and she can't help but wonder if a foot, hidden by a boot, is worth the nightmare Kit has brought here with him.

"You want this," she says.

For a moment, Kit's face stills. "Want isn't the correct word, but ... they're mine. Mine. Surandil saw that too well." He breaks into another beaming grin, one that stretches his lips and shows his teeth. "Bacon, Amelia? Something to eat? Anything? I'm hungry, and Os—oh, Amelia, this is Osprey. I met her five days ago, and she's with us, now. She eats bread and cheese and meat that hasn't been smoked—Osprey, go look

at Amelia's cupboard and get what you like. The eyeballs are just peeled grapes for show. Don't touch her cat. The horrible thing bites."

Midnight might suffer a dreadful name, but he's most discriminating in his attitude to people.

Osprey looks up at Amelia, her hands tightening on the satchel.

The thought of someone else touching her shelves makes her stomach knot, but since Osprey looks as though she's missed meals on a regular basis, Amelia just nods and points to the right-hand shelves, the ones covered by blue calico curtains decorated with embroidered grey cobwebs and black spiders. "Wash your hands first."

Osprey drapes the satchel's strap over one shoulder and dallies at the pump without argument, even taking care to work the brush under her nails, but nobody speaks as Osprey carries the satchel over to the kitchen nook and pushes back the curtains to poke at the cold shelf. To distract herself from the horror of someone touching her cheese platter, Amelia looks back at Kit, sprawled in her rocking chair. Why doesn't he remove the belt and sword? "I think you need to tell me what's going on, Kit."

He shrugs, places the empty mug on his lap and threads his fingers together. "I made a deal with Surandil, but I don't think Surandil will keep his son in line—well, I know he won't, or he wouldn't have asked that I take the sword, would he? He knows it, too. So, I expect ... I expect things to get interesting on that account. I really need to get a bodyguard or two. Anyway, I've decided." His voice rises, leaping octaves—and that, not his body and not his face, is his tell, because Kit, excited, has never been able to speak at a moderate pitch. Kit, excited, doesn't care, and Amelia knows she doesn't possess that, the art of not caring about the sound of her voice. "I'm going to start a school. A school that teaches magic, for people like us, for Osprey. Magic helps us, so why shouldn't it help them? I need a teacher—oh, and someone who won't be bothered by a water birth in the serpent pond. What do you think?"

Amelia blinks. A moment to sort through all that doesn't make it any better. "Are you swiving *mad*?"

“Probably, but why let madness stop you?” Kit’s smile fades. “I don’t know if it’s wrought by magic, or if they wouldn’t let me get close, or if there aren’t elves like us at all or ... I don’t know, Amelia, but they’re not like us. The elves. If there’s people like us in the Greensward, divergent ... maybe just those herbs and spells that make problems go away.” He stops, exhales, and threads both hands together, his knuckles clenched tight enough to hurt. “Even Surandil, sometimes, he’d just look like he couldn’t understand why I was alive, and I didn’t forget, ever, that I was a novelty to him—and this was before I knew! Before I knew what he meant by being with me! No, I was small and black and shift and divergent and crippled, a novelty. Something to be used when the opportunity presented.” His eyes drift towards her face, but the angle is too low for a proper glance: he looks, she thinks, at her neck. “We don’t exist there. I’ve spent eight months never forgetting that madness is breaking down in tears because the cup over your stump feels wrong—no, madness is having the court watch you do it and then wonder at such strangeness over your head. Wonder why you’re mad, even as you cry.”

She heaves a breath. Again, when will she remember that Kit, the professionally-exasperating, is only a masquerade? “I didn’t mean it that way,” Amelia says, and the words aren’t an excuse, aren’t justification, just the truth, a truth that isn’t close to acceptable. She walks across to the bookshelf, pulls out a basket and reaches for the first object to come to hand—a faded yellow bean bag. “You’re ... frustrating. You come in, every time, and ... pull things apart, make a mess. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

She walks over to Kit, drops the bean bag in his hands, and walks back to the fire, poking at the wood until the fire flares bright. For a moment, there’s nothing to hear but the crackle in the grate, her own unsteady breathing, the rustle of dried legumes as Kit grabs the bean bag in both hands and pushes a bean around inside the fabric, the chewing noises made as Osprey bites and swallows.

Amelia sighs, fists her hands, turns and looks across at the girl, who sits again at the table, a wedge of cheese in one hand and a hunk of torn-off bread in the other. The satchel rests on her lap, both elbows

pressed against it. Osprey ducks her head down to bite and raises it to swallow, never lifting her arms from the battered leather. What is her story that she guards a magician's satchel as though it is more important than her right to eat in comfort?

Eight months ... she can't imagine it beyond sketches and abstractions, not the gut-wrenching reality. Siya was like that, in some ways, but not enough for her to know in the heart. She had books and autopsies and exams, love with Lyra and those forbidden lessons with Eren Adalet, and a girl who rushes from her rooms to the library can be forgiven the lapses of easy talk and companionship. It can even be praised, with words like "studious" and "devoted", and if the students talked behind her back, it didn't matter. It never mattered, because she had books and autopsies and exams, the siren song of knowing.

"You'll go far," her teachers said, unrecognising of her differences even though they were written in the books she read, but Amelia never did. She came home with papers that spoke of her skills, but papers matter less, so much less, than the words that come from her mouth. She went, in fact, to a small village two hours' ride from Grandmother's rambling house, still alone, still divergent, but the diagnostic term is "autistic": a word they use to mean self-obsession because the people who study people and write down their observations in scholarly tomes look, hobbled, from the outside in.

She has a cat, though, and she pretends to be a witch—a magic worker, strange by definition. The illusion of hats and bottles with mysterious labels gives her something those papers don't, even if, most of the time, her skills come from medical textbooks. Witches can rattle around a spooky house with a cat for company. Witches can live on the edges, part and not part of the village, and while she knows the folks she tends won't find it a comfortable living, Amelia does.

Food, she realises. She's thinking too much, drowning in the chaos of feeling. She's also failing to do her job. Amelia heads for the sink, scrubbing the brush over her hands and nails, pressing the bristles into her skin with force enough to make her wince—a force that does little to still her mind.

“What do you need?” Kit speaks softly, gently. It’s far more kindness from him than she deserves. “What do you need from the telling, Amelia? And do you have any bacon?”

“No bacon. I’ve bread, cheese, half a leg of ham, apples, and yesterday’s soup.” She dries her hands and stops at the cold shelf, not needing to look to reach for the soup pot. “Tell it slowly! Give me ... why. Context. Give me the swiving story, not the *dénouement*!”

Kit laughs, a light, insufferable chuckle. “Story. Very well. Where should I begin?”

“Why are you carrying a *sword*? What do you mean by keeping it?” She puts the pot on the stove and kicks the casing. It’s clean, for nothing dirty remains in her house, but it does lack the loving blacking a good homemaker puts to iron. “Wake up and heat, blast it! A sword? A *sword*?”

The once-slumbering imp swears at her in some demonic language, but she hears the rustling sound as it uncoils and then the rushing crackle of its fiery exhalations.

It will take a few moments for the stove to heat enough to warm the soup—like all good soups, comprised of whatever vegetables and meat she had remaining after the week’s meals—so Amelia grabs the ham, the basket of apples and the crockery with which Osprey didn’t bother.

The plates clatter as she places them on the table, and Osprey winces.

“Because of Surandil’s only child and heir, Erondil.” Kit thumps the bean bag against the arm of the rocking chair, scowling. “Should I join you at table? They brought me to Surandil, laughing, this, this hubristic human who thought to offer petty magic for wood. I showed him my magic, thinking to impress him, and he mocked me before the court, mocked my magic. They forget, I think, that petty human magic once felled a tree.” He pauses. “Petty human magic backed by a righteous death god, but petty and human enough.”

“If you stand for any reason not the privy,” Amelia says as she sits down opposite Osprey, reaching for the bread and her knife, “I will go down to Mother Wilfred’s and ask her to pay me for her bone-setting in *spinach*.”

She wonders, as she slices enough bread for herself and Kit, if the elves permitted him to see the stump of a tree, all that remains of a magic that must be, by anyone's reckoning, grand beyond the telling.

"But I amused him, and so he kept me—an entertainment, I thought, but he had his crafters give me scraps and teach me something of the making. A little. For that, a petty human man might let himself be kept for a time without questioning the why, and we know—well, I know—there are other kinds of human magic a petty man might block, if he wishes it, and I am not unskilled in this. Or so I thought."

She should reach for the cheese or ham. She should, but she sits unmoving. The stove roars and the fire crackles, and if she listens, really listens, she can hear their breathing, the wind whistling about the eaves. The silence, though, the silence conjured into existence by Kit's quiet words, shrieks and holds her still. Grandmother had that, the enrapturing speaking of stories: while she spoke, sitting by the fire, her words became the world. That too is a kind of magic, and for a moment Amelia wishes she hadn't opened her door, that she still sits in her chair reading the safe, distant sorcery of a romance novel.

"Be what magic?" Osprey's voice is deep and melodic, a big voice for a gangling girl. She looks at the satchel now, Amelia realises, not at Kit, as she tears herself another slice of bread.

"He swived him." Amelia rolls her eyes and cuts the ham, more at Kit's little dig than at the need to explain. There is a magic in attraction, a magic writers need put to words just as any magician blocks a spell, but it is an equal magic to be unmoved by the forces that pull two or more people together—a power Kit might now regret not possessing. "Stop wasting time on trying to be poetic and just tell the bloody story."

The words free her, just as they freed her from Grandmother's thrall, and Amelia drums the heels of her boots into the flagstones. If she hears the boots, she won't hear the words echoing in her ears. Won't hear, she prays, because she's witch enough to know when the old man raps on her door and bids her go into the world to seek a gemstone, when the crow steals her laundry and sends her chasing after it, when the universe puts her on the road to rescue a prince disguised as a

beggar-girl. Always witch enough, no matter how much she feigns the rest of it.

“Too late,” she whispers. Osprey stares at her, and Amelia knows that no amount of whispering will stop Kit from hearing those words. She starts on the cheese, pretending anyway. “Too late, too late, too late...”

Kit raises his eyebrows. “More cheese, please. I made. Surandil enjoyed his human pet and I thought that would be enough. Entertainment for a foot.” He hesitates, twisting the bag in his hands. “He used me, Amelia.”

She tries to laugh. “I thought that was swiving obvious, Kit, but as long as you agreed to it...”

“Not that way.” Kit looks across at her as Amelia pushes back her chair and rises, a plate in hand. “I think he knew. I think he knew the definition spoke of a human, not an elf. I think he wanted this.” He doesn’t, thank the Goddess, rest his free hand on his belly; he just flicks his fingers inward, as though his meaning needs punctuating. It doesn’t. “He didn’t touch me after this became known. I saw him each morning, to show my work, to display another petty human magic for him, like he asked of me since the day we met, but he didn’t touch me. He just waited until my foot was near done, then summoned me. I didn’t know what I’d done; I couldn’t put it together. Not until he told me that I was to hide this and then leave when done, leave before anyone but he and the physician knew, and, in return for the gift of our lives, I would keep for him a sword and its scabbard. If I kept, he wouldn’t tell the court what we’d done and made. Petty human I might be, Surandil said, but I proved myself magician enough to be a watchdog.”

She can hear the soup bubbling on the stove, but Amelia can’t move. She doesn’t know what to say. The feeling that she has once again put her foot in her mouth isn’t even the worst of her confused babble of emotions. She can’t imagine how it feels to be discarded by a lover—Amelia discards prospective lovers, including Lyra. Even if Kit meant to use Surandil for the wood and skills to craft a limb, she’s read enough

novels to think it must have hurt. Even Kit, for all his bouncing. That, though, doesn't help her any in the sheer senselessness of events. Is there something she's missing? "Kit ... *why*? Why not just ask? Why ... this? Why a child? *Why*?"

"Why?" Kit grins at her before he leans back in his chair and laughs, a hoarse, rasping chortle that makes Osprey startle.

Well she should, Amelia thinks, because there's no peace in that sound, just bitterness and despair.

She walks over, silent, and holds out the plate.

"This." Kit takes the plate, but he doesn't eat; he jerks his chin towards the belt and pommel at his hip, the sword protruding out the side of the rocking chair. "It's the Worldblade, and if ever an elf not Surandil and his physician discover I have it ... I don't know. I don't know. We'll find out, I suspect. One sword, one scabbard, gifted by a judgmental god to an angry human to bring the elves down, and if I didn't promise to guard this, we would both be dead. He'd let slip our indiscretion and hand us to the court. In the 'Sward ... the crime isn't his. None will care for what he did. It's mine, a human who dared quicken."

We. Amelia shivers. A man can laugh at the king of the Greensward for threatening his own life, but he might think differently when more than his own life is risked. Even so ... how can an elf think so little of humans that the life of his own get is just a bargaining tool? Or did he read Kit that well? Did he do it knowing the answer, thereby risking nothing? Better to think that; easier to think that. Easier, because she doesn't want to think about a man, even an elfish man, being so inhuman as to make such a trade.

It is, though, pointless to wonder: what is, is.

The more important question lies in the identity of the sword Kit wears. A myth too pervasive to be a lie, and, in her time, she's heard it told several different ways. In Malvade, they claim the Sojourner gifted hir avatar with the blade and sent hir marked to fell so that even immortals learn the art of impermanence. Greenstone's Crone, the Third and Last face of the Goddess, gave a rock fallen from the stars to Her first worshipper as a gift and Her dying curse, the galactic

sword quenched in divine blood and sent in vengeance. Grandmother never told it, never spoke the stories cradled in the hearts and minds of the invaders that scarred the stolen earth, but in her tales, Crow and Magpie gave to and took from humans with equal abandon—which the giver and which the thief depending entirely on the teller. The name of the god differs, but it is always a god of age, death, journey or trickery, gifting a human a weapon to refuse the immortal elves their route to a heaven denied all others. Everything that matters to humans is granted by the gods or spirits in one tale or another, so why not a sword?

An act so long ago that it has become myth to humans still must ache in the heart of elves, slow to age but now cursed to an alien death nonetheless.

Amelia is yet to hear the tale that pities them for that.

“Why would he give it to you?”

Kit drops his right hand and thumbs the pommel. What it might be under the strip of worn and stained leather that binds it, Amelia doesn't know. “They kept it for years and years, while they scavenged, and scavenge still, the landscapes of the Changed world for seeds preserved in amber. Wise enough to know violence in answer will only beget more of it. Surandil is wise enough, I suppose, to know the knot of hate in his son and craven enough that he seeks only to remove temptation. Surandil has no love for humans, but he doesn't hate. Erondil hates.” Kit's lips twitch. “We took away the thing that made him special, and that is unforgivable, no matter how long ago.”

He plucks a slice of ham, rolls it in his fingers and doesn't so much as swallow as devour it, one slice after the other.

What happened, Amelia wonders, to the wielder of the sword? Blood stains the pommel and scabbard; is it reasonable to think that the warrior who Felled the Worldtree survived the elfish rage that followed? No, it is likely that the owner didn't survive, leaving a powerful weapon in the hands of the Greensward while a myth took root among the human peoples of the world, told over and over until, like the stories with Crow and Magpie, it became less history and more a morality tale warning against the cherishing of unshared possession.

There's a saying every Greenstone child knows: "You can't spell 'selfish' without 'elfish'."

"It's real, then?" She doesn't realise, until she speaks those three words, that she whispers, but even when she does, Amelia can't bring herself to raise her voice. "It's not just a crown or a sceptre? It's eldritch?"

"They're eldritch." Kit nods, frowns down at his plate and starts on the cheese. "I think ... I think one can be a lifetime in learning them, but they're eldritch. That I know; the rest is difficult. There's ... I can't describe, a *wanting*. I think they want this, for a time. The elves kept them, but they were never meant for elfish hands. Surandil doesn't know that. He just wanted weapons that can change the world somewhere Erondil can't reach, wanted a man and his child to play guardian. Wanted someone who'll never become a threat. Powerful enough to defend, not powerful enough to take and rule. Not like him. Surandil looked at me and saw that I am not enough. A magician and human and petty, but too divergent, too mad and broken, to take a sword and wield it against him. And he's *right*."

He didn't cry, those weeks he recovered in her house, and Amelia hated his unfailing cheerfulness.

She hates it even more, now, that Kit looks down at the plate on his lap and does nothing to keep his tears from spotting the bread.

Amelia doesn't know what to say, so she turns, grabs her oven mitts from the hook on the wall and takes the soup pot off the stove.

"What you will do, sir?" Osprey's voice sounds near a whisper. "Then with the sword?"

Amelia ladles the soup, the surface covered with froth from the boiling it was never meant to undergo, into three wooden bowls. Two she carries over to the table, placing one before Osprey and the other by her own chair.

"Teach." Kit's voice sounds a low, desperate snarl. "Teach." He jerks his head up, tears rolling down brown cheeks, and scrubs his left sleeve over his face. "I will keep them, sword and scabbard—I can't not. I met Erondil. I heard him. He can't be allowed to touch these. He can't, but I also won't let Surandil send an assassin after Mitzie because I won't keep

a sword. I'll teach us magic. Because they think we're too divergent and broken and mad to matter—we're not. We'll guard them, and let the elves think us dogs, but that's their mistake, not ours. And one day, Surandil will know he didn't just give artefacts over to humans too broken to threaten him—he gave them back to their rightful owners. He will know, when we claim them, that *we are not less.*"

Her cousin is many things, most of them frustrating, but never has Amelia heard him speak like that. How did she not know that Kit can be so hard? Does Kit even know it? Is that what he paid for a foot and a child and a burden he was tricked into accepting? Enthusiasm fuelled by a newfound bitterness and hurt?

Amelia wraps her hands around the sides of the third bowl, places it on a wooden plate and carries it over to the man occupying her rocking chair.

Too late, too late, too late, too late.

"We will keep, sir." Osprey stares at Kit, and Amelia wonders if they both realise that Osprey will do anything for Kit, anything at all. Do they both know that he won her when he showed up, swept her away from her life and promised her magic? She nods, a slight tuck of her chin, and then ploughs her way through her second helping of bread, one hand still tapping against the satchel she guards. Amelia isn't fool enough to read her words and that nod as anything other than an unbreakable vow. Osprey is his, all for the pledge of danger.

Amelia doesn't know if that should be wonderful or terrifying.

"Yes." Kit bobs his head and accepts the bowl of soup. "They're not something one person can claim. We. Amelia?"

One word to ask a question that encompasses a destiny, and Amelia shivers. She's a witch. She has a village, a cat, duties. She also won't be missed, if she packs her things and leaves: someone else, someone better with words, will come and take her place, because the papers that give her competence don't mean anything at all. She's always known that, ever since she returned to Greenstone and learnt just how far she can never go: it is the way of the world, and what can one autistic woman do about it?

Learn magic. Teach magic. Show her own how to fly far and how to stay close to home and how to walk the path between, because her limitations don't hurt her as much as the crushing weight of expectation.

Kit needs her. She is also witch enough to know that isn't the whole truth, and Amelia turns her head towards the fireplace and the book sitting abandoned on the floor by the grate. A story, a story about two women in love, script magic rendered safe by distance because Amelia knows now she'll never feel that way about a stranger, but those two women are not divergent, not autistic, not mad in a way labelled "self-obsession" or any other, because the strange and the divergent and the mad don't make it into books. They're not in histories, not in novels, not in anything but the words written down by people staring outside-in but never knowing. They don't exist in the legends of gods gifting humans with fire and weaponry; they don't exist in Grandmother's tales of Magpie and Crow, even though Kit, more than any person Amelia has ever met, is *bird*. They don't exist, even though she knows Osprey is theirs, kin by mind if not blood.

The divergent people who keep sword and scabbard must become a story.

The divergent people who take sword and scabbard back to the Greensward must become a story.

Too late, because her lips part and speak the dread beginning: "I'll come with you."

additional works

mara and esher hill

The Sorcerous Compendium of Postmortem Query
Love is the Reckoning

amelia march

Old Fashioned
Conception

efer and darius

Certain Eldritch Artefacts
Love in the House of the Ravens
One Strange Man
The Adventurer King

the eagle court

Their Courts of Crows
A Prince of the Dead
The King of Gears and Bone

Crooked Words
The Wind and the Stars
Hallo, Aro

about the author

K. A. Cook is an abrosexual, aromantic, agender autistic who experiences chronic pain and mental illness. Ze writes creative non-fiction, personal essays and novels about the above on the philosophy that if the universe is going to make life interesting, ze may as well make interesting art.

Ze is the author of several short fantasy stories combining ridiculous magic, cats, disability, bacon, mental illness, microscopic gnomes, aromanticism, the undead, verbose eldritch entities and as many transgender autistics as any one story can hold.

Ze blogs at **Queer Without Gender** and runs the aro media blog **Aro Worlds**.