



ringbound



a marchverse short story

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imprint

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blurb

Kit can't find anything unfair about the contract or the man, so why is the ring so heavy?

Kit March is a signature away from marrying the man who loves him. He should be delighted, but for reasons he doesn't understand and can't explain, his future with Lauri weighs upon him. What is a magician to do when no script extant has words for the confusion he feels?

Contains: A gay, transgender, aromantic autistic struggling with the difficulty of wedding the gay, cis man who loves him.

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content advisory

This short story is about the pain of an aromantic man who is trying to deal with being aromantic while not understanding it, a man who makes a questionable decision in abandoning his partner because of it. Kit doesn't gain understanding or comprehension by the end, but if you have read the short story **Old Fashioned**, you'll know that he is on the way to finding it in Raugue.

author's note

Ringbound should be readable on its own as a short character study, but it may make more sense if the short story **Old Fashioned**—also about Amelia and Kit March—is read first.

In terms of timeline, this takes place two years before *Old Fashioned*, wherein Kit makes passing reference to the events depicted here. This story isn't quite the way Kit described it, but he seldom speaks the painful truth about his past.

This story is also an experiment in production, in the sense that I went from idea to draft to final to cover and formatting in less than twenty-four hours. I wanted to see what I could create if I did so under a time limit for various stages of the writing and production process—if I put my focus on just making content available as opposed to agonising over its appearance and presentation.

For this reason, please don't expect this piece of short flash fiction to be flawless. It isn't meant to be.

ringbound

The gold ring has a smooth, unmarked band. Kit pushes it around his fourth finger while he stares into the lightening corners of the bedroom. Unmarked, which feels strange given the pages of text sitting in the study downstairs, a contract awaiting only his signature and the witness of a notary to become binding. No temple, no priest, no words exchanged before the tribe, just the solemnity of ink and legal jargon. In Malvade, the Sojourner has everything to say about death and not a word of substance to say on marriage, so the notary stepped in to make the union a different kind of sacred—and Kit has tarried long enough to know they deem the legal contract a strange, baffling consecration.

So many words below and nothing to mark the ring. It doesn't seem right.

Beside him, Lauri lies in an unstimulating sleep. Kit can sit up, slide out of bed and bump into chest and chair and dresser on his way to the water closet, and Lauri still won't wake. At times this frustrates Kit, but now it is a relief to know he is alone in the early morning, alone with his wakeful thoughts and a gold ring weighting down his hand. Alone as much as he can ever be in another man's house.

A house, with Kit's signature, that will become in part his.

It shouldn't be a question. Lauri is a good man. Handsome enough, successful enough, although neither are the reason why Kit started flirting with Lauri that night, two men sitting apart from the company

and sharing a sighing glance over yet another bowl of beans. No, Kit flirted because of Lauri's burbling laugh, because of the way he shifts from smiling to pouting with never an expression between, because of his suit jackets with buttons shaped like cats and dogs and horses, because of the feeling that Lauri has a touch of divergence about him in how he obsesses over novels and counts his profits. Lauri likes men—bent only towards men, as the Malvadans phrase it—and never once has Kit felt Lauri to see anything other than Kit's masculinity, a gift Kit doesn't take for granted. The contract on the desk states that while Lauri expects exclusivity unless they both consent otherwise, he doesn't wish a husband to remain quietly at his side—Kit can travel as he pleases despite the ringbinding.

Kit can't find anything unfair about the contract or the man, so why is the ring so heavy?

The dark corners of the bedroom lighten to a fuzzy grey, showing the shapes of dresser and screen and morning table. Only a few hours, now, and then they'll be downstairs awaiting the carriage. Parents and a brother arriving before the wedding deluge of family, and Lauri has said ten times at least how his mothers are sure to love Kit. It shouldn't be anything to fear. Lauri's friends and business partners are kind, decent people; it's hard to imagine his kin being otherwise.

Amelia won't forgive Kit if he weds without so much as a letter in the post, but every time Kit sits at his desk and starts to write what should be glad news, he stares down at an empty, ink-spotted page, lost for words.

Why? He likes Lauri. That he spends long hours over ledgers and in meetings suits Kit fine, for Kit has no desire to spend all or even most of his day managing the conversational expectations of others. Lauri is content to spend evenings together in the study, two men engrossed in their own work but sharing a companionable silence. If Kit spent ten years looking for a partner, would he find a better one? He is of an age to marry, of an age to start a family, of an age to take up a career. Why not Malvade? Why not Lauri?

He sighs and turns the ring, turns it until his finger aches from the rub of the band over his skin, while Lauri slumbers, unmoving save for breath, at Kit's back.

For weeks, Kit has chased logic around in never-ending circles. Logic offers the same answer each time: there is no reason he shouldn't wed.

No reason except the dark, nameless fear growing inside him, a fear he doesn't understand or even recognise.

He should wed.

He isn't sure he can.

Kit saw it bloom from an unthinking seed. At first it was casual smiles and the feel of skin touching skin, the desperate togetherness of people discovering that they fit, that they can find and make a temporary harmony. This he knows, but they didn't drift apart in the way Kit has always wandered from every other man, toward something or someone else. There came no magic or escapade to draw Kit on, no blessed excuse to leave. Instead, he had breakfasts and invitations and gifts and long kisses in the drowsy morning sunlight, and it was nice to have a man who laughs and smiles and looks down at Kit with the kind of desire that makes his heart beat faster. Kit saw it bloom, appreciation surging into adoration surging into love, saw it in an arm draped around his shoulders, saw it in the plans for their future, the *their* unquestioned. He saw it in the kiss before Lauri left for the warehouse and the flower, placed each morning, on the desk that became Kit's own, and somehow he stayed here, too tangled up to know what to do, too tangled up to know what he wanted when Lauri presented a small leather box, one lined with silk that housed gold.

Ringbinding, Kit has heard it said in Malvade—a marriage for love, not for politics or financial gain. A marriage more than the sacred words of the witnessed contract.

The script for these sorts of conversations offers two single-word answers, and Kit couldn't find a reason to keep his lips from mumbling *yes*.

He stares up at the vaulted ceiling, the brightening sky suggesting the shapes of beams overhead. Kit has words, more than most men—

words for colours and shapes and spell constructs, words for the absurd and the impossible. Whatever this is, the feeling that he doesn't possess some insubstantial quality, he can find for it no name or label. He just knows the dread cloaking his brown skin, because he should want this, he should need this, he should delight in this—and all he wants is to be somewhere not here, somewhere free of gold and contracts and kin.

Somewhere free of the looming future offered by a man who loves him.

Kit rolls on his side, his tears moistening the linen pillowslip under his cheek, but the want is truth, cold and cruel and brittle. He tried. He saw love bloom and waited, waited when he would once have left, for that feeling to flower in him. He cares, he cares enough for Lauri to stay, to say the word, to twist the ring on Kit's finger and wish he didn't feel so tangled and lost. He cares, but he doesn't love, not the kind of love that builds houses, paves roads and binds two souls for the journey ahead without regret or doubt.

What kind of man is he that he cannot give what he should?

He stares into the shadows, listening to Lauri's deep breaths and the sound of waking birds, but there are no crows in this port city, just shrieking gulls.

Lauri won't stop him from returning home, but Kit can't imagine sharing with Lauri the rambling house, the pond or the bush that deepens into mountains. He can't imagine introducing Lauri to the guardian serpent or telling Lauri Grandmother's tales by the crackling midnight fire; he can't imagine Lauri being possessed, in any way, by the land that owns Kit's bones.

He should, but he can't.

Kit releases a shuddering breath and slides out from under the covers. His folded clothes rest on the chair beside the bed, and the greying light is now strong enough that he can see the shape of things, half-feeling his way through buttons and ties. Lauri doesn't stir, not even when Kit's purse clunks as he fastens his belt. Boots and cloak and money; he'll miss the books downstairs, but he's a magician with health and youth and a purse, unneeded of anything else. Better to go in the

dawning, an unvoiced mystery—go, however despicable and cowardly it will be to vanish, because he doesn't have the words, and how can he explain something he doesn't understand himself?

He has words for spells beyond counting but not the words to say how he feels and why, and he almost laughs, bitter at the absurdity of it. He's a magician. How can he lack words?

Kit pins closed his cloak, considers. His breath quickens, but it isn't terror—no, it's call of the road, it's the knowledge that anything might happen between now and dusk, and let it, for isn't this his life? Isn't this how he lived, and lived well, before he happened across a sweet man who smiled at him over beans and drew him into something deeper? Isn't this right, the wanderlust? Or is it just easier?

Does it matter?

Garbed, Kit turns back to the bed. Not enough light, with his back blocking the window, to see the detail of Lauri's eyes and cheeks and mouth. No smile, just a shadow of dark hair and features lost to memory, and it must be kinder this way, to leave and forget. Kit draws another breath and slides the ring, gold and heavy, from his finger. The pull to reach out, to brush his hand through Lauri's hair, to feel one last time what he must leave—no. Kit drops the ring on the mattress laid bare by folded-back covers and a missing lover, and turns for the window.

Where shall he go, then? Somewhere different, somewhere new—Astreut, perhaps, and he'll stop at home on the way, stop and pay his respects to Grandmother, tell the story of a man called Lauri to the campfire burned above her resting bones. Perhaps he'll spend a day or two annoying Amelia first. He'll climb out the window, he'll scale the wall, he'll go down to the market and buy a horse, and then ride with abandon for Astreut—Raugue, perhaps. Why not?

Craven, whispers a voice at the back of his mind that sounds far too much like Lauri.

Kit can't disagree.

He picks up candles and seashells and a vase of flowers, pushing them to one side of the table under the window. Outside, he can see

the trees in the courtyard, the slight tang of eucalyptus overshadowed by salt and fish from the harbour, but beyond that calls the hills and farmland and bush of Greenstone and Astreut. Hours from now, he'll leaving Malvade in his wake.

The catch on the window opens without noise; Kit steps up onto the table and stretches one leg out over the sill before risking one glance behind him.

Lauri is a still shadow, the ring lost to darkness.

Kit's fingers fly free.

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
When Quiver Meets Quill

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**.