



love is the reckoning

a marchverse novelette

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imprint

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blurb

Esher Hill left his home and kin a crying wreck of a man, too depressed and dysphoric to care what his people make of him. If he'd had his way, that would have been the end of it.

His sister Mara, the village witch, made sure he didn't.

Two and a half years later, Esher owns two dogs, a blade, a career and a new body—the shape of masculinity he always felt he should be. A miracle Mara refuses to explain. A miracle the Sojourner's priests reject and fear. A miracle, say the Grey Mages, that cannot exist without something precious sacrificed in exchange: a soul.

Returning home in search of his sister and the truth isn't just a matter of enduring stares, whispers, explanations and the condescending pity from those he left behind.

Love holds edges sharper than Esher's sword, for nobody wins but demons in the sale of souls.

Contains: a graysexual, aromantic trans man fighting his own mind; the trans sorcerer of a sister who loves him; a grizzled aro-ace mayor and barkeep; and a heavy reliance on schemes and manipulations in the absence of simple communication.

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content advisory

AMATONORMATIVITY AND ROMANCE MENTIONS ABOUND, given that this story is in part about an aro-ace man's dealing with the assumption that romance is everybody's happily-ever-after.

This story depicts a protagonist who has been suicidal. I've attempted to show a character who has some recognition of the ways his brain lies, but it's impossible to write Esher without his feeling moments of doubt on his future. As someone who experiences this, I want our story to be one of looking this lie in the eye and living despite its real difficulties.

If you are not in a state where you can safely experience these thoughts and feelings, *don't read this story*.

This novelette also looks at acts of magic, consent and consequences, and in multiple circumstances Esher isn't given the right to make free, informed consent. His story is of a character tangled up in the complicated aftermath of someone else's decisions regarding his body and his life—something with which he'll spend some time understanding and contextualising.

This piece may be also triggering for people experiencing gender dysphoria, since it appears that Esher got the gift for which most of us yearn: a magical transition to the body that best suits him. This story doesn't depict the experience of dysphoria (but does contain references to the challenges in interacting with people who knew us

before transition) but trans folks feeling its pain may find it difficult to read about something so (currently) impossible.

Lastly, it's worth noting that some trans people do find that transition (in whichever forms desired by and accessible to the individual) eases their anxiety or depression. Some of us, however, possess bodies, brains, histories and circumstances in which transition is only one challenge in managing our mental health. Esher is meant to depict one shape of this collection of experiences.

love is the reckoning

TABLES AND STOOLS CROWD THE barroom. Dogs snooze by booted feet while a grey tabby picks its way along the tarred rafters. Barrels replace proper chairs, patrons risk lockjaw by catching themselves on a protruding nail and candle stubs burn in the windows because Reggie “doesn’t hold with that new-fangled witchery”. A low fire crackles in the stone hearth, offering the room a tang of redgum smoke to cloud its mingled reek of beer, lanolin and sweat. Stock workers and labourers, their voices a roar of noise, chase down the day’s work with drink and gossip. The floorboards peek through a scattering of straw and dirt, while the oft-polished redgum bar reflects the lamplight near as well as Da’s mirror.

A follower of the Sojourner owns no belief in hell, but Esher Hill stands upon its threshold.

Since Reggie stands behind the bar with a twig between her teeth and a battered felt hat slid so far back on her head that its refusal to fall appears an eldritch miracle, a man may be forgiven for thinking that no time has passed in Dead Horse Hill.

Esher exhales with slow deliberation, trying to ease the uneven rhythm seizing his ribs.

Outside, the sun rises and sets to lead the seasons in their year’s dance. Inside, a dusty, stubborn timelessness constrains the world. People sit in work-stained check shirts, nod over foaming glasses and

continue the business of a village best held away from grass and yards. Esher's ears snatch the edges of unchanging conversations: the mares best covered by Michael's prize stallion, the order for haying next spring. Isa and Ida Fisher knit while debating the history of local paddock names. Folks pass around a greasy cap before handing its coin-filled weight to Mistress Hayes, who weeps into a voluminous lace-trimmed handkerchief. Is nothing here new?

Two and a half years gone, and it seems both too long and not long enough.

One of Esher's earliest memories has Pa and Da taking him here, to this world of talk made with lips instead of hands, to participate in a different kind of normal than that of his fathers' home. He didn't ponder, until a man on the road, what they paid to come to this place of boisterous noise. Never staying for longer than an hour, every evening Mara and Esher exchanged mouth-words with Reggie or the Fisher biddies, practicing the vocal tones that the world without deems more necessary than those framed only by movement and expression.

The pub feels like home as much as his fathers' crooked cottage and smithy, its regulars kindred as much as Uncle Sascha. People here will recollect, with howling laughter and slaps to the shoulder, the time he climbed onto the roof, lost his balance and fell into the water trough. People here will recollect, with hushed voices and averted eyes, the weeping man Mara bundled into a blanket and the back of Jackson Kell's cart before she stole him away from the Hill's dangerous sameness.

Two and a half years.

Surely that's time enough to blunt the edges on their last memory of him?

He can't stay forever with the priests at Sirenne. Leaving before the Grey Mages arrive at the monastery prevents any awkwardness should they recognise Esher as the man who sought them in Rajad. Mara may have requested this meeting, but how much longer could he have gone before returning for her explanation? No, the answer is simple, as difficult things often are: he must talk to his sister. She, for reasons

unknown, told him to meet her at the pub; there, away from parents and spouses, she'll explain that bloody night at Sirenne.

Maybe the Grey Mages are wrong. Maybe it is simple witchcraft. Maybe...

Why didn't she tell him in a letter, if she doesn't want their fathers to overhear?

There are other ways, of course, to escape both a conversation fraught with listening kinsfolk and an answer he doubts he can survive.

Habit, Esher tells himself. Thinking it doesn't mean his depression has again worsened. It doesn't mean that he's like to hurt himself. It just means that his mind falls into a rut like a wheel on the road. *Habit*.

He sighs and, possessing no better option, strides into the barroom. A lean wolfhound as tall as his ribs walks at his hip; a shaggy black and white herder trots at his feet. A cavalry sword rests at his hip, a Rajadi sun pin pierces his collar, short hairs cover the skin of his jaw and neck—all familiar to Esher and new to his kinsfolk.

He's two and a half years gone from the man who left Dead Horse Hill, too far gone and not nearly gone far enough.

The room stares, as people do at a man who dithers by the door, with a scattering of frowns and shaken heads. Esher looks as much a Plainsman as any other here, with washed-out sienna skin, dark brown hair and hazel eyes. He moves with his head tilted so that he seems to glance at the floor but watches the goings-on from the corners of his eyes, a habit naming his fathers and family more than his colouring and tallness. He'll be, Esher supposes, a collection of the alien and the familiar. Perhaps that will allow him to sit in the corner, undisturbed, while folks wonder if they dare offend him by asking for his name?

How much has Mara told them? What if they fear to call attention to the village madman? Does he hope to pass unrecognised or does he hope to be remembered?

He risks the horror of eyes meeting eyes to survey the room, checking corners and the fireplace nook hidden from the doorway. Where is she? When is Mara, quick and impatient, ever given to lateness?

Reggie, barkeep and mayor, possessor of all knowledge that Dead Horse Hill deems worth remembering, peers over the counter. She stares, blinks and, without hesitation, tips her hat before settling it more firmly on the crown of her head.

“G’d eve.” In this room, Esher’s new voice rings too loud and too deep. For another terrible, desperate and self-hating moment, he wishes to lack the tone for which he so long yearned. “Drink and bread, mate?”

“G’day.” Reggie never adjusts her greeting for the time of day or events that don’t merit the word “good”. She once wished Younger Ned and the village entire a “g’day” before officiating at Ned’s mother’s funeral. “Seat yonder, Esh. How’d you get yourself a wolfhound? And that bitch ain’t from the Hill, either!”

She speaks with the indignation of someone who knows that only local bitches whelp any herder worth having; most of the shepherds and stockmen, obedient Hill-bred dogs at their feet, nod in agreement.

Reggie doesn’t ask him where he’s been.

She doesn’t need to.

“Saw a man in Astreut beating his dog. Took the dog, Bill.” He ruffles Bill’s ears; the grey wolfhound, never fond of people crowding small rooms, rests his not-inconsiderable weight against Esher’s leg. “The bitch is Berta. A pri ... a friend gave her to me as a pup. Greet, Berta.”

Berta, all lithe black-and-white fluff capable of charming even those humans disdainful of her bloodline, trots up to Mistress Hayes, sits and extends her right paw, her feathery tail thumping against the floorboards. Hayes lets out a startled sob, bends down and gently shakes Berta’s paw before holding out her hand for Berta to lick.

“Sit down.” Reggie tilts her gnarled, pockmarked chin towards a table by the window. “Glad to see you hale.”

He wants to laugh at the absurdity: if depression’s lack can be indicated by speaking of food and dogs, would he have suffered for so long under the village’s pall of silence? Esher grunts, softly whistles Berta back to heel and turns towards said table. The best “seat” is a barrel facing the peppercorn trees growing between the pub and the

village square, with enough space between it and the next table to fit a wolfhound. The table rests flat—helped by blocks of wood shoved under two legs—and isn't adorned with many protruding nails. One of Reggie's nicer offerings, it's close enough to the bar that half the room can talk to or at Esher.

Neighbours and townsfolk engage in elbow-nudging and whispering, but he spots nobody closely-enough related to arouse panic—until a man his age turns to face him.

Esher wipes his sweating palms on his coat, voiceless.

Lis Sascha, commanding co-conspirator in Esher's worst and best misadventures. Lis, who copied Esher's spelling and grammar only to gift Teacher Evins a lying smile; Lis, who spent schoolday lunches with Esher, another enthusiastic participant in the sport of hitting each other with sticks, fence palings and rope. Lis, missing two teeth because Esher knocked them out during a furious engagement in which Lis broke Esher's forearm—while Mara screamed from the schoolhouse steps that she was going to die from embarrassment and, if they didn't grow up, she'd sheep shit their boots until they did. Lis, crossing the room to take the wobbling stool across from Esher's barrel.

A man looks at an arrow coming for his heart in that same moment of twinned panic and clarity, knowing that his few heartbeats remaining don't permit escape.

Esher settles himself on the barrel, pats his knee to invite Berta to his lap and strokes Bill, sitting beside Esher's feet, across the chest and flanks. In the taproom, Bill seems ridiculously oversized, but he doesn't try to sit on Esher in the presence of roofs or furniture. Only when he's lying in his swag or sitting on the ground with a plate in hand does he find himself smothered by a stretched-out wolfhound.

Lis's stool rocks, one leg half an inch above the floor. "*Esher...?*"
 "Lis."

What does Esher say when there's more than two years between them and neither put pen to paper?

It once felt unreal. An experience refracted by time in the way water distorts light, difficult to recollect with clarity or comprehension. On

the road, his suicide attempts became memories to recognise and label, artefacts sensible in context of a past he thought acknowledged and accepted. On the road, with his horse and dogs marking the life labelled “after”, it felt safely historical—important, but as distant as the Change that rent the world.

In Dead Horse Hill, a village so unmarked by time that *after* appears in *before’s* garb, it happened yesterday—forever an immediate yesterday.

What does he say when his life of the last two years has abruptly lost colour and sharpness?

Esher rocks, digging his fingers into Bill’s wiry coat. Berta, too big to be comfortable on Esher’s knees but never reluctant to position herself above Bill, turns and licks him on the jaw. No. His dogs are real, Berta the living embodiment of the promise Esher made and kept. He isn’t falling apart. He won’t lose himself in melancholy because he returned home—doesn’t the shape and nature of his body prove that Esher isn’t the same man? This vibrant desperation isn’t *now*, just the lies spun by a mind inclined to falsehoods.

What if depression’s lies are truth? What if Sirenne’s priests told prettier, fancier lies? Isn’t it also true that while Esher’s body changed, much of his mind remained the same?

Did Mara ever realise that dysphoria wasn’t the sole reason for his attempted suicide?

“...your shoulders! But the beard, Esh! The *beard!*”

Esher, grateful for a distraction, moves his free hand around Berta’s body to stroke the close-trimmed hair on his chin. He still can’t take the sensation for granted. “Yes. I fill it in a bit.”

Lis blinks, staring. “Illusion? Or glue? It looks so real!”

Save for the missing teeth and a chin marked with nothing but a dimple and a scattering of freckles, a stranger to the Hill may reckon them twins. Cousins, both inclined to the family’s long-boned height, but only a month separates their birthdays and their parents’ houses sit across the lane from each other.

Where is Mara? The moon calls the hour, but there's no witch here, just the curiosity of a village that must ask questions for which Esher owns no easy answer.

His stomach ties itself in knots, his back prickles under gawking eyes and, try as he might, he can't stop his ears from catching the barroom's whispers. One thing to talk on his voice, his face, the new shapes of his body; he expects these remarks. Another thing to murmur about his health and ponder any scars hidden by his coat—to wonder what his delays in returning home mean about his recovery. How ill must he have been, Ida asks Isa, to only come back now?

I am better, he wants to shout, even should it undermine his argument.

Today, "better" feels like the gravest of all lies.

"I ... grew it. Most of it." At least his stilted words won't provoke remark. Many locals applaud him for speaking verbally at all; a few have said as much to Esher's face. "You look ... well? Is your—"

"You have a beard!" Lis gawks, his lips ajar, his eyes owl-wide. "How'd you go and *grow* a beard?"

Mara, it seems, didn't tell their cousin what she did at Sirenne.

Ask Mara, Esher wants to say. *Ask Mara*.

He looks down, wriggling the small journal from the inside pocket of his coat onto the patch of knee free of Berta's fur. He doesn't know how Mara came by it, but everything he writes copies itself inside her matching volume. She pressed it into his hands the day she left Sirenne, an inscription written in her looping scrawl inside the front cover: "Remember Aunt Rosie". Esher flips through the pages, near three-quarters filled, but he finds no new additions. No apology for lateness; no explanation of delays. Nothing.

Berta lowers her head to nose at the blank page.

"Esh. Mate, you've got to tell me. How'd you grow a beard?"

He isn't witty enough for a humorous deflection or quick enough to turn the conversation elsewhere. He has only honesty abbreviated to uselessness: "I don't know, exactly. Magic."

It just wasn't his.

Lis scoffs. “You don’t know? How don’t you know?”

Esher woke, alive when he didn’t intend to be but unknowing of that significance, in a narrow bed inside Sirenne’s infirmary. Woke, surrounded by a cocoon of sloughed skin and tissue, housed in a body that, for the first time since Esher knew anything about himself as a person, matched his mind’s expectations. Woke, after agonising nightmares of his body expelling flesh and growing it anew, in a bloody moment where his mind’s expectations held no meaning. He doesn’t remember what happened after, what Mara said or explained from her chair beside that bed. His rebirth provoked a screaming terror that brought priests with spells and medicines and too-calm expressions, a madness that even now stalks his sleep and commands his nightmares.

Magic.

He taps his fingers against the mirror journal’s leather cover, focusing on the press of the barrel’s head hoop under his thighs.

Later, when his mind settled enough into his unexpected body that he regained thought, Mara offered a script of evasions and non-answers to serve the *how*. She admitted that she enabled his transition—perhaps because of the priests’ emphatic disavowal—but she implied the cause only a witch’s deeper arts.

If so, why doesn’t she gift Lis this wonder?

If so, why doesn’t she tell Esher how she gave him a body capable of siring?

When she judged him well enough, Mara returned to Dead Horse Hill. Esher, too new in this raw skin to think of homecoming, left the priests for Astreut with a herder puppy poking out of his saddlebag—far enough from the Plains that he needn’t explain his illness or transition. For a time, while he learnt how to live with this new body and the horrors that shaped it, he held contentment in his work and his animals. Improving health brought strengthening curiosity, a driving need he couldn’t otherwise assuage, and when one of his employers took cattle over the Straits to Rajad, Esher accompanied her. Doesn’t that ancient city house enchanters, magicians, witches of myriad disciplines, magic workers of countless abilities? By the time he reached Rajad, Esher had

money enough for an interview with a Grey Mage who pursed their lips and, after a cursory examination, told him only one craft not their own can work so complete a transition. Sorcery.

Mara sold something to a deity or demon to pay for Esher's body.

Only one thing humans own possesses value enough for such a trade.

She promised to explain, but the moon and stars now put them well past eight.

"Here." Reggie rounds the bar, her skirts swishing, a tray held in one hand, a well-polished truncheon hanging from her belt. She slides the tray onto the table between Esher and Lis. Bread, cheese, ham and beer, plated alongside the stringy offcuts from a side of mutton, the last heaped in two small dishes. "You're come over all thin." She rests one dish on the ground, about a foot away from Bill's head; she places the other on the table before Berta's nose. "What're you lot looking at?"

Everyone engrosses themselves in a flurry of whittling, crochet, cards and dice; Reggie heads back to her accustomed position to survey the room with a brow-creased frown.

"Eat," Esher says to two salivating dogs before helping himself to a piece of cheese. Bill scatters half the meat over Esher's boots while swallowing, the embodiment of the verb "wolf"; Berta eats with a cat's delicacy, nosing a single piece off her plate.

Lis, the otherwise irrepressible, says nothing.

Mara, according to the Grey Mage, became a sorcerer. She sold her soul for magic enough to change Esher's body, thinking that this must hold him into life; she sacrificed something beyond price because she believed him unable to survive as he was born. If the Grey Mage is correct, his sister is lost to the Sojourner and her family, her path unable to cross his in the worlds beyond. Her spirit will remain here, bound in servitude to the demons now owning her soul.

His green stomach curdles the cheese.

If he'd been stronger and braver, Mara wouldn't have paid for his life with her future.

Reggie drums her fingers against the counter in a steady *one-two, one-two* beat. The cuffs of her too-long shirt, like always, brush her knuckles. “You know that ain’t priest magic, Esh?”

Silences form the rhythms of madness. The gasping silence when someone looks upon him having broken the rules for how a man treats his own skin. The horrified silence when he says something too honest about his thoughts or feelings. The demanding silence when his confessions come under question. The pregnant silence when a priest says something that they think must change Esher’s heart and mind. The stifling silence when they realise that their profound words don’t reach him. Madness sings the melody of sounds a man should never make entwined with the rhythm of other people’s pauses and hesitations.

Those aching, bewildering silences never stop hurting. They feel like a blade to the heart, like a man wanting the blade to the heart. Nothing less final offers escape from their stinging cruelty, as though agreeing to breathe means permitting others to wound him.

Habit.

He rolls another slice of cheese between his fingers, unsure how to answer save with the obvious: “I know.”

Reggie tips her hat a little further back off her face. “You, Esh?”

Esher shakes his head. “I didn’t choose. *I didn’t ask.*”

Will they think that, when they find out what Mara did?

Will they think that Esher begged his sister to surrender her soul for his health?

Madness rings and silence sings. Esher, fighting to keep in his mind the feel of the bread crust in his fingers, looks out the window in hope of seeing a tall, long-haired witch wearing her wife’s wedding gift—a purple many-pocketed overcoat.

Mara made him promise on Great Aunt Rosie’s name that he wouldn’t go home, that they’d first meet at the pub.

Has something happened to Benjamin or Olive? Or his fathers?

“Shades, Esh! You’re still as chatty as ever!” Lis heaves a drawn-out sigh that can’t fill the echoing space between them. He does, however,

avoid personal questions and awkward commentary by changing the subject. “You look good, man. It’s good to see you ... like this, after. If this magic means you won’t want to, need to, now ... it’s good, really good, that you found it.” He plucks a slice of bread from Esher’s tray. “And your beard! It looks so good! I’m jealous!”

Esher forces a smile. “You said ‘good’ five times...?”

“It’s a useful word.” Lis shrugs and helps himself to another slice, immune to the interrogation in Esher’s voice. “It’s so perfect that you’ve come back today! Well, not *perfect* perfect because... you know...” He shakes his head and beams at Esher too broadly for sincerity. “But it’s good, in a way! Rachel’s sibling is in, the youngest one, the carpenter. Brice. Ze’ll be by the pub in a bit, and I’m sure ze’ll be delighted to see you again—especially now! Beard and muscles! What do you think?”

Reggie scowls at Lis, drumming her fingers against the counter.

Shades, is he really pulling this nonsense again?

“Brice?” Esher asks, unable to conjure a non-infuriating reason why it’s “perfect” that a mentally-ill drover meet the carpenter sibling of his cousin-by-law.

“Ze’s making new cabinets for the shop.” Lis flashes Esher another broad, gum-baring grin. “And ze’s building hir own house and workshop out on the road to Riversedge. A house, Esh, and...” He pauses like a stage actor seeking to startle the audience. “Ze’s still unmarried!”

An infuriating reason, then. Just a tired repetition of the same old story, unsubtle and irritating. “I’m a *stockman*.” Esher doesn’t trouble himself to hold back on stressing the last word. “Horses, dogs, cows, mountains. I’ve got work in Astreut.”

“So?” Lis shakes his head. “You remember Brice, don’t you? Taller than Rachel, not as tall as you. You’ll look so good together!”

Six at least. Did Lis say the word before Esher started counting?

He remembers Brice, a couple of years older than Esher; ze used to sit with Mara and Rachel, the three sneering at Lis and Esher during lunch and from across the classroom. That suited him until an incomprehensible shift took place and two people replaced their mutual disdain with fascination. Lis spoke ceaselessly about Rachel’s

beauty and queried Esher on the best ways to court her—impossible to escape while they pitched hay. Esher, however, returned from a day’s sweaty labour to find Rachel waiting with endless questions on Lis’s preferences in coats, dresses and trousers. Shoving them both into the cellar, sitting on the shut door and reading an old recipe book while they spoke to each other solved that problem, although Esher doubts either understands how they tested his patience.

In gratitude, Rachel and Lis have devoted an absurd amount of time to finding Esher the right partner—while ignoring his demonstrable lack of interest.

“Rachel hates mess in her shop,” Esher says, doubting he can achieve a successful deflection. “That must be ... difficult, for her. What kind of—”

“Brice is in town. Ze’s pretty, ze has a trade, ze’s building hir own house and workshop, and ze’s unmarried.” Lis sighs. “Maybe you want to think about that, Esh, before everybody’s wed and you’re sitting out the front of the pub, grizzled and grey, grumbling about running children? Like Pepper? And Mother Orrin? You don’t want to bloody end up like Mother Orrin!”

Lis does Mother Orrin no justice while disregarding the tragedy of her husband’s dying so young ... and that’s enough for Esher to ponder the likelihood of his living long enough to grumble at children who gulp their water. No. Doesn’t it mean something that he spent the last two months back at Sirene? That he went himself? He’s better. He must be.

How many times has he thought that word since entering the pub?

The priests named Esher’s shapes of personhood. Mara revealed her lithromanticism to Benjamin without rejection. Great Aunt Rosie is more like him than he ever dared imagine. Can he tell Lis? “I won’t work for Bryce, because—”

Lis sighs in the hiss he saves for when he most wants to smack Esher over the head. “You’ve got wool for brains, honestly!” He lowers his voice. While the barroom now houses several unrelated conversations, as if people look to avoid obvious shows of eavesdropping, a quarter

of the village's population sit close enough to overhear. Enough to tell everyone else! "I know you—we know Mara took you to the priests. That doesn't make you unlovable or unwedgable! You're back, you're good, you got witched even, so it isn't a problem! Why wouldn't Brice be interested? Yes, you ... *you went to the priests*, but you're back!"

Never did Esher think that Lis, as shift as Mara and Esher, should mimic the Astreuch, the best of whom are still prone to calling cousins or friends "transgender" or "homosexual" with that same strained stress. Why can't outsiders speak normally those words describing an unshared difference? Why must they invent awkward euphemisms like "switching sides" or "riding on the wrong side of the road"?

The room falls quiet enough that Esher can hear dealt cards slide across a wooden table.

You went to the priests is the phrase said to his face.

Does Dead Horse Hill own crueller sayings? Ones spoken behind his back?

He shivers like a man doused in ice water, smacks his right hand against the table and speaks, his voice a pitched, unsteady mess hitting all possible registers. "Say it. Say the words. Jackson offered his cart. Reggie brought a blanket. Ida and Isa sat with me when Mara fetched our fathers. I tried to kill myself, Lis! *Say it!*"

Silence, cutting and cruel, sings hir bright soprano.

This. This is why he broke the way he did.

Better? He isn't better enough for a neat reweaving into the village's tapestry, his attempted suicide a stitched-over stain or loose thread hidden from view. He'll never be better enough!

"Just say it. You know what's worse than ... having tried, knowing everyone knows that?" Esher drags in a breath. "This speaking around it, like you're all pretending I don't know that you know! It happened. Just say it."

Is Mara's answer worth this? Couldn't he have gone back to Astreut, avoiding all this unpleasantness?

Lis stares with an aghast, unsmiling quiet that looks more than passing strange on his vivacious, restless features.

Esher grunts and shakes his head. No, Lis won't say it, because Esher isn't asking for something his kinsfolk understand. He isn't asking for reassurance, for the kindnesses they think shore and strengthen a person against difficulty. He's asking for an end to the silence that came near to killing him, for a world where difficult truths aren't spoken over or around, for the knowledge that the unpalatable is accepted as barroom conversation because of, not despite, its challenges.

Mara found connection and identity when Aunt Rosie taught her that they possess kin in more ways than blood; Mara found hope of a life built to honour her nature. Esher found tragic confirmation of something he'd long realised: nobody living in Dead Horse Hill speaks beyond sheep, paddock names and romances.

How can he survive here when the dangerous and the personal is only shared after death?

How can he survive here while so ignorant of the way his ancestors failed to stick to their signposted paths?

"I was saying," Esher says softly, "that I'm aromantic and asexual. I'm not interested in going with Brice or anyone. I'm not interested in marrying Brice or anyone. I'm just me."

He reaches under the table and digs his fingernails into Bill's spine, holding on to the thump of a wolfhound's tail smacking the dusty floor.

All his life—until one night with Mara and the ghosts of Dead Horse Hill—Esher believed the assumption that his happiness must lie in romance, marriage and family. Moll, after Mara gave Esher his unasked-for gift, asked questions about partners and family; Esher's answers led to the provision of unnatural-sounding academic terms, a language naming the dead's tales.

Aromantic.

It'd be a better word if other people already knew the meaning.

"I don't understand." Lis exhales, overlong and overloud, his eyes darting around the room. "It's okay, Esh. You're back, and that's the important thing. It's ... good, too, to talk."

Seven? Or is it eight?

“I don’t desire other people.” The words feel awkward in his mouth, and Esher can’t help feeling that there’s something wrong in his speaking them. “I don’t want ... intimate relationships.”

How did he mention his gender to Lis or his fathers? So long ago that he doesn’t remember, but perhaps they differ only in that those conversations offer a signposted road. These new words own nothing more than a break in the trees, a goat track leading to pastures unknown. These new words, ones the dead didn’t have to speak in or beyond their lives, require explanations.

“I don’t need or want to be matched with someone. Some people don’t feel attraction and still wish to couple or triple. Mara does. I don’t. Do you understand?”

It isn’t a lie; it also isn’t the truth at its most complex. He doesn’t understand the appeal in romantic partnerships or the non-romantic intimacy Mara and Benjamin built for themselves. “Aromantic” feels accurate. Esher doesn’t know if his previous absence of attraction came from depression, dysphoria or the lack of someone suitable, but since Mara’s magic, his asexuality has become a fluid, flickering thing—large, ordinary periods of dispassion disrupted by moments of fleeting, bewildering interest. Since Esher doesn’t desire a partner, he behaves as though his attraction doesn’t exist, using the word “asexual” without additional description. Acknowledging that he feels a periodic sexual interest too often serves as an invitation for ignorant listeners to force upon him their narrow expectations of normal.

The word “asexual” still applies, even if it in him names greys as well as translucent absences.

“That sounds so *lonely*.” Lis presses his lips together, gulping. “And now you’ll need someone, and I just thought that, given everything that’s happened...”

Esher lives for the peace of his fathers’ home, Mara’s laughter, the weight of Bill’s head resting on his left boot, the warmth of Bert’s coat under his fingertips, the rolling dice connecting drovers by a campfire, the solemn kindnesses granted by red-robed priests. A life where he buys the food he likes, dresses without regard for another’s opinion,

sings knowing there's nobody to laugh at his off-key voice, sleeps with a dog at his back and another at his feet. There's danger in a fall or broken leg, but he's never alone in the bush—and there's danger, too, in curling up at night with a partner.

Of all the things Esher fears, dying alone isn't one of them.

"I'm not lonely."

"Esh!" Lis grips the edge of the table in pale-knuckled hands. "People don't just marry for love! They marry and fall in love after, they marry for companionship, they marry for politics and finances, they marry to be cared for. You'll..." He swallows, his eyes fixed on Esher's face, as close to tears as Esher has ever seen him. "You'll die alone out there, and we won't know what happened to you. Won't you now think of your fathers?"

We. Did Mara mention Esher's return? Did Dead Horse Hill whisper its plans and schemes? Does Mara idle to give Lis time to speak? Esher shifts on the barrel, his free hand resting on Berta's chest, his food forgotten. The future stretches before him with the inevitability of a prison sentence, a freedom restrained by an anxiety not even his. Yet Esher can't say with certitude that they're incorrect, for *better* feels as insubstantial as an ashy log crumbling beneath a poker's tap.

Why did he come back? Why does Mara ask this of him?

Good, better. Such vague, clumsy words: hopeful but imprecise, wielded with desperation by men who need them to be true. What does either mean? An illusion, he supposes. The aberration of his illness cut clean from the tapestry, a return to a world where Esher lived unaware of any desire to kill himself. Fantastic, absurd, impossible. The ghosts of depression have long existed in his mind, their roots entwined through the weave of his past, present and future.

Better can't be a return to the past that shattered him.

Better can't be a return to a past that never existed.

Esher exhales, long and shuddering.

"I went to the Greys in Rajad. I asked them what Mara did to me, how she gave me this body. How." He relaxes his hand, resting his

fingers on Bill's grey head. "They told me ... sorcery. They told me how someone becomes a sorcerer."

If he's betrayed Mara's secret to the taproom of Dead Horse Hill, maybe she should have told him before the Grey Mages.

Maybe she shouldn't have sent Lis to talk for her.

In that quiet room, Reggie's indrawn gasp echoes above the creak of shifting chairs and the clink of knife resting on plate. Reggie, who doesn't hold with magic, doesn't lack understanding. Why didn't Esher question her reluctance? Why did he regard it as a foible, tolerated to her face but mocked behind her back? Why did he too fall in line with the village's conspiracy of silence, the denial masquerading as tolerance?

"I didn't come straight here. For two months, I stayed at Sirenne again. I had to, after learning ... what Mara did, what she gave up. I had to go, to save myself. I've learnt to do that, Lis." He shifts his hands to Berta's chest and Bill's ears. He isn't slipping free of his body or losing track of his surroundings. He can smell dog, smoke, ham; he can stroke silky coat and wiry coat. Esher doesn't feel safe, but he hasn't lost his moorings. "You don't know how hard that is, but I'll do it again if I need it."

"Esh." Lis huffs his annoyance, his hazel eyes fixed on Esher's face. "I'm trying to help you. We want you to be safe. We want you to love and be loved. We want you to be happy."

For years, Esher couldn't deny his cousin's gaze. Why does it touch him so little now?

Because Lis knows the world of attraction, vibrant and compelling; he can't understand living without an experience so seemingly natural that its absence must be an aberration. It's taken for granted that all people love; Esher, in rejecting the shape—romance—with highest value, must be damaged or ill. Rarely does he explain that he doesn't experience romantic interest without his audience latching onto his history, their misunderstanding both his illness and his identity, as the reason for his supposed deficit.

In Lis, love offers a comprehensible solution to complex circumstances.

In Lis, love designates healing, wholeness and survival.

I don't love, Moll said once. The priest perched on a boulder like a crouching cat, their only movements breath and the breeze's shifting of hair and robe. Never has Esher met someone so competent in the art of unruffled serenity. *Do you think my service and faith less because of that?*

Love is the reckoning of a good man, or so says every story that matters, so why fixate on only one of its many shapes? Why can't Lis respect the binding love of family and friendship? Why can't he trust that while his love may not hold Esher into life, pressing him into marriage won't lessen that risk? Why can't Lis realise that his fragile fantasy will shatter under pressure like a sugar cake knocked from a plate?

Is it hypocrisy to think Lis's actions twisted and self-serving but Mara's a sacrifice? Should this feel different to Mara's selling of a soul for the sorcerous power to transform a body, a simple solution that can't encompass the whole of something as complex as Esher's mind?

"I'm just trying to help you."

Yes, and that's what scares him: his erasure writ in the words of love.

"I am a singular man. I will look after myself as a singular man. I will be safe, or not, as a singular man. And ... and I won't suffer you making me into something I'm not. I won't let you break me again." Esher shakes his head, hating every word of this speech. Not even Moll enticed so many words from his lips all at once! "I'm sorry, Lis. I'm sorry for hurting you. I'm sorry for being born into a village where to speak of anything painful and real was so impossible, death was the easiest option." He shifts his feet until Bill raises his head and Berta leaps off his lap; Esher pockets his book and stands, forcing himself to look at Lis's face. "Tell Rache I wish her well. I hope Brice survives the cabinetry and returns home to his own house ... unencumbered."

He doesn't wait for Lis's reaction.

Esher turns away—man, sheepdog and wolfhound fleeing the heart of Dead Horse Hill.

He'll knock on Mara's door. He'll demand from her an answer—one spoken by her hands, not a Grey Mage's lips. He'll lay his truths bare

and expect hers in return—that his fear she surrendered her soul for him weighs on his bones, that *better* is too oblique and abstract a metric to be worth keeping, that hope of an unfaltering life only halts him from learning how best to fall, that he can ache at her secrets but still love her generosity. A priest’s truth, perhaps, but more welcoming of complexity and individuality than Lis’s desperation. It may be as much a lie as anything else, but isn’t it a kinder one?

Mara, another aromantic, should understand that.

He hears the footsteps that follow him outside before the rusty voice: “Esh.”

He stops and turns.

Reggie settles down on the wooden bench outside the front window, a candle’s flame flickering in a halo of light above the crown of her hat. “Sit. Talk with me.”

He rests beside her, stretching his legs out across the pavers. The night feels pleasantly cool, the stars crisp in a cloudless sky. The witchlights—strung and spelled by Mara’s hands—adorning the trees growing over the square and the gables of abutting buildings lend the space a festive appearance. Did he miss a wedding? Does that also explain Lis’s enthusiasm for setting Esher up?

Reggie, despite her request, volunteers nothing but silence.

“Did you tell Mara about sorcery?” Perhaps it’s better to sit a moment until his anger cools; raging at Mara for sending Lis is no way to begin their conversation. “Or she you?”

Reggie’s lips crook into a twisted smile. “In a way.” She pushes back her hat, baring wisps of the greying brown-black hair beneath. “She were trying magic from a book, bored of Mother Hayes, several years before—before. I sat her down, right here. Told her the costs.” She moves her right hand to the cuff of her left shirt, unfastening the button. “Tried to tell her that magic has answers, more than right or safe.” She pushes up her sleeve and holds her bare forearm towards Esher. “You visited the East. Seen this?”

A tracery of scars marks her tan skin, most thinned and narrowed by time, faded to an almost-translucent paleness. They’re too straight, close

and regular for accidental cause, and while their age explains something about Reggie's avoidance of magic—perhaps she gave up the art even before Esher's birth—he wonders at three newer cuts by her elbow, the skin still red around the healed slice.

“Yes.” He hesitates, unsure of her point. “This side of the Straits, though.”

Reggie rolls down the sleeve. “Didn't know if you would.”

No. In a world where magic workers can be as common as drovers, some still wrap their craft in secrecy, relying on trusted customers concealing their real trade from officials. “Astreut. This body. Living with it, all new, wasn't ... simple.” He swallows, not wanting to explain the difficulty in his first year as this other shape of man. “An employer in Raugue took me to a blood witch. Magicians, there ... they're *Astreuch*. A blood witch's less likely to object to someone's being shift or trans.”

Where did she learn this art? Surely not here?

“I ain't surprised at that.” Reggie snorts, but she doesn't ask. “Thought she were just reading, then. Not until she came back from Sirenne, years after. Took her a few weeks to tell what she did. Sorcery. From another *book*.”

She rasps the last word as though about to hawk and spit, even though Reggie doesn't spare the truncheon's threat on any person looking to do so inside her pub.

“Mara sold her soul?”

“Didn't ask. Didn't have to. Nothing else demons want.” Reggie shrugs and rolls her shoulders back against the wall. “You can't undo it. Neither can she. Just love her back and hold on as best you can. Easier to say, but still truth.”

Esher nods, shivering.

Mara sold her soul. He didn't ask, yet he still made her do it.

How does a man live with that?

“I want to ask something.” Reggie's phrasing rings wrong enough, despite her soft voice, that Esher tenses. “Easy, Esh. I just want you to promise me. That's all.” She places her palms on her knees, glancing past his face; he can still feel the intensity of her regard. “Promise me,

on the only name that matters. Promise me you won't surrender your soul."

He stares at her crinkled face and deep-set brown eyes, unable to reckon why Reggie asks this of him. His soul? "I'm not a magic worker. I don't want to be."

"I don't want you giving your soul to Mara. Maybe you'll mean it well, trying to make up for ... her gift. Don't. Promise me."

Why Reggie? Where's Mara? Nothing about this evening rings right since his entering the pub, yet the promise costs Esher nothing. Reggie knows his heartname, Esher has no interest in sorcery and the Sojourner requires ownership of a soul to follow his wandering road through lives and worlds. Does Reggie fear Esher's offering his soul to replace Mara's? Is this why his sister refused to explain how she wrought his magic? Is this why she avoids him now, for fear that her suicidal brother will surrender his soul to her and again attempt his death? Does she think him still that broken?

He didn't return home. He took Berta and headed for Astreut. Why wouldn't Mara think that?

If she needs this to trust him, he'll swear.

"My name is Avery Esher Hill," he says, moving his hands into the father-given signs for his name, "and I promise on that name that I will retain possession of my own soul."

Too many names in verbal languages are shared, but hand-spoken names aren't an arrangement of letters with historical meaning. They're crafted for that individual, personal far beyond most lip-spoken names. One fingerspells a shroudname and signs a heartname; how else should one signify such profound difference? The Sojourner can't know Esher from any other man called Avery, a sop to priests, lawyers and lip-spoken customs; the sign Da and Pa gave him truly names Esher in the Sojourner's eyes.

Reggie jerks her chin. "I'll take you to Mara."

He stiffens. "Take?"

"She asked me to meet you." Reggie pushes herself up, groaning. "Come."

“She said for me to meet her!” Esher leaps to his feet, Bill brushing against his leg. “She said—” Why isn’t Mara here? Why did she ask Esher to meet her at the pub instead of going first to her and Benjamin’s house, the shop or even Pa and Da’s? Why, if Mara first needs Esher’s promise, didn’t Reggie take him aside after he entered the pub? “No, *what is this...?*”

Reggie rests one broad hand on his shoulder. “I needed to know who you are now—and that you ain’t doing nothing rash.” She walks across the square, her footsteps steady and sure; Esher jigs and jerks beside her. “Mara’s ... dying. Growth in the lungs. The doctor from Malvade thinks she has ... weeks. A month, maybe two or three. They’re just trying to keep her comfortable, now.” She pauses. “They tried everything, Esh. I tried everything. Everything that’s reasonable, and I ain’t her. I ain’t apologising for that. What she did ain’t reasonable.”

It isn’t until Reggie stops and turns that Esher realises he stands in the middle of the square, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Teacher Evins frowned upon his swaying; the drovers deem it childish. *Good with stock, not much else. Don’t try and talk with him.*

He didn’t care then and doesn’t care now.

“Esh?”

“Dying? She didn’t say—”

Too late, he understands.

The sister who bought him his body with her soul is dying.

The one thing he can spend to save her, the one thing demons accept as payment for magic powerful enough to change a body, he bound to himself by promise and heartname.

His mouth hangs open, dry and useless; his fingers tremble. He tries to speak and jerks his hands, fumbling to clear away the mess of signs. It seems to Esher that there’s one language left to him, one both simple and comprehensible, and without further thought he takes it.

Reggie stumbles backwards as his knuckles graze her chin.

“*You—*”

She grunts and grasps his wrists before he can land a second punch, pulling Esher into her chest. Her lips move; he can't hear anything but her hoarse voice pronouncing two awful words.

Mara's dying, and he can't give for her as she for him.

Mara's dying, but he spent two months dallying with the priests because he's too broken to return home without their help. She's dying, but he let himself get caught up in Reggie's trap. She's dying, but...

"She asked me to make sure you ain't giving your soul for her. She asked, Esh." Reggie's voice cracks; only then does Esher realise that she's crying. "She said she ain't living to see you lose your soul. I did this for her, because she did you wrong. That's why."

"She! She with her wife and babe! She—"

"Don't you *dare*." Reggie's growl provokes Berta's warning yip, but she wraps her arms around Esher's shoulders, rocking them both. "Those words you said in there ain't null now. We ain't less because our road leads elsewhere! We ain't less than parents and wives and husbands and partners!" She exhales, one hand reaching up to snag itself in Esher's braided hair. "She didn't ought to have gifted you that body how she did. Now she's drawing a line, trying to protect you and hurting you more, but it were already hurting you, what she did. She's trying to end this, Esh, because nobody wins but demons in the sale of souls."

For a moment, he's lying on that narrow bed, his hands and thighs slick with gore.

For a moment, Esher remembers what he did the night before awakening to that bloody madness.

"She..." He sobs into a thick shirt of Hill-woven wool, inhaling its trapped aura of wine and smoke. Mara will die. A demon took her soul, forever chaining her spirit to servitude in this world. If Esher had only been braver and stronger, she wouldn't have made such an exchange.

Love is the reckoning, say the stories.

Isn't love just as much the breaking?

He weeps, and Reggie stands steady down to her worn work boots. She waits until his gasping slows and walks them both across the square and down the lane to the little house tucked beside Rachel's dry goods

store. His feet, even shod, recognise every step and stone inside Dead Horse Hill; he knows they've arrived before the hinge-stiffened door Benjamin and Mara still haven't fixed groans into the night.

Two and a half years gone; two and half years too late.

He jerks his head up, scuffing his feet on the doormat.

Inside waits a tall woman sitting in a rocking chair by the well-blackened stove, her waxy skin drawn so tight over her cheekbones and knuckles that her shroud of skirts and blankets can't soften the sense of a corpse awaiting her burial. She clasps a cream cloth blotched reddish-brown in her left hand; a basket filled with similar cloths sits at her feet. Esher last saw her smiling, waving at him from the back of a cart, her hair glistening and her eyes shining. Now she fights to sit upright, her lips pale and peeling, her long locks limp, her hairline beaded with sweat.

They got their stubbornness from both their fathers; Esher and Mara had no hope of becoming anything else.

He hears the door thud behind him, Reggie ask after coffee, Benjamin exclaim over Bill's size, the *click-click* of nails as two dogs cross the wooden floor, a small child crying out the words "*pony dog*", the stool by the rocking chair creak under Esher's weight. Some unconscious part of him watches Bill to make sure he doesn't startle at the onslaught of said child, but his own body rests at arm's length, too far distant to hold his focus. Nothing in this warm, cluttered kitchen matters more than Mara in her chair and a pain too big for language or thought.

"I'm sorry." He fights to move his lips and tongue, to operate the body become less and less his own. "I'm sorry I made you do this. I'm sorry—"

Dried lavender hangs by the grate housing a crackling fire, but Esher still tastes air leaden with bitter herbs and sourness. Sourness and looming death.

Mara jerks her head. "I knew this was going to twist you up! Did Reggie make you promise?"

Startled, Esher nods.

Berta, tired of being ignored by a child uninterested in an ordinary sheepdog, jumps onto Esher's knees, scrambles into a sitting position and licks him on the cheek.

"Thank the dead for that." Mara folds her arms. "Esh, shut up and listen—Ben, pass me that spoon, would you? So I can rap Esh over the head if he says the word 'sorry'?"

She glares at Esher until Benjamin, unnaturally thin and wan herself, hands over a long wooden spoon; Mara clenches it in her free hand. Surely he's seen soldiers with less fearsome a glower than this gaunt witch in a rocking chair?

"I didn't sell my soul for you. I swear to you that I didn't." She speaks with slow, bitten-off purpose. "I sold it three seasons before. I thought—to find a solution, something to make me not lithromantic. To love Ben, romantically. And, when my demons wouldn't give me the magic to change myself, to ask the dead about love spells."

"Is that why—Aunt Rosie?" Esher thought only that she wanted to talk to Aunt Rosie during the Thinning! Shades, his sister is a *necromancer*? "The dead? You summoned them? After the Thinning? Or before?"

Benjamin's tense, still expression leaves Esher guessing that this revelation isn't new to her.

Mara jerks a nod. "Yes. And that's how I knew to take you to Sirenne, too. They told me. Anyway, I was already a sorcerer. But the power ... how much you get depends on the demons and the sorcerer both. That didn't matter, then—I thought I could save you, and I'd already traded my soul. Why not? I wasn't using the magic I'd bought!" She coughs—a wet and bubbling sort of noise, sickening in its heaviness. "How could I leave you like that when I thought I knew the problem? Watch you try again? You woke up ... screaming, but after a while you were better. Really better. I fixed you as much as anyone could."

She became a sorcerer, a necromancer.

He attempted suicide.

He can't decide which of them is least sane.

“There isn’t power left after me for you to...” What, Esher doesn’t know: if she could have saved herself, wouldn’t she have done so?

“I was the older sister who saved my brother. A hero from the stories, and you didn’t need to know.” Mara’s hoarse laugh ends in another bout of wretched coughing. “A nice little story. Helped me sleep at night.”

“It isn’t—”

A wooden spoon to the ear hurts, but not near as much as memory tells him it should.

“Shut up,” Mara says while Esher stills Berta. “It’s a story, and I liked it. Reggie called me a hundred kinds of fool when I told her, but I laughed. Even some of the things you wrote about ... well, I gave you something you wanted. And you were living in Astreut with your dogs. You ... you weren’t trying to kill yourself again.” She presses her lips together in hesitation. “It looks so different now! I’m sorry for not asking you, and I’m sorry for not telling you, and I’m sorry for the pain I’ve put you through trying to fix all this. I’m sorry, Esh.”

He stares at her. “You didn’t hurt me. You saved me.”

Mara shakes her head. “Do you really believe that?”

He stops, assent silent on his tongue and stilled on his hands. All the stories about his world unravelled two and a half years ago; the tales he tells in their place feel no more substantial than ash and sugar. What does he believe? How should he know? “I ... the last two months. With Moll. Again. I don’t know...”

Her smile bears a warm familiarity framed by a face unfamiliar in its gauntness. Same hazel eyes, same sable hair, same crooked front tooth, changed woman. “Good! If you can go back yourself when you need the help, I won’t worry.”

A nod is all the communication he can manage. Mara will understand if he speaks around the point, but what does he say when his sister is dying? Where does he begin? How does he manage something as ordinary as language when there’s nothing ordinary about this evening?

Mara hacks into the rag, a cough that rattles her body, before burying the cloth in her fisted hand. Guilt? Stubbornness? The bone-deep aversion to revealing her suffering? Some torturous mix of all three? “I

know you've had all of minutes with this, but ... just stay with me until the end. Give me my family until the end, as normal as we can. That's all I want. *Please.*" She shakes her head, her casualness forced even to his ears. "I know you said he was a wolfhound, Esh, but he's so big! And Berta's all grown now!"

Berta sits up to offer her paw to Mara, her wagging tail smacking into Esher's belly.

Mara rasps a laugh, shakes Berta's paw and trails her free hand over the rocking chair's arm to work her fingers down Berta's ears and neck.

Esher, numb, looks down at Bill, now lying stretched across the hearth and half the floor. Olive curls up beside him, their head resting on his flanks. In a storybook happily-ever-after sort of way, Bill and his nibbling should rest comfortably together; Mara should pet Berta. Why didn't he question the assumption that his family will wait for Esher to heal enough to return? Why?

Dead Horse Hill isn't nearly as unchanged as he once feared.

He should have thought ... and he no longer knows what *should* means, just that the seams of his world are fraying and Mara, this secret-keeping sorcerer Mara, asks of him the unreasonable.

"My memories," he says aloud, fighting to get the mouth-words out for Benjamin but doubting that he'll find hand-words any easier, "of that night, here, are ... I know what happened, but I know it how Da talks about the day you were born. I don't remember it like I was there." He watches the steady rise and fall of Bill's ribcage and the glow of the goals making Olive's auburn hair shine red before resting his cheek against Berta's fluffy shoulder, in desperate want of feeling. She noses his ear while Esher works to recollect the comfort in the smell of warm, dusty dog. "I don't remember it like I was there ... over your bones would you let me kill myself. Over your bones, you said." He almost sings the phrase in the deeper voice alien to this room: *over your bones, over your bones*. Necromancer. "I wanted ... my bones, not the rest. The only reasonable thing left. To me. I was ... *sick.*" He looks up to meet Mara's eyes, unsure how else to stress the depths of his sincerity with his

hands buried in Berta's fur. "Don't say that to me, Hela—that the end is what you want. Don't say that."

Mara's lips tremble. "There's nothing else."

Nothing, because Reggie stopped him from offering his soul for sorcery. Why did he let himself break after seeing the Grey Mage, after being told what Mara refused to confirm? Why did he waste two months at Sirenne, months he could have spent with her—and Esher jerks, startling Berta; her claws snag his trousers as she works to stay balanced.

He went to Sirenne! What if that's their answer?

If the priests could have treated Mara's illness, they would have. When no witch, magician or priest in Astreut answered the question of his body, however, Esher tried the Greys. Magic workers famed on both sides of the Shearing Straits, they wield power possessed by no magician or witch. They took most of his coin and gave Esher an answer, but everyone knows they can halt a cancer grown too far for a blood witch or magician to survive the magic needed. If the Sojourner means for Mara to go now to her end, why did Moll mention the Greys' arrival?

Surely Mara, earlier in her illness, went to the priests?

He wrote message after message in the mirror book, ignorant of everything, while Mara coughed and withered, silent. Dying. Lying. Why did he wait for Mara's request to return? Why didn't she ask him to come back earlier? Why didn't the priests tell him? Why...?

"There's three Grey Mages visiting the monastery—they come every hand of years. They arrived ... yesterday. They discuss and trade spells and medicines." He draws a breath, working to speak. The why isn't important. *It isn't important.* "The Greys are at Sirenne. Today, now."

A startled gasp sounds from the table. Benjamin, who adored Mara since the day she arrived in Dead Horse Hill, who said the right things when Mara spoke to her of romance and love, who let her wife accompany Esher to Sirenne without complaint—at least not so that Esher heard. Benjamin, now watching the woman she loves sicken and wither in a small Plains village far from her own blood kin. Benjamin, who must ache that her sorcerer wife can't heal herself because of

the magic wasted on—spent on—Esher’s body. Did Mara too twist Benjamin out of a choice, ensuring that Olive possesses one mother in this world and those thereafter?

Mara, silent, stares at Esher.

He can’t do anything about Mara’s soul, but what if he can give her a life with Benjamin and Olive? What if she dies of old age with the solace of having seen her child grow to adulthood? What if he can offer her the life she wanted to gift him? Should he work for the rest of his to pay back the Greys, what of it? He’ll have all the worlds that come after; Mara has but this one.

“We can’t afford—” Mara stops when Esher shakes his head. “Esh! Nobody here has that money! We can’t go asking!”

For the first time, he understands why Mara called this a story. Don’t the tales spoken around fires or immortalised in song extoll the sacrifices made for romantic love? How does this differ, save in love’s shape? Esher looks at his sister, thinking. No, he doesn’t know how to feel about souls, trades, secrets and magic; it’s all a bewildering tangle he can’t begin to tease out. He doesn’t have to understand or agree, however, to be sure that she loves him.

One contrast with a clear conclusion. One love rendered simple by waiting death.

For the first time on this bewildering night, he owns direction.

Mara talked Reggie into manipulating him out of saving her life by sorcery, all for love of him, but nothing will stop Esher from riding back to the monastery and finding out what he’ll pay for the Greys to save her.

He turns and looks at Benjamin, her white skin so pale that her brown freckles look like livid sores, the red hair once fingernail-long grown out shaggy to her ears. Wasn’t she a plump, smiling woman who twirled in her skirts just for Mara’s appreciation? How did she grow so tired? “I’ll find a way,” he says, disregarding Mara as much as Mara once disregarded him. “She gave me this,” and he flicks one hand towards his body, “so I’ll find a way. I swear by Aunt Rosie. By Aunt Olive Rose Amara. You know ... this meaning?”

Benjamin gifts him the slightest of exhausted smiles. Permission, not belief.

Good enough.

“Esher—”

“Aunt.” He glares back at Mara. “Rosie.”

Mara presses her lips together and says nothing.

He’ll go, ignoring her just as she ignored him when needed. Even he knows it isn’t much, just a glimmer of hope that he can save someone who never forgot the vow she made—but if this isn’t reason enough for a man to live, what is?

For Mara, Esher will convince the Greys and survive his own mind while doing so.

By Aunt Rosie, he will.

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**.