



ringbound



a kit march short story

k. a. cook

imprint

Ringbound, © 2018, 2020, K. A. Cook.

Produced in Geelong, Australia.

This publication is under copyright. No part of this book may be copied, reproduced or distributed in print or electronic form without written consent from the copyright holder.

Ringbound is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living, elfish or undead is unintentional. Any references to persons living, elfish or undead do not necessarily espouse the views of the author.

Layout and cover design: K. A. Cook

Credits: Cover and text typeset in **Amadeus** by Bright Ideas, **Life Savers** by Impallari Type, **Nymphette** by Nymphont and Adobe Garamond Pro. Assorted stock images from **Open-ClipartVectors**, **echapman** and **geralt**.

blurb

If Kit can't find anything unfair about the contract or the man, 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.

contents

content advisory	5
ringbound	6
additional works	14
about the author	16

content advisory

THIS PIECE DEPICTS THE EXPERIENCE of a non-partnering, allosexual aromantic man who possesses little understanding of his identity and makes questionable decisions in navigating his feelings and society's amatonormativity. Please expect casual/non-explicit sex and sexual attraction references, along with kissing mentions.

ringbound

THE GOLD RING BEARS A smooth, unmarked band. Kit turns it about his fourth finger, staring into the bedroom's lightening corners. Unmarked. Ironic given the pages occupying the study downstairs, a lengthy contract awaiting only his signature, Lauri's and a notary's witness to become binding. No temple, no priest, no words exchanged before mob or tribe, just the solemnity of ink and legal jargon. In Malvade, their god the Sojourner speaks some on death, little on life and nothing on marriage, so the notary makes the union a different kind of sacrosanct—and Kit has tarried long enough in this city to know that they deem the contract a strange, baffling consecration.

Scores of words wait below—outlining ownership of property, familial obligations, legal obligations to city and Kit's nomination to house membership—but nothing marks this ring or the one he gave Lauri. Ironic, save that “irony” seems an empty word with which to describe the relationship between action and symbol.

Will he find ease should he settle on a precise, accurate term?

Or is the absence of a word only another symbol?

Beside him, Lauri lies in unstimulating sleep. Kit can slide out of bed and bump into chest, chair *and* dresser on his way to the water closet without fear of waking his partner. At times this frustrates Kit, but now he appreciates the early morning's peace, hours spent alone with his wakeful thoughts and a ring weighing down his hand. Alone—as

much as he can be in another's home, the floorboards' creak and halls' echo not yet lost all unfamiliarity. As much as he can be when he still feels himself clad in performance, offering a guest's obligatory presence in dining room, parlour and study.

The house, with Kit's signature, will become in part his—as he, in turn, becomes part of the trading house occupying its walls, person and building bound together by gold and ink.

Why does he still question?

Lauri is a good man. Handsome enough, successful enough, although neither caused Kit to flirt that cold desert night, two men sharing a sighing glance over another tired bowl of rice and beans. No, Kit flirted because of Lauri's burbling laugh, his suit jackets adorned with animal-shaped buttons, the touch of divergence revealed in his obsessions over novels and coin-counting. Because boredom, because cold desert nights, because Lauri smiled at Kit when he thought Kit wouldn't notice, because sex.

They're not mismatched. Lauri likes men—bent towards men, as the Malvadans phrase such things—and never has Kit felt Lauri to see anything other than Kit's masculinity, a gift he doesn't take for granted. Lauri doesn't possess the same degree of bedroom voraciousness, true, but Kit never feels undesired. The yet-unsigned contract states that while Lauri expects exclusivity unless both consent otherwise, he doesn't wish a husband to remain quietly at his side. Kit can travel as he pleases despite the ringbinding. Lauri even offered to spend part of each year at Greenstone, and when Kit forces himself to follow the fantasy to its pat, story-ending conclusion, he can admit the possibility of sharing his home with their child.

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

The bedroom brightens to a fuzzy grey, the ghostly shapes of dresser, screen and morning table emerging from the dark. Only a few hours to endure before the carriage arrives, before Lauri's parents and brother begin the celebratory deluge of kin and friends throwing parties to prelude and conclude signatures on paper, and Kit sighs. Lauri insists

that his mothers will love Kit and won't object if he absents himself from busy conversations; introduction should offer comparatively small trial. Lauri's friends and business partners are kind, likeable people, so why expect his family to differ? Why carry this unreasonable, irrational dread?

Why does he prepare to welcome Lauri's mothers yet hesitate to invite Amelia?

Kit's cousin won't forgive him if he weds without sending a letter. Nor can he blame her for raging at such perfidy, but every time Kit sits at his desk to write what should be glad news, he loses all words. He has nothing but the silent mockery of an empty page and a hand aching from its death-grip on his pen.

Amelia, I've met a man and I want you at our wedding. Simple. Isn't it?

She'll be pleased for him, pleased in the way only possessed by a woman who also lives without family and mob. Should her village be somewhat free of illness and injury, Kit knows Amelia will abandon her work, pack her cats into baskets and catch the soonest wagon to Malvade ... and if he sends a letter this morning, *now*, there's still time for Amelia to attend most parties. She'll pepper him with vegetable-related insults for sending her invitation last minute, of course, but he can ensure that his only living kinswoman, as close as a sister, helps him celebrate marriage and husband.

He just can't make himself put sentence to paper.

He likes and loves Lauri. That he spends long hours over ledgers and in meetings suits Kit, for he has no desire to pass all or most of his day managing other people's social expectations. Lauri enjoys quiet evenings in the study as much as he does cards and the theatre, two men engrossed in their own work but sharing a companionable silence. Lauri makes Kit laugh in his warm, fussy, mother-hen ways, but he's always amenable to Kit's peculiarities. If he spends ten years looking for a partner, how can he find a better one? He is of an age to marry, to start a family, to take up a career—and a trading house with partners in

Rajad and Khaloun offers no small opportunity for a good magician. Why not Malvade? Why not Lauri?

Kit sighs and turns the ring until his finger aches from the rub of the band against skin.

Lauri slumbers, unmoving and unaware, at Kit's back.

For weeks, he chased logic in never-ending circles only to find the same answer: no cause precludes him from marriage. If there's nothing more he can think to reasonably want from this relationship, if he knows Amelia will approve of Lauri and his library, why doesn't Kit revel in the wondrousness of a partner that so suits him?

Kit owns no cause except the dark, nameless fear growing inside him.

He should wed.

At first, connection meant casual smiles and the feel of skin touching skin: the frenetic togetherness of people discovering how they fit, the creation of a temporary harmony based on sex's ineffable pull. This Kit accepts with the confidence of a man who perceives and comprehends the expected rules and yearnings ... but this dance didn't end. He and Lauri didn't drift apart, despite Kit's history of wandering away from or towards other men; he found no blessed excuse to leave and many to stay. This unending song lead him to breakfasts and invitations, to romance-scented gifts and long embraces in morning's drowsy sunlight, and he can't deny the enjoyment in having a man wake to look across at Kit with a comfortable, complacent hunger.

For the first time, Kit danced with another the way he knows a person should—no temporary passion abandoned for fear their flowers must bloom alongside his vegetables. Lauri's desire came shaped with the expectations of a lifetime, and Kit stayed to greet its arrival.

No, he didn't feel the same way. Kit always knew himself absent those feelings indescribable, but if he stayed, if he tried to love the easiest man he could ever find to love, why shouldn't he find affection's missing depths? With Lauri, Kit would make a heart throbbing to return and build that non-impermanent harmony. He'd celebrate—no, crave!—the inevitable roses displacing his yams.

This time, he thought, must be different.

It must be different because he wanted it to be.

Lauri's love showed itself in casual plans for their future, the kisses given before leaving for the warehouse, the tokens waiting on the desk that became Kit's own. Lauri's love spun Kit into a dance he should want, leaving him tangled in bewildered pretence on the day Lauri took him to a jeweller's shop and asked if Kit wished to choose, with him, a set of rings.

Ringbinding, the Malvadans say when referring to a marriage for love instead of politics or business. A marriage borne of more insubstantial things than the witnessed contract's secular-sacred words.

The script for these conversations offers two single-word answers, and in the hope that a ring may yet birth Kit's romantic heart, his lips mumbled "yes".

But his finger aches inside its heavy constraint, and even now, after months of hoping and wearing, Kit finds himself still in want of want.

He stares up at the vaulted ceiling, the encroaching morning now permitting overhead beams to stand out from the plaster. Kit owns myriad languages offering words for colours and spells, words for trees and Crow, words for the absurd and the impossible. Whatever this is, the feeling that he doesn't possess some profound quality, he can find no name or label for such absence that doesn't make monstrosity of him. He just knows the dread forever cloaking his brown skin, because he should want this, he should need this, he should delight in this—but he craves distance, somewhere blessedly free of gold and contract alike.

Somewhere free of the looming future offered by a man who loves him, because the will to keep pretending slips from him like water through spread fingers.

Kit rolls onto his side, tears moistening the linen pillowslip beneath his cheek. Truth rings cold and brittle, cruel in its lack of compromise. He tried. He saw Lauri's love bloom and waited, waited when he would once have left, for the same feeling to flower in him. He cares enough for Lauri to try, to say the word, to give a ring and wear another. Kit

cares, and he loves, but not in a way that builds houses or binds two souls for a lifetime's journey. The seed never sprouted; that earth lies barren.

What kind of man is Kit that he cannot love as he should?

He sighs, listening to Lauri's deep breaths and the sound of waking birds, but this port city welcomes few crows, even on the rich's tree-lined outskirts. The streets offer only shrieking gulls, clattering hooves and the voices calling cheer on a rare sunny day, the land so buried under road and wharf that nobody can possibly hear its murmurs.

Lauri, in this marriage, offers Kit joint ownership of house, name, status and occupation. Can he share, in a soul-deep way, the bush that deepens into mountains, a land bound in song, the country that owns his bones? Can he introduce Lauri to the guardian serpent or tell him Grandmother's tales, Crow's tales, by the crackling midnight fire? Or will he forever hold part of himself separate? Just thinking of it has Kit hesitating, as if a love-given ring makes too weak and ineffable a bonding for such an exchange.

Grandmother gave Grandfather her names in return for his ring. Kit's parents shared together more than a declaration signed by priest or notary, even when his father was still a stranger to song and hill. For him, though, a ring embodies the wrong kind of sacred—no, not the wrong kind of sacred.

The wrong kind of *love*.

Isn't that the answer, the inconvenient but irrevocable truth?

Kit releases a shuddering breath before sliding out from under the covers. His folded clothes rest on the chair beside the bed, and the light strengthens enough to let him see the shape of smaller things, only half-feeling his way through buttons and ties. His hands shake and his breaths come hard and fast, but Lauri doesn't stir, even when Kit's purse clunks as he fastens his belt. Boots, cloaks, money, satchel. He scans the room, considering. What more does he need to risk taking when he's a magician with health, youth and purse enough to begin again?

Better to go in the dawning, an unvoiced mystery—go, however despicable and cowardly his disappearance. Better to go than to hear

Lauri name Kit's inability to love as he suspects he deserves. Better to go than to endure Lauri level accusations like "heartless" and "cruel".

Is it so very cowardly to not want to be monstrous?

His breath further quickens as Kit sits on the floor to wrestle with his boots, but for the first time in months, he feels released of fear. The road calls him, sweet with the knowledge that anything may happen between now and dusk. Let it! Isn't this how he lived before he happened across a sweet man who smiled at him over beans and drew him into something alien? Isn't this wanderlust right and familiar, a land seducing his heels so that his ears may witness and remember their stories?

Is it so very awful to not want to be bound, even in love?

He stands, flapping his hands, rocking on his feet. With his back blocking the window, he lacks light enough to see the detail of Lauri's eyes, cheeks and mouth. No expression shows in sleep, just a shadow of dark hair and features lost to memory, and for a moment Kit yearns to cast a light, to take a last look at a face become familiar. Can he risk brushing his hand through silken hair in a farewell, forbidden touch of warm skin? Land a soft kiss on the brow?

Kit sighs and slides the weighty manacle from his finger, his throat aching as he drops the ring on a mattress laid bare by folded-back covers and a missing lover.

He loves, but not in the right way.

The window beckons.

Where shall he go, then? Astreut, perhaps? The northern lands of Ihrne and Arsh? He can stop at home on the way, pay his respects to Grandmother and country, tell the story of a man called Lauri to the campfire burning above her resting bones. Perhaps he'll first spend a day or two annoying Amelia and her cats. He'll climb out the window, he'll scale the wall, he'll buy a horse and ride from the city with glad abandon ... and ignore the part of him that thinks he's trying too hard to believe himself embarking on a grand adventure.

"Craven," whispers a Lauri-sounding voice at the back of Kit's mind.

He shoulders his satchel and takes up Lauri's collection of candles, seashells and vases, pushing them to the farthest side of the table beneath the window. Outside, Kit will see the trees in the courtyard and breathe the tang of eucalyptus overshadowed by the harbour's brine. Hours from now, Malvade will lie in his wake, these last months nothing more than a failed experiment ... but still he hesitates, fearful, regretful, uncertain, afraid.

A sleepy groan sounds from the bed.

The catch on the window opens without noise; Kit climbs up onto the table and stretches one leg out over the sill before risking a last 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

The Mundane Progression of Premortem Colloquy

What Makes Us Human

Those With More

Love is the Reckoning

kit and amelia march

Ringbound

Absence of Language

Old Fashioned

Conception

efe 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 fiction 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 many short fantasy stories combining ridiculous magic, cats, dogs, disability, bacon, mental illness, stim toys, cross stitch, coeliac disease, verbose eldritch entities and as many transgender and aromantic autistics as any one story can hold.

You can find hir blogging at **aroworlds.com** and running the Tumblr accounts **@aroworlds** and **@alloaroworlds**.