

A COUP OF OWLS



Issue 00

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Cover Image – Detail from ‘A Coup of Owls’ by Amandu

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Foreword**Page 4****Peace by James Castiel****Page 6**

How long can a peaceful moment last?

Germany-based James discovered his love for writing through fanfiction. After a turbulent twelve years in the army, several runs at universities, and a new career path well into his thirties, he finally started writing original works. This is only his second non-fanfiction story to be published, but it sure won't be his last.

The Magic In The Mountains by Regina Jade**Page 9**

Once upon a time, a girl climbed into the mountains in search of a friend.

Regina Jade is a writer and poet who lives in the US. She loves chocolate, custard tarts, and cats. In her spare time, she can be found trawling the depths of libraries for new books to add to the to-be-read pile, which never seems to get any smaller. Her love of writing fantastical creatures comes from her times cat-sitting, because somehow the cats always managed to magically appear in the strangest of places.

I don't believe in ghosts as such by Leonie**Page 14**

Something is haunting Noah, but he doesn't believe in ghosts.

Berlin bred, England reared. When she isn't found writing, Leonie can be found crocheting. Spending most of her day administering democracy, she uses her writing to explore the many shapes and forms in which relationships can develop and change.

Shadows and Memories by Jane Renton**Page 20**

When shadows and memories threaten to overtake reality, changes must be made.

Jane Renton has been writing, in some form or another, since she was a child. She lives in London where she teaches music.

His Prince by Max Turner**Page 24**

So much has changed when the prince turns to an old friend for help.

Max Turner is a gay transgender man based in the United Kingdom. He is also a parent, nerd, intersectional feminist, and coffee addict. Max writes speculative and science fiction, fantasy, urban fantasy, gothic horror and LGBTQ+ romance, and more often than not, combinations thereof.

Foreword

When I first read through our selection of stories for this issue, what struck me was that all the authors had picked up on themes that were very much the reason for starting this anthology. Themes such as identity and finding your true self, what that means, what it looks and feels like. Or how you find love when finding yourself seems impossible. What does it mean to be different, isolated, misunderstood, unrepresented? We wanted *A Coup of Owls* to be a place where voices that aren't always heard can tell stories that aren't always told. Stories that will surprise and connect with people in unexpected ways. When you are marginalised, it is always important to have your voice heard and to read other voices that might be calling in a similar voice to your own.

The themes explored in these wonderful stories are all things the authors and the readers we hope to reach are feeling and that the *Coup* editors themselves have felt in their own lives. Writing is a way of exploring our psyches. It helps us figure out who we are, what we want to say, and how we want to be seen. Reading stories also connects us, makes us realise we are not alone in the malaise of the modern world. Lockdown has, of course, affected us all in different yet similar ways. Suddenly people who had never felt isolated were left feeling alone, and people who had never even questioned leaving their house became fearful of the outside world. Others found themselves wondering why everyone was making such a fuss about things they deal with on a daily basis.

This made us all, at least we hope, take a look around and realise that actually, we have a lot more in common than we don't. Humans need to connect. We are a social species. We need human contact. What happens when we don't get it? What happens when who we are prevents others from wanting to be with us? When the only person who understands us is a dragon? How does it feel when a cat rubbing up against your leg on a sunny terrace is the only thing that gets you through your day? Or when an old friend from childhood who always felt different too, but never to you, unexpectedly reappears in your life and throws you a lifeline you didn't even know you needed? Or when the memory of an old flame that never went out ignites something inside you that just might help you get through this thing called life? What happens when your loneliness manifests itself as your only friend and helps you take that scary step you know you need to but have always been too terrified to take? Despite being very different from each other, the stories written for this issue all explore the basic

human need to be seen, to be understood and accepted. These were not themes we mentioned to our authors, yet they connect them through the societies and parts of the world they are in.

The marginalised, underrepresented voices that long to be heard. We hope this magazine will reach out to those voices, just like that haunting hoot of owls you hear in the darkness of the night, calling out to each other. ‘Let’s form a coup,’ they might say, ‘let’s all sing and shout and hoot together so that everyone in the dark, and also those in the light, can hear us and understand us.’ So, join our coup, read the words of voices you might not have heard before, and find yourself in the darkness. We will be here waiting...

Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief

Peace

by James Castiel

Content Warnings: none

Not your thing? Skip to page 9 for the next story.

Stepping out of the house and onto the terrace felt like walking from one world into another.

Indoors, the cool rooms were doused in darkness, and the light falling through cracks and open doors created a quiet, almost ominous twilight inside. All the blinds were closed to shut out the heat of late summer.

In comparison, outside the world was blazing. The light was so bright that, despite wearing sunglasses, she had to blink for a moment until her eyes adjusted. The sun stood high in the cloudless blue sky, and the heat was a heavy weight in her lungs and a prickle across her skin. She loved this, the heat and spending times like these at home in her garden or on her terrace. Such a contrast to her chilly, grey work environment with its narrow metallic corridors and the constant smell of machinery.

The terrace was a small paradise of potted plants, climbing roses and heavy-scented flowers. A summer day in the middle of the green, jungle-like surroundings was the perfect place for a vacation. Woodbine had created a small, shaded area, like a canopy, under which she had placed a deckchair and a small table. An orange sunshade produced an almost dream-like glow.

She sat down with a happy smile, laid back and stretched her legs, wiggling her toes. Warm air caressed her exposed arms and legs. Closing her eyes for a moment, she soaked in the peaceful atmosphere of her garden in summer and the luxury of being out of her work boots.

Bees were buzzing around her, birds singing in the hedges, and a little creek gurgled a few meters away from the garden stairs. No human noise interrupted the pure and unfiltered sounds of nature. No engines, no shouts or arguments, no alarm noises.

Gradually, she let her muscles relax, taking a deep breath in and letting the air out in one long exhale, sinking into the soft chair cover underneath her. The stress of the last week fell away slowly until she groaned in relief. It was perfect. Well. Almost perfect.

‘Darling,’ she called towards the open door. ‘Come on! It’s beautiful outside!’

There was no reply, but she hadn’t expected one. He could be so stubborn. She picked up her book from the little glass table and started reading. A soft breeze of warm air moved across her skin and brought the smell of sunflowers, roses and ripening apples from her apple tree. She’d bake so many apple pies. Maybe some apple puree. With vanilla ice cream.

A soft fluttering sound drew her attention from apple pie daydreams, and she smiled.

‘Hey, little robin,’ she whispered softly. Her heart gave a happy thump. The robin was sitting on her table and eyeing her curiously, close enough that she could touch it if she reached out.

It hopped onto the glass table, its little claws causing tiny pricking sounds, before leaping upwards, urged into flight by something she couldn’t hear or see. She followed it with her eyes until it vanished across the neighbouring hedge into nowhere.

‘You missed the robiin,’ she sang in the direction of the kitchen obscured behind the dark entrance. ‘Such a pity, you could have seen it if you’d been here with meeee.’

Still no reaction.

‘Idiot,’ she muttered with a shake of her head.

She read for a while until she reached for her juice and realized that she’d forgotten it inside. With a sigh, she put her book away. Sometimes she wished he would be more considerate and give in to her demands of bringing her the things she needed.

‘There’s probably no chance you’d bring me that cold juice from the fridge, is there?’ she asked without any hope. There was no reply, and groaning, this time with mild regret, she sat up.

Stepping back into the sun felt like needles pricking her skin, the hot tiles burning under her feet and her scalp heating up immediately. The unmoving air of the terrace was heavy with heat, and she felt sweat breaking out under her thin shirt. It made her feel alive. She was more aware of herself, of her body, when the heat outlined every inch of skin, when she could feel the pores opening and sweat breaking out and running down her back and face. She needed the stark contrast to cold and unfeeling dark.

The kitchen was at least ten degrees cooler despite the open door. The jug of orange juice fogged up when she took it out of the fridge and placed it on the counter. Some ice cubes and a deep pull of cold juice later, she knew what she wanted.

‘How about some ice cream?’ she asked into the next room where he had probably gone to hide from the heat under his favourite blanket. He never cared about the contradiction in that. ‘No? Oh, I know what I can do to get you out of hiding.’ She rummaged in the drawer for a spoon with one hand and opened the freezer with the other, letting her bare shoulder hold it open while she expertly scooped vanilla ice cream into a bowl. Closing the top door, she tugged open the fridge and reached for the spray cream. Pulling the cap off made a loud pop, and before she even started shaking the can, a heavy thud came from the living room. She smiled.

‘Gotcha,’ she murmured, and the answering meow echoed through the kitchen a moment before warm fur wound around her legs. The long-legged tabby with his black nose and white paws almost had her tripping over him before she decided standing still was the best option. Every second she shook the can, he protested with pitiful cries before she took mercy on him. She sprayed a big heap onto a small plate and placed it on the floor, his paws urging her along.

‘You know, you’re an awful butler and way too demanding. I’m not sure why I put up with you. You’re almost as bad as a man.’ His purrs answered her question. ‘You’re lucky you’re so cute.’ Once he was done cleaning the plate as best as he could, she picked him up and carried him outside together with the ice cream. She was about to get comfortable again and was contemplating a fruity cocktail when a chime interrupted her thoughts.

‘No,’ she said to the cat. ‘Absolutely not. Not yet.’

The chime repeated, and she hid her face in her hands with a groan. At the third insistent chime, she picked up a little innocent-looking device from the table. She looked around one more time, her other hand still petting the purring cat. ‘Guess it was too much to hope for at least two days off.’

Pressing the button, she snapped, ‘What?’

‘Sorry to disturb you in your time off, Commander, but the Captain wants you on the bridge. We’ve reached the mining asteroid, but there’s an issue with another freighter.’ The tinny voice resonated with an unusual disturbance, and with a sigh, she got up. ‘On my way.’

The cat looked up and protested with a soft sound when the petting stopped.

‘Goodbye, buddy. See you soon. End program.’

The cat melted away, and the garden was replaced by black walls, the stench of oil, and cold steel under her feet. The heat was nothing but a memory on her skin. The change from the perfect dreamscape to biting reality felt like a tight band around her chest until she took a deep breath and readjusted to the state of things. Life had restarted. Peace was over.

The Magic In The Mountains

by Regina Jade

Content Warnings: none

Not your thing? Skip to page 14 for the next story.

Once upon a time, a girl climbed into the mountains in search of a friend. She had already sailed the great seas and traversed the endless plains and walked amongst the oldest forests, yet she had found no home among them and no family to call her own. The fish had fled from her steps, the birds had flown from her shadow, and the deer had bounded away at the sight of her.

And yet still the girl persisted, for although her own society had cast her out for the curse laid upon her, she had found other cursed children living in harmony with the creatures of the deep and of the woods.

Those same creatures had run from her, but perhaps, she thought, the mountains might be a different story.

The mountains, after all, were ancient, as old as the seas and taller than the forests, vast and endless and terrifying. If there were creatures that would accept her presence among them, perhaps she might find them here, in these steep, rocky slopes where few humans dared to tread.

Or, at the very least, the girl might find a place in the mountains where no humans would bother her. A small cave, maybe, where she could find food and shelter in peace without the mockery and the fear inspired by the curse she bore upon her lips. It would be lonely, but magic was different in the mountains. Magic was calmed in the deep forests and lessened by the great seas; not so in the mountains, where the peaks reached towards the sky, and the roots travelled deep into the earth. Perhaps here, where magic lived in every wisp of wind and danced in every sunbeam, the girl's curse might not seem so out of place.

The girl walked and walked and walked, all through the day, past the steep paths and over the crumbling rocks. She battled thorny vines and sharp stones. She braved the powerful

winds and the merciless sun beating down overhead. And still she climbed until, at last, she came to a small cave.

The cave was tiny and dark. The girl tapped on the wall, *tap tap tap*, but there was no furious roar from an occupant inside and no emergence of an animal intent on defending its territory. It was small enough that bigger predators would not be able to enter and long enough that the chill of the night wind would not bite into the girl's clothes. It was high enough in the mountains that few humans would stumble across it, yet not so high that the air would be thin and hard to breathe. It was perfect to rest in for the night.

So the girl dug into the satchel over her back and took out a pouch. Inside was a small collection of precious gems, which the girl had used to barter for passage and trade for goods. She hunted now for a topaz, for it would reflect the light of the sun it had absorbed throughout the girl's travels and therefore would serve as a better guide than any torch.

Upon finding it, the girl held the great stone up to the air and stepped inside the cave. The light of the topaz gleamed off the walls as the girl walked inside, and she found no old bones, no cold fires, no hints that anyone had ever lived inside. And the girl thought, *Perhaps this can be home.*

The girl walked until at last she came to a small branching in the tunnel. The left passage went sharply down, deep into the dark belly of the mountain. The right passage, the girl saw when she extended the hand with the fire gem, led to a small, round alcove. It had been gouged out of the mountain by some distant, long-ago creature, and time had worn down the walls into smooth surfaces. It was relatively clean, just large enough for the girl and her satchel of precious keepsakes, and above all else empty, with no signs of anyone or anything calling it home.

The girl closed her eyes and thought of home. The memories were distant and hazy, but the girl could still remember the warmth of the fire, the softness of her blankets, the scent of fresh bread and hot drinks. The girl gathered up all of those memories, inhaled, and spoke.

'Home sweet home.'

Plink plink plink. The girl winced at each sound.

Three gems had clattered to the floor. One was a topaz gem, dull and shadowed. It would take time in the sun before it would show its true radiance, bright yellow or orange. Another was an amber gem, one of the softest stones, glittering like honey. The last was a tanzanite gem, light blue like cold, fresh streams, and already a small puddle was forming underneath it.

The girl knelt on the floor and gathered the gems up. Sometimes the gems came forth easily, and sometimes they did not, no matter how the girl focused. But the mountains were steeped in magic, and here they had come as easily as a thought.

The girl then set about making the alcove into a home. She set the tanzanite on a small ledge and lodged her canteen below it so that the slow drips of water could gather there. She lined the entrance to the alcove with the topaz gems to light the way. She took the amber gem and placed it carefully in her pouch, where it could stay until she had need to trade with it.

The girl hummed tunelessly as she worked – she had learned the hard way that singing would clutter up her workspace and delay her tasks – and in short order, she had laid out blankets for a bed, filled her canteen with water, and dug out her provisions in order to have a meal. She was just about to have her first bite when a sound echoed in the tunnel.

The girl froze. At first, she thought it might have been the wind, but then the sound echoed again, scraping against the wall like scales on rock.

And it was coming closer.

Against the beating of her racing heart, the girl tried to keep her breath steady. She thought of her desire for a home, her yearning for safety, her memories of being driven out and made an outcast. She whispered, ‘I am strong.’

Plink plink plink went the diamonds, clattering to the floor. The girl gathered them with shaking hands. At best, they would serve well as weapons. At worst, she might be able to throw them at her attacker and get away.

The scraping sound came again, louder and more terrifying, and the girl braced herself.

And the shadows resolved themselves into a tiny little creature. From nose to tail, it was barely the length of the girl’s arm, and its face was so small it could have rested easily in her palm. While the girl stared, the creature rose on its hind legs and beat tiny wings, letting out a small screech. It had scales, and a long, winding tail, and two beautiful wings. When it huffed, steam blew from its nostrils.

A dragon.

A small one, to be sure, but none of the old gods were to be taken lightly. The sky dragons had called the mountains home longer than the giant wolves had the forest, or the ravenous leviathan had the seas.

The dragon beat its tiny wings again before landing back on its legs. It snuffled curiously at the two topaz gems, nudging the glowing one with a paw.

The girl swallowed hard and mustered her bravery. She thought of the long climb up the mountain, the trek to the far seas, the plunge into the night when she ran from her village. She took a deep breath and said, ‘Hello.’

A tiny ruby fell. It rolled across the uneven floor to the dragon.

The dragon made a soft sound. It did not seem aggressive, just curious, but then again, baby dragons often had little to fear. They were usually guarded by fierce parents.

Of course, this tunnel was far too small for a full-grown dragon.

‘Where are your parents?’ the girl asked. *Plink plink plink plink.* ‘Did you wander from your hoard?’ *Plink plink plink plink plink plink.*

The dragon pounced upon the gems as they rolled to it. It pawed at them, rearranging them as if trying to make a nest, and made happy sounds as it tucked the new gems under its wings. The girl knew that dragons hoarded gems and gold, but they never started new hoards when they had an existing one. The baby dragon was small but not so small that it couldn’t carry a few in its mouth.

Yet it did not leave and curled up upon the little pile of gems like it had found a new nest.

‘Where’s your home?’ *Plink plink plink.*

The dragon fixed one eye upon her and did not answer. It chirped softly, sadly.

The girl knew that sound. She had used it herself, for she rarely spoke within human lands. There was a deep sadness that came with loss, and all who felt it knew the pain that reverberated deep in their bones.

‘Are you alone too?’ asked the girl.

More gems fell, but the dragon ignored these. It focused its eyes on her, unblinking and serious, as though it could understand her, even if it could not speak. The girl picked a diamond up off the floor and held it out in her palm.

Slowly, the dragon edged close, step by step. Its wings unfurled against its back, like shields, and it snorted smoke at her when she moved her hand.

‘I won’t hurt you,’ the girl told the dragon.

The dragon eyed the gems that fell. It cocked its head, tail swishing on the floor. Perhaps the dragon understood the girl’s curse more than anyone else. The old gods had always been steeped in magic in ways humans did not understand. Perhaps it was why so many human magics went wrong and turned blessings into curses.

The dragon sniffed at the girl’s fingers. Tentatively, it nudged at the diamond before it swiped it off her palm and retreated, claws firmly closed around its prize.

The girl scooped up another diamond and held that out too.

Three more gems later, and the dragon no longer flinched when the girl spoke or moved. It rumbled in pleasure when she sang little lullabies and herded the gems that fell to the floor into a growing pile in the corner. When the girl went to start a fire, the dragon breathed tiny sparks until the wood ignited.

‘I am alone, just like you,’ the girl said after they had shared her meal. ‘Will you be my family if I am yours?’

When the girl reached out again, the dragon let the girl pet its smooth scales. It purred in pleasure and arched up under her touch. There was no fear or hesitation, no rage or hatred. Just pure and simple acceptance.

‘I’ll take that as a yes,’ the girl said, smiling.

Plink plink plink plink plink plink went the gems, but this time the girl didn’t notice. The sound was drowned out by the rumbling purr of the dragon at her side. Her new family, as magical as she was, and neither of them alone ever again.

I don't believe in ghosts as such

By Leonie

Content Warnings: discussions around death, loss and hauntings

Not your thing? Skip to page 20 for the next story.

'I don't believe in ghosts, as such.' A phrase he has repeated to himself so many times but he still believes it completely.

'Liar.' Too often has he heard the word in response to the statement he has given. But that doesn't stop him from repeating it to the figure in the mirror.

'I don't believe in ghosts, as such. But I believe in hauntings.'

'Go figure.'

Finally, Noah turns to the shadowy figure speaking to him. 'I told you to leave me alone.'

'Shan't.'

Noah sighs and finishes shaving. The ghost in his life has been with him for a decade. Every moment of his day, he sees the shadowy figure. He's seen it in so many people, too, over the years. Sees it in smiles, eye colours and shapes, and in freckles. It's the freckles that always catch him out. They throw him for a complete loop every time. It's so much like seeing *him* all over again that it stops his heart for just a second.

Noah presses the lotion into his skin to soothe some of the burn of shaving. The ghost smiles at him. 'What's on the agenda today?'

'Nothing you should concern yourself with.' Noah avoids looking at the shadow. 'Don't you have someone else to haunt?'

'Perhaps.' The ghost pauses. 'But you're the one that needs me.'

'Since when has anyone ever needed haunting?' He hates that his voice rises; his neighbours must think that he is not altogether with it.

'Needs are more than the physical. I can't help with anything that makes a difference to your physical wellbeing.' Noah can feel the eyes of the ghost studying him before it continues. 'Not that you need much help with that. But I can help with your mental state.'

Noah scoffs. 'There isn't much that will help with that these days.'

'No. But there is something you've not let go of yet.'

'What could that possibly be? The last relationship I had, I let go of because it wasn't good for me.'

'And I am so proud of you.'

'Don't patronise me.'

'Right. Sorry.' The ghost chuckles. 'But there is one thing that you haven't let go of.'

Noah doesn't want to have this conversation. 'I have to get to work.'

'Of course. I'll be around if you want to chat.'

He gets dressed and then heads outside. The air is hazy with heat, and his clothes are already beginning to stick to his back with it. He hates summer with a passion; everything about the season feels like he is being buried in heat. By the time he arrives at work, sweat has stuck the hair to his forehead and he has to go clean up in the bathroom. The ghost is there the entire time and Noah avoids looking at him more than usual, to make sure that he doesn't draw unnecessary attention to himself.

Another man walks into the bathroom and goes to the sink too. Noah recognises him as Billy from Accounts.

'Hot one today,' Billy says.

'Why does everyone spend so much time discussing the weather? It's only ever a variation of, like, four things.' Noah ignores the ghost.

'Must be up to thirty degrees by now,' Noah agrees.

'Well, let's hope that it holds till the weekend. I think pints in the beer garden are in order.'

'Yeah.' Noah knows that it is a tacit invitation, one he will be ignoring.

'You should really say yes one of these days.' The ghost never shuts up and Noah just wants five minutes of quiet.

'Well, I'll see you, Noah,' Billy murmurs as he leaves the room. It's clear he had noticed that Noah was distracted.

'See you later.'

'You never use people's names.' The ghost isn't asking a question, but Noah has to respond.

'Names have too much power.'

The ghost scoffs. 'I just want you to say my name. Nothing is going to come strike you down if you utter it. I'm not Macbeth.'

A shudder runs down Noah's spine. He grew up around theatre and it still feels wrong every time he hears the word.

'You're too superstitious,' the ghost says.

'I'm not. I just don't want to take any chances.'

'Yeah, and it stops you from making good choices.'

'What do you mean?'

'You always say no to anything that isn't perfectly within your comfort zone. It's a miracle that you even have a job.'

'A guy needs to eat.'

'Yeah, and if you don't hurry you're going to be late for your first meeting.'

'Fuck.' It's completely the ghost's fault that he has been so distracted all morning. He rushes out of the bathroom to his desk, manages to grab his laptop and heads to the conference room.

Luckily, he's not the last one in, which the ghost helpfully whispers in his ear. He swats at the ghost and his colleague looks around. 'Just a fly.'

The meeting lasts far too long and is bearable only because the air-con is still on, so he doesn't get too hot. Like so many meetings that he has to be in, it could have been a longer email with the relevant decisions made. He takes a few notes of the things he has to do, and as soon as it's done he heads back to his desk.

He is waiting for him there. Noah should have expected that. The ghost follows him everywhere, and by now he should be used to it.

'Fun meeting?'

'The most,' he murmurs. Noah has to be careful when he's at work, because it becomes too obvious when he is this close to other people.

The ghost chuckles. 'Not long now, though. Just a few more hours, then you're free.'

Noah only hums and puts in his earphones. He wants to drown out the sound of the ghost. Pressing play, the ghost's voice fills his ears. Noah wishes he was at home so he could scream, because he had forgotten that the last thing he had listened to was *him*.

*

Finally, the day is over and Noah heads back home, the ghost a constant presence the entire way.

'You know, you really should get out and do more.'

'I walk to work.'

‘Yeah, but the only person you talk to is someone dead. Who, and I quote, you “don’t believe in.”’

Noah doesn’t say anything. He’s still trying to convince himself that he is just hallucinating, that his mind has finally broken.

‘You never even say my name.’

He can feel his cheeks begin to heat. ‘When you name a thing...’

‘It makes it real. But I’m already real.’

‘Are you?’

‘You’re the one who summoned me.’

‘But how?’

‘I don’t know. One day I was somewhere and then I was with you.’

He sighs. This is a conversation they have had over and over again. But Noah doesn’t feel like he is any closer to an answer.

‘I just want it to stop.’

‘I know. But it’s not really me haunting you, is it?’

‘No. It’s not.’

‘Well, do you know what it is?’

‘I don’t want to have this conversation right now. I’m hungry.’

‘Eat, then we can talk.’

Noah nods. He feels anxious because he wants the ghost to be gone, but at the same time he doesn’t think he can face whatever the ghost knows about him; the things he doesn’t want to admit to himself.

After dinner he sits down on his couch with a beer. The ghost sits down next to him.

‘I want you to say my name.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Yes, you can. I think it’ll help.’

‘How?’

There is a cool touch on his cheek. ‘Trust me.’

Noah does trust the ghost. He knows he shouldn’t, but he does.

He inhales deeply. ‘How does this work?’

‘You just say what you have been wanting to say to me all this time.’

Noah chuckles. ‘Does that include before you died?’

‘Of course.’ It’s like cool lips are brushing against his cheek and he can feel a sob at the back of his throat.

‘Tom. I miss you.’

‘I know.’

‘I’ve missed you every single day. It’s like my heart is ripped in two and I’ve never been able to mend it in a way that makes sense.’

This time the lips at his cheek feel more solid and Noah turns his head to capture them. Tom’s lips are cool, and Noah sighs into them. Even if this isn’t real, at least this way he got there just once.

‘I loved you. With every fibre of my being. But I hated that I felt like that. I wanted to stop feeling.’

A hand brushes the hair out of his eyes. He doesn’t know how he will cope when he wakes up from this dream. His vision begins to blur with tears that threaten to fall.

‘So I never said anything. Because I would rather have swallowed up my feelings until they burned a hole through me than lose you.’

‘But what would have happened if you’d spoken them aloud?’

‘I don’t know. And now I regret that, because what if you had reciprocated? Even though it never would have made sense to me.’

He can feel Tom’s hands on his face, and Noah searches for his lips again. They meet in another salty kiss.

‘I loved you. And then you died.’

‘I did.’

‘And I think I’ve never learned to get over you. I think you’re haunting me because my love for you is still haunting me.’

Tom doesn’t say anything, and for a moment, Noah thinks he is gone, but when he opens his eyes he can see Tom so clearly it’s like he is flesh and blood again.

‘I see you everywhere. In people’s smiles, their eyes and their freckles. Someone I saw smiled in the exact same way you did and every time I saw it, it felt like my heart would fall apart.’

‘But you haven’t. And you won’t.’

‘How?’

‘Noah.’ His name sounded so good in Tom’s voice. ‘You are not broken because you loved someone who died. You just have to give love a chance. Open your heart.’

‘I’m so afraid.’ He is gripping Tom’s wrist and he’s worried he’s going to break something.

‘Love is fucking terrifying. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t worth taking the risk. You could tell a hundred people you love them and only one might reply. That makes it all worth it.’

‘What if you were my one?’

‘The thing is, there is more than just one person for everyone. And maybe I was one of them, but you never would have found out because you never would have asked.’

He can feel the tears flowing down his cheeks. ‘So how do I stop love haunting me?’

‘You go out and love.’ Tom puts a hand on his chest, right over his pounding heart. ‘I will always be here, but you have to open yourself to others.’

Tom presses one more kiss against his lips.

Noah opens his eyes, and Tom is gone. He takes a shuddering inhale. Strangely, it feels like his chest is lighter. Like he has been carrying around something too heavy to name.

He stands to open a window and inhales deeply again. The sun is setting, and it’s the most beautiful thing he has ever seen. ‘I love you, Tom. I always will,’ he whispers into the air.

The confession feels good, and it doesn’t make his heart clench in the way he thought it would. Noah can still feel the echo of Tom’s hand over his heart, so he presses his own to the exact spot, and for a moment, it’s like he can feel Tom’s skin against his.

Shadows and Memories

by Jane Renton

Content Warnings: memories of World War II, mentions of loss

Not your thing? Skip to page 24 for the next story.

She finally acknowledged it when she realised she had lost a whole weekend to it. This strange half-life. A life of shadows and memories. As if she were Persephone, half a year in the Underworld and half above ground.

It couldn't continue.

This time, she had barely managed to last two days before she found herself tugging the battered suitcase out from its hiding place. She didn't really know why she'd bothered to put it away in the first place, not when it was inevitable that she would pull it out again. Still, she supposed that two days was progress. In the beginning, she had barely managed to put it away at all, unable to go more than a few hours without her hands trailing over the items within.

She couldn't avoid the real world completely. Food, water and sleep were necessities for survival, but the shadowy world of memories was where she was genuinely happy.

The problem was, it was a fine line to tread between the two worlds and her place on that line was precarious.

She didn't want to forget the Special Operations Executive and the life she had lived whilst part of it. Equally, she acknowledged she couldn't dwell so much on memories that she forgot to live in the real world. There had to be a balance. Other people seemed to have managed to make the transition, so why couldn't she?

She gently traced her fingers over the lid of the suitcase before opening it and gazing almost reverentially over the items contained within. Memories of what could have been a bygone age, they felt so long ago. A myriad of small, sometimes inconsequential items, that proved that in another life she had been more than what society expected of her. Than what society now expected of her. Now, she was expected to leave behind everything she had done and stay at home and be a homemaker. To cook and clean, to be a wife, to be a mother.

She had been so much more.

She had been a tactician, a fighter, a spy, a lover.

She had been so much more than her sex. The men she'd worked with hadn't cared that she was female, they simply cared that she had been able to get the job done. And she had. She had done things she had never thought she was capable of, things that people would never know she had done. Some things that she was proud of and some things she wished she could erase from her memory.

The contents of the case represented five years of lies, five years of obfuscating to her family and friends. Of enlisting colleagues into her web of deceit. Five years of secrets hidden from the world. Doing everything she could to prevent suspicion. Not just in her work but in her personal life. It had been exhausting but it had been necessary. It had been worth it for every second they had been able to spend together. Her family wouldn't have understood. Her friends wouldn't have understood. Society definitely wouldn't have understood.

How could they when she hadn't understood herself to begin with?

There was a silk cipher that had once been hidden in the lining of her clothes. Various papers that would have ensured her safe – or as safe as possible – passage across various European borders as well as passing German identification checks. There was the leather flying jacket she had worn when she had been parachuted into France, still smelling of engine oil and cigarettes. Below that was her Welrod pistol and the Fairbairn-Sykes knife issued to all operatives. The medal she had been given by King George VI in honour of her gallantry in the face of enemy action. Buried at the bottom was a silk scarf and a lipstick in a shade she would never dream of wearing but that she would keep always, simply because of who they had belonged to.

Moving aside those items, she let her fingers brush against what she considered to be the true treasures contained within the case: a bundle of letters and a simple portrait done in pen and ink. It had been a trade, done in the depth of night as they'd waited for information. She had bartered a pair of silk stockings in return for the portrait, copied from a photo by candlelight.

She allowed her fingers to skim over the surface of the drawing, tracing the features worshipfully as she could no longer do in person. Fingers tracing the ink of her handwriting, of the promises she had made. Promises she hadn't been able to keep. Not a day passed where she didn't miss her with every fibre of her being and, even though she knew she would never see her again, that they would never be together again – she was buried in a field somewhere in Europe – she knew that she would never love anyone else the way she had loved her.

They had met at Arisaig in Scotland. The only two women in their group of recruits, they had been thrown together and things had simply developed. They had been complete opposites: one from a small Cornish village, the other a society debutante who had attended finishing school. Their first kiss had been an exultant celebration at passing their commando training. They had become lovers shortly after, fumbling through their first experiences at Beaulieu as they finished their training. She had never thought of another woman in that way, but she had been so different to the boys back home. So much more. It had been revelatory. Between her lover and the work, she had felt free for the first time ever.

Had felt like herself.

Had felt truly happy.

Bletchley Park had been their cover story. An acceptable job for women where people simply understood that the employees couldn't talk about what they did. They'd enlisted a friend there who had accepted letters for them and who was the only person who knew the truth. He had acted as a cover for them both on several occasions, playing the acceptable lover in the eyes of society.

They had been sent to opposite sides of Europe but, in the few letters that they were able to send, they had spoken of their future. Of the life they hoped to live together once the war was over. Of the work that they would do. They would never be able to live truthfully, but they would be together. It wasn't much but it got them through the darkest days. It had given them courage and, more importantly, it had given them hope.

Until that hope had come crashing down in a mess of flames and twisted metal somewhere in Europe.

This suitcase might contain nothing but memories, but they were memories she would treasure for as long as she lived.

She simply had to learn to treasure them while living in the real world, without existing in a world of shadows and memories. *She* wouldn't have wanted that for her. *She* would have wanted her to live.

The world of shadows and memories would never disappear. It would always be there, but she had to leave it behind. That night, she took one last look over the items in the case and removed the drawing, placing it on her mantelpiece. That done, she closed the suitcase and, climbing into the attic, hid it in the farthest corner.

She had to live.

It wouldn't be the life they had envisioned, the life they had talked about together, that they had dreamed about. That had seen them through the darkest days. But it was life, and she had to live it.

For both of them.

His Prince

by Max Turner

Content Warnings: family drama, press hounding and explicit sexual content between a cis man and a trans man.

Not your thing? Then this is the end.

Christopher Montgomery had been the first person Robert thought of in the whole of the kingdom.

It was an old kingdom with traditions that ran deep. The towns and cities were prosperous and the countryside was filled with the ruins of castles and farmsteads alike, speaking to many aspects of their past.

It was a sizable kingdom with a large populace and yet there was no one else Robert had ever trusted as he did Christopher, despite everything. Once, Chris had been a nobleman and Robert a prince, but those days were behind both of them, and now Robert was in need of assistance.

Robert walked the dark street lined with opulent apartment blocks. He felt the mist of rain in the air and pulled his thin jacket tighter around himself. It had been over a decade since they had seen each other.

Christopher's father had been a royal advisor and nobility in his own right – Cedric Montgomery, Duke of the Northern Isles. So it made sense that, being so close in age, the children had been introduced as toddlers and become fast friends. They'd rough-housed and run around the grounds as they grew, getting into scrapes and coming home covered in dirt.

Christopher was the only person that had always called him Bertie, despite the many frowns it had earned them both.

Despite how close they had been, their teenage years saw an end to it all. First, as a result of the awkwardness of puberty and then the not-so-subtle nudges from their families.

Robert had realised then that there had been a very specific reason their parents pushed them together as children. They were a suitable pairing. Or at least they had been.

It had seemed to everyone, except the two of them, that this would be a perfect match for the tomboy princess. The son of a duke, friends since childhood, someone aware of her

strange ways and quirks. And marriage, apparently, was just what she needed to straighten out her odd ideas.

Together, they had looked a beautiful and charming pair, from childhood through to near-adulthood. Bertie with fair skin that sometimes bronzed in the sun, and light freckles that were only a little darker than his unruly mop of blonde curls. Christopher, dark-skinned like his mother, equally curly but neatly-cropped black hair, and his father's hazel eyes. Almost of a height with each other and both quite lovely to look upon.

The truth of it had become unavoidable at the age of sixteen, when their betrothal was announced merely days after they had themselves been officially informed of it.

Bertie had loved Christopher, deeply. Or at least as deeply as was possible at that young age. But to be married to each other was impossible, and he'd always kept those feelings in check. Robert was not Princess Roberta and never could be. It was simply impossible that he would ever become the princess everyone anticipated, the one anybody would be happy to marry.

Christopher had been polite, but he'd withdrawn from their friendship. Perhaps he had known the princess well enough to be repulsed at the idea of their marriage. They saw each other less and less until it was only at obligatory functions. And eventually, despite trying to be as courteous as he would be to anyone, it was clear to Robert that Christopher would rather be anywhere than the same room as him.

Despite this, a marriage had still been expected. That was, until a little over a year after their official betrothal, when Christopher's father passed. And then Robert never saw Christopher again.

He had declined his inherited lands and title, letting those fall to his brother Alexander, and moved to the city to study and make his own way in the world. Christopher had refused to do them both the disservice of forcing them to enact their parents' wishes. The severing of their betrothal was included within the renouncement.

Whilst Robert understood Christopher's desire to escape their lives and the betrothal, he had felt a sting of anguish over it that he couldn't quite process or name. The only relief in this event had been that Alexander was already engaged and so no betrothal was to be had there.

Eventually, with some luck, a son had been born to the King and Queen. Prince Charles was now to inherit from their parents and the pressure on Robert to find a suitable match had been alleviated, leaving Robert free to live a spinster's existence, away from public view.

Until tonight had changed everything, thrusting Robert's deepest secrets into the public eye.

Despite the decade that had passed, the disparate lives they'd led, Robert knew with unwavering confidence that he could turn to Christopher in his time of need. He was an honourable man, that had always been clear.

Robert pushed the buzzer.

*

Kit opened the door and blinked.

There stood a young man, soaked through. Cold, pink-tinged flesh was visible under a wet wool hat, and damp, dark blonde curls framed a face he'd never forget despite how it had changed over the years.

He'd recognise Bertie anywhere.

If it was a shock to see him, it wasn't a surprise that Bertie had run. Not after everything that had been in the papers that morning.

Even so, they hadn't seen each other in, what? Ten years? More? Not since he had run away like a fucking coward the first chance he had. Kit could claim that it was down to his father's death. But, as hard as that had been to deal with, it was far from the only reason he'd declined his lineage and let everything go to his younger brother.

'Bertie.' Kit breathed the name, and felt the odd shape of it in his mouth. It had been so long since he last uttered it aloud.

Bertie's weak smile and watery eyes, his trembling lower lip, all were so familiar to him. That same expression from the hundreds of times he'd fallen down and grazed a knee or elbow. Those times when he'd tried to be brave and not cry, as Kit rubbed a dock leaf over nettle stings.

'Chris.' The name would have sounded strange coming from someone other than Bertie, albeit in a deeper, older voice than he had remembered.

He smiled softly and held open the door. 'It's Kit these days, come in.'

Bertie let out another shuddering breath as he walked over the threshold. He was trembling and Kit had a sense that it wasn't just from the wet and cold.

'Robert,' Bertie said. 'It's Robert now. Rob, but Bertie's fine.'

Kit closed the door and they stood opposite each other in the hallway.

Bertie was still a little shorter than him but not by as much as he remembered. Maybe because his frame had filled out. Where once he'd been slender and slight, even with the

jacket Kit could see he was now more muscular. Athletic. He looked all the better for it, more comfortable in his skin.

Bertie pulled the soaked woollen hat from his head, revealing the mess of curls underneath, and Kit couldn't help but smile. Bertie had never been permitted to cut his hair short when they were young, but now it was short and soft, completely wild. The kind of hair meant for running fingers through. Kit blinked and hoped he hadn't telegraphed that thought.

Bertie's smile was still slight, and the way he looked like he was about to crumble made Kit want to wrap his arms around him. Instead, he held back, scrubbing his hand roughly over the back of his neck.

Bertie didn't hold his gaze long, breaking to look around at the surroundings he'd found himself in.

Kit's apartment was comfortable. He made good enough money to live in a nice part of the city and get some reasonable square-footage. Nothing like the home of his childhood though, nor Bertie's. But then nothing was quite like the grand palace in the heart of the city.

'I was... just making dinner. You want some?' he asked tentatively, as though Bertie popped by all the time. Wasn't that for the best? Try to keep everything as normal as it would ever get?

And it was true, the pasta was ready.

But it felt such a strange thing to say, mundane even.

What could he say to a person he had grown up with? Someone he'd pretty much been in love with in his own childish way, been betrothed to, and then left the first chance he'd had? What did he say?

Especially as he knew exactly why Bertie had run, even if not why he had run to him.

Bertie's uncle had outed him last night. And Kit couldn't begin to fathom the pain he must be in. The nightmare he was living was one that Kit had deliberately avoided.

The fact that he had left Bertie alone to face that reminded him that Bertie really was completely alone.

'I heard about your parents, I'm... I was heartbroken, Bertie.' Kit wanted to erase the words as soon as he had said them. They were condolences two years late and not entirely unconnected with Bertie's current situation.

He *had* been heartbroken, though, when he'd heard about the crash during the state visit that had robbed them all of the King and Queen. Their young son had thankfully been with a nanny, and was now the ward of the new King, their uncle. Without a husband and

with a younger brother, Bertie had not been in line for the throne. Kit wondered if that was something Bertie might have been thankful for.

Kit had cried for them but also for Bertie too. And it had become yet one more time when he should have been there for Bertie but wasn't.

Bertie nodded solemnly at the words then looked down at his feet and shuffled them about.

Kit wasn't one for tabloids, but he saw enough to know that Bertie had been a recluse since his parents died. He wondered if there might be some chance of freedom in that. A freedom for Bertie to be himself.

Until last night, when the King had outed Bertie to the nation as part of a speech on his policies on inclusivity. He had spoken at length about his love and support for the nephew he treated as a son but with such poor wording that it wasn't immediately clear that he was talking about Bertie and not Charles. It was a clumsy and obvious grab for liberal popularity by a man who would forever live in the shadow of his beloved brother.

It had been inescapable news all day. Channel after channel showing their own angle of footage as the press camped outside Bertie's gates, waiting for a glimpse of the reclusive princess-come-prince.

Watching the spectacle of it unfold, Kit thought about what support he might have given had he been there, still in Bertie's life. He thought about the many letters he had written over the years but never had the nerve to post. Once more it was too late to be there and support his friend. His first love.

'I wanted to get in touch. Not just now. Before, but...'

Kit started as he led the way down the hall and into the kitchen. Struggling to find the words.

'It's okay, I—I never expected. Maybe I shouldn't have come here, but I didn't know where else to go. You were the only one that ever, um...'

The words trailed off and Kit knew that Bertie was trying to hold back tears. He remembered all those tells.

Yeah, he'd been the only one that had really understood that Bertie was a boy.

It had been impossible not to with how close they'd been.

But more than that, he'd never thought of Bertie as a girl from the moment they met. To Kit, he was so clearly a boy, and that was just how it was, unspoken and natural. It had been jarring when they'd had to dress up for special occasions and Bertie was forced into a dress suitable for a princess. Bertie was a boy, just... not quite the same as Kit was.

But none of his friends were exactly alike, one way or another, whether body type or race, hair colour or height. So it never mattered. Not until it did. Not until it made Kit have to question a lot of things about himself.

He shook his head, both denying Bertie's words and shaking out those thoughts.

'Hey, you're welcome here, you know that? Whatever you need, I'm here for you. I should have been...' It was Kit's turn to lose his words, not able to admit he should have been there. Or that he could have been if he'd just gone along with everything and not been full of his own self-doubt over something he'd always known.

They could have been married; he could have been there for Bertie if he'd just gone along with it all.

'You're here for me now,' Bertie replied, so quietly that it was almost a whisper.

Kit, overwhelmed and unsure whether to cry or reach for Bertie simply cleared his throat then said, 'Want some food?' He grabbed an extra bowl and started to serve up the pasta with shaky hands.

Bertie looked on the verge of tears and Kit hated that he might be contributing to his pain.

'I'm cold. I don't... I don't have anything. This is all I have. I just walked out and I can't go back.' Bertie blurted the words and Kit instinctively moved back to him, placing his hands on Bertie's arms and feeling the more muscular frame than had been there before.

Feeling his heart skip just a little at the contact.

'Food can wait. Have a shower, I'll grab you some fluffy towels. And... um, some clothes. I mean, they'll kind of swamp you but I think I have some drawstring lounge pants or something.'

Bertie managed another small smile and nodded. 'Thanks Chr—Kit. You don't have to do this.'

Kit felt his heart shatter, but, forcing himself to smile fondly, he replied, 'What are friends for?'

*

Under the cover of the hot water, Robert – *Bertie* – cried. Not over any one thing but the overwhelming circumstances of *everything*.

He'd heard horror stories before of people being outed, and whilst he knew there were many in situations far, far worse than his, it didn't lessen his pain or make the press leave him alone.

The first had arrived minutes after the broadcast had ended. A broadcast he had watched in horror as he sat at home. He had long been the family secret and now the most powerful man in the country had revealed him to everyone.

Now his home, the small palace he had lived in since his parents died, was surrounded.

His residency there had never been a secret, but his life had been. Behind the high walls and strong gates, he had been living there, as a man, for years. It had been something his parents were still slowly coming to terms with when they'd died.

It wasn't that they were ignorant of the existence of transgender people; they took care to appear to be supportive of progressive causes and rights, at least in public. But it seemed that such support couldn't extend as far as the royal family.

Even so, they had wanted him to be happy. And whilst they still talked of marriage and lineage, they hadn't stood in his way when he engaged private doctors, started hormones, had surgeries, all in absolute secrecy and seclusion. Never stepping foot in public.

It was better that the kingdom thought he was just some reclusive oddity than come out before he was ready. Before his parents were ready. Though they might never have been.

The end of his betrothal had been the best and the worst thing to ever happen to Bertie, until last night.

Losing his best friend and someone he deeply loved in a way he had only just started to find words for, had been devastating. But it had also meant there was nothing more to lose. Once Charles was born, Robert dropped any pretence or attempt to be the princess his parents had wanted. Removed from the line of succession, he'd had that freedom.

Robert considered how tentative that freedom had been as he pulled his thoughts back to where he was and why. He lingered in the shower for as long as he felt was reasonable, before finally shutting off the water.

He took a deep breath and focused on pulling himself together, despite how easy it was to fall apart around Chris. Like it always had been, knowing his friend was there for him.

Kit.

All grown up. His hair was the shortest Robert had ever seen it, tight curls cropped and a slight greying at the temples making him look older than his thirty-one years. He was handsome, striking even. But then, Bertie had always thought so.

He couldn't help a little smile through his sadness.

Kit. It suited him and Robert had the vague memory of Kit's paternal grandfather and namesake using the same moniker in private. He was sure there was more to the name change

than just family nostalgia, but after ten years Robert wasn't sure he had the right to ask anything personal.

And he was equally unsure whether Kit would welcome personal conversation like that or not. Kit was the one who had broken their betrothal after all. As kind as he was being, he'd been the one that had left. He must have had his reasons for that.

Robert pushed down the sour thought and chided himself, unsure why he'd come here. It had been a bad idea and unfair on Kit. None of this was his problem.

Robert let out a sigh as he wiped condensation from the bathroom mirror and tried to tame his curls just a little.

It wasn't like many other options had been open to him. Or any really.

A maid had smuggled him from the palace in the trunk of her car and dropped him where he'd requested, though she had been concerned about doing so. But, as he'd explained to her, he needed the anonymity of an old friend.

If he'd gone to a hotel it would have been minutes before the press arrived on his heels. If he fled the country he'd still have had nowhere to go.

He only had Kit.

Robert understood breaking the engagement, he really did. It had been awkward between them the moment they had been informed of the betrothal, and it was clearly something that Kit didn't want. But he could have said that instead of just disappearing and never coming back.

Deep down, Robert knew he was the reason Kit had broken their engagement. Though he had always hoped that wasn't also why Kit had stepped down from his noble life.

No use thinking about it now. He hadn't come here with the intention of digging up the past. He'd come here because he had nowhere else to go. He should be grateful.

Robert pulled on the clothes that Kit had given him and they really were too big. Normally Robert hated to wear anything that made him look smaller than he was, but there was something comforting about being in the soft pants and loose t-shirt that smelled like Kit. A scent that brought back memories of dancing together at formal events, of being close enough to breathe in his natural musk and preferred toiletries.

When he emerged from the bathroom, Kit was in the kitchen tossing a salad.

'Oh hey, I made up the spare room for you,' Kit told him. It was so matter of fact, not like Robert had just wandered back into his life out of the blue after everything. But not quite like they had still been friends all these years either. A strange but tentatively-easy middle ground.

‘Thanks, I really am very grateful,’ Robert said as he slid into the stool at the breakfast bar, facing Kit where he was starting to plate the pasta and salad.

‘You’re welcome here,’ Kit said softly.

Robert nodded his acknowledgement and took a seat at the breakfast bar in silence, unsure what to say, what to ask. They were barely eighteen years old when they’d last spoken. He was sure so much had happened in Kit’s life since then.

It had to be obvious from the fact that Robert had known where to find him, that he’d been keeping tabs on Kit to a degree. That was perhaps something he should voice at least? He cleared his throat as Kit set the plates in front of them and took the seat opposite.

‘I... haven’t been spying on you or anything. Just checked in with your brother here and there. He told me about your job, about being in the city. I knew which street. I just walked, looking at the names on buzzers until I found you.’

Kit was still grinning as though this was all pretty amusing, which Robert supposed it oddly was. He shook his head as though to dismiss Robert’s concerns.

‘Lucky I only changed my first name, then,’ Kit chuckled.

Despite the opening, Robert didn’t think it was the time to press about that, so he began to tentatively pick over his food. It looked and smelled great, but his appetite was lacking, after everything.

Kit looked at him with a sad expression that wasn’t quite pity and placed his hand over the top of Robert’s.

‘Hey, you’re welcome to stay here as long as you need. As long as you want.’

Robert bit his lower lip and nodded. ‘Thank you. I wasn’t sure you’d be welcoming.’

The words were out of his mouth before he had a chance to think, and his breath caught in his throat as he looked at Kit’s frown, feeling the stiffness of his hand.

‘What does that mean?’ There was genuine confusion there and suddenly Robert couldn’t take in air fast enough.

‘I just... always assumed I had done something to make you leave. I...’ He didn’t want to say it out loud but forced himself to. ‘I thought you must have known, or suspected and you... You didn’t want me and maybe felt betrayed that I never said anything. But truthfully, I didn’t even have the vocabulary for this back then. I had barely even heard the word transgender much less fit it to myself.’

Robert’s tone was desperate and he wished he could take the words back as Kit’s face fell.

‘Fuck,’ Kit muttered under his breath and shook his head, looking down and taking a breath before turning back to Robert and letting out a sigh. ‘It was never that, Bertie. Never. And I’m sorry, because I should have said something or I shouldn’t have run like a fucking coward. Or at least once I worked this all out in my head, once I came to terms with my own shit I should have gotten in touch with you. I nearly did so many times but... I...’ He shrugged. ‘So much time had passed.’

It was Robert’s turn to frown as he tried to understand the meaning behind Kit’s ardent words.

‘I don’t—’

‘I knew. I always knew. I knew you were a boy. I didn’t have the words for it either. But I knew. And it terrified me that I loved you. That I wanted you. It terrified me to acknowledge what that meant about myself,’ Kit admitted, growling the words slightly.

Robert blinked and shook his head. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘I... Fuck. I hadn’t meant to say this. But I guess it’s just been stewing all these years and now you’re here.’ Kit let out a deep breath and squeezed Robert’s hand before releasing it and stepping up from his stool.

He scrubbed a hand over his face and paced the kitchen for a moment before stopping in front of Robert again. After a moment he calmed and sat.

‘I loved you. I mean... I was in love with you. You were the one constant in my life from the day we met, and I don’t know when those feelings went from being childhood friends to more. Probably around the same time I realised you were a boy. And I didn’t care. I knew I should. But the situation... Damn, the weight on my shoulders. On yours too. Our families.’ He shook his head again and Robert was sure he saw tears in his eyes.

He understood. It had always been hard for Christopher Montgomery. Being nobility had not shielded him from the discrimination he received from being mixed race, in the media especially.

Cedric Montgomery had been an old-school colonial who happened to fall in love with Abebe, a beautiful woman from a well-respected family, equivalent to nobility in the small nation with which Montgomery had diplomatic connections. To some, it was a beautiful love story; to others, Abebe Montgomery and her children were viewed more harshly.

It hadn’t been lost on Robert over the years how Christopher might be one of the few people of his acquaintance who would understand what it was to be judged on how he looked, who he was, on something he couldn’t change.

It had made the loss of him from his life, when he was only just starting to explore his gender identity, all the harder.

Robert reached across and grabbed Kit's hand before he had a chance to move.

'It's okay, I understand. I... ' He looked away, stopping himself from apologising for who he was and the impact that he'd had on Kit.

Kit laced their fingers together. 'No, you don't. I mean... I was in love with you and it made me realise I was gay and I just. I couldn't. I couldn't do that to my parents. It shouldn't matter but it does, it did. It would have broken them. So I ran and I fucking shouldn't have; you should hate me. I was a coward and I left you there all alone.'

Robert shook his head and smiled, 'No. You were my best friend and I loved you too. I thought you didn't want me and I didn't blame you.'

'Shh,' Kit hushed him. 'Please don't say that.'

Robert let out a deep breath and they fell into silence for a moment, hands still laced on the counter between them.

'Are you... You never got married or...' Robert started tentatively. He'd never asked, never wanted to know.

Kit huffed a laugh and then chuckled lightly, bringing Robert's hand to his mouth and brushing his lips over his knuckles.

'No one ever took the spot you had in my heart. That you *have*... if you want it. If we can start over, get to know each other again.'

Robert let out a shuddering breath.

*

Kit moaned into the kiss.

They had been standing there, gazing at each other, and then they were kissing and he couldn't think of anything he wanted more.

He'd dated men here and there in the last few years, exploring his sexuality, getting to know what he liked. But he'd never really connected with anyone on an emotional level. Even when he'd wanted to. It was just never there.

Perhaps if Bertie hadn't been someone he regularly read about in the media he might have been able to move on and forget him. He'd even considered leaving the country so many times, but he couldn't do that either. Couldn't leave and have nothing, no link to Bertie no matter how tentative.

Kissing Bertie felt right and so good. It felt like a return to a comfort they had found in each other as children, before life had become complicated for both of them.

Bertie let out a little whimper and pulled back, tears in the corners of his eyes.

‘This is so much... this is...’ He trailed off and Kit felt a wave of panic, stepping back a little to give him space. Had he misread? Misunderstood?

Bertie let out a shuddering breath and stepped after him, pressing himself against Kit’s chest, Kit automatically enveloping his arms around him.

‘I thought you hated me.’

Kit shook his head. ‘I loved you.’

Bertie looked up, tilting his head and they were kissing again. Frantic this time, as though making up for all those lost years. He could feel Bertie’s free-flowing tears against his skin as they began alternating between undressing each other and themselves. Just ripping at any clothing between them in their desperation for flesh to press against flesh.

When Kit realised that the draw cord of Bertie’s pants was loose, he took hold of them, pulling them down, underwear and all, as he dropped to his knees.

His cock pulsed and his mouth watered as he took in the sight before him. Bertie's phalloplasty hung waiting. It was a perfect size and shape, perfect like Bertie.

Kit took hold of Bertie at the root and lifted him to his mouth, licking over the tip.

‘Ung...’ Bertie let out a strangled sort of sound. ‘Kit...’

Kit continued his attentions, gently positioning Bertie to an erect position as he realised that some sort of rod inside made him pliable in this way.

Then he sank his mouth down and took in as much of Bertie as possible, moving his hand to fondle Bertie’s balls.

‘Oh... Oh god...’ Bertie mumbled, his hands sliding into Kit’s barely-there curls and gripping tight to his scalp. ‘It’s too much...’

At the first tug of his hair, Kit pulled back.

‘Sorry, I should have asked, are you comfortable with—’

Bertie dropped to his knees and took Kit’s mouth again, before he could finish his question.

Another minute passed. The frenetic kisses slowed to something more gentle and sensual, until they were both moaning.

Finally Bertie pulled back, flushed and beautiful.

‘I’ve never...’ Colour rose even further on his cheeks and then Kit’s did the same once he realised what Bertie was trying to say.

‘It’s okay. That's okay, and we don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with,’ Kit reassured him.

Bertie smiled softly, almost shyly, and bit at his lower lip. ‘I never wanted to before I was really me. And then I couldn’t trust anyone enough with this. And I never, um. Never really wanted anyone, except you.’

Kit felt a pang in his chest. He could have made love with Bertie a long time ago. He pushed the thought aside. It didn’t matter now, they had talked and made the peace that they needed to.

‘Fuck, Bertie—’

Bertie shook his head and frowned.

‘I’m not completely innocent you know. I have fully mastered jerking off and a range of sex toys,’ Bertie joked lightly.

Kit returned the grin that spread across Bertie’s face. A grown-up version of the humour they had always shared.

Kit started getting to his feet and held out a hand to help Bertie up too. ‘To bed, Robert,’ Kit said softly, barely above a gentle whisper. They took each other's hand once they were both standing. Then Kit gave Bertie a light tug, leading him towards the bedroom.

‘Please call me Bertie,’ he replied, equally quiet but forceful, a request not a plea but desperate all the same.

*

Bertie was shaking. Trembling.

He stood in front of the bed, naked and flushed. His face and chest were red as he watched Kit strip off the last of his clothes until they stood facing each other in a way they never had before.

Bertie’s breath caught in his throat.

‘You’re so... so beautiful...’ He had searched for the word and come up with the only one that would fit.

Naked, Kit was athletically muscular and in good shape; clearly he worked out regularly. A smattering of tight, dark curls lay across his chest and Bertie couldn’t help remember all the times they’d spent in the lake as children, innocently half-naked. How they had both changed.

He remembered how his own skin would tan, his freckles darken. In contrast, now he was paler than he ever had been before, so reclusive had he become.

Bertie let out a sigh. It didn’t take much to imagine how well their bodies would fit against each other – his head against Kit’s chest, fingers playing with the hair there.

‘You’re staring,’ Kit chuckled after a few minutes, before moving close enough to breathe words into Bertie’s ear. ‘Don’t worry, I was staring too. You’re gorgeous. I can’t tell you how often I have wanted this.’

Bertie trembled again, taking in a shuddering breath.

He hadn’t ever thought of this. He’d never allowed himself to. It was too painful, when all he could believe was that his friend, his betrothed, had not wanted him. But now his thoughts were completely consumed by making love with Kit.

Kit brought his hands up, running them over Bertie’s bare back and around him, pulling him close and leaning in to kiss him.

And Bertie whimpered into it, feeling Kit harden against him, pressing against his own ready length.

Kit pulled away to trail kisses down his neck before finding his ear again, the words coming out a low rumble as Kit asked, ‘Will you fuck me? I want to feel you inside me.’

Bertie let out a shuddering breath and closed his eyes, feeling his arousal almost painfully.

‘I... I’ve...’ Bertie started; the idea of taking Kit was immediately enthralling, only his lack of experience made him nervous.

‘I’ve got this,’ Kit reassured him, taking his hands and stepping back slightly. ‘If you want to?’

‘Yes,’ Bertie replied without hesitation, his heart already thumping erratically in his chest.

Kit’s grin was soft and he moved to the bed, lowering himself down as he pulled Bertie with him until they were on their sides facing each other. They gazed at each other as Kit ran his hand up and down Bertie’s side, before running it up to his jaw, cupping it and pulling him into a kiss.

Bertie moaned, all the more so when Kit shuffled closer so that their bodies were flush against each other. Kit took Bertie’s hand and placed it on his ass, and Bertie squeezed his eyes tight shut as he squeezed Kit’s buttock.

It was firm and toned, and the whole thing felt suddenly intimidating, and Bertie moved his hand up to Kit’s hip.

‘Sorry,’ he apologised softly against Kit’s lips, his face burning.

‘Nothing to be sorry for, we’ll take this as slow as you want. We can stop at any time,’ Kit reassured him again, and Bertie nodded before seeking Kit’s lips again.

He wanted to. In some ways he *needed* to. To know this was really real and really happening, not just some wish mysteriously granted like in the storybooks.

They kissed for a few minutes, languid and deep. Kit had started to rut against him, his hard cock leaking as his hips made little thrusts. Within minutes they were rocking against each other, both chasing the friction they were creating, grasping at each other and panting until Bertie was sure they were going to come.

But then Kit stopped and pulled back, catching his breath. He rolled away, digging into a bedside drawer and coming back with a bottle of lube. He pumped some onto his fingers before placing it on the bed.

‘I need you,’ Kit moaned, his eyes fluttering shut as he hiked one leg up to Bertie’s hip and then reached his slicked hand behind him.

Bertie whimpered, knowing what Kit was doing. Watching Kit’s face contort in desperate pleasure, the flex of his arm as he pumped fingers in and out, clearly relaxing into the penetration, slicking himself.

Emboldened by thoughts of inciting these feelings in Kit, Bertie felt around on the bed for the lube and then poured some onto his own fingers once he had. He took a steadying breath before reaching around and sliding his fingers over Kit’s.

Kit moaned and shuddered when Bertie’s fingers felt around his hole, where he pumped his own fingers all the faster.

‘Kit...’ Bertie gasped his name.

‘There, Bertie, please darling...’ Kit groaned the words as Bertie slid his fingers next to Kit’s, gently pushing into his relaxed hole. ‘Oh fuck,’ Kit gasped and Bertie felt his cock strain against him. Kit stilled and Bertie did the same.

They lay there quiet and panting for a moment before Kit regained his breath.

‘I want you to fuck me right now; I want to come with you inside me.’ Kit’s words were ardent but his expression was cautious, allowing Bertie to say no.

Bertie was already nodding, pulling his fingers out and rolling away to try and work out what position they should be in. But Kit stopped him.

‘Hold on.’ He reached to the side again and then presented a condom packet to Bertie, who nodded and fumbled. After a moment Kit took it, opening the packet and looking deeply into Bertie’s eyes as he rolled it onto him.

Bertie let out a shocked gasp.

Kit pulled him down and rested his forehead against Bertie’s. Breath laboured, his expression almost pained.

‘Kit...’ Bertie moaned, glad when Kit actually finished rolling it on. It was overwhelming and every nerve in his body felt like it was alight.

‘I want you so much, I always have...’ It came out of Kit’s mouth, almost a lament. But Bertie understood. If they had both been what their families expected and wanted, they’d be married by now. It was surreal to think of it that way.

Instead he was trans and Kit was gay. And in this weird, fucked up situation they’d found themselves in, suddenly the world was the right way up again. In some ways Bertie was glad that his uncle had outed him and this chain of events had led him to Kit’s bed.

To Kit.

‘Here,’ Kit said, finally catching his breath and pulling away to shove a pillow under his hips as Bertie watched. ‘Please...’

It was practically a moan, and the desperation in Kit’s eyes wasn’t lost on Bertie.

‘Okay.’ Bertie nodded, reassuring himself as much as anything else as he moved. The bed dipped with him, and then he was settled between Kit’s legs.

Kit’s cock was throbbing and leaking. Bertie was tempted to taste him, but uncertainty stopped him. He had longed to do things like this, to explore another person’s body, but yes, Kit’s was better than just anyone’s. And now he had the opportunity he was terrified of getting things wrong and being too inexperienced.

So, even as his mouth watered and his palms itched, he didn’t place hands or mouth on Kit. Instead he moved forward and pressed his cock to Kit’s slicked entrance.

‘It’s okay,’ Kit muttered softly. ‘It’s easy, it’s instinct. Just push insi—’

Kit cut off with a grunt as Bertie did as instructed, slowly pressing forward and feeling the sensation of Kit tight around him.

‘Oh my god, oh, Kit...’ Bertie rambled, his body shaking again as he tried to process these new sensations. Sensations he wanted to enjoy again and again.

‘You feel so good...’ Kit struggled to get the words out, his face lax with pleasure but his body tense with the sensation. ‘More... you can... more...’

Bertie nodded and swallowed before taking hold of Kit’s hips and pushing further, deeper.

Kit’s grunts turned to moans. And then he jolted, his muscles tensing outside and in.

Bertie gasped and shook.

‘There, right there, Bertie...’ Kit panted the words and moved his hands to Bertie’s arms, digging into the sweaty flesh.

Bertie started to move, finding his own pleasure in the friction of thrusting in and out, increasingly aroused by Kit's sounds and expressions. Kit was losing himself to the pleasure Bertie was giving him and that gave Bertie a sense of joy he couldn't quite describe.

Kit's cock had briefly flagged but was at full hardness again, and Kit took it in hand, pumping himself in time with Bertie's thrusts and letting out a little cry every time Bertie grazed his prostate.

'I'm gonna come,' Kit warned, his whole body now covered in a thin sheen of sweat.

'I want you to.' Bertie breathed out the words, watching Kit's hand before placing his own over it. He wanted to feel it, wanted to feel what it was like to come like that.

Kit winced for a moment at the touch of Bertie's fingers and then linked them with his so that they were stroking his cock together.

'Will you come?' Kit asked, breathless.

Bertie nodded. He was sure he would. He had no basis for comparison but he could feel his orgasm pooling. It was like when he jerked off but more. More intense, more friction. Warmer. Beautiful.

Bertie cried out as Kit grunted and clenched around him, Kit's cock pulsing as he came on his belly and chest, his release catching in the hairs there.

He could feel Kit tightening around him, could see his balls drawing tight and cock throbbing. It was perfect. It was everything.

Bertie almost wanted to pull out. It was so much, so intense. But he was *so* close.

He thrust into the constrictions around him, savouring the squeeze and friction as he chased his own release, not entirely sure he would achieve it until—

'Kit...' Bertie cried out his lover's name, his hands finding Kit's shoulders and digging into them as he came. He shuddered through his orgasm, still feeling the tremors of Kit's and practically sobbing at the sensation.

'Hey, hey... it's okay... are you okay?' Kit's words were gentle as Bertie slowed and stopped, tears forming at the corners of his eyes.

Bertie shook his head dismissively as he answered, 'I'm fine. More than fine... I...' He couldn't get any further words out so instead collapsed on top of Kit, feeling his lover's spend between them as they clung to each other.

'I've got you...' Kit muttered against his ear as they held on to each other. Bertie remembered the times he had said that when they were kids, the times where his friend had been there for him over a hurt knee or hurt feelings.

Anything he needed. Kit had always done everything he'd needed, been everything he'd needed back then.

'I know,' Bertie replied with a sob.

*

It had been the early hours of the morning when they'd finally started to nod off, but it felt like no time had passed at all when Kit was woken by movement next to him.

He was immediately awake, expecting to see Bertie leaving, and terrified that it would be the case.

But instead Bertie was still there, soundly asleep, or so it seemed. After a minute Bertie moved again, jolting slightly and whimpering. Clearly having a bad dream.

'Shh,' Kit whispered, wrapping himself around Bertie and holding him as he shook. 'I've got you.'

Bertie let out a sob and then a gasp as he woke. He struggled for a moment against Kit before realising where he was and settling.

'I'm sorry I was...' Bertie started, still trying to catch his breath. He was shaking and had tears in his eyes.

'It's okay. There's been a lot going on. But you're safe here, okay?' Kit reassured him and Bertie relaxed against him.

'You don't have to be so nice,' Bertie said, clearly trying to make light. 'I'm not royalty anymore, I don't think.'

'You'll always be a prince to me.' Kit muttered the words into Bertie's hair.

Bertie let out a light laugh and then sighed.

Kit released a soft sigh of his own, sleep tugging at him but not quite managing to take him over once more. He wanted to savour having Bertie in his arms.

'You changed your name because you didn't feel like the old you, right? You didn't feel like your father's son,' Bertie said quietly, stroking his fingers through Kit's chest hair.

Kit let out a long breath and nodded. 'Yeah. I wasn't Christopher. I wasn't the duke that my parents expected I would grow to be. I wasn't like them. I didn't want to be.'

Bertie nodded and snuggled against his side as Kit ran a hand over the smooth skin of the prince's back. He'd known Bertie of all people would understand. The nobility had become accepting of many things, but open and out people in their ranks wasn't one of them.

'So you prefer Robert? Rob?' Kit asked.

‘Neither really. I was just very unimaginative when I changed my name. And... I guess I felt sort of tied to my, um, my birth name. An obligation to keep my royal name.’ He shrugged. ‘Felt like I had to. Sometimes I wish I had gone with something else.’

‘Why don’t you? What’s to say you can’t change it again?’ Kit asked, knowing Bertie would hear the fight in those words, that Kit was ready to stand behind him on the matter.

‘Maybe I will.’ Bertie smiled. ‘But I like Bertie. From you, anyway. It was the only name that felt right when I was growing up. I always hoped that you saw the real me.’

‘I did,’ Kit confirmed, pressing a kiss to Bertie’s temple. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you back then.’

‘Better late than never,’ Bertie joked.

Before either of them could speak again, Kit’s alarm clock sounded and he untangled himself from Bertie to reach over and turn it off. He’d call in and let work know he had a personal emergency and couldn’t come in today. He wasn’t even considering for one moment leaving Bertie. Not again.

He settled back in the bed and pulled Bertie to him. The prince hesitated for a moment before allowing himself to be nestled in Kit’s arms. As though he had been expecting Kit to leave him, or kick him out.

That pretty much seemed confirmed by his next words.

‘What do we do now? Sh—should I leave? I don’t want to impose...’ Bertie sounded so scared in that moment that Kit couldn’t help but pull him closer, peppering kisses down his neck.

‘I told you, you can stay here as long as you like. As long as you need,’ Kit reassured him. There were so many other things he wanted to say, all rushing around in his brain. He settled for softly murmuring, ‘I want you to stay for as long as you want. I don’t want to lose you again.’

He felt Bertie shudder against him and then relax. Relief almost palpable.

‘Should I follow your example? I could get a job, be a normal person.’ Despite the light tone, Kit was sure Bertie wasn’t joking.

‘I encourage this, for my own selfish reasons,’ Kit replied as he held Bertie close. ‘And you’re perfectly normal.’ Kit’s correction was met with a short, derisive laugh.

Kit smiled at the reaction before adding onto the end, the suitable honorific, ‘Your Highness.’

Bertie’s chuckle made his heart swell.

Their journeys had been convoluted and separate, but with Bertie in Kit's arms, it finally felt like everything was exactly how it was meant to be.

'One day the history books will call this a modern fairytale,' Kit mused, overjoyed at the deep laugh it drew from Bertie.

His Prince.