

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

CONTRARY INSTINCTS

Ava Penn

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

CONTRARY INSTINCTS

By Ava Penn

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A thin, frail young man with short, dark hair curls into the embrace of another man whose chest he is being cradled against. The unconscious man has his left hand placed against his protector's neck, like he needs an anchor. The man holding him is awake, staring at a point in the distance. His thick curls aren't long enough to hide the protective expression he wears, emphasized by his hand on the other's shoulder.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He needs a keeper. Look at him! His hair buzzed to his skull so short I couldn't run my fingers through his curls anymore. I'd ignored his threat to cut them off after the last time I'd held him still with those soft tendrils. The bones of his face were stark without his hair to hide behind. His hips jutted like knives and his long arms were stick thin. They were surprisingly strong as he curled into my warmth, though.

Somewhat he'd gotten away from the family, attempting to live a life different from the one he was born to. He had to know I'd come for him eventually. I found him shivering in the driving rain, too lost in a haze to fight me when I scooped him up.

He always fought me.

See, I knew he loved me, and damn did that piss him off. Because if he loved me, then he'd given in to his instincts... and that was the last thing he'd ever do. But I needed him too much to ever let him go again. Now I just had to convince him to come back home.

Sincerely,

Alicia

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, other world

Tags: one mage/sorcerer, Viking/Celt/Barbarian, first time, hurt/comfort, soulmates/bonded

Content Warnings: incest

Word Count: 8,615

CONTRARY INSTINCTS

By Ava Penn

Lyle

Lyle felt the darkness envelop him, knowing the danger of relaxing into the embrace it offered. That was the problem with being a Cathach, a son of The Morrígan. It was too easy to lose yourself to the dark—to *become* dark.

He had lived on a precarious edge since the dawn of his thirteenth year. Most Cathachs who lived as long as he had had found an Anamlia within four years of their darkness rising to the surface, but Lyle was in his twenty-eighth year and still had no Anamlia—at least not officially. Thoughts of Dustyn pulled him out of the shadows. Dustyn was the only Anamlia he wanted. Anamlia were the most sacred of his people; and as such, they were free to choose which Cathach to bond with, if they wished to bond at all.

A wisp of sound drew his attention; and all thoughts, even those of Dustyn, evaporated as the darkness laid claim. His dagger rasped free from the sheath at his waist. In mere seconds the pool of blood was spreading until it touched his boots, blacker than the starless night sky above him.

Dustyn

Dustyn trudged forward, despite the lack of energy to do so. He had been at the mercy of nature for almost two weeks now—almost as long as Lyle had been gone.

There was plenty of water to be had, since he had followed the river; but Dustyn couldn't hunt and had never learned to identify edible greenery. He had managed to stretch the food he had packed until about three days ago, but this morning's violent protest by his empty stomach was a harsh reminder of his ill-thought decision to run away.

The soft clip-clop of hooves on the road startled Dustyn, and he tripped over a root on the footpath. A failed attempt to push himself off the ground had him groaning in defeat. When a pair of arms slid under his shoulders and knees to haul him up, he didn't protest. He was gently laid across the horse's back, and he let the rhythmic motion of the animal's gait lull him to sleep.

Dustyn awoke to find himself in a bed, a real bed. Not a pile of leaves, or a patch of thick grass. For a brief moment he panicked, thinking that he was back home. He looked around frantically, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings, and relaxed with the realization that he was still free.

"Can you eat? I've saved some broth for you, if you can't keep food down." The feminine voice preceded the appearance of its owner from the shadows in the corner of the room.

"I can eat." Dustyn's reply was tentative. Only a Cathach could cloak themselves in shadow, and he didn't want to be near any Cathachs. His upbringing overrode his desire to flee as he spoke again, "Thank you."

"It was no trouble." The woman walked away and returned seconds later with a bowl and spoon. "You have no need to be wary of me, Anamlia. I have a Soul-Healer already." She handed him the stew and retreated to sit on a stool in front of the unlit fireplace.

"I'm that obvious?" Dustyn asked, after swallowing the first mouthful of the wonderful dish.

"I'm just good at reading people. After you eat, I'll give you a change of clothes and some more supplies. You can stay here for the night, but that's all."

"I'm grateful for your care." Dustyn bowed his head as the woman departed, and then finished eating his stew.

Lyle

"What?" Lyle growled the question, barely managing to restrain a worse reaction to the news.

"He's gone." His mother made the statement so calmly, like it was not worth worrying over. "A few days after you left, Marlow went to fetch Dustyn for the morning meal; and his room was empty."

"Where did he go?" Lyle forced the words out through his clenched teeth.

"I haven't a clue. He didn't even have the decency to leave behind a letter. Your youngest brother never has been the most thoughtful person." Her opinion was emphasized by the disgusted curl to her upper lip.

"Has nobody looked for him?"

"Why should we? It's his choice as an Anamlia. No one can force him to do anything he doesn't wish to."

"Maybe not, but we could at least talk to him. I'm going to find him; and if he won't come back, then I won't either. Goodbye, Mother." Lyle stalked from the library and slammed the door behind him. What an infuriating woman his mother could be! Had she no love for her son?

Marlow stepped in front of his path as Lyle made his way back to the front door. They didn't say anything for a moment. Instead the two stood facing each other, studying one another.

"You're going to look for him?" Marlow broke the taut silence first.

"Of course I am. Obviously no one else is, and he won't survive by himself. If he doesn't want to come back, then I'll escort him where he wishes to go." With that, Lyle shoved his eldest brother out of the way and yanked open the door.

"He left because of you."

Lyle stopped dead in his tracks. "What?"

"Dustyn left because he doesn't want to be an Anamlia. He doesn't want to be bound to a Cathach."

"What in the nine hells does that have to do with me?"

"Nobody else may have noticed, but you don't ask anyone else to restore you anymore. For the past two years, you have only asked Dustyn. He noticed, and so did I."

"So?"

"You've turned down every Anamlia that has ever approached you, Lyle. You're twenty-eight. It shouldn't be like this. One of you needs to decide. Just remember that." Marlow turned and walked away. Lyle knew Marlow wouldn't say anything more on the subject. He also knew that he was right.

Most families were graced with one Anamlia every three or four generations, but not his family. No. In his family, *he* was the anomaly. Lyle had been born a Cathach when his mother's side of the family, his brothers, and his sisters were all Anamlia. It was only thanks to their constant presence that he hadn't yet been consumed.

Fortunately his horse hadn't yet been stabled, so it only took a few minutes before he was on his way to town for some food for another trip.

Dustyn

This was infinitely worse than the sun bearing down on him day after day. If he had thought this through at all—instead of being his reckless, impetuous self—then he would have waited to leave until the rain season was over rather than just beginning. Day two of the rains had him soaked through to the bone, feeling like he would never warm up from the chill of the water. He was having trouble focusing on his thoughts to top it all off.

Dustyn was grateful he still had some food from the woman who had helped him several days ago. He planned to be smarter this time and keep his food supply restocked regularly. Now, if only he could find a way to dry off and warm up. The next village should be less than a day away. He could find a room at the inn there, right?

A violent shiver caused his knees to give way, leaving him to kneel in the mud on the side of the road. Absently, Dustyn realized that he couldn't feel the ground beneath his knees. He reached out with his hands and wouldn't have known he was touching it if his eyes didn't see it happen. He knew that wasn't good but couldn't quite remember why. Did it matter? He decided it really didn't. Dustyn rolled to his side. He could get to the village when he woke up. Sleep sounded like a good idea right about now.

Lyle

Lyle couldn't tell which was racing faster, his heart or his horse. The rain season had started the afternoon he set out to find Dustyn; and knowing that thoughtless prat the way he did, Dustyn had probably forgotten to pack a rain slicker. Which meant that it was entirely possible he had been wandering around unsheltered in the rain for the past two days. Wonderful. It was a good thing Lyle had packed extra blankets in the saddle bags because he knew he was going to need them.

A figure collapsed across the road in the distance. Lyle's heart stopped beating at the exact same moment that he urged his horse on faster. He prayed to Diancecht that it wasn't Dustyn. The reins went slack in his grip as he slid from the saddle, stumbling in the mud.

His hands shook; his strength draining out of him at the sight. Lyle drew the shadows to himself. He needed the help to pick up the prone form of his youngest brother. With more effort than he should have needed, Lyle laid

Dustyn across the saddle. He took only enough time to throw a blanket over him before he ordered the horse forward.

Lyle

The town had been just over the hill, praise the gods. It had been a simple matter to find the inn and rent a room. Lyle waited impatiently as the innkeeper hauled hot water to fill the tub in their room. Didn't the man understand that time was precious? That Dustyn might catch his death if he remained cold for much longer?

"That was the last bucket. Please, let me call the Sage." The innkeeper wrung his hands nervously, pleading with Lyle.

"He'll be fine in my care. Thank you." Lyle made the dismissal clear by gesturing to the door. After the man had left, he began to strip the wet clothes from his brother. Some color had returned to his face after Lyle had sat in front of the fire with him while he waited, but Dustyn was still unconscious.

With great care, Lyle lifted his brother in his arms and stepped into the tub. He cradled Dustyn close as he washed the rain and mud from them both. With each passing second, the cold skin against his body warmed. A twitch of movement was the first sign that Dustyn was close to coming around.

Lyle smoothly slid out from beneath his brother and stood, still holding him above the water by his arms. It took no small amount of maneuvering to snag a blanket to dry their bodies with while keeping Dustyn from slipping beneath the water. With the blanket tossed over one shoulder, he pulled his brother out of the tub, taking note for the first time that afternoon of the loss of weight.

Lyle gently wiped away the lingering droplets of water. It worried him that where his brother once had smooth planes of sleek muscle, he could now see the sharp jut of bone and joints. Was Dustyn not eating? Had he been ill? Almost as worrisome was the loss of his plentiful, silky curls—though Lyle knew the reason for their absence.

"Wh—" Dustyn's speech was abruptly cut off by a coughing fit, but Lyle was just glad he was conscious again. He rubbed his back until Dustyn could speak again. "Where...?"

"Shhh. We're in Benlamora." Lyle stroked his fingers along Dustyn's cheek, soothing him.

Dustyn

Dustyn struggled to open his eyes. His lids felt leaden, too heavy to lift. Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes, and a face materialized in his blurred vision as he finally gained a sliver of sight. "Lyle?"

"Yes. Were you expecting someone else?"

He was forcing his eyes open more while trying to gather his thoughts and memories. Lyle shouldn't be here. Dustyn was supposed to be alone. "No. There shouldn't be anyone else. You can't be with me."

Dustyn felt Lyle flinch at his words. The hands drying his hair with a blanket fell away; and his brother leaned back, putting distance between them though he was sitting on his lap. The shadows at the edges of the room deepened.

"I need you to heal my soul." Lyle's words were a soft whisper, but Dustyn heard them easily in the silence.

"If I refuse?" That's right. This was why Dustyn had left in the first place. He was tired of bearing the burden of healing Lyle from his Cathach duties. Why hadn't his brother just accepted an Anamlia already, instead of relying on family to heal him? Why did he continue to force Dustyn to do it?

"Would you damn me so easily?" Hard, unyielding eyes fixed him with a glare so cold it chilled him in a way the rain had not.

"No, I... Not yet." Dustyn dropped his chin to his chest, trying to stifle the familiar ache slithering around his heart. Didn't Lyle understand how hard this was for him? There was a reason that Anamlia's bound themselves to a single Cathach.

"You really did it," Lyle's warm breath tickled across the shell of his ear as his brother leaned forward once again. His calloused hands caressed the shorn hair on his head.

"I told you I'd cut my hair if you held me by it. You never listen to me." Dustyn couldn't help jerking his head sharply from Lyle's touch.

"I'll just have to hold you another way then." Lyle shackled Dustyn's wrists in his unbreakable grip before he even started speaking.

In the next moment, Dustyn found himself laid out across the blanket on the floor and pinned with the weight of Lyle's body atop his. Muscular forearms

landed on the floor next to his head. Dustyn tried to turn his face away, but was impeded by the block made with his brother's arms.

"Damn you, Lyle! Why does it have to be like this? Can't I perform my duties in a manner of my own choosing?"

Lyle

"No," Lyle replied curtly and silenced further protest by sealing his lips against Dustyn's.

Without a single moment's delay, the darkness surged forward. Lyle could feel it writhing inside his soul. He fed it to Dustyn, angrily, through their kiss. As the shadows ebbed from him, Lyle was flooded with the peace of knowing his soul was being restored to a whole state. The peace never lasted long though. It was always inevitably overtaken by desire.

Lyle broke the kiss, gasping for air. Dustyn had slipped back into unconsciousness. His body was already processing the darkness, breaking it apart and returning it to the collective energy around them.

A sliver of guilt settled uncomfortably in Lyle's throat as he pulled Dustyn onto his lap again. He didn't have to kiss him in order to heal his soul. It could be as simple as holding hands or letting Dustyn place his open palm over his heart. That was how the rest of his family used to perform their duties as Anamlas. Both methods took much longer, but they were also much less intimate.

The fire crackled merrily, and Lyle stared into it as though he might find an answer to his unasked question. He was unsure of himself. Should he continue as he had up to this point, living an abnormal existence; or perhaps it was time to let the darkness possess him body and soul?

Dustyn

Dustyn screamed at Lyle to come back. His brother walked forward into the looming darkness, not even sparing a glance over his shoulder. The wind picked up; and Lyle's figure began to dissolve, particles swirling in the violent air current until the bare skeleton crumpled to the ground. Blackness spread across the white bones from where they touched the earth.

This was the fate of a Cathach whose soul was claimed by darkness. This was the fate of a Cathach with no Anamlia to heal the wounds inflicted on their

spirit by their duties. Dustyn knew that as surely as he knew that Lyle would leave him. Lyle had to if he wanted to continue living.

Dustyn bolted upright with a sob caught in his throat. It was just a dream, a night-terror. Lyle lay peacefully beside him in the bed. One way or another, Lyle would be gone someday. Either he would wither and die when the darkness claimed him body and soul, or he would accept an Anamlia.

Despair warred with fear to seize hold of his battered heart. Dustyn had always thought it a myth in school, that Anamlia possessed an instinct to love the one that needed them the most. Yet, people as a whole possessed an instinct to avoid things that could hurt them.

Dustyn succumbed silently to the tears waiting to be released. He ran from his brother because Lyle could hurt him, break his heart. He loved his brother because Lyle needed him. If Lyle accepted an Anamlia, he wouldn't need Dustyn anymore.

Lyle

"Get up," Lyle barked gruffly at Dustyn. He hated mornings. They always came so damn early in the day.

"Wha—Why?" Dustyn's mumbled reply was muffled by the down pillow.

"We need to eat. Now get up." Lyle knew he was taking his exhaustion out on Dustyn, but he couldn't help it. He had slept for shit last night. Dreams of his little brother walking away had tormented him the entire night.

Dustyn sat up and lobbed his pillow at Lyle. "You could be a little nicer! I almost died yesterday."

"It's your own fault. Who told you to take off by yourself in the rain season? You never think!" Lyle's control slipped a little as his voice edged toward a yell. "Get dressed so we can go and eat."

Lyle slammed the door of the room behind him. He had come up with a plan last night while watching Dustyn recover from the effects of healing his soul. The first part of the plan definitely involved food, since Lyle hadn't stopped to eat yesterday. The second part relied on Lyle's ability to talk some sense into his brother.

Dustyn

Dustyn pursed his lips and huffed before flopping backwards on the bed. Lyle was right. It really was his own fault. He wasn't about to back down from his decision though. He would leave Galmor no matter what it took. He needed to be somewhere that nobody knew he was an Anamlia, somewhere with no Cathachs.

Dustyn carefully got out of the bed, not quite trusting his body to be strong enough yet. Between passing out in the rain and healing Lyle's soul, his body had been pushed to its limits. Sometimes Dustyn found himself wishing he was stronger, like a Cathach. Today was definitely one of those times.

It took longer than he wanted to get cleaned up and dressed. The hallway stretched before him in a seemingly endless distance as he stepped out of the room, letting the door swish shut. One step at a time. All he had to do was take one step at a time.

By the time he reached the buzzing space that was the dining room of the inn, Dustyn was holding back a cold sweat. He turned his head to look for Lyle, and blackness teased the edges of his vision. He lurched forward once he spotted his brother sitting against the wall closest to the counter. It took an eternity to make his way along the counter and drop into the seat across from Lyle.

"Took you long enough," his brother griped after taking a drink of his ale.

"I'm still recovering, bastard." Dustyn leveled a glare at his brother that used to result in Lyle leaving him alone. Sadly, it no longer held the same power.

"Like I said, your own fault." Lyle waved a hand for the barmaid to come over and took another swig from his mug.

"Not entirely. You could have waited to be healed."

"How sure are you of that, little brother?"

"Well," Dustyn began to reply but Lyle barreled on.

"I'm twenty years and eight. I was called to the darkness at thirteen. For fifteen years, I have survived with no Anamlia bonded to me. For fifteen years, family has taken on the duty of healing my soul from each wound suffered by the slaughter of the dread-ogres that prowl Galmor. For fifteen years, the

shadows have taken their toll on my body as I subsisted on minimal soul healings. Does *this* look like I could have waited?" Lyle thrust his hand forward, palm down.

Dustyn couldn't suppress his gasp of surprise and sorrow. His brother's nails were almost entirely black and the skin around them was taking on a dark grey tinge. The darkness was staking its claim on his body, just as it had staked its claim on his soul. Except, a body could not exist as shadow.

Lyle

Lyle watched Dustyn's expression morph from petulant to heartbroken in a matter of seconds. Maybe now his little brother understood the severity of the situation. He hadn't wanted to use the threat of the darkness overtaking his physical body to force Dustyn to pay attention, but something had to be done.

"Lyle," Dustyn choked on a sob before continuing, "why didn't you say anything before? Go home. Go to the guild where they can find an Anamlia for you."

"No. If you have your mind made up to leave, I'll see you to where you wish to go. That will be the last thing I do." He had intended to make Dustyn see reason, to claim him as his Anamlia. So where had those words come from?

Lyle shook his head at his own foolishness. For his constant chiding of Dustyn about being selfish, he really was no better. In the end, he would rather claim his little brother for himself than see Dustyn happy and succumb to the shadows. So, he figured it was a good thing that he came to his senses and offered to escort him to safety instead.

"Brother, please. I can make my own way just fine. You need help." Dustyn's expression was heart wrenching as he pleaded with Lyle. "You can't die. You can't!"

The few other patrons in the dining room all turned to stare at them. With his shout, tears began to fall from Dustyn's amber eyes. At the first broken sob that spilled from his lips, the patrons turned back to their own business.

"I'll do what I damn well please. It would be worse for you to catch cold and waste away or get killed by a dread-ogre than it would be for me to pass into the darkness. You've made up your mind, and I've made up mine. Now stop your bellyaching and eat." Lyle slipped into his role as the elder brother when the barmaid arrived with their morning fare.

Dustyn

Dustyn poked numbly at the food in front of him. He couldn't comprehend that Lyle had decided to just... die. It made his dream from last night a possibility that was suddenly all too real.

An hour later, Lyle was hauling him from his seat insisting that they get ready to leave. Dustyn had taken a handful of bites from his meal. His stomach was churning too violently with guilt and sorrow to have really eaten.

"I packed an extra slicker for you. Gather your things while I see about purchasing more food." Lyle ordered after ushering Dustyn back into their room.

Dustyn wandered about the room, but most of his stuff had remained in his traveling pack. When Lyle returned, he was sitting on the bed with his head in his hands. He forced himself to stand and follow his brother out the door.

"I've purchased a horse for you. It will make the journey faster, since you can't ride in front of me like when you were younger."

"It's not like I've grown much since then, just an inch or two at most."

"All the same, with the amount of food we'll need to carry to cross the forest out of Galmor, this way will be better."

Dustyn merely nodded. He couldn't think of a good argument for riding on the same horse with Lyle. If anything, he should have been thrilled to have his own horse.

He vaulted up onto the riding blanket and let his horse follow Lyle's out of the village. By the time dusk fell, they were well away from the little town. Lyle set up a shelter for the night and informed Dustyn that tomorrow they would reach the border of the forest. Dustyn knew what that meant.

Lyle

Lyle shifted uneasily by the struggling fire. A week into their journey and the rain season had come to an end, leaving everything damp yet cleansed. It had taken too long to find enough dry tinder and kindling to start a fire with, and the sun's warmth had already faded.

He flicked a worried glance at Dustyn. Since the morning that Lyle had made up his mind to escort him through the forest, his little brother had been

despondent and listless. The closest he had come to seeing a smile was when a hummingbird had landed on Dustyn's finger yesterday afternoon. Unbidden, a memory swirled to the surface of his thoughts.

"Lyle!"

The shout came from the orchard behind their house, the voice bright and innocent. Lyle turned and ran toward the trees, following the sound of childish giggles. His gaze raked through the branches above him as he passed.

"Catch me," Dustyn laughed before leaping down from the crook he was standing in.

"Oomph," Lyle grunted as he tumbled to the ground under the slight weight of his youngest brother. He hadn't quite had enough warning to brace himself for the impact. "Don't do that. You could have been hurt," he scolded Dustyn.

"But I wasn't. You were there to catch me."

"I'll always be there to catch you." Lyle couldn't help smiling and wrapping Dustyn up in his arms.

Things had been so much simpler when he was twelve. There was no reason to worry about his future or his soul. His only cares had been tending the orchard, the horses, and looking after Dustyn.

A sharp crack had him leaping up from his seat. He ached to extinguish the fire in order to give strength to the darkness around him, but he couldn't because Dustyn was there. The next best solution would be to walk away from the circle of light provided by the weak flames.

"Lyle?" Dustyn's voice was timid, shaky.

"I'll be back. Stay by the fire." With those words, Lyle slipped into the shadows of the forest.

His senses expanded so that he could feel, hear, and see everything that the dark around him covered. The only area within miles that was blind to him was the fire where he had left Dustyn. To his right, the presence of a dread-ogre was slowly shuffling forward.

Lyle took to the trees. Not only would it afford him more silence, but it was faster. The closer he came to the dread-ogre, the closer the darkness within him rose to the surface. The large, lumbering creature finally passed underneath the tree he was in.

Lyle pulled his dagger and dropped from the branch. His free arm wrapped around the dread-ogre's neck, pulling its head back to expose the vulnerable throat. A mere sliver of moonlight glinted on the blade of the dagger as it sliced through the thick skin.

The creature fell forward with a soft whump. Lyle wiped the dagger in the grass and smoothly slid it back into its sheath. The night grew darker still as a thick cloud blotted out the feeble rays of the waning moon; and Lyle felt the same effect deep in his soul, knowing it would show on his body.

Dustyn

Dustyn shivered in the humid air of the night. He'd known that at some point they would come across a dread-ogre. It was impossible not to when traveling through the forest surrounding Galmor.

A growl from the edge of the firelight startled him. He stood and edged closer to the fire. If it was just a small predator, he could grab a lit branch to swing at it. If it turned out to be a dread-ogre, he planned to dash into the shadows where he could alert Lyle.

As his brother's form emerged, he instantly noticed that something was wrong. Lyle's movements were too sinuous, too smooth. Dustyn scrambled backward and tripped over the log he had been sitting on. His brother's eyes glinted like obsidian in the light of the fire.

Lyle dropped to his knees right in front of him, and Dustyn could see the inside edges of his brother's lips turning black. Left hand shooting out to grip Lyle's, Dustyn forced open the energy channel that would allow him to absorb the darkness from his older brother. Still, the black tint spread outward until Lyle's lips were half covered with the unnatural coloring.

"No, no, no. Please, no!" Dustyn whispered fervently, sliding his other hand under Lyle's shirt to rest above his heart.

Lyle merely stared off into the distance. Dustyn knew he was too far into the grips of The Morrígan to try to bring himself back. The fire beside them was growing weaker and beginning to sputter, while Lyle's lips were now entirely black.

"Damn you!" Dustyn surged to his knees, pushing his older brother back and down to the ground in the process. He kept his hands in place as he brought his lips forward to tentatively touch Lyle's.

The taste of forest shadows, moonlight, and blood lingered on the dark lips. Dustyn had to admit it was an addicting taste, almost as addicting as Lyle himself. With a groan, Dustyn gave in to the attraction he had denied for so long. He forced his tongue past Lyle's pliant, but unresponsive, lips and past his teeth.

The darkness in his brother roared to life without warning, charging into Dustyn in an effort to possess him as well. The current of shadows began to ebb, and Lyle's hand came up to cup the back of his head lovingly.

Dustyn was dizzy from lack of air when he drew back to look at his brother's face. Noting that Lyle's eyes had returned to their rich chocolate, Dustyn smiled and collapsed against the strong form. He snuggled against Lyle's warm chest and let his eyes drift closed.

Lyle

That had been too close for comfort. Lyle didn't even remember making his way back to camp. The darkness had almost won.

He stared down at his brother, curled against him like a scared child seeking comfort. That was exactly it though. Dustyn had been scared. Lyle had felt it in the way his hands had trembled, had seen it in his eyes before Dustyn kissed him.

He sat there for gods only knew how long, just holding his youngest brother close. When Marlow had told him to choose, he hadn't put any credence in the warning. Yet as the first rays of dawn brightened the sky above, Lyle made up his mind to stand by what he said in the pub. He would see Dustyn wherever he wished to go and then let The Morrigan claim his being.

He shifted Dustyn off of his lap and began to clean up the camp. When all was ready for traveling again, he took a moment to think about the problem of keeping an unconscious Dustyn atop a horse. Hoping that the horse he bought in Benlamora was well trained, Lyle hoisted Dustyn's prone form across its back. He took his own seat on his gelding before calling the other horse over so he could lift Dustyn up onto his lap once more. Lyle gave the order for his horse to walk forward, knowing the other would follow.

Dustyn

Dustyn knew he was dreaming again, although this time the dream was really a memory.

“Lyle! Lyle, watch this!” Dustyn waved at his older brother from the top of the waterfall. Once he had caught his attention, Dustyn brought his hands together above his head and dove toward the crystal clear waters below.

The pool was not as deep this spring as he was used to, and Dustyn injured his wrist trying to slow his momentum. A strong hand grabbed him by the arm from above and pulled upward. He surfaced and was met with an angry glare from Lyle.

“Fool!” Lyle shook him by the shoulders. “You could have hit your head and drowned. What were you thinking?”

“I thought it was safe. Besides, if I had hit my head you would have saved me.” Dustyn smiled at the brother whom he adored.

“Don’t you understand that I won’t always be there to save you? I’m a Cathach. I’ll have to go away on hunting trips. Someday The Morrígan may claim my body for the shadows. You can’t expect me to be at your side forever.”

Dustyn held back his tears until they were safely back home.

Though the memory was from twelve years ago, it was just as painful now as it was back then. The tears came again, falling from sleeping eyes.

Lyle

This was surely torture. Perhaps it was the price The Morrígan was making him pay for being deprived of his body the night before. The way Dustyn’s hip rubbed against his groin with the gait of the horse was having a predictable effect on him.

By the time nightfall was only an hour away, Lyle was in pain from the sustained arousal. He was once more thankful for the training of the horse he purchased as he transferred Dustyn to its back. It took a few moments of deep breathing before Lyle could bring himself to stand upright after dismounting.

Trusting the horse to not wander off with his little brother, Lyle began gathering tinder and kindling. He readied the space for their camp and made sure to clear a spot where they could sleep. Just as he finished, Lyle heard a soft thud from where the horses were.

“Ow...” Dustyn’s groan calmed Lyle a little. That meant he was awake. “Where are we?”

"We're almost out of the forest. I carried you on my horse while you were unconscious." Lyle turned to guide his brother to a seat by the fire he was about to start.

"Your lips?!" Dustyn gasped and dropped to his knees. "They're still black..."

"Don't concern yourself with that. Sit down." Lyle was unnerved by his brother's reaction. Shock and sorrow had been all too clear in his expression. "Once the fire is started, I'm going to see if I can hunt some small game for dinner."

"No! Don't, please don't..." Dustyn's hands were clinging to him, balled into fists at the hem of his shirt.

"We need to eat." Lyle jerked forward, pulling his shirt free.

"I can catch fish if there's a stream nearby. Please... You can't..."

"It's just going to be a rabbit or two. The Morrígan won't ask her due for just that."

The fire crackled as it greedily spread to the kindling. Lyle didn't say a word as he walked into the forest. He thought he might have heard Dustyn sob, but he needed to find game before it grew too dark.

Dustyn

Dustyn hugged his knees close to his chest. How could he ever have thought he would be able to leave Lyle? There had been a time, before the waterfall incident, when Dustyn had believed he could stay at his brother's side forever.

He had been naïve enough to think he could even stay with him after Lyle bonded to an Anamlia. That day had shattered that illusion into countless shards. That was the day he had decided that if he couldn't be with his brother, then he didn't ever want to be bonded to a Cathach.

The thing was, Dustyn had always believed his older brother would bond to an Anamlia. He had reasoned with himself that settling for a mildly happy existence was better than suffering every time he would see Lyle smile at his bonded Soul-Healer. It had never occurred to him that Lyle would choose to fade into shadow.

As the different strings of thought wove an intricate web within his mind, Dustyn resolved to change the outcome that Lyle had in mind. He walked over

to his brother's gelding and searched for the knife Lyle had been given by the Guild when he turned thirteen. He pulled the wickedly sharp blade from its sheath on the saddle. The last ray of sunlight reflected briefly off of the black, stone blade.

Lyle

Lyle tied the legs of the fourth rabbit in the same rope as the others and tossed it back over his shoulder. The catch had been quite simple, really. He had been lucky enough to happen upon the little animals grazing on clover in the shade of a tree. It only took a thought to bend the shadow to his will, trapping them all.

He mulled over Dustyn and the careless nature that was his trademark. Lyle decided that before dissolving into the darkness permanently, he should find someone to protect his brother in his stead. Would that really work?

No. There wasn't a person alive, save Lyle himself, who could keep his youngest brother in line. Who said that he had to let The Morrígan claim his life after they were free of Galmor and the forest surrounding it? Nobody. He could claim some freedom for himself after this. He could claim Dustyn for himself.

That was what he had intended to do all along, wasn't it? It had been the dumbest, random loss of common sense that day at the inn when he vowed to see Dustyn to safety and then leave. He internally despaired the time he had lost trying to be the sensible, protective older brother as he walked back to the camp.

Dustyn

Dustyn shivered while the rabbits cooked on a spit over the fire, but he wasn't cold. He was anxious. Lyle had come back from hunting with a different air about him than before. Lyle was obviously deadly as a Cathach, but only to dread-ogres and other threats to their land. Now, Dustyn felt a sense of danger focused on him.

He watched his brother move about with determined, precise efficiency. Once, he caught Lyle looking at him. The effect was like that which a wolf's gaze might have on a fawn. A thrill shot down his spine, causing his heart to race.

Yet, through the process of serving the rabbit with some of the bread they carried, and through the meal itself, Lyle didn't say a word. He didn't give any

indication as to the change in his demeanor. It was only when Dustyn lay down on his side of the bed of blankets, clutching Lyle's dagger where he had hidden it earlier, that his brother finally acted.

Dustyn felt Lyle's strong arms enfold him in a possessive embrace from behind. Hot breath feathered across the back of his neck, inducing another shiver to ripple through him. The sudden caress of Lyle's tongue down the side of his throat made him jump.

"Give in," Lyle whispered in his ear.

"To what?" Dustyn panted, trying to clear the haze filling his head. There was something he meant to do.

"Your instincts. Give in to them. Give in to the instinct that makes you love me. You can't run from me after all, can you?" Lyle was tormenting Dustyn both with his words and his hands as his fingers began to slide up underneath Dustyn's shirt.

"You sound—ah, so sure of yourself." Dustyn's reply was interrupted by a sharp gasp when Lyle lightly pinched one of his nipples. Speaking was impeded by the rapid breaths caused by his excitement, and coherent thought was quickly slipping away. Those devilish hands roved all over his torso, teasing and toying with his most sensitive spots.

"That's because I'm going to tie you up if you ever try to leave again. You're mine. You've always been mine." Lyle bit at the tender spot where Dustyn's neck and shoulder met to accentuate his claim. "Nobody else can ever touch you the way I do. Do you understand me?"

Dustyn could only nod, too delirious with the painful pleasure of his brother's attentions to his body. He thrummed with a buzzing, excited energy. Dustyn wanted to push Lyle over the edge. It wasn't fair that he was the only one losing control.

Lyle

Lyle groaned when his little brother pressed back against him, wriggling in the most evil way. A smaller hand pressed over his and guided it down the smooth skin under his palm. He could feel the quivering of Dustyn's muscles as their hands moved past navel, hips, and the waistband of his trousers.

At the same time Lyle wrapped his hand around the erection begging for his attention, he licked from Dustyn's shoulder up towards his delicate jawline. His

brother took the hint and turned his head to meet Lyle in a smoldering, desperate kiss. Hard, demanding lips met soft, yielding ones.

Possessive nature blotted out any protective instincts still residing within him when Dustyn abruptly pushed Lyle's hands away. He let out a low growl and reached, out of habit, for the curls that were no longer there. The growl changed to a strangled moan as Dustyn straddled him.

A flash of moonlight was the only warning Lyle had before the tip of his obsidian dagger cut into the palm of his left hand. The blood welled up quickly, and he resisted the urge to clench his hand in a fist. Speech failed him when he saw Dustyn press the tip of the dagger to his own left hand. In one swift motion, he flipped Dustyn back onto his back and pressed over him.

"You've no idea how little patience I have left. There won't be any going back." Lyle's words were hard but his touch was soft as he began to undress his brother.

"That's okay," Dustyn whispered. "I can't let you leave me."

"I was just trying to do the right thing, as your brother."

"You were?" Dustyn blinked, wide-eyed, and pressed a hand to Lyle's chest.

"It's what I should have done. I'm a horrible brother." He grinned bitterly.

"You're not! You're a good brother," Dustyn argued.

"If I were a good older brother, I wouldn't be doing this." Lyle pressed one finger into the tight pucker that he had exposed.

Dustyn

Dustyn let his head tip back to expose his throat, lost in the sensation of Lyle fingering him. His cock twitched when the finger inside him brushed against a sensitive spot. Lyle must have noticed, because he touched it again.

With a moan, Dustyn gripped his cock with his right hand. He began slowly jerking himself to the rhythm of Lyle's ministrations. His lips parted in silent invitation, and he raised his left hand toward Lyle.

His brother immediately twined the fingers of his own left hand between Dustyn's. A burning heat spread from where their palms touched, their blood mingling. It was not an unpleasant sensation, but Dustyn had never realized how powerful it would be.

"I bind your soul to me through blood. Just as your soul belongs to The Morrígan, part of it is mine to keep, so she can possess you no longer." The words flowed not only from Dustyn's memory, but also from his heart.

Lyle withdrew his finger, leaving Dustyn feeling empty. After a moment though, something wider and hotter pressed against his entrance. It burned uncomfortably as the ring of muscle began to stretch farther than it had for Lyle's finger. The burn morphed into sharp pain, making Dustyn's breath shallow and forcing a tear to leak from his eye.

"You bind your body to mine by entering me. Your body belongs only to me, and The Morrígan can have no part of you." Dustyn struggled to recall the words through the fog of pain and forced them out with the little breath he had left.

"I bind my soul to you through blood. I bind my body to yours by entering you. This son of The Morrígan is your bonded partner for as long as I continue to live." Lyle leaned in to kiss Dustyn after uttering the bonding words. When he pulled away Lyle asked, "Are you ready, or do I need to wait a bit longer?"

The passion of the kiss had eased away some of the pain, so Dustyn replied, "I'm ready."

Lyle's hips snapped forward, burying his shaft deep inside Dustyn. He couldn't help but wince, and was thankful when his brother didn't withdraw immediately. Their left hands were still joined, but Lyle brought his right hand to wrap around Dustyn's where it was still curled around his softening dick.

Lyle started to glide their joined hands up and down, making Dustyn hard again. When he began to moan and pant, writhing beneath his brother, Dustyn felt Lyle slide out from within him. He keened a protest that was cut short when Lyle surged back in.

The pace was slow at first, but it built rapidly until Dustyn felt like he was going to fly apart. Lyle suddenly shifted back, and the head of his cock rubbed against that spot inside. Dustyn incoherently babbled his pleasure, but his brother seemed to understand anyway and remained in that exact position as he pistoned in and out of him.

The friction coiled inside him, filling him to the brim with restless ecstasy. White spots exploded across his vision as he came hard, shooting his seed up onto his chest and clenching his ass. He felt Lyle follow in the next instant, and he was further aroused by the feeling of his brother's semen spilling inside of him.

Lyle

Lyle collapsed on top of Dustyn, kissing him in satisfaction. Dustyn would always be safe now. Lyle would never have to leave his side again, at least not until he died. Death was a distant possibility now instead of impending reality.

He found himself smiling as he thought of the years stretching ahead of him, the decades. Dustyn was his now, and he knew that some things would change while others would not—for instance, Dustyn's penchant for fighting with him.

"You're heavy. Get off me already." Dustyn glared at him.

Lyle chuckled, and it turned into full-blown laughter when the glare intensified and was accompanied by the strike of a small fist to his bicep. He worked his arms under Dustyn and rolled over onto his back. With a roll of his hips, a gasp drifted into the night and Dustyn's eyelids fluttered closed. It was a good thing Lyle knew how to distract his youngest brother.

The End

Author Bio

Ava Penn is an incurable bibliophile with a passion for food, romance, and nature. This often shows in most of her writing. Other interests include anime/manga, video games, horses, and Amtgard. She loves to hear from readers, so feel free to get in touch.

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