

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



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**THE EAST WIND
AND THE
ROOTLESS CYPRESS**
Elyse Night

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE EAST WIND AND THE ROOTLESS CYPRESS

By Elyse Night

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 is an Open Road*.

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many

long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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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THE EAST WIND AND THE ROOTLESS CYPRESS

By Elyse Night

Photo Description

A young man is crying, war paint streaked down his face. He is clutching a sword, and there is a blue tattoo around his visible bicep.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I've been watching him for what seems like forever. I hate him. The need to kill him burns like acid in my veins. But when I come to do the deed, this is what I see, and I find that I cannot end his life.

Fantasy or sci fi, please. Other than that, go for it.

Sincerely,

Jaye

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: enemies to lovers, shifters non-wolf, magic users, sweet/no sex, action/suspense/adventure

Content Warnings: violence, genocide

Word Count: 7,220

THE EAST WIND AND THE ROOTLESS CYPRESS

By Elyse Night

He ran. Cin ran as fast as his legs would carry him, as the spirits of his dead comrades, his *family*, helped him navigate the treacherous Phantom Forest. He could still feel the stray brush of oily magic trying to ensnare him. Cin could not allow that; his entire life depended on getting as far away from the ones who wielded the strange oily magic. They had already murdered all of the Spirit Walkers that had resided in Zefrin. Cin and a few others were the only lucky ones because they had been all the way across the continent helping the dead in the different kingdoms.

He just had to reach the old, abandoned temple residing in the middle of the Oldhaven mountain range. The wards that had protected it from becoming decrepit also kept it from being found unless one was keyed into it. Cin was the only person to know of it, so he would be protected once he got there.

“Hyacinthe, your pursuers have stopped to replenish themselves.” The spirit of his foster father, High Priest Cian, spoke up. *“It would be a good idea to find someplace safe to rest; you are still a day’s travel from the tunnel that runs through the Oldhavens into Soltarwyn.”*

Cin shook his head, his white-blond hair flowing down one of his shoulders, and never broke stride in his running.

“The tunnel will be watched, Papa. Besides, I’ve been through these mountains so many times since I took over the duties to help the departed in Soltarwyn and Ansturian; I’ve found hidden passageways that cut the time in half, as well as a temple that only I seem to be able to see and enter.”

Cin continued on, wanting to get more distance between himself and his pursuers. He finally stopped when he stumbled over a tree root. He lay on the cold ground gasping for breath and tried to ignore the pain in his sides. He slowly rolled over onto his back, staring blearily up at the waning moon through the branches.

He could no longer feel the oily magic, which could only mean his pursuers were out of his sensing range. Good. He finally found the strength to crawl to a nearby tree, resting his back against the trunk. He shut his eyes and fell into a light sleep.

Cin collapsed to his knees. Gone. They were all gone. He stared blankly at the wreckage that used to be the Temple of the Grey Lady, his home since he was three years of age. What—Who had done this?

“Hyacinthe! Hyacinthe!” a deep voice called to him, bringing him out from his shock. He blinked slowly, the faded ghostly form of his foster father kneeling in front of him.

“Papa? What—what happened?” Cin sobbed out.

Cian looked sorrowfully at him. “You remember the reports we’ve been getting about those strange mages that came from the Northeast?”

He nodded. “Yes. They were searching for something and were thought to be the ones behind the destruction of many of the temples.”

“Yes, we found out that they are looking for someone. They seemed very interested in you, Hyacinthe, and they acted as if they were running out of time, anxious and aggressive in their questioning. And when none could give them the answers they desired, they razed the temple to the ground with all of us inside.”

Cin trembled. “What do they want with me?”

Cian shook his head. “I do not know. Nevertheless, whatever they want you for is something very dark, something corrupt and a bastardization of our powers. They felt like black magic and death, but an unnatural death. That is a sign of a Necromancer.”

Before he could say anything, a pervasive magic oozed over him. Shuddering in horror and disgust, Cin quickly grabbed his staff and bolted toward the Phantom Forest. Escape was the only thing on his mind and he knew the perfect refuge.

Cin gasped awake, sweat cooling over his body. He sat there in silence for a moment before he felt the oily magic growing stronger. Cursing quietly, he took a hold of his staff and scrambled away, running deeper and deeper into the forest. He had maybe a half-day’s travel to get to the entrance of one of his secret tunnels and then a few marks to reach one of his many hidden rest spots. Then he would reach the old temple a day later, Gods willing he lose his pursuers before he reached the mountains.

Maelgwyn shoved a dead lynx Shifter off his sword, already coming around to parry a blow aimed for his shoulder with one of his numerous daggers. Punching the bastard, he struck a deadly blow before continuing to fight against the larger Pack. He could hear his own Flight fighting—their yells and curses and the sounds of their weapons meeting flesh, the death screams of dying Shifters. *Fuck these fuckers to the Pits!* The fights had been called off three days ago, as per the treaty the Warlords struck thirty years earlier.

He dodged a sloppy punch before striking the attacking Shifter in the temple with his sword's pommel, using enough force to cave in their skull. When no one came at him, Maelgwyn let loose his own call to signal for his Flight to respond too. Several birdcalls from different areas answered him back. Counting, he reached thirty-three distinct calls before his second-in-command came to his side.

“Report, Durst,” he said, already cleaning his weapons on cloth scraps.

“They were Pack Heartrage. Their leader was Warlord Shademaw, and they came at us with their entire force. One hundred eighty-seven all together from Theron's count. We lost twenty-seven Flight members and Pack Heartrage lost one hundred sixty, including their Warlord. The 'Dancer twins tore Warlord Shademaw to pieces from what I could see.” Durst finished calmly.

Maelgwyn nodded, proud of his youngest Flight members. “Anything else I should know?”

Durst hesitated, a small hitch in his left shoulder. “Lorcán told me that he had seen a Zefrini Spirit Walker while scouting before we were ambushed by Pack Heartrage. He believes the Spirit Walker will arrive within the next hour mark.”

Clenching his fist tightly, Maelgwyn breathed harshly through his nose. Tamping down the desire to find the damn Spirit Walker and rip their corpse-fucker body to pieces, he breathed heavily for several minutes, Durst tense beside him.

Gradually, he calmed down and finally sheathed his sword. He watched as his remaining Flight members walked toward them, visually checking them for any serious injuries. He could see Blair already pulling out medical supplies, her left hand resting on the shoulder of one of the goshawks. Her hand glowed a soft golden color as she gradually moved it down the arm. As it faded, she nodded at the goshawk and walked on to the next Flight member in medical need.

“Once everyone’s healed up, we make for the base as quickly as possible. I don’t want another ambush to happen, so be more alert than usual.” Maelgwyn ordered, getting calls back in affirmation.

Once he got the go-ahead from Blair, Maelgwyn shifted into his golden eagle form and let out a cry, flying into the air above the treetops, and was joined by the rest of his Flight seconds later. Circling around his Flight, he gave out three short cries then flew off toward base hidden in the Oldhaven Mountains.

Hours passed as they drew closer to the mountains, Maelgwyn keeping an eye on both the setting sun and his Flight. Swerving down, he gave the cry for descent and carefully led the others through one of the numerous openings that led into the mountains proper. This particular opening led to a tunnel that the first leader of the Skyfall Flight had hollowed out herself, leading to a safe rest site. Landing inside the tunnel, Maelgwyn shifted back into his human form and waited for the rest of his Flight to come through before leading them to the site.

The campsite looked the same from the last time they had been there, months ago. Ancient trees surrounded one side and a large hole overhead let the evening sky filter inside and provide some light. Maelgwyn signaled to Espen and Lorcán to scout around and report in a few hours as he watched the camp set up and a few fires get started. He sat close to where Durst was talking quietly with the ’Dancer sisters, a pair of twin peregrine Shifters who had joined the Flight several years ago after their own was destroyed by some human mages.

As the evening turned into night, Maelgwyn roused from his thoughts by a presence coming to stand next to him. He turned and looked up to see Espen, who signed that he had found someone a short flight from the campsite. The person was close to the split tree, maybe a few dozen meters from it.

He nodded in thanks and stood up, signaling at Durst to take watch while he dealt with whoever was near the split tree. Shifting, he flew off. When he landed close to a group of trees, he saw exactly whom Espen had found. Maelgwyn held his breath, crouching back behind the group of trees and small boulders.

Ahead of him, leaning against a large rock, was a fucking Spirit Walker. Their clothing was ripped in several places, stained with muck and blood, and scratches littered the revealed skin. Their staff was in the circle of their arms, their face hidden from view. He felt that familiar burning hatred coursing through his veins.

The bastard was so close Maelgwyn could taste the blood he would be soon spilling. He checked his weapons, loosening his favorite dagger from its sheath. Readying himself, Maelgwyn took one step forward from his hiding spot before he halted in surprise.

Tears. Tears fell from pale eyes surrounded by smudged eye paint. White-blond hair, dirtied and loose, covered parts of their face, but Maelgwyn could still make out the tears and the complete and utter heartbreak on the Spirit Walker's face.

Something twinged in his heart and he sheathed his dagger. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. FUCK!* Maelgwyn could not do it. After so many years of waiting to avenge his mother against Spirit Walkers, he could not even fucking kill one, even when he stumbled upon one. Not when they looked devastated, like their entire world had fallen and crumbled apart and nothing would ever fix it again.

“Who is there?” the Spirit Walker called out in a soft tenor.

Maelgwyn silently cursed himself before stepping out to where he could be seen by the Spirit Walker.

The Spirit Walker muffled a scream with his hand, his entire body shaking in fear. His eyes widened and the tears seemed to cascade faster down his cheeks.

“S-Shifter! H-have you c-come to k-kill m-me as well?” he stuttered out in his fear.

Maelgwyn held his hands out and away from his weapons, attempting to look as nonthreatening as possible. However, it appeared to not work as well as he had hoped. The Spirit Walker shrank into himself as Maelgwyn drew closer at a slow pace. Some sort of unknown inner calm overcame him.

“No, Spirit Walker. I have not come to kill you,” he replied in as gentle a tone as he could.

“Lies,” the Spirit Walker retorted. “You were going to kill me a moment ago. What changed?”

“I do not know why, when I hate Spirit Walkers with my entire soul and body. Yet, I saw you crying and could not raise my dagger to you,” he answered truthfully.

He watched as the Spirit Walker attempted to crawl away from his approach, whilst still facing him. However, he was too slow and Maelgwyn was able to get close enough to pinch a nerve in the back of his neck that caused the

Spirit Walker to pass out. He caught him gently and tied his hands up with a bit of rope he had stored in a pouch. Grabbing the staff and slinging the other man onto his back, Maelgwyn walked back to the campsite.

Maelgwyn knew his Flight was confused over his behavior; he did not fully understand it himself. There was something different about the Spirit Walker he had brought back, then had tied up to a tree close to his tent. At the very least, Maelgwyn knew he could keep an eye on the other man.

He kept an eye on his Flight as well, especially the younger members. They were more curious than a feline Shifter with a new toy. One of his Flight sat next to him, nudging him in his right arm. Maelgwyn looked over. It was Durst, of course. His half brother would know him better than anyone else would. He would be the bravest to come near him right now.

“Why did you bring him, Maelgwyn?” Durst asked softly, keeping his tone neutral.

Sighing deeply, Maelgwyn shrugged. “I had the chance, Durst. But I couldn’t for some fuckin’ reason.”

“Bullshit. Why?” Durst retorted sharply, not giving up on getting the truth from him.

Maelgwyn struggled to find the words—words to explain why he didn’t cut the Spirit Walker’s throat when he had the chance. He stared across the campfire, where the Spirit Walker lay unconscious with dark shadows under his closed eyes. Finally, after several long minutes passed, he found his reason.

“I saw him crying, looking like his entire world had burned to ashes, as if he was a shadow of the person he should be. Like how Father looked when my mother fell into Blood Rage and almost murdered the entire Flight before she fled. And I found that I couldn’t kill him,” he told Durst quietly, his eyes never leaving the Spirit Walker’s form.

Durst sat beside him, letting it all sink in. Taking a deep breath and then slowly letting it out, he gripped Maelgwyn’s shoulder gently.

“I understand, brother. Do you want me to tell the rest of the Flight? Or leave this alone and let you deal with it?” he asked.

“It’s up to you; I do not care either way.”

Nodding, Durst stood up and left Maelgwyn to his thoughts.

Cin woke to the sounds of people talking near him, the smell of meat cooking, and the sharp ashy smell of fire. Confused, he lay where he was, trying to remember what happened to him. It was with a sickening jolt that he remembered: the Shifter appearing, Cin certain he would die from the other's blade, and the pure hatred that had been in the Shifter's eyes before he had gotten a clearer view of Cin.

"Oh good, you're awake," a woman's soft voice said above him. Startled, he opened his eyes and locked gazes with an older woman with reddish hair and kind cinnamon-brown eyes, who was holding a bowl of porridge. "Good morning, Spirit Walker. I am Blair Steeltail, Healer of the Skyfall Flight, led by Warlord Maelgwyn Bloodwalker."

"Good morning, Healer Steeltail. I am Hyacinthe, Priest of the Grey Lady and Spirit Walker of Zefrin," he said with a small bow as he accepted the bowl.

Healer Blair smiled as he took small bites, nodding her head in return. She quietly asked him if she could check him over. Cin gave her his permission and sat still while she ran her softly glowing hands over his form and he left his breakfast unfinished. He observed his new surroundings, taking notice that while everyone was busy, they all still stole glances his way.

"If you don't mind my asking, why does everyone keep glancing in my direction?" Cin asked Healer Blair.

She hummed for a moment, "Well, for the younger members, you are the first Spirit Walker they have ever seen. However, for us older members, it's because we're mostly confused about why our warlord brought you to the camp. You see, Maelgwyn has a deep hatred for Spirit Walkers, so we usually try to avoid going near them. To make sure Warlord doesn't lose his control and kill them. And yet, here you are, alive and in relatively good health."

Cin looked over to where Maelgwyn was standing. He was conversing with another man who bore similar facial features to his own, and he was pointing at several places on a worn map he held in his hands. In the morning light, Cin could see that he had an imposing look about him, and his height helped with that.

He was golden-tan, his dark brown hair was in a braided mohawk, and his skin was heavily tattooed, scarred, and pierced. He wore a pair of dark brown breeches tucked into equally dark boots with a deep orange-red vest that showed off his muscular arms. There were weapons settled all over his body. Cin felt a shiver crawl down his spine; Maelgwyn was a man he did not want to cross.

When Healer Blair left, Cin finally noticed that he was tied loosely to a tree next to a broken-down tent. Luckily, his staff was close enough for him to reach it and bring it to his lap. He picked up the bowl and finished eating; the spirit of his father was gone now, having disappeared the moment Cin had reached one of his hidden tunnels into the mountains.

He still was unsure why the Necromancers were hunting him; Cin had finally been able to lose them once he entered the passageway. Hopefully, they would not be able to find him. Now he just needed to find a way to get away from the Shifters and he could make his way to the hidden temple and safety.

“So, I am told you are called Hyacinthe,” a deep growling voice said.

Cin startled, looking up into gold-brown eyes. Maelgwyn scowled at him, his lips pinched together. Cin’s voice caught in his throat, so he nodded in answer instead. Maelgwyn stared hard at Cin before unsheathing a small knife and cutting the rope tying him to the tree.

Cin stayed still, unsure of what to do. Then, he felt it. The Necromancers’ oily, pervasive magic seemed to crawl down his spine, leaving Cin feeling violated. They had found a way into the mountains.

“Where exactly are we? In the Oldhavens?” he asked, shakily standing up and using his staff as a crutch. Maelgwyn raised an eyebrow at him.

“We’re currently at a campsite close to the bend that leads to the Forked Paths. Why do you need to know?” he replied slowly.

Cin breathed deeply. Forked Paths, which was about four days away from where the temple was resting in the Shallow Valley. The Necromancers were two days behind him, maybe less if he could now just feel their slowly strengthening, violating magic. If he left now and pushed himself, and used several of his shortcuts, he would just barely make it to the valley.

“Why do you need to know this?” Maelgwyn demanded again, jarring Cin from his thoughts.

“Because I have been pursued by Necromancers for the last several days! Necromancers that have already killed all but a few of us Spirit Walkers, and they seem to be after me specifically. For reasons *I do not know!*” he told him quietly.

“Necromancers,” Maelgwyn said flatly, disbelieving Cin.

“You think us Spirit Walkers don’t know what a majority of people call us? What they think of us? We know exactly what people talk about behind our

backs, but we ignore it because the Grey Lady has chosen us to help the souls that are lost or need spiritual healing before they can cross over. We heal the battlegrounds so that negative spiritual residue does not stay and cause problems for the living. Necromancers are what you people call us. What they do is dark magic, unnatural magic. They feed on the souls of their victims and use that to power their unnatural lives and magic. They raise the dead and use their bodies to do their bidding. That is a Necromancer, Warlord Maelgwyn Bloodwalker,” Cin told him.

Maelgwyn stared down into Cin’s eyes, before seeming to see the truth in his words. He seemed to deflate a little bit, a tiredness creeping into his expression.

“I might not hate as much as I made myself believe, but I still do not like Spirit Walkers. But you speak the truth. I will let my Flight know we will not be going back to our base.”

Cin sighed in relief. “I know a safe area. No one can go in unless they are with me. It is an abandoned temple in the Shallow Valley; I know several dozen shortcuts and passageways that can cut the time to get there. We need to hurry, though; I can feel their magic getting stronger.”

Maelgwyn nodded and went off, ordering his Flight to break down camp quickly and telling them there was a change of plans. None of the members seemed surprised at the changes. Half an hour later, the campsite looked undisturbed and showed no signs that a large group had been using it.

Cin stood near Healer Blair, using her as a shield from the curious eyes of some of the younger Flight members. She seemed to find it amusing, but she let him be. He was thankful for that, and he would thank her later, just once they were in a safer location to do so. Now, he just had to survive.

Maelgwyn watched as the Spirit—no, as Hyacinthe—led the Flight through one of his hidden shortcuts. He was sure-footed and careful, warning those behind him if there was a low ceiling or rubble. His presence was calming, and Maelgwyn had noticed that Blair had taken him under her wing. This seemed to settle Hyacinthe who, even though he tried to hide it, was still quite wary of the Flight and, more specifically, of Maelgwyn. He could not blame the other man, though.

They had been traveling for two days, and from what Maelgwyn was able to hear from Hyacinthe, they were less than a half day away from Shallow Valley and the temple he claimed was a safe haven.

The Necromancers' ambush party came out of nowhere; the only warning the Flight had was Hyacinthe falling over with a piercing scream, convulsing on the ground as if he was being tortured. Immediately, two members went to protect him while the rest fought off the horde that the Necromancers had brought with them. Maelgwyn was in the thick of the battle, cutting off heads of the clearly undead Shifters the Necromancers were controlling.

He ignored everything but the undead Shifters coming at him, using every weapon he carried and fighting hand-to-hand as well. He distantly heard the screams of his Flight fighting back, the death screams of those cut down. Then he heard a sound he never wanted to hear again. He turned around and saw Hyacinthe standing up and using his staff as a crutch.

Hyacinthe was paler than the undead Shifters, facing off against a man he clearly knew, judging by how shaken he appeared. His head shook frantically in denial before his eyes went from pale grey to pure black, a harsh dark green glow surrounding his body. It pulsed out from his body, hitting the man before him and sweeping out through the battle.

Every undead dropped from where they stood, what mockery of life they had snuffed out by Hyacinthe, who swayed where he stood beside the fallen man's form.

"We need to go, *now!* The Necromancers will regroup quickly, and we need to get as much space between them and us as possible!" Hyacinthe demanded, looking at the fallen Flight members with grief. Maelgwyn buried his own grief, looking around and seeing that only ten Flight members made it out of the ambush.

"You heard him, Skyfall Flight. Everyone partial shift and let's get to that damn temple. Durst and Blair, you're to carry Hyacinthe," he ordered before shifting his wings forward. His Flight followed his commands, Blair and Durst gently gripping Hyacinthe by his shoulders and waist and then lifting up.

Hyacinthe stayed calm the whole time, directing where to go through the greater height and soon enough, they entered into Shallow Valley. Hyacinthe pointed toward the northern part of the valley, saying that the temple resided in a large cavern hidden by the ancient forest in that area. The Flight landed outside the forest, Maelgwyn landing next to Hyacinthe and allowing him to lead his Flight.

"I need everyone to place a hand on me once we get close enough to the wards. They're keyed to me and I think that as long as you're touching me,

you'll come through safely," Hyacinthe explained quietly, as he set a fast pace through the trees.

Maelgwyn kept pace with him, focused on getting his surviving Flight to a safe place and planning how to make those Necromancers pay. Then, afterwards, he would find a hidden corner and grieve properly. That could wait for another time. The trees thinned out then, and as the opening to the cavern came into view, Maelgwyn got his first view of the temple.

Large, was his first thought. Large and oddly pretty like one of those old noble mansions he had gotten a glimpse of in his youth during his first year out of base. The entire temple was made of some pale grey stone, streaked with white and pale blue crystals. Great murals were painted with bright colors on the pillars, depicting the Gods and their great deeds. The Grey Lady, Goddess of death, rebirth, and magic, was painted into a mural toward the front; Her eyes closed and at peace, She was dressed in Her loose-fitting gown and shawl.

"Everyone, place a hand on me now," Hyacinthe said, already reaching a hand out for one of them to grasp. Maelgwyn grasped it, ignoring a warm feeling in his chest. He watched as the others placed their hands on Hyacinthe's shoulders, arms, and chest. Then they all slowly made their way through the wards Hyacinthe had indicated. A cool mist fell over them, causing Maelgwyn to hold his breath in shock. Then they were through the wards and Maelgwyn could breathe normally again. This close, he could see the wear of age in the temple stones. He could see that the murals were not as bright as they had first seemed. The Grey Lady's eyes were not closed, but in truth the paint had worn out with the passing of centuries that the temple had been abandoned.

"Skyfall Flight, we rest here. Tomorrow, we plan for what we'll do to those Gods forsaken Necromancers. We can grieve afterwards; right now we need clear heads," Maelgwyn said softly, watching as his Flight nodded and started clearing up a place to camp.

Satisfied, he turned around to Hyacinthe who stood there waiting. "Now, you and I are going to have a talk."

Hyacinthe nodded, seemingly not surprised. "Yes, I agree. We can talk over here." He pointed toward a corner that was still in view of his Flight. Maelgwyn walked over to it and settled against the wall.

"Now, explain what that was when we were ambushed," he demanded.

"I can't quite say. The magic that the Necromancers have, it feels oily and violating to me. Like someone is continually pouring disgusting slime down my

spine. When they were close enough for me to feel them clearly for the first time, I could feel them attempting to grab ahold of my magic. It was as if a thousand red-hot poker sticks were holding me down, twisting into my skin,” Hyacinthe explained softly, his eyes turned away from Maelgwyn.

He hummed softly. “And the undead man? Who was he?”

Hyacinthe stiffened, biting his bottom lip and eyes growing damp. “He was my foster-father, Cian, High Priest of the temple I grew up in after my parents were murdered while trying to protect me from a Shifter in Blood Rage. I haven’t been able to see or talk to Papa’s soul imprint since I entered the mountains several days ago. I believe that’s when the Necromancers enslaved his soul and raised him from the dead.”

Maelgwyn felt a sense of sympathy toward Hyacinthe. Then what he said caught up with him. A feeling of dread settled into his chest.

“The Shifter that had murdered your parents, did they happen to be a golden eagle female Shifter? With long, curly golden hair and a curved sword with a hilt shaped like a bird’s talon?”

Hyacinthe furrowed his brows in thought. “Y-yes? I vaguely remember she was wearing a torn up dress and was covered in blood.”

He closed his eyes, letting go of the small kernel of hatred he had been holding onto for all those years. “She was my mother, Valkyrie Rainwalker. I was eleven years old when she succumbed to Blood Rage. She massacred almost the entire Flight before she was able to regain enough control and run off. Father followed her, in hopes that he could help her. He never told us the entire story, but the way he worded it made it seem like a pair of Spirit Walkers had killed her when she had regained her mind. I now believe that that was not the full story.”

Hyacinthe gave him a saddened expression. “I’m sorry for your loss. I don’t remember much of the attack, but what I do remember is that my parents kept trying to talk to her. They stayed kind, even as she stabbed them over and over, screaming incoherently. After that, I remember a strange cold feeling rushing through me and then there are these bloody, torn up undead tearing into her and ignoring her cries. Then it’s blank and next thing I know, I wake up in the temple and Cian is sitting by me; his large warm hand is holding mine.”

Maelgwyn took a deep breath then let it out slowly. “I no longer carry the hate I once held for Spirit Walkers. I can see that my father lied to me and to

the rest of the surviving Flight for some unknown reason; maybe he will tell me when I one day join him in the Afterlife. Now, let's go back and rest up. Tomorrow, we make plans for the Necromancers."

Cin woke up the next day with a heavy feeling of dread and the magic of the Necromancers crawling over his body heavily. They were close, very close. All he could hope was that Maelgwyn's plan would work. "Either we die fighting them or we die like animals." Which really, was not exactly a good plan. However, what would Cin know? He was not a fighter.

He rolled out of his bedroll and saw that he was the last to awaken. The entire Skyfall Flight was already up. Maelgwyn and his half-brother Durst were quietly chatting with Healer Blair, the arrogant Rowan, and the young peregrine Shifter twin sisters, Kallistrate and Persephone. The mute Espen was signing to stoic Sindri and boisterous Nestor, while Lorcán and Theron quietly made breakfast with the last of their supplies.

He imprinted these last quiet moments into his brain, wanting to make sure he knew what he would be fighting for once the Necromancers arrived. Because that was what he would be doing, fighting for the first time in his life. All because somehow in the last few days, he grew attached to this Flight of Shifters and their surly yet caring Warlord. He knew that if Cian had been alive, the older man would have laughed incredibly hard at the irony.

Just as he stood up, Cin felt the now familiar feeling of the Necromancers attempting to latch onto his magic and life essence. Gasping, he fell over and could faintly hear the clatter of feet coming near him. Hands grasped his shoulders and he was leaned against someone's chest, hands running over his body and hair. Words murmured into his ear.

"Th-They're here," he rasped out in warning. A deep rumble came from the chest he was against, and he felt the hands grab ahold of him and pull him upwards. Then as suddenly as the attack happened, it was over and he greedily gasped for air.

"Hyacinthe. Take deep breaths, and then slowly let them out. Yes, just like that." Healer Blair soothed him, Cin following her soft orders. When he could finally breathe without panicking, he looked around.

"Where is everyone?" he asked her, seeing that besides Healer Blair, Theron was also in the temple.

“They left to meet the Necromancers outside the temple doors. Theron and I were given orders to keep you safe until either the Flight came back victoriously, or if they all fell, we were to get you as far away as possible,” Healer Blair informed him, her expression strained.

“They won’t ever stop, Healer Blair. Not until they have killed what Spirit Walkers remain and have raised their undead army to take over the kingdoms. I was able to glean that much when they attacked me magically. I need to be out there; I need to fight them. I can’t run anymore.”

He grabbed his staff and made his way out the temple, ignoring Healer Blair’s calls for him to come back. He walked into a nightmare. Necromancers were controlling a large mixture of undead Shifters and humans, outnumbering the Flight. Members were partially shifted or fully shifted, using everything they had to destroy the undead. There in the thick of it was Maelgwyn, looking like the God of war himself.

A large undead came at Maelgwyn, hacking with a sword longer than he was. Cin watched, stunned, as Maelgwyn dodged and weaved around the attack, never noticing the Necromancer creeping closer behind him, a dagger in their hand. Cin tried to cry out, but his throat closed up as he watched Maelgwyn be stabbed in the spine. The large undead, seeing their chance, thrust their sword into Maelgwyn’s unprotected stomach, twisting the sword before pulling out.

Cin screamed as Maelgwyn toppled over, blood pouring from his multiple deep wounds. Something inside of him broke with a painful snap, releasing an ice-cold rush through his veins. Twisting his staff upside down then twirling it around his body in an intricate formation, Cin pushed that ice-cold feeling—magic of a kind he had not felt since his parents were murdered—and slammed his staff into the marble tiles with enough force to create a deep crater.

The magic he released spread out from his staff, reaching deep into the earth and awakening the souls that had been stolen by the Necromancers. Rising from the cracks in the marble like mist, they slowly solidified until they were completely in corporeal form. The dead surrounded Cin by the hundreds, eyes a bright, glowing green. They were waiting for his command.

“Destroy the Necromancers and their undead armies until their very souls are erased from this plane,” Cin ordered, tears streaming down his face. Unearthly shrieks came from his army before they descended upon the panicking Necromancers and their slow undead.

Cin ignored their screams, instead collapsing beside Maelgwyn, getting blood all over his clothing and hands. Maelgwyn gave him a feral grin, blood trailing down his chin.

“There’s some fire in you after all,” he managed to get out, choking on the blood in his mouth. “Good.”

Cin hushed him, futilely trying to stop the bleeding, biting his lower lip. “Please, stay with me,” he begged, wishing for the first time in his life he were a Healer and not a Spirit Walker.

“This won’t kill me, you soft Walker. Just get Blair, she’ll patch me up.”

Cin nodded, turning to call for Blair. She appeared at his side, gently pushing him out of her way. He stood up then, looking out at the destruction his powers brought. The spirits standing before him were familiar to him, those that had been murdered and their souls stolen to power the Necromancers’ corrupted magic. Their souls were finally released by the deaths of their captors.

“I release you. May the Grey Lady bring you peace in your next lives,” he intoned.

Twirling his staff once more, he let it hang in the air for a moment before a gentle soft grey-blue light covered the souls and they faded into the Afterlife.

“I love you, my son,” Cian told him before joining the others.

“Rest in peace and may we meet again in the next life, Papa,” Cin whispered before blackness overtook him and he fell, unconscious and weak from the exertion of using a different sort of magic. He never heard Maelgwyn’s cry or the rush of the others to his prone form.

Cin woke up, his bleary eyes unfocused. He felt weak and like he had taken a beating from a rampaging Shifter.

“Don’t you ever fucking do that to me again, you fucking bastard,” Maelgwyn growled at him, looming over his prone form.

“You’re alive,” Cin murmured, smiling softly in happiness. “Thank the Gods. I was so scared.” Maelgwyn growled at him again before, to his surprise, Maelgwyn embraced him gently.

“*I scared you?! You fucking scared me! What the fuck were you thinking?*”

Cin struggled to return the embrace, fingers tightening into Maelgwyn's vest. "I thought you were dead! There was so much blood; you had wounds in vital areas of your body! You had been stabbed in both your spine and your stomach! You were not moving, and you were not *breathing*! I could not think and lost control of my powers for the second time in my life. I was so furious at the Necromancers for killing you, at the thought that I had lost you..." Cin tearfully said into his neck.

Maelgwyn pulled away to stare into his eyes, a soft expression on his normally stoic face that took Cin's breath away.

"You're not the only one who feels that way, Hyacinthe," he said softly. "How do you think I felt when I saw you fall? I thought you had exhausted yourself to death, using an unfamiliar magic that sucks your life force the longer you use it."

Cin looked up at him, speechless. Then there was no more talking. Maelgwyn swooped down and kissed Cin like he was something precious, like Cin was his soul, and he would never let him go again. Cin returned the kiss with equal fervor, reaffirming everything they had not said to each other but had instead shown.

They broke apart, but stayed close enough they could feel each other's breath fanning against their cheeks.

The End

Author Bio

Elyse Night has been telling stories since she could talk. It wasn't until she was in her early teens and she stumbled upon slash and M/M romance that she really started writing. She first started with fanfiction, before she grew courageous enough to write something with her own original characters. After that, she became hooked. When Elyse isn't writing or outlining for any new ideas, she can be found reading or making jewelry, sometimes painting too.

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