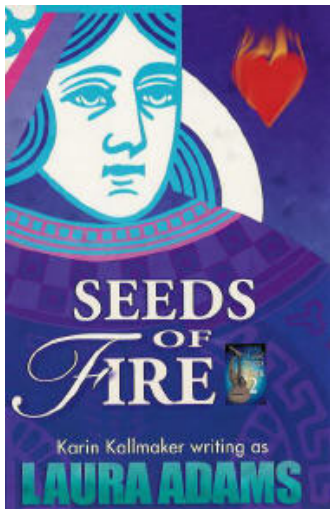


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**Excerpt from SEEDS OF FIRE,  
Book 2 of the Tunnel of Light Trilogy**



*SEEDS OF FIRE* IS A LESBIAN  
FANTASY ROMANCE BY  
KARIN KALLMAKER.

INSPIRED BY THE MYTH OF  
ST. URSULA AND THE MUSIC  
OF HILDEGARD VON BINGEN.

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## PROLOGUE

Her memory was veiled with shadow. Ursula knew she had not always been like this and did not remember what had happened to change her.

Soil broke in her hands, and she led bees to the nectar of the young orange tree Autumn had brought her. The flowers she did not know, nor the plants that prickled with spines, but she planted all that Autumn brought her because it was all she knew how to do. She called birds to their rightful feast on the tiny bugs that nibbled at the blooms. She stroked the new plants and the leaves reached for the sun.

This was peace. She understood that. But she knew it wasn't a lasting peace. Something would change. Perhaps it would be her. There were moments when she felt as if she could almost touch her past, but she had grown wary of the biting headaches.

She was aware that Autumn loved her. She worked in the garden and knew that Autumn was not asleep, that Autumn's oceans-deep eyes followed her movements. She did not know if she had loved Autumn in return. She wished it were so, and prayed that when her memory returned she would find herself loving Autumn in the same, unwavering way that she was loved. But the future and past had been disconnected.

There were voices behind the shadows of memory. Three called to her, wanting her to come back to them. A chorus of women sang of their longing. A lone, weary voice wept in despair, while another muted despair with crashing anger.

She worked in the garden and felt Autumn's gaze on her shoulders. She heard the voices, but memory was veiled by shadow. This peace was healing, and she was caught between wanting to remember and wanting to stay in this place, loved and guarded. She could not stay. The budding leaves and ripening fruit told her, as was the way of things, that life was change.

\*

When sleep abandoned her yet again, Taylor St. Claire wanted to abandon the bed, the house, and her life. Liz stirred and, for a moment, Taylor thought that she, too, had woken before dawn once again. When Liz settled back into slumber, Taylor used the dim light from clock face to study the curve of her lover's cheek. Liz needed sleep more than she did.

She had not seen Liz smile since the first of August, since the disastrous outcome of their Lammas Night working. Taylor blamed herself for those failures and for Liz's ongoing turmoil.

She had underestimated the forces at work. Ursula was lost. Kelly would not speak of Lammas Night nor the distant past they had all shared. She and Liz, of course, had studied every nuance of their dreams, when a long-ago Ursula, surrounded by her companions of an ancient time, had been ambushed in an abbey near Cologne.

Taylor believed it was a memory of a past they had all shared, which explained why the memories were only from their own perspectives. Taylor's contribution to the past had begun the moment she, then known as Abbess Claire, had left the abbey's cloister and tried to draw on her powers in the Old Ways to defend the women who had arrived in the foregate.

There had been a moment of clarity. Three

women, herself, Ursula and the murderous Uda of Jutland, had all worn the complicated Norn braid of the Goddess, the great she-bear who guarded and nurtured the realms under her constellation of Ursa Major. She interjected herself between Uda and her first victim. Later she knew that woman was Elspeth, who was also the Liz who now slept by her side. At the time she had only known one thing: the woman's voice, her eyes, her touch had all evoked an astonished recognition within her. Her distraction had been fatal. Her senses stunned, her heart leaping gladly, she had forgotten, for a moment, that they were in mortal danger.

Uda of Jutland had not forgotten why she was there. In an instant Claire's braid lay in the foregate dirt, and the shock from its cutting had left her nearly unconscious in Elspeth's arms. Light flashed on the broadsword raised by Uda's cruel lieutenant, then her blood mingled with Elspeth's in the dust, finding and losing each other in less than a minute.

Liz frowned in her sleep and Taylor was tempted to try a spell to relax both of them, but she knew it would not work. Nothing worked. She didn't even have the resources to put herself in a light trance where she might be able to pursue these thoughts more fruitfully. Liz's pain came from Taylor's wildly swinging emotions: frustration, rage, helplessness, anguish. They spilled out of her and Liz bore the onslaught, day in and day out, because she refused to use her shields to shut Taylor out. Their rapport was continuous and that

intimacy was the only thing they had left. Taylor could not imagine trying to survive the destruction of her circle--battered and broken on Lammas Night--without Liz in her mind.

Liz's pain was mounting with each passing day, and Taylor knew she would eventually have to urge Liz to raise her shields between them. They were the shields Taylor had taught Liz to use, the only thing that had ever shut off the emotional noise that bombarded Liz every moment of her life. Even more dire, Taylor could tell Liz's shields were weakening as time passed, as if they could not be sustained without Taylor's help.

With conscious effort, for both their sakes, Taylor turned her mind to happier memories. The day she had met Liz--yes, that would certainly do. She had been officiating at a wedding. Liz had arrived while the ceremony was in progress. Taylor had sensed her the moment she entered at the back of the church. Envisioning the day did bring another pang of pain, for she had given up her parish, her vestments, her Christian calling, to prepare her circle for the deep Lammas working. Church and circle had been pressing her to choose between them, neither accepting that she could work equally for both without a conflict of loyalty or a paradox of dogma. Meeting Ursula had seemed like a sign. She had chosen circle, only to watch it shatter beyond repair.

Vexed that her thoughts had so easily gone back to

that bitter night, Taylor envisioned again the moment that she had seen the ethereal Liz for the first time. Taylor had thought of an eggshell--fragile, but capable of holding the very essence of life within it.

Then she had looked at Liz with her other senses and seen the unrelenting suffering of Liz's spirit. She had been like a lightning strike in the peaceful clarity of the chapel. As the ceremony progressed, she felt the rising joy of the bride and groom, of the congregation, and gave of herself for the blessing she wove into the couple's life and the day. It had been the Vernal Equinox and there was hidden but equally joyous magic in her choice of her chant for her solitary blessing.

*In a garden of fruits, in a splendor of flowers, we are joined. We gather as one, in this garden of blessings, in this splendor of love...*

Her exultation in the day and the ceremony only increased, and so did Liz's pallor.

She had not allowed that to detract from her duties as she followed the happily married pair down the aisle. But at the moment she came abreast of the last pew, she had looked directly at Liz, curious about the woman's distress. Liz had met her gaze with stunned, relieved recognition that had mystified Taylor.

Liz had stayed in the church while she had given her further blessings to the couple and accepted the thanks of the extended family. Some time later, having not seen Liz emerge, she went inside again, not

knowing that with her mind clear of her duties she would be utterly changed by her next look into Liz's tortured eyes.

"I knew I would find you," Liz had murmured, almost as if against her will.

For a fleeting moment Taylor had thought, "The woman is mad," but then she knew that this madness was hers to embrace. She had sought completion all her life, and found measures of it in the twining magics of religion and spirituality. Church and circle were her callings. But when she looked into Liz's eyes she had been flooded with an ache of incompleteness. She only had to believe, to find her perfect trust, her perfect love, and the ache would be healed.

She believed, she trusted, she loved. The forces of life she had been studying since she was a child had brought Liz to her. Scarcely a minute later, in a tiny room surrounded by linens and altar vessels, she found the missing piece of her soul in Liz's kiss.

Liz stirred again, drawing Taylor out of her contemplation of their past. She had taught Liz how to shut out the chaos of a world full of emotion, and shown her how strong she really was to have survived without going insane. They had found each other, and had been almost inseparable for these past eighteen months.

Her mind turned inexorably to when the daily joy of their lives had changed, on the Fourth of July. Liz

had brought cousin Kelly and her lover Ursula back to their house after family festivities. One look at Ursula and Taylor had felt her life veer from its course. She had no way of knowing if it shifted away or toward her fate.

What she knew was that Ursula was exhausted. It showed in her eyes, her shoulders, in the way she carried herself. They shook hands and Taylor had felt then the hungering darkness that hunted for Ursula and, even from beyond the gate, drained Ursula's spirit. Another touch and Taylor had easily pushed the darkness away. Why couldn't Ursula do that?

And then the music had caught them both. *We long ever after you in tearful exile... semper suspiramus post te in lacrimabili exilio. Chants for the Feast of St. Ursula*--how could Ursula not even know its name?

It's what ministers do, Taylor told herself. Confronted with a suffering spirit, who carried power but did not know how to use it, she had naturally wanted to help in any way that she could. More intriguing, this fragile woman was hunted from beyond the gate and seemed the embodiment of a legend most thought was pure myth. The mystery and the challenge had captivated Taylor. Arrogant fool, she cursed herself. She had been so busy looking for a sign for her own destiny that she disregarded everyone else's.

They had only unbraided Ursula's hair, planning to rebraid it in a ritual designed to unlock knowledge

that Ursula ought to already have. But each uncoiling lock had been an agony for Ursula. Her pain had shaken the circle to its foundation. The rapacious darkness had done the rest. At the utter end, fighting oblivion for herself and those who had given their trust and fate to her to raise the circle, Taylor had not seen Ursula taken. The darkness had screamed, then it was all gone, leaving Taylor and her companions unconscious until Kelly had roused them.

She could not help her groan of defeat when she realized her mind was back where it had started when she had awakened from a vague, disquieting dream.

Liz reached for her then. "I know, my love. Let me help."

For a while there was only Liz in her mind, but solace ended when Liz finally rose from their bed. Liz left for work and another empty day loomed ahead of her. The well of failure was there for her to dive into, yet again. She could not stop herself from falling into its depths.

\*

Kelly Dove stirred as the shimmer of daybreak touched her face. There was no instant between sleep and waking that she did not remember that she had lost Ursula.

Another day to go through the motions of living: bathing, breakfast, checking the progress of the late summer shallots or onions that were scheduled to be picked, sorted, seeded and readied for winter. Fall was unmistakably in the mid-September air. It had seemed to come the day Ursula was taken, as if even the fields knew she was gone.

She had cried only twice in her life. Self-pity was a stranger, and regrets just as foreign, until the night Ursula left her. But now she woke every morning weeping, not believing she deserved to lose Ursula's love. She wept and wished she had never let Liz's girlfriend anywhere near Ursula no matter how much Ursula had said she needed Taylor's help. She let herself grieve, trying to reap the bitter harvest and move onto the frigid winter. Winter always brought the promise of spring. Spring would never come for her, not again, and so she was caught, ever falling into tears.

She rubbed her shoulder where Ursula had kicked her in her struggle to leave. Were it not for the bruise that ought to have long since healed, Kelly might have been able to lie to herself and pretend that Ursula had simply returned to her home in England. But the bruise was a constant reminder of the night when Taylor and her circle had unbraided Ursula's hair, though Kelly had had to help at the last. She had only helped because Ursula told her it would prove her love.

In her mind, Kelly had heard Ursula's fear. *:I won't*

*go there again. I won't.:*

The darkness had seized Ursula then, her body shimmering with an eerie blue-green glow. There had been screeching--almost musical but for the volume--and Ursula had begun to rise toward the swirl of roiling light above them.

Ursula had gone to it willingly, pulled into the air, into the spiral of darkness, lifted by a woman's hands that had gleamed with purpose and power.

She had gone willingly to that other woman and was forever lost to Kelly. Kelly would have never let go, but Ursula had kicked her, wanting to be free, and said once again that Kelly had to prove her love.

She slammed her hands into her pillows. Her love had never been in doubt. Ursula knew that. What Ursula had meant was that Kelly had to atone for hurting her, to atone for the bruises she had left in the night of passion that had been their last.

Her tears didn't mask the chilling echo of a distant time when she had hurt Ursula. Killera had been her name in that dream, and she had known she was losing her goddess, her Ursula, to the daughter of the captain who sailed them to Ursula's arraigned marriage. Killera had taken revenge in an act of intimate violence that Ursula had neither resisted nor reproached afterward. Kelly's soul was burdened by guilt, by the pain she had caused in the past and in the present.

She would never have let go otherwise. She should

not have let go no matter what Ursula asked.

Fall came early, mired in tears and regret. With regret came a curse. She did not curse Taylor, whose useless mysticism and nonsensical magic circle had delivered Ursula into danger.

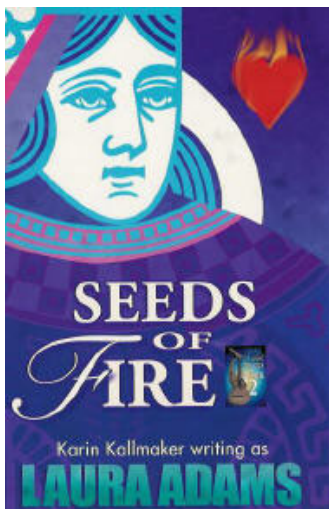
She did not curse Uda, the demon of past dreams. Not even Ursula, though she had not trusted Kelly's love or strength.

The only curse in her was for the captain's daughter, the thief who had stolen Ursula's heart, for Kelly was certain that the hands that had taken Ursula on Lammas Night had been Autumn's. Were it not for Autumn, she would have never hurt Ursula, and Ursula--her Ursula, in this life--would have never doubted their love.

Ursula was with Autumn, a gift Autumn did not deserve.

So she cursed Autumn, wherever she was now, in whatever life, in all her pasts and all her futures. She willed evil into whatever peace Autumn might find.

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