

To Steal the Tithe



Laylah Hunter

For as long as anyone can remember, the elves have avoided getting involved in the endless conflict between demonkind and humanity—but they pay a steep price for their immunity, a tithe in souls to keep the demons from their doors. When Keliel’s sister is chosen to be the newest tithe, he finds he can stay neutral no longer. He will pledge himself and his magic to a human if that’s what it takes to find an ally in the fight to rescue her. But human battlemage Tavren Balefire turns out to be not at all what Keliel expected, and their rescue mission will be the start of something much more than a simple working partnership.

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

TO STEAL THE TITHE

By Laylah Hunter

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they 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 Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, 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.

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Photo Description

A sepia-toned, head-and-shoulders painting of a handsome young elf, looking intently and maybe challengingly at the viewer. His hair is short and tousled, he's shirtless, and he's wearing a thick leather collar with one heavy ring at the front.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Elves are rare gifts. In distant lands, in a fantasy world where humans and demons are in constant war, this elf is a rare magic creature that, not against his will, prefers to be with a human. Even if it's against the elves' rules to take a side in this war.

Of course it's a forbidden love, of course it must seem like he is not in love, but a possession.

Who is the human the elf is in love with? So in love he decides to risk his own life, going against his own race's rules?

Just few requests: no hardcore BDSM (no pain, no cut), can be even a story without sex scenes at all and must be a fantasy, nothing more :), freedom to do whatever the writer's muse tells him/her to do.

Author can do anything with this elf. :) HEA, HFN, it's up to the writer.

Thank you :)

Sincerely,

Bookwatcher

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: elves, magic users, demons, magical bonding, adventure, light bondage, teasing

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The hour is late when Keliel crosses the wall into the human town. The guards have shut the main gate and would question anyone who asked to have it opened; the wall itself is warded against demon essences, but not to repel the magic that Keliel embodies. The great war is between the World Above and the World Below—but Keliel’s people occupy the Under-Hill spaces, rare and scattered and giving their allegiance to neither cause. They are strangers to humans, but not enemies, and thus the shadows Keliel draws around himself are enough to hide him as he scales the wall and drops down lightly on the other side.

He releases the shadows as soon as he has his footing. He has little need of them now. The street where he finds himself is dark, lamps extinguished in all the homes, and he can smell the acrid stench of waste that seems common to every substantial settlement humans establish. Somewhere in the distance a tomcat yowls for his queen. Keliel tugs the hood of his cloak closer around his face and follows the sense of thrumming, fast-beating human magic that drew him here.

After two wrong turns and more confusingly curved streets than seem entirely fair, Keliel finds himself in front of a house that he’s certain is the right one. Even at this late hour, one of the windows glows with warm light, and Keliel can sense the hum of tamed power close at hand. He takes a deep breath and steps up to the door. What he’s about to do will leave him an outcast among his own people at the very least, but some things are worth the price. He knocks.

When the door opens, he says, “I’m so sorry to disturb you, especially this late,” the words he’s rehearsed in his head the whole time he was making this trip. “But I need your help.”

Only then does he really take in the appearance of the man—the human mage—who has opened the door to him. He had expected someone twisted

and wizened, carrying the marks of age the way humans do after a few short decades, but this man is nothing like he expected. The hair pulled back in braids is silver, yes, but the walnut-dark face is unlined and the green eyes are bright and clear instead of rheumy with age. Where Keliel pictured ceremonial robes, the mage wears a simple tunic and trousers, clean but plain.

“One of the Fairest needs my help?” His voice at least is imposing: smooth and deep, resonant with controlled power. “This is an unusual occasion.”

He hasn’t done anything to suggest that Keliel is welcome yet. Keliel tries not to fidget, tries to simply meet those piercing eyes and let his sincerity show. “I do not come seeking favors with no recompense to offer. I am prepared to pay.”

The mage simply inclines his head, acknowledging the offer but no more. “And this is a thing your own people could not assist with? I flatter myself to think that I am skilled, but the Fairest are known for their magical prowess.”

“It is a matter my people *will* not assist with,” Keliel confesses. “It concerns the tithe.”

That produces a reaction, silver brows rising toward the mage’s hairline. “Perhaps you might come inside and tell me more.”

Keliel bows. “Thank you.” He steps into the mage’s house and tries to ignore the nervous prickle down the nape of his neck when he hears the bolt slide home behind him. He has walked into this cage of his own volition, and he will bear it as gracefully as he can.

“Here, draw up another chair by the fire.” The mage takes a book from the seat of his own chair and sets it aside before he sits down again. Keliel sheds his cloak, the better to bear the warmth of the room, and pulls a second chair toward the fireplace. He glances around as he takes his seat; shelves along the walls hold books, bottles, strange instruments, little carved figures. The mage clears his throat delicately, and Keliel flushes, turning his attention from his surroundings to his host.

“A matter of the tithe, ser...?”

“Keliel, ser.” He inclines his head in another bow. “Keliel te Pellinye.”

“Thank you. I am Tavren Balefire.” He smiles faintly. “As you probably already know.”

Keliel keeps his face carefully neutral. He simply followed the trace of power, shaped in the particular sharpened form that human sorcery produces; luck has brought him to a man renowned for his battle magic. “It is an honor to make your acquaintance, ser.”

“Now. Tell me what troubles you about the tithe, and why you would seek human assistance.”

Keliel takes a deep breath. “My sister was chosen.”

For the People Under-Hill to maintain their precarious position in the middle of an ongoing war has required sacrifices. Humans will leave them be in trade for blessings on crops and livestock, widespread but gentle applications of the magic best suited to elvenkind. Demons require a payment in souls.

“She has been taken, and you want revenge?” Tavren’s tone suggests that he seeks simply to clarify an implied truth.

“I want her back.” Keliel swallows hard. “The gates that open the way to the World Below can only be opened at the full moon. She’s not yet truly lost.”

“You want me to undertake a rescue mission.” Tavren laces his fingers together and props his chin on his hands, studying Keliel in fascination.

“I can trace her, but I... You know the limits of our magic, I’m sure. I’m not a warrior. I would have no hope of defeating the guards and setting her free.”

Tavren nods slowly. “And the payment?”

“You’ll do it?”

“I haven’t ruled it out.” Tavren looks him up and down slowly. “I pray you don’t think the chance to kill demons is enough of a reward in itself. What are you offering me in trade for my assistance?”

Keliel fights the urge to wipe his damp palms on his trousers. Better that he should suffer torment at the hands of a mortal than that Muriel should have her soul consumed by ravenous demons. “I offer myself.”

Tavren’s eyes glitter, catching the firelight. “You have my attention.”

“I will put my magic at your service, to be fuel for your spells, for a year and a day.” In that one sentence he has doomed himself to exile or worse; he has chosen a side in the war, and will never be welcome Under-Hill again. His voice is steady, though he has to look down to maintain his composure.

A flicker of Tavren’s power brushes him—an inquiry, it feels like, testing to see what he has to offer. “A fair trade, if you can bring yourself to go through with it. Now, the question is, do you cringe so because you have heard the method by which I bind another’s magic to my own, or because you have not?”

Keliel looks up again in surprise. “Ser?” He’d thought there was only one way to manage such a binding, and that common knowledge—inducing pain and shedding blood to break the boundary that keeps the giver’s magic self-contained.

“You have not,” Tavren concludes. “You expect me to carve you up like a sculptor’s block, while you tremble and suffer and tell yourself you’re willing.”

“There is another way?” Keliel asks. He can hear the way relief creeps into his voice, and it shames him. He should not shrink from this; it was his choice, and he knew the cost.

Tavren stands, apparently simply to pace, as though the leashed energy in him will bear only so much stillness. “There is. Quite possibly there are several, though most mages don’t bother to seek out others when they already know of one that works perfectly well.” He turns on his heel so he is facing Keliel again. “Have you ever had relations with a man?”

Keliel's ears feel hot with embarrassment at the sudden invasive question. "It is common among my people to express no strong preference for one sex over the other."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"I have," Keliel says. Was that the correct answer? He can't remember all the details of human practices; they seem to vary widely from one region to another and one age to the next.

Tavren nods slowly, accepting, measuring him. "I prefer a sexual connection with my adjutants rather than a bond of blood. No, do not rush to answer," he says, holding up one hand when Keliel opens his mouth to speak. "Before you mistake me, it is still a matter of power. I would require your surrender, unflinching and honest. You would need to give yourself to me without resistance." He smiles wryly. "Some people find the blood ritual easier to bear."

"I have no desire to bleed," Keliel confesses. He looks at Tavren, trying to see him as a potential lover rather than a stranger who holds the keys to his sister's salvation. Tavren is an attractive man, in an alien way—there is a sharpness to his features unlike the smoothness of elvenkind, and his build is solid and sturdy rather than lithe and lean. Keliel imagines himself pinned under that powerful frame, pictures those green eyes fierce with passion. "I am willing to accept your terms."

"Willing is an excellent first step." Tavren paces closer, and Keliel begins to think he should rise. Before he can do so, Tavren's fingers snarl in his hair, pulling his head back and baring his throat. "Now it remains to be seen if you are able."

Keliel's mouth has gone dry. "What would you have of me, ser?"

Tavren kisses him, not cruel but firm and insistent, and a rush of power thrums between them as his magic curls up against Keliel's with the same unhesitating certainty. Keliel responds clumsily, not sure what Tavren wants from him—should he be entirely yielding, pliant in response to Tavren's desires, or should he try to match that hunger with his own?

He's breathless when Tavren pulls back, and he leans forward unthinkingly, trying to follow. Tavren's grip on his hair stops him.

"You're lovely. But what I need most from you is the willingness to obey." Tavren lets go of Keliel's hair and strokes his cheek once, fondly. "Go upstairs, light the lamp, and undress. I'll follow you once my business is done here."

Keliel bows his acquiescence and Tavren steps back to let him move. He's trembling slightly when he rises, when he makes his way up the narrow staircase tucked along the back wall of the house. The upper floor is dark, but not so cold as he feared, the fireplace downstairs apparently enough to heat the entire house. Keliel takes a moment to adjust to the darkness again so he can pick out the shape of the lamp—a glass chimney on the small table beside the bed. Tavren didn't send him upstairs with a lit taper, and there are no matches to be found nearby. Is this a test as well?

At least this one is easy enough to pass. Keliel pulls heat inward from the rest of the room, gathering it into a tight point at the lampwick until it kindles. The flame stretches upward, a fierce, tiny light, steady and bright inside the protective glass.

By lamplight the room seems inviting, pleasantly cluttered in a way that makes Tavren seem less a legendary battlemage and more a living person with varying interests and curiosities. A small stack of books sits on a shelf beneath the lamp. The bedclothes are disheveled, as though the bed was made up in haste by someone with more important things on his mind. A table on the other side of the room is strewn with notes, sprays of dried flowers, and chunks of unevenly faceted crystal. The wardrobe stands half open, abandoned with as little care as the bed.

Keliel shakes himself. He was sent up here for a purpose, and that purpose was not to investigate Tavren's belongings and speculate on what they mean about their owner. He unlaces his tunic and slips it off; the thin linen shirt beneath follows. Keliel shivers, his nipples pulling tight against the sudden chill of bare skin. It has been years since his first time, and he'd thought

himself done with the nervous anticipation of inexperience. But Tavren will be different, both in what he wants and why he wants it.

Different doesn't have to mean bad, though. From what he said, it sounded like Tavren developed this technique so that he could *avoid* doing harm to someone who offered him power. That should be reassuring, shouldn't it? A sign that he's worth taking a risk for. Keliel tugs off his boots and tucks them against the wall neatly.

When he's stripped entirely bare, Tavren has yet to come looking for him; it feels as though the hot, thrumming center of Tavren's power has not moved. Keliel wonders where he should wait, whether it would be presumptuous of him to crawl into Tavren's bed. No doubt he will end up there—but if his obedience is being tested, will Tavren want to order him there specifically?

Keliel kneels on a rug in the middle of the floor, facing the stairs. He tries to calm himself, breathing slowly, smoothing the flow of power inside him. He pictures it as a well, silvery and still, energy ready to be drawn. He closes his eyes and imagines the ripples fading, leaving the surface smooth and bright as a mirror.

He opens his eyes to the tread of footsteps on the stairs. Tavren steps into the room without a word, and Keliel can feel his power expanding to investigate at the same time that he looks around.

“Good,” Tavren says after a moment, and Keliel's shoulders relax slightly in relief. Tavren opens a small box on one of the wall shelves and lifts out a collar, thick leather, of a size that would suit a wolfhound—or a man. “You are familiar with human sorcery?”

“Some,” Keliel says. “Enough to know the basic differences from ours.”

Tavren nods. “This collar will work as a talisman, to focus the conduit between us. Your throat, please.”

Keliel tips his head back, deliberately relaxing his shoulders, making himself available. Tavren wraps the collar around his throat, and he bows his head to allow it to be fastened at his nape. The leather already feels warm against his skin, even though it was sitting unused until just now. Whatever

enchantment has been laid on the collar makes him feel unbalanced, his center of power shifting upward to his throat instead of resting at the base of his ribcage.

“Given the bond we’re seeking to establish here, I should be able to feel it if you cease to be willing,” Tavren says, running his fingers through Keliel’s hair slowly. “If I don’t, or if I’m not responding quickly enough, then speak up. I have no desire to tear your power from you by force.”

“As you will, ser.” Keliel leans into the touch. “I... confess I thought you might plan to have me bound and gagged.”

Tavren’s hand closes, tugging gently on Keliel’s hair, and Keliel’s cock stirs. “Not this first time, certainly.” The warmth in his voice—or perhaps the promise implied in that statement—makes Keliel shiver. “If things go well tonight... we’ll see.”

He releases Keliel and steps back. “In bed, please. On your back.”

It seems strange that he would be so polite when Keliel is supposed to be demonstrating submission of will; there are too many things about him that Keliel simply can’t correctly anticipate. Maybe it would be better to stop trying to anticipate him—to simply be the pool of still water, and ripple when the wind ruffles his surface but not before.

Keliel rises to his feet and climbs into bed, only slightly unsteady. The sheets on Tavren’s bed are cool against his skin, and his heart pounds as he stretches out. He spreads his legs, watching Tavren’s face for a reaction, and his cock stirs again when Tavren licks his lips hungrily.

Instead of disrobing, Tavren kneels between Keliel’s legs fully clothed, stroking his way lightly up the inside of one thigh. “What I need from you most is receptiveness,” he says, quiet and calm. “Any method for forming this bond is designed to allow me to reach past your defenses. The spirit echoes the body. Relax.”

He leans forward, bracing his arms on either side of Keliel as he claims another kiss. He remains more thorough than aggressive, exploring Keliel’s mouth deeply but with no urgency. The heat of his mouth and the flickering

tease of his tongue make the order to relax an easy one to obey; Keliel melts under him, and when one of Tavren's hands starts to wander, teasing aimless paths over Keliel's skin, Keliel arches into the touch.

Tavren makes a low sound in his throat, half moan and half purr, and Keliel shivers in response. It's easier than he would have thought to give himself over to this, to treat Tavren like a lover, when it feels as though Tavren wants to learn every inch of him intimately. The only difficult part is remaining passive instead of pushing back into the encounter, but Keliel does his best to let Tavren lead him.

He arches his back, pressing into Tavren's hands and mouth, moaning when Tavren leaves lingering, hot kisses down his throat. "Yes," he breathes, "yes, aah," squirming as Tavren's fingers trace lower.

"Beautiful," Tavren tells him, curling a hand around his cock for one quick moment and then releasing him all too soon.

Keliel's hips rock toward Tavren's retreating hand and he whimpers, "More, please, more."

"Yes," Tavren says hoarsely, "gods, yes, you'll have more from me." He fumbles with something Keliel can't quite see, and then his fingers press between the cheeks of Keliel's ass, slicked with some kind of ointment. "Keliel te Pellinye, let me in."

He pushes, and Keliel rocks down to meet him, concentrating on relaxing the muscles there to make it easier to take him in. The sensation echoes through Keliel's body and resonates somewhere other than his flesh as Tavren reaches into the well of his power, warm and human and strange. None of his lovers have made him feel quite like this, so vulnerable, so *opened*. He can't tell whether it's more that Tavren's fingers are a distraction from his magic or the other way around, only that the feeling is inescapable.

He dares to wrap his arms around Tavren's shoulders, pulling him closer, and that makes Tavren groan, a low sound that could be either pleasure or pain. "It feels good," Keliel breathes, "having you—inside me," and he thinks he means it both ways, Tavren's fingers and magic both.

“You’re taking to this, ah—even better than I could have hoped,” Tavren answers, crooking his fingers forward against the spot that makes it feel as though he’s stroking Keliel’s cock from the inside. Pleasure surges up through Keliel’s spine and he moans, writhing in the sheets.

“Please,” he gasps, “please, I—” The words fall away as Tavren takes hold of his cock again, pumping him steadily. His body is humming taut as a strung bow, pulling ever closer to orgasm, but his magic is opening, unfolding, spreading out to allow Tavren into its source.

“Let go for me,” Tavren demands, low and raw. “Let me feel you.”

Keliel nods frantically, trembling, tensing in Tavren’s hands. He’s close, so close, overwhelmed by the multiple layers of sensation, the touch to his magic so intimate he can hardly stand it. For one drawn-out moment he teeters on the precipice, and then climax overtakes him. His fluids splash his chest and belly and his hands clench tightly in the rough fabric of Tavren’s tunic, desperate for any kind of anchor as the wave of pleasure crashes through him.

“I believe you’ll do.” Tavren’s voice belies the coolness of his words, ragged and barely controlled. “You’ll do quite well.”

The previous night’s experiment is still replaying in his head when Tavren starts to pack his bags in the morning. He is no stranger to working with an adjutant to boost his power; it’s necessary, for a battlemage who handles frontline combat. The natural power of demonkind requires concentrated force to resist. But all of Tavren’s previous partners have been humans, and none of them have responded so beautifully to his methods from the first attempt. Most of them have been more wary of Tavren’s technique than they would be of the more traditional bloodletting.

It’s a stupid limitation in the human understanding of magic, one that holds them back from the chance to truly realize the power of shared energies. Tavren seizes on that familiar hot anger, focusing on that instead of letting himself linger on the way Keliel trembled, the way soft lips shone wet in the lamplight when he cried out—

Perhaps theory is not enough of a distraction after all.

Tavren has no delusions about their experiment being some grand romance. Keliel barely knows him, and agreed to his terms for the same reason that Tavren offered them: as a means to an end, a stepping stone on the way to his actual desire. Their connection will be an effective one, given how readily Keliel responded to Tavren's control, but that doesn't mean there is any more to it than a potent catalyst.

When he comes downstairs with his pack, Keliel is waiting, quiet and still but alert. The connection they established last night thrums between them, a barely perceptible current on the air that ties Tavren's controlled, deliberate sorcery to the wildness of elven magic. It feels intoxicating in its strangeness, almost as much so as its bearer.

"You're ready?" Tavren asks.

Keliel nods, rising smoothly to his feet. He watches Tavren warily as if he's expecting a command. When none comes, he says, "At this distance I can only feel a faint trace of her presence, but it should be enough to find the trail."

Tavren nods. "I'd prefer to ride. Can you provide for yourself?"

"Once we're outside your city walls, yes." Keliel lifts the satchel of provisions gathered from Tavren's larder, and Tavren leads the way outside.

The sky is clear this morning and the day promises to be warm. Tavren watches Keliel absently as he readies his horse—by firelight the elf was already striking, but in the full light of day he's beautiful. His skin is the warm, pale color of birchwood, his hair the red-tinged brown of fallen leaves, his features smooth and finely sculpted. It's easy to see why superstitious men of earlier ages thought the elves were born literally of the trees.

As they leave Tavren's home for the city gate, the well of Keliel's power wakes, a strange tickling sensation at the edges of Tavren's mind. "Are you tracing her?"

“I don’t need to. We’re of the same blood—I can find her without an active working.” Keliel walks beside him, hood up, ears hidden. “I’m calling for a ride.”

Sure enough, when they reach the road, there’s a huge elk stag emerging from the pinewood ahead, walking steadily toward them as though it’s tame as a milk cow. Keliel reaches out a hand to the beast as it approaches, and it ducks his head in a rough bow. It even kneels for Keliel to mount its broad back.

“I’ve never seen an animal controlled so smoothly,” Tavren remarks as the stag climbs to its feet again.

“It isn’t control, not truly.” Keliel touches the stag’s withers and it starts to walk again, falling in step beside Tavren’s brown bay. “I asked for help, and he volunteered.”

“The same way I volunteered?” Tavren can’t keep the amusement from his tone.

Keliel flashes him a quick smile, breathtakingly beautiful. “His needs are easier to meet than yours.”

Tavren falls silent, contemplating his companion as they travel. Elven magic, so far as any theorist has been able to determine, uses the same forces as the human variety but applies them very differently. Human sorcery is far more direct, a road built with a destination in mind; elven magic is more like a game trail through the wood, meandering, detouring around obstacles rather than dismantling them. Keliel seems to use a similar approach to solving his problems in general, seeking assistance and making trades instead of facing things head on.

The road is nearly empty, especially after they reach the first fork. Keliel hesitates there for a long moment and then chooses the northern path, deeper into the wood, instead of taking the wider track that leads to the settlement in the next valley. The deep wood’s darkness and unfamiliar sounds make the hairs on the back of Tavren’s neck stand up; he knows he is a match for any

mundane threat he might meet here, especially with the potent reservoir of Keliel's power to fuel his fires, but the reflexive unease is hard to dispel.

"How far does the wood continue?" he asks eventually. The fiercest fighting between humans and demons has always been further south, at least in Tavren's lifetime. His knowledge of the country further north comes mostly from books and maps.

"In some places, nearly to the edge of the endless winter." Keliel sketches a shape in the air, a curve that sweeps upward on one side like a drinking horn. "We aren't going that far. From the strength of Muriel's presence when I reach out to find her, she can't be more than three days off. If we stay on this path we'll be camping at the wood's edge tomorrow night."

One night under the pinewood's smothering branches, then. One night is bearable.

Keliel is peering at him curiously. "You're uncomfortable with some part of this."

"I'm out of my element, that's all." Anticipation and uncertainty have always made Tavren uneasy; he much prefers an experiment with a clear result, or the direct problem-solving of combat.

"Would it help to share my senses?" Keliel asks. "I think... If the bond you established last night works the way it feels, then you should be able to experience what I'm feeling." His voice is calm and level as he makes the suggestion, no hint of embarrassment or blush. Tavren should have sought an elven adjutant years ago.

He nods. "I'd like to try it, yes." He steers his horse a little closer to Keliel's stag, and reaches out to take Keliel's hand. Close contact makes any form of power-sharing easier, which is excuse enough; he won't allow himself to dwell on the callused warmth of it or the delicacy of the bones.

Then the connection unfolds between them, and Tavren has plenty of other things to distract him. He conceives of Keliel's magic as something like a lake, a pool of swirling, opalescent colors. This connection feels like he's

immersing himself in it, no longer still water but now a swirl of fog, tendrils stretching out in all directions.

“You can seek in any direction you choose,” Keliel murmurs. “Here, follow me for a moment and see what our surroundings are like.”

The fog sense expands, and Tavren starts to be able to pick out variances in it, the steady hum of trees and the tiny quick pulses of birds and rodents. The wood is an entirely different experience through Keliel’s power, a sprawl of light and color and sound instead of the dark unknown it seemed previously. Tavren stretches his reach further, following a meandering track through the wood that feels like a ribbon of blue. Everywhere he looks, every time he presses further, there’s more waiting for him, ready to be discovered. Wary foragers and cunning little hunting minds, slopes and streams and brambles—

And something he can’t identify, some snarl of rust and crimson and discordance, a sharp horrible tang in the back of his throat that makes him wrench free of the connection. His heart pounds. “What was that?”

Keliel nudges his stag into quicker motion. “Something corrupt and hungry. Something tainted.”

“Demonic, then?” No wonder the elves have such trouble fighting demons themselves, if close contact with them feels like that.

“Or something they’ve ruined.” Keliel’s earlier calm is gone, replaced by an alert tension that resonates between them. “Demonic influence can do that to what was once an ordinary mortal creature.”

Anticipation and uncertainty again. Tavren glares into the dark of the wood as they hurry onward. “Will it have noticed us?”

“We can hope not,” Keliel says, but his tone suggests he’s not optimistic. “It was hungry, whatever it was, so it’ll be looking for something to devour.”

Whatever senses the demonic thing hunts by, it’ll be tempted if it gets close enough to notice them. The animals offer plenty of meat, and Tavren and Keliel themselves would be a potent source of the emotional energy that demons seem to thrive on.

“I don’t like the idea of leaving it out there to prey on whatever— whoever—it finds,” Tavren says. “But we don’t have time to lie in wait for it, do we? Not when we have a tithing party to catch up with.”

“I’m sorry to take you away from your prey,” Keliel says ruefully, and Tavren starts. Does he truly seem like a hunting beast himself? Keliel is smiling when he looks over, at least. “Let’s hurry.”

They spur their mounts into the quickest pace that seems safe on a trail this rough. The muffled thump of hooves on soft dirt is the only sound that reaches Tavren’s ears for long moments. The birds and rodents seem to be hiding now, whether from the hunting beast or from their own rushed passage Tavren can’t tell.

“Can you keep track of it?” he asks as the animals slow to pick their way down a slope. “See whether it’s moving toward us?”

“I’ll try.” Keliel falls silent, his face smoothing into calm. Tavren mostly senses his power welling up, rising from dormant to active—then Keliel sways and nearly falls from his stag’s back, clutching at its shaggy neck in a flailing, graceless manner that Tavren tries desperately not to laugh at.

“It’s definitely getting closer. I didn’t get a chance to feel its focus before, ah...” Keliel gestures awkwardly as if he doesn’t have words for his clumsiness, like a cat who’s fallen from a windowsill.

“We’ll assume it knows we’re here. I’m going to start looking for a place where we can make a stand against it.” Tavren takes point, moving faster now that they’ve hit the bottom of the slope again. There should be a stream or river nearby, from the shape of the terrain. That might provide some clear space, room enough to fight this thing—and a ready source of water to douse any fires he starts.

“It’s gaining,” Keliel says shortly.

They’re definitely being pursued. The knowledge makes Tavren’s nerves thrum, makes his senses sharpen in preparation for the fight. Little does that monster know what dangerous game it’s hunting.

He *is* the wild thing Keliel sees in him, isn't he?

“This is the best we'll do,” he decides, when the trail leads into a clearing, with the burbling sound of a stream off to the right somewhere. He slides easily from the saddle. “Can you use those charming skills to secure the animals so they don't bolt?”

Keliel nods, landing light on his feet and taking the stag's face in his hands for a moment. Whatever he does, the elk and Tavren's horse amble off toward the sound of the water together, unhurried and calm. Tavren can only hope they remain so unruffled when the pursuer arrives.

“Can you fight?” he asks.

Keliel hesitates, which is already answer enough. “I...”

“Get yourself somewhere safe, then.” That's easier said than done, when they're making a stand in a place with enough cover to hinder visibility but nothing solid enough for protection. Tavren scans the clearing, trying to figure out where he could best keep Keliel out of the creature's path—and turns back to see Keliel already disappearing up the nearest tree. He laughs. “That'll do nicely.”

Something crashes through the brush, close enough now that Tavren can smell the first hint of rot on the breeze. The connection he has with Keliel flares to life, power pouring into him as the demon beast lurches out of the shadows into view.

It was a bear once. The shape is still a bear's, hulking and heavy-bodied—but its fangs are ugly, overgrown daggers, and its fur has split in long lines down its back to accommodate the gleaming black spines that rise from the flesh. It smells like blood and death.

Tavren gathers power into a crackling sphere and hurls it at the beast, a searing bolt of lightning too bright to look at directly. The afterimage floats blue in front of his eyes and the air feels taut with the promise of a storm.

The beast pauses, shaking its head, growling a low, ragged warning. It looks more irritated than harmed. Fire, then? Tavren has plenty of power to call on.

A quick pull, a twist from what-could-be to what-is, and the greasy fur on the thing's back bursts into flames. It bellows, rising onto its hind legs for one furious instant before dropping down and charging toward Tavren. The flame is a nimbus around it, burning brightly but not seeming to do the creature any harm.

Tavren drops to a crouch, slamming his palm into the ground. *Sunder*, he demands, and the earth cracks and splits, dropping the beast into the crevice that opens. Its claws dig furrows into the earth as it tries to climb free, snarling its rage. Tavren forces water from the surrounding soil into the creature's pit, turning the clay to slick mud, then to a wet slurry that the beast sinks into, flames slowly drenched as it slides deeper.

When it's completely submerged, Tavren wrenches the crevice closed again, sealing the opening shut with heat and pressure. He stands to watch the space, to see whether the beast might still struggle free again, but the ground doesn't move.

Keliel drops out of the tree, eyes wide, raw energy echoing from him to Tavren. "That felt amazing." His voice is a hoarse whisper. "The amount of, of force alone..."

Tavren's blood sings in his veins with triumph, with the magic still coursing between them, with the need to pin Keliel up against the nearest tree and—

He makes himself turn away. Keliel agreed to offer him power, no more; he won't abuse that offer by demanding anything selfish. "We should find the animals and keep moving." At least he sounds more calm than he feels. "We still have far to go."

At the end of the third day, the ruined castle looms ahead of them in the twilight, crumbling stone still imposing, still standing guard over a traditional

pathway to the World Below. Keliel tries to keep himself focused; he should be thinking about the battle ahead of them, and how he can best help Tavren gain the victory. Instead he's thinking about the night before.

Tavren with his eyes shining by the firelight, with hunger written in every line of his face, as he wrung helpless cries of pleasure out of Keliel. Like the first time, Tavren didn't disrobe or ask anything in return, exhausting Keliel with skillful hands and nothing more. Would it harm the magical effectiveness of the act if he did otherwise? The collar is warm at Keliel's throat, pulsing faintly with the depth of the connection between them.

"Can you tell how many there are?" Tavren asks, his eyes on the castle. It's the only structure left standing as far as the eye can see; once there was a human settlement here, hundreds of years ago, before a volcano to the north scorched its fields and buried its walls under layers of ash. By now the empty plain is treacherous and marshy, with deep, sucking mud punctuated by small islands of solid stone.

"Of course." Keliel shakes himself, turning his attention back to the task. Muriel is in there, close by, and soon they'll be reunited. He extends his senses carefully, opening himself to the flow of energy here.

Much of the plain is silent, stagnant, too thickly choked with volcanic mud to be home to much life. Still, there are places where stands of reeds grow, and small animals that make their home among them. Keliel exhales, seeking further, stretching toward the castle. Muriel, a vivid impression of swirling colors and chiming music. Near her, the small furtive traces of rats. Scattered throughout the castle, half a dozen tangled, discordant knots of demon energy. And *below* them, down in the castle's foundation...

"The spirit of the city is still here. Slumbering and weak, but it's there." Usually a city spirit is too big to touch, too big to even feel the edges of, but this one is barely a shell of what it once was.

"The demons," Tavren prompts.

"Six, and they're scattered." This close, probably Muriel can sense him, too. She was never as magically inclined as he was, but no elf is entirely

without the gift, and they're close kin. "Muriel probably knows I'm here. She... might try to cause a distraction herself."

"So we should draw attention before then." The air tingles between them, Tavren beginning to wake his magic.

Keliel nods. "I might be able to wake the city and ask its help. Then you could save your efforts for direct attacks." He smiles. "Which you've already shown you can do very effectively."

"You and your volunteers," Tavren says, but he's smiling. "Try it."

The city stretches beneath the plain, but its spirit is concentrated in the castle, the only remaining home for it. Keliel reaches out again, not just to find the spirit this time but to touch it, the withered shape of wood and stone, the memory of breath and blood. He pushes a little of his own strength into the slumbering spirit and feels it shudder, uncurling like the new growth of a fern in spring.

The spirit wakes curious, brushing up against Keliel's mind, its questions not in words but in slippery sense impressions as it absorbs their presence and purpose. When it becomes aware of the demons, the heat of its anger washes outward in a slow, intent tide. The ground quakes underfoot, rumbling up through Keliel's bones.

"Don't let it do too much of that," Tavren warns. "I don't think the castle's stable enough to support it."

"I'll tell it, but I'm not exactly holding it by the reins." *Danger*, Keliel tries to explain to the spirit. He focuses on Muriel, on her safety, on how important she is to him.

A surge of power through his connection with Tavren disrupts his concentration, and he opens his eyes to see Tavren striding out from behind their cover and throwing a bolt of lightning at one of the parapets. A body plummets from the ledge, trailing tattered wings as it falls.

"The others are moving. They'll be expecting attacks now." It's all Keliel can do at this point to keep up with the movement around the castle, to feel the

blight of demon presence surging toward the castle's half-fallen tower. The filth of their energy makes him sick, and he hopes he isn't spilling too much of his nausea into the bond with Tavren. The city spirit has stopped shaking the ground, at least. Keliel tries to keep offering up his power, for Tavren and the spirit both, as the attacking demons come over the castle wall.

They shriek and squawk in flight, horrible sounds that must be a language but mean nothing to Keliel's ears. One of them throws a ball of fire at Tavren, and he whips up a hand to take control of it, forcing it to ground instead of letting it reach him. He blasts back and the demon dives to avoid the attack—but it isn't quite fast enough and one of its wings tears, forcing it to the ground.

The air between Tavren and the demons becomes a crackling, seething tangle of energy, spells traded so quickly and so violently that Keliel can scarcely keep up. There are four demons against him but he never falters, making a dance of it as he diverts their attacks and lashes out with his own. One by one the demons fall to earth, baring crooked fangs and thrashing their damaged wings in rage, but on the ground they're only easier targets, quicker to fall to the bolts of Tavren's lightning.

Then something changes inside the castle—something changes for *Muriel*, and Keliel cries out in alarm as he feels her energy shift. But it's not the shattering he'd expect if she were attacked. Instead it's a surge of wildness and fury that ripples out around her, flaring bright and loud.

The last demon falls to Tavren's magic and he looks back at Keliel, twisted bodies ringing his boots and seeping foul ichor into the mud. "How many more?"

Keliel pushes through the residue of the fight and the sudden intensity of Muriel's presence. "One? It's hard to be sure." He waves a hand at the fallen demons. "All of this muddies the waters."

"Then we go carefully. Follow me." Tavren steps over the nearest body and starts picking his way toward the castle. It's unpleasant going, trudging through the heavy mud and struggling for footing, and Keliel is starting to feel

light-headed. Between extending his senses enough to expose himself to demons continuously and allowing Tavren to draw his power for open battle, he's nearing his limit. He grits his teeth and forces himself to keep going.

The castle's main gate is halfway submerged in ash mud, and the old wooden door is rotted away almost completely. Tavren ducks through the opening and Keliel follows close behind. There was a courtyard here, surrounding the central keep. Fallen stones litter the space now, half submerged, the walls crumbling slowly. Muriel's presence shines from the keep, overwhelming whatever demon presence is left inside.

"Almost there," Keliel says, as much to himself as to Tavren. "She's—"

And the words die on his lips as Muriel steps out of the darkened doorway to the main keep. The air around her crackles with energy, her hair standing on end, black demon ichor splashed on the front of her tunic. She has a jagged sword in her right hand. "Kel?"

Tavren pulls more power, as if he's expecting her to attack, and Keliel sways on his feet. "It's all right," he says, probably to both of them. That's the power of the city spirit, settled on her like a cloak, naming her its champion. "Don't do anything stupid."

Muriel laughs, and that means it's going to be fine. "If you came all the way out here just to tell me that, I think for once you might be the one who needs to hear it."

"I didn't come after you *just* for that." Keliel sways again and this time Tavren catches him by the elbow to steady him. He smiles weakly. "But it usually needs to be said."

The cloak of borrowed power burns off like mist under the morning sun, leaving just Muriel behind. "Oh, Kel. Running off into trouble is supposed to be my job." She drops the demon sword and crosses the courtyard toward them.

Keliel shakes off Tavren's hand so he can meet her partway. "Finally learned from your example, I guess." He opens his arms and she hugs him, hard enough to crack the riding-stiffened joints in his back.

“Thank you,” she murmurs against his shoulder. “Thank you.”

The return trip passes quickly, without the weight of anticipation hanging over them. Keliel’s sister is outgoing and talkative once she’s recovered from her captivity and the guardian spirit’s intervention. She can’t return to her former home, after the ritual exile that preceded her tithe sacrifice, but she seems to count that as no great loss. Instead she quizzes Tavren on life among humans, asking questions about everything from proper manners to major trade routes, until his voice is hoarse from answering her. In the evenings both of the elves bid goodbye to the mounts that have carried them that day, and in the mornings new volunteers arrive to take their places. Tavren has to wonder whether his horse feels ill-used by comparison.

By the time they get back to town, Muriel is talking about disguising herself as a human and going to join the war effort, or possibly hiring on as a sellsword with a merchant caravan, or possibly going to sea and learning to be a sailor. If Keliel is a deep pool of still water, then Muriel is a swirling gust of wind, catching up anything that doesn’t hold fast to its place and carrying it off. She pores bright-eyed over the maps in Tavren’s library until he produces quill and parchment to allow her to make copies.

“I’m glad to see the exile has not succeeded in dampening your spirits,” he says as he sets down the bottle of ink.

Muriel laughs. “It might just turn out to be the best thing the entire clan of Under-Rowan-Hill ever did for me.” She looks up at Tavren, and he can see her similarities to Keliel for all that her smile is more sly and her eyes more fire-golden. “Thank you for listening to Keliel and coming after me. Take good care of him.”

Tavren holds very still until he’s certain his voice won’t betray him. “I will. I admire his courage intensely.” Has Keliel disclosed the terms of their agreement, or has something in their behavior made it obvious to her? Tavren has done his best to maintain a respectful distance on the return trip, and with

no new battles to fight there was no harm in failing to renew the bond for a few days.

“Good. It’ll help him to have someone he can treat as an anchor while he learns how to live in the human world.” She shrugs. “And I’ve never been a grounding influence.”

Keliel comes back inside then, carrying water for the evening meal, and the subject is closed. Tavren keeps thinking about it over the course of the evening, though, trying to be circumspect as he watches Keliel. An anchor, is he? He’d have thought of the bond as more like shackles; he knows how little choice Keliel truly had. If he were slightly more honorable, or less practical, he would release Keliel from the year-and-a-day obligation—but having an adjutant means he can return to the battle, and having an adjutant of Keliel’s power and skill means he’ll be able to fight better than ever. Irritability makes him restless; how neatly he’s found a moral justification for what he wants.

He excuses himself upstairs shortly after dinner, to give the siblings some time alone. It seems like the decent thing to do, when Muriel will be striking out on her own soon enough, and he’ll be taking Keliel to the capital with him to report to the war council for a new posting. They should have some time to spend with each other before that happens.

It comes as a surprise, then, when he hears footsteps on the stairs perhaps an hour later. He has been reading at his desk, and now sets the book aside. “Is something the matter? Your sister...”

“My sister thinks I need to be more direct in going after what I want.” Keliel comes closer and Tavren rises to meet him. “And I suppose she’s probably right. Waiting patiently doesn’t lead anywhere fast.”

Tavren frowns. “If you wish to be released from your obligation,” he begins, and then feels ashamed of himself. Wasn’t he just thinking earlier tonight that continuing the bond was a dishonorable thing to insist on? If Keliel outright says he doesn’t want it, then it would be inexcusable for Tavren to refuse.

“That’s not at all what I wanted to say,” Keliel answers, his back stiffening, “and I hope you don’t find me that dishonorable.”

“Certainly not,” Tavren protests. “If anyone has behaved dishonorably it was I, in taking so high a price to aid you. You asked me for a skirmish and now I’m taking you to war.”

Keliel puts his fingers to Tavren’s lips, and Tavren lapses into a startled silence. “You accepted my offer, and under kinder terms than I expected. You have been a pleasant companion and a respectful master. Will you listen to my actual request before you fault yourself further?”

Tavren bows his head in acquiescence. “Suddenly I can see how you resemble your sister. Please, go ahead. I’m listening.”

“Thank you.” Keliel pauses for a moment, breathing deeply, as if collecting his thoughts. “I don’t mind sharing my power with you. I don’t mind making the bond through a sexual connection. It—it feels good. But I want to know why you’re holding back.” He takes a step closer, so their bodies almost touch. “Would it harm your ritual for you to take pleasure in it?”

“No, it—I’ve had lovers who—” Tavren cuts off that sentence; he has no wish to speak of the dead. “You didn’t come to me by choice. I didn’t want to demand more than what was required.”

“You wouldn’t have forced me if I said no.” It’s clearly no question, but Tavren still shakes his head. It would have been both cruel and counterproductive, and he has no wish to be a tyrant. Keliel looks him in the eyes, not quite challenging but certainly not passive. “Then give me the chance to say yes.”

The heat that washes through Tavren’s body isn’t from Keliel’s magic this time, though it feels just as intense and intoxicating. “I want you,” he says, and Keliel’s expression sharpens with hunger. “I want to take you to bed, spread you out, and bury myself in you.”

“Yes,” Keliel breathes. He drapes his arms over Tavren’s shoulders. “I want you to.”

Tavren takes hold of Keliel's wrists. "And if I wanted to bind you, as you suggested that first night?"

Keliel's breath hitches. "Yes."

Tavren pulls Keliel's arms down and pins his wrists at the small of his back, dragging him into an embrace. Keliel relaxes into him, beautifully willing, lips parted already for a kiss. Tavren takes the offer gladly, savoring the yielding softness of Keliel's lips, groaning when Keliel nips at his tongue. This is not a passive surrender, an acceptance of inevitable conquest; it's a willing welcome, and it makes Tavren's blood sing.

He pulls back. "Undress for me."

Keliel pulls at the laces of his tunic, his fingers quick and nimble. "Will you do the same, ser? I'd like to see you."

Tavren nods. He'd already intended to—they come to bed now as lovers, not as mage and adjutant—but it certainly does his pride no harm for Keliel to ask. When he strips away his shirt he catches Keliel taking in the sight of his scars, the old battle injuries where a stray spell or arrow left its mark. They track pink and pale over his torso, the flesh pulled back together in a hurry by battlefield healers with no time to spare for finesse. He refuses to be ashamed of them, but he does wonder how they must look to one of the Fairest, sleek and unblemished and ever-young as they are.

If the marks trouble him, Keliel doesn't show it. By the time he's stripped bare his cock is already beginning to swell. After a second's hesitation he crosses his wrists behind his back, meeting Tavren's eyes steadily, wearing only his collar and his pride.

"Yes, like that." Tavren tosses the last of his clothes away and wraps his arms around Keliel again, relishing the feeling of bare skin against his, the fine-boned strength he can feel when he closes his hands around Keliel's wrists. "You look so beautiful." He lets his teeth graze the lobe of Keliel's ear, then bites the soft flesh below the jaw, suckling with every intent of leaving marks. He can taste magic on Keliel's skin and smell the wild strangeness of

him, as though he carries the wild wood everywhere he goes, even when he's trapped behind human stone walls.

And the sounds he makes! Keliel moans at the bite, trembling, and his breath comes in ragged pants. "Please," he murmurs, "oh please, more."

The words are even more intoxicating now than they were the first night, now that Tavren knows how much more he can have. "You want more?" He slides one hand up Keliel's chest to take hold of the ring in the collar. "Shall I tie you to my bed and take you, then?"

Keliel shudders in his arms. "Yes, yes—I'm at your mercy, ser."

Heat thrums down Tavren's spine, a heavy sense of need settling at the base of his cock. "Come, then." He crosses to his bed, fingers still hooked in the collar to pull Keliel with him.

He uses a length of silk to secure Keliel's wrists to the headboard, admiring the way the position draws him out into a long, lean arc of beautiful bare skin. Keliel's back arches, pressing toward his touch, when Tavren draws his fingers down over the gentle curve of one bicep. "You suggested I might gag you, as well," he says, cupping Keliel's jaw in one hand. "But then I couldn't listen to you beg."

Keliel's hitched breath then might be a surprised, swallowed laugh; he turns his head to kiss Tavren's palm. "As you wish, ser." He smiles, playful and sly. "What should I beg for?"

Tavren laughs, letting his fingers slip down to curl in the collar's ring again. "Whatever comes naturally." He pushes a little power into the collar, just enough to wake the bond between them, so a touch will have magical resonance to go with the physical. Keliel catches his bottom lip between his teeth, but he says nothing.

Tavren settles himself between Keliel's thighs, drinking in the sight of him, sleek long limbs and skin warmed to golden by the candlelight. It feels so different from the first two times, knowing how much more liberty he has. When he coaxes Keliel's body to a more receptive state, he does so for more than just the magic's sake.

He lets his hands explore—the gentle hollow where ribs give way to soft belly, the smooth arches of hipbones, the unbearably delicate skin of inner thighs. Keliel presses into his touch at every moment, and the connection between them is filled with a slow, smoldering longing. Tavren leans down to leave another love bite on Keliel’s thigh. The scent that fills his nostrils is rich and earthy, cut with a wild sharpness that leaves him hungry. He licks at the mark he’s made and deliberately holds back, despite the temptation to turn his attention to Keliel’s cock and balls.

When he sits up, Keliel makes a stifled noise of frustration, hips arching after him. The gold of Keliel’s cheeks is suffused now with a rosy blush, and he squirms in the sheets.

“Something you wanted?” Tavren asks, calmly as he can.

Keliel’s chest rises and falls with his quick, needy breaths. “If I had no suggestions, what then?”

Tavren runs his fingers up the inside of Keliel’s thigh and trails random patterns across his hip instead of offering any relief. “Then I would have no direction, and in its absence I would have to entertain myself.” This teasing resistance comes as a surprise, after how readily Keliel surrendered to form the bond—but the surprise is pleasant, making the difference more clear. This is not an obligation to be performed correctly, but play Keliel engages in of his own free will.

Delightful play, at that. Tavren has always enjoyed the challenge of a partner who refuses to be too easily overwhelmed. He takes his time, learning the contours of Keliel’s body, the particularly sensitive places, the ticklish spots, the places his hands fit most comfortably to the contours of warm flesh. Keliel responds beautifully, arching toward him, sighing and moaning, crooning with need. His cock is stiff and flushed against his belly, foreskin drawn back to expose the crown, and Tavren can scarcely tell whether it’s Keliel’s desire or his own that makes him want to lean down and take it in his mouth.

“Please,” Keliel gasps at last, and Tavren stills. He’s close enough to ghost hot breath over Keliel’s cock, waiting for more. “Please, touch me.”

Tavren laughs. “I thought I had been.”

Keliel whines, a thin and needy sound, and Tavren would almost take pity on him if he weren’t so lovely when he was desperate. “Touch my cock,” he pleads, rocking his hips up helplessly. “Please, I want you so much.”

Perhaps he should have more control, Tavren thinks, but already he’s seen Keliel reduced to moaning, beautiful incoherence twice without having the chance to indulge his own needs. He takes the pot of ointment from the bedside table and leans down to lap at the head of Keliel’s cock. Keliel is gloriously vocal, wonderfully responsive, moaning and sighing his pleasure shamelessly as Tavren licks and sucks him.

“Yes,” he gasps when Tavren presses slicked fingers into the cleft of his ass, spreading his legs wider. He yields easily, tight muscle relaxing to let Tavren’s fingers press deep, and a wave of pleasure echoes through the bond between them. Tavren’s cock throbs with answering need, and he takes Keliel’s cock deeper in his mouth.

The hum and pulse of Keliel’s magic is almost as pleasurable as the sleek heat of his flesh, and the more Tavren focuses on that sensation the more intense it gets. By the time he has three fingers in Keliel’s ass, he feels like he’s on the edge of catching fire, lit up with power that’s only half his own. He gives the tip of Keliel’s cock one last lick and sits up.

“You’re ready for me?” His voice is raw, and he can still taste salt on the back of his tongue.

Keliel pulls against his bonds, as if he wants to reach for Tavren despite them. “So ready, please—please, fill me. Give me your cock.”

Tavren groans, pulling his fingers free and slicking himself up. He sits back for just a moment to admire the picture Keliel makes like this—collared and bound, holding himself spread open to be taken. A moment is enough, though, when he’s been craving this since the first night Keliel turned up on

his doorstep and surrendered to him. He guides his cock carefully into position and pushes, and Keliel lets out a low sigh of satisfaction as he slides home.

At first Tavren has to simply hold still, letting himself adjust to the feeling; it's been some time since he last had a lover, and with Keliel's magic crackling and sparking against his, amplifying every sensation, he's nearly overwhelmed. He takes a few slow, steadying breaths, and Keliel's body ripples around him, muscles clenching tight. Tavren gasps a curse.

"I need you, Tavren, gods, please move," Keliel says, breathless. He wraps his legs around Tavren's waist, pulling him closer, pulling him down. Tavren braces himself against the mattress, pulls back, then drives in deep again to the sound of Keliel's sweet moaning.

Tavren mouths at Keliel's skin, anywhere he can reach, tasting the wild sharpness of him and leaving love bites behind. Keliel rocks up to meet him at every thrust, crooning, pleading, trembling. The pulse of magic through their bond redoubles, a heady flood of power and sensation, so that Tavren can feel the shadow of what Keliel is experiencing, the pressure and fullness, at the same time that he loses himself in the physical pleasure of burying himself in Keliel's ass.

When climax hits it scours through him like wildfire, brilliant and inescapable—and Keliel sobs beneath him, coming with his cock untouched, their pleasure reflected back to each other with wrenching, breathtaking intensity. Tavren is gasping by the time it finally ends, shaking with the effort of holding himself up even for long enough to pull out.

He collapses to the mattress beside Keliel, leaning close for a kiss that's wet and languid and sated. Keliel hums into his mouth, kissing back, and then tugs on the scarf binding his wrists. Tavren laughs, and reaches up to undo the knots.

"There. Better?" He chafes Keliel's wrists gently, and when he lets go Keliel drapes an arm over his chest. The bond between them is finally settling now, leaving a warm, soothing exhaustion in its wake.

“Lovely.” Keliel tucks his head against Tavren’s shoulder and sighs in contentment.

Tavren wraps an arm around him to hold him, and the immensity of this adventure finally starts to sink in—the amount that Keliel was willing to risk for his sister, and the amount that he was willing to trust a human stranger in his desperate gamble. It wakes something hotly protective behind his ribs, something he can’t blame on the magical bond at all. He wants to know what lies beneath that fierce courage. He wants to know what makes Keliel happy, what he enjoys when he’s not fighting for his life. He wants to make sure Keliel never regrets giving up this next year to serve Tavren’s cause. He wants...

Well, plenty of things. But they can wait. Keliel is falling asleep on his shoulder now, a well-earned rest at the end of several long days of battle and traveling. There will be time enough in the morning to start learning each other in truth. For now, Tavren closes his eyes and follows Keliel into sleep.

THE END

Author Bio

Laylah Hunter writes speculative fiction, often queer, often erotic, often concerned with power dynamics, and sometimes all of those things at once. Hunter's mild-mannered alter ego has a day job in one of the driest and stuffiest corners of the publishing industry, a video game habit, and two cats who consistently fail their aloofness checks. Hunter writes best on rainy days and is powered mostly by lattes, which made moving to Seattle a wise career choice.

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