

MOONLOVER AND THE FOUNTAIN OF BLOOD

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I DON'T remember the day I was born, but the moment of my death is seared into memory.

I'd been riding with my lovers-too many lovers, Mother would say, and not enough friends, but that's another story. . . .

Or, perhaps not. As to that, only time will tell.

But I get ahead of myself.

As I say, I was riding. Upon returning, I'd sent my lovers on to the house ahead of me, wanting time in my garden, and my garden being that one, hidden part of my Self that I shared with no one: lover, friend ... or enemy.

I recall the scent of the roses. Even then, with senses no better than any other human's, I could close my eyes as I walked and know where I was in the maze by the scent of the nearest rose. As the essence of sun-warmed raspberries filled my nostrils, I paused, opening my eyes upon my current favorite, a rose that radiated the color of the glowing sun at its center, shading to the deepest of mountain berries along the edges of the petals. I remember noting that it thrived while its neighbors wasted- perhaps because it was my favorite. I felt guilty that in loving one more than the others I'd caused suffering.

I knelt beside the nearest of those distressed plants and thrust my fingers deep into the soil, seeking the flow of lifeblood from the Fountain. As I'd suspected, the sunberry was getting more than its share, the patterns flowing deep beneath the neighboring plants, rising again to touch the roots of the sunberry.

I sternly redirected the flow, then stood watch as the wilted leaves plumped, and the heads of the valiant buds lifted.

Tomorrow there would be blooms.

Assured the flow had stabilized in the new pattern, I sent a silent apology to those I'd neglected and moved on, working my way inward toward the Fountain that glittered with rainbow colors in the sunlight. Weaker colors than was my preference, as the lifeblood's scent had been weak, hence my determined march on the center of the maze.

In the pool at its base, those colors swirled, eddied as I passed my hand through them. I thought of my lovers, and the liquid calmed, turned mirrorlike, reflecting those thoughts, not my own face.

As I knew they would, they'd retired to the rejuvenating pools deep in the mountain beneath the tower, basking in the soothing liquid, doing what lovers did.

I blew their reflections a kiss and silently wished them joy. Perhaps I'd join them later.

And perhaps not. It depended on how hungry the Fountain was today.

I drew my knife, set the point to my wrist and jabbed quickly, cleanly, severing only skin and the artery that was my target.

Blood streamed across the pool, dissipating quickly. Too quickly: the Fountain was starving. I held my hand steady, resisting the instinctive urge to thrust it into the pool, feeding the Fountain until at last the mirror on my lovers turned deep, rich red.

Finally, weak with blood loss, I lowered my hand into the mirror, scattering my lovers into the Fountain's red spray. I closed my eyes, sent my inner awareness to the wound, waiting only long enough for the Fountain to heal the artery before pulling free.

My knees gave way, and I sank to the ground beside the pool. Leaning my back to the stone edge, I drew my legs up, rested my arm in my lap, and waited for the skin to heal. The Fountain's blood-touched water evaporated quickly in the dry summer air, leaving the job undone. I dipped a single fingertip into the pool and dabbed the red spot, keeping it moist, using only enough of the lifeblood to heal the wound.

For the rest, dinner, a good night's sleep-alone, I remember thinking, though

reluctantly-and breakfast and I'd be ready to feed the Fountain again. In the meantime, I drifted in the sunlight, gathering its warmth.

"Well, that was rather foolish, now, wasn't it?"

"Hello, Mother," I said, without opening my eyes. She was the only one I allowed here. Of course, since it was her garden before it was mine, I couldn't very well keep her out.

"Child, you must stop this. You spread yourself too thin, the garden is too greedy."

"My garden isn't greedy. It takes only what it needs."

"And the blooms grow fat as you grow thin. Greedy, I say, as these leeches you bring into my house are greedy."

Mother never thought much of my choice of lovers. "They aren't leeches."

"They want only the things you give them, the beautiful home, the good food and fine clothes-"

"The hot baths." I laughed aloud. "But, Mother, I don't care. In return, they give me what I want."

"Cheap, uncomplicated sex?"

I lifted my head defiantly.

"Child, you grow tiresome-and old. You must give me an heir, before the garden and the leeches eat you alive."

"I'll have no woman beneath my roof."

"Your problem isn't with women, it's with yourself."

I said nothing.

"There are other ways," she persisted.

"Not for me. Go find yourself an heir the way you found me."

"I didn't find you, I simply lost you for a time. You were conceived in this house, in love, but her parents came and took you away before you were born. When the women of the village expelled you, the earth led me to you, and I brought you home."

That was news. I remembered my mother and the village, but nothing of my father. "Was my father owner of this house?"

She shrugged. As usual, Mother's moments of enlightenment were as short-lived as her arguments were persistent.

"The point is, my lazy darling, the heir to this house and this Fountain must be born of love, and love is receiving as well as giving. You give too much ... to the Fountain, to your leeches. You must learn to accept in return."

"I'm doing fine, thank you."

"Rabbit piss. You're killing yourself, inside and out. Your body rejuvenates your blood, but what rejuvenates your spirit?"

"Love."

"You don't know the meaning of the word. Won't so long as you surround yourself with these sycophants."

"Speak from experience, do you, Mother?"

"Yes."

I hadn't been expecting so plain an answer, wasn't accustomed to the cold, determined expression on her face.

"Were they to see you as you truly are-" she began, but I interrupted:

"They won't."

"If they loved you, it wouldn't matter to them."

"No one can love that-creature."

"Nonsense. / do."

A ludicrous comment which deserved no answer.

"You get in there now and tell those leeches to leave, or-"

"Or?"

"Or I will."

I laughed, knowing it for an empty threat. My lovers never saw my blessed Mother. I pulled and pushed myself to my feet, then leaned over to kiss her cheek-carefully, I was still dizzy.

She hissed annoyance, but cupped my face between her clawed hands, matching us lips to lips, and exhaled into my mouth. I didn't resist, felt, as I knew I

would, the weakness evaporate from my knees, and the vitality elsewhere returning.

Mother didn't need the Fountain. She drew her strength from deep within the earth itself. Hers was a magic well beyond my understanding, let alone my ability, and I was sincerely grateful for the gift.

I wrapped my arms around her scaled shoulders and held her close, whispered, "Thank you," and bounded for the house.

The last call I recall clearly from that day was her voice in my head as I left the garden: Don't thank me too soon.

The rest of that day is awash-murky-with sensations. Sight, sound, smell . . . my very sense of the lifeblood soared beyond human ken.

I remember running all the way to the baths beneath the ancient tower, rushing to my lovers, so full of energy, I wanted to have them all at once. I recall my poor servants jumping out of my way, clearing the halls before me.

I remember flashes of glowing stalactites, the small streams that crisscrossed the path, the exhilarating rush as I dived, headfirst, into the glowing pool among the smooth, beautiful bodies.

I recall coming up for air.

I recall the horror on their faces.

The fear.

The disgust.

I recall the way they pulled away, pressing themselves to the edges of the pool, and how the cousins, Jhemine and Jharl, leaped out and disappeared up the pathway, screaming for help.

"Cal?" I asked the nearest, oldest and best of my current lovers, and I reached to catch his arm as he, too, pulled away. But my voice was not my own, and my hand, my fingers, my . . . claws . . . bit into his arm, scoring deeply before I realized those claws belonged to me and let him go. "Cal, it's me, Tammerlindh." I struggled, forcing the words past a throat that seemed too stiff to make the sounds, but Cal heard, or saw, something that made him pause, at least long enough to look more deeply, past the scales, the claws . . . the fangs I felt pressing my lower lip.

By now, the pool was empty, leaving only Cal, and . . . whatever I had become.

"God of lightning, is it you, Tarn?"

I nodded, afraid to open my mouth lest he flee as well.

"Wha-what happened to . . ." Cal was shaking. I remember how he sank into the pool, seeking its warmth. I remember sensing the flow of the lifeblood to the wounds on his arms and how my own soaring energy drained as the pool sought to heal the deep gouges.

Gouges I had made. "I don't know-"

Cal winced, and I closed my mouth on the unnatural sounds. "What happened?" Mother's voice, a voice very like mine had become, finished for me. The words echoed in the cavern. "Nothing happened, Calvern of Tandoshin, worshiper of . . . lightning." And Mother herself appeared-for the first time to one of my lovers-standing on the edge of the pool, her tail whipping from side to side, her scales glimmering in the light from the pool. "This is my child, Tammerlindh."

"Mother, no!" I cried in protest, but it was too late, and I was condemned by my own words. Cal stared at me in horror. "Cal, this isn't . . . I'm human, Cal, as human as you. I was born in Kheroshin. Bastard, yes, but human. My mother hid me for years, but the village women discovered me, stole me from her hut, and left me, naked and bound in the woods. Mother found me, yes. Raised me, yes. But this-" I raised my hands between us. "This is not me! She's done this-" And turning to Mother, I begged an answer. "Why?"

"For truth, child. For love. True love will break the spell."

"Cal loves me. -Don't you, Cal?"

But the horror remained on Cal's handsome face, and the distance between us grew steadily.

"Cal?" I held out my hands, pleading, and something in my eyes must have reached Cal at last, because almost, I swear, he lifted his hand to meet mine.

But at his movement, the pool rippled, sending out waves of light. The scales on my fingers glittered. Cal jerked back, shook his head as I reached desperately for him, shook his head again as he stumbled out of the pool and up through the tunnel. "The garden is dying." Mother's words: the first sounds I recall from the days following my death. "So am I." But in truth, I was already dead, my sleek, scaled form nothing but a mobile tomb. "Rabbit piss. Get back up there and tend your roses." My answer was to slither farther into the utter darkness of the cavern depths. Somewhere in that time following my death, I'd left behind the rejuvenating pools. Lack of food and water made my reptilian shell ever smaller, allowing for deeper and deeper penetration into oblivion. But one day I made one crawl too many. Before me, then around me, the glow returned. "Too easy, child." Mother's voice in my head, and in the next moment, sunlight blinded me. Well, not permanently: Mother wasn't a total fool. She transported me into the shadows beneath an arbor, but it took many long minutes for my long-unused vision to return. When it did, I wished for the darkness back. The garden was, indeed, dying. I tried to stand, but my body had forgotten how to walk. I crawled slowly to the heart of the garden, where the Fountain ran clear and cold as mountain ice-melt, its lifeblood totally consumed. I had no knife, my clothing was gone with my skin, but I had the weapons of my new form. I aimed a sharp claw above my wrist, plunged it deep . . . But there was no blood. Frantically, I tried again. "That won't work." Mother's voice, and Mother herself, perched on the side of the pool. "What. . ." My voice was little more than a hiss. "What, then, can I do?" "Tend them. Love them." "The soil has no life. Without the lifeblood, the water is impotent. Your truth, Mother, not mine." "Leave, then. Find Love. Assume your true form and return to feed the Fountain." "And in the meantime, the garden dies." "Perhaps." "And perhaps I'll remain here and die with it." "A compromise. I give you the night. You shall have your true form back, but only at night. And you will have no more substance than the greater moon. When it is new, you will be nothing but shadow. As the moon increases, so shall you. Only when the moon is full will you be solid flesh. Only then can you feed the Fountain." "The roses will die." "Not if you control the lifeblood's flow more carefully. The roses need little merely to survive. You were profligate with the Fountain's essence with your glammers and your parties, your gifts to your lovers. Conserve. Wait. Find love for you, not your gifts." "You ask the impossible. No human, man or woman, could love what I've become. What you have made me." "And that, child, is where you do me an injustice." "How?" "One day, you'll understand." My life became a morbid dance of hope and disappointment. Travelers passed through my gates, took advantage of my shelter and my generosity . . . then left, never to return. I tried, oh, how I tried, to be the gracious host, but my form was frightening, even to myself. I banished all mirrors from the house, and ultimately all objects with a polished surface. I avoided looking

at myself . . . I didn't have to, I saw Mother's truth in the eyes of the travelers.

Finally, I shut my gates. Not all Mother's insults could make me reopen them. Without my tapping the Fountain for human comforts, the garden did well enough. I survived off the woods. I became more and more a creature. And thus did I exist, growing darker and more bitter with each passing breath . . . until he came into my garden.

But again, I skip too far. It was the merchant, first. The merchant and his servant boy.

I saw them first in the woods. The merchant was in the cart, the servant at the donkey's head when the wolves attacked. The boy tried to ward them off with his puny stick. The merchant wielded a heavy whip that hit the boy as much as the wolves.

It was obvious who would win that fight. I turned my back, content in the knowledge that had I not been there, they'd have died anyway.

But the boy's cry proved my undoing: I looked back. He was down, with the pack leader's teeth reaching for his throat.

I was there, and because I was there, I couldn't pretend otherwise. Before I thought again, my claws were digging into the pack leader's scruff. I pulled him off the boy and thrust him into the woods, hissing and snapping my teeth. The pack leader challenged; I threw him back again.

In my hunting, I'd grown wise in the strengths of my inhuman form. I used those strengths to liberate the merchant and the boy, and knew satisfaction for the first time, as the pack slunk off into the shadows.

I turned back . . . to an all too familiar fear on the merchant's face.

I approached the cart, slowly, palms upturned, so as not to frighten. The donkey had a laming wound in its hindquarters, the boy lay still on the ground.

I thought to help.

The bite of the merchant's whip ended any such inclination.

Without a word, I escaped into the woods, glad to see the last of this ungrateful pair. I ran through the woods that day, ran and ran, trying to escape the face of the servant boy, the fear and the pain that changed, or so I wanted to believe, to hope and gratitude as I freed him from the pack leader's weight.

Night fell. A clear but moonless night, and so I became shadow.

It was, perhaps, the strangest of my forms to comprehend. I existed. I saw, I thought, I moved through the landscape. But I could not touch or speak.

I returned home . . .

To find it invaded. The merchant was there, eating-gorging himself on food I hadn't created. Mother's doing, I thought, though I hadn't seen her since I closed my gates.

But the boy was not in my house, not gorging on Mother's food. I thought myself through the door and into the courtyard, where I found the cart, but no donkey, no servant boy. Traces, a veritable trail of blood led through the maze and into my garden, all the way to the Fountain.

I found the servant collapsed on the ground beside the donkey, a bloodied rag in his hand. The ugly wound I'd seen on the donkey's hindquarters at the last was half-healed. The boy leaked a steady stream into the thirsty soil.

Dying. Trying to help the beast while his master stuffed his face inside.

I knew if I could get him into the Fountain, he would not die, but I had no substance. I couldn't so much as dip fingers into the pool.

I could, however, direct the flow of the lifeblood. That was a feat of will, not of substance. I sank my insubstantial fingers through the boy's body and into the soil. I sensed the flow. I called it to me, drew it up and into the body, to that wound in his side.

I knew, when the long-lashed eyelids flickered, that I had succeeded. I kept drawing, feeding the slender body, restoring the lifeblood lost.

It was, Mother would say, profligate spending of the Fountain. But I knew the limits of the Fountain now, understood the needs of the garden. The roses

would suffer, but they wouldn't die.

The boy shuddered to life, curled into a ball, shivering in his thin tunic. Cold, but he would live. There was nothing more I could do for him.

Dawn approached. Soon, I would resume my reptilian form. I returned to the house . . . where I found the merchant awake and stealing jewelry.

Not that I particularly minded: the jewels had been gifts to my lovers. The merchant had slept in one of the rooms vacated in that last hurried exodus. I didn't mind the theft, but somehow, the ingratitude overwhelmed me. Anger flared with the dawn, and I descended on him in fury, as my claws and scales glittered into substance in the light from the window.

The merchant cowered, dropped to the floor, pleading innocence. I called him liar and coward, and thinking of that boy left to die, raised a hand to even the score.

"Stop! Please!" A voice from the doorway stayed my hand. A deeper, richer voice than I'd expected the boy to have. But not a boy, seen on his feet and in dawn's light. A young man. A young man covered in blood and dirt, his long hair in tangles about his face, but with a dignity utterly lacking in his master.

A sigh heaved beneath the dirty tunics as I lowered my hand.

"Thank you." The young man stepped into the room and moved toward me, carefully avoiding the carpet with his filthy feet. "He didn't mean to hit you yesterday, my lord. He was frightened. If he'd understood, he'd have thanked you. I'm certain of it."

"Thanked me. And is stealing another way he . . . shows his gratitude? Is leaving you outside to die while he feeds his overstuffed face?"

"He was very hungry, my lord. It's been days since we ate a real meal. He came in to find help. I imagine he was . . . distracted."

"You make excuses."

"Do I? Forgive me. If you won't accept his gratitude, will you at least accept mine? You saved us yesterday . . . you also saved me last night, in the garden, didn't you?"

His gratitude disturbed me. "Corpses lying about upset my gardener."

A knowing smile lit his face.

"It still doesn't excuse the theft," I persisted, resisting the lure of this proud young man, who defied my anger and who showed no fear of my fangs and my claws.

"I'm certain it was for his wife, my lord. He's a merchant who lost all on this venture. She's expecting a gift, and she's . . . very demanding."

"Then perhaps she should find herself a more prudent husband."

"It wasn't my fault!" the merchant protested, even as he tried to rise.

I pushed him back down with a flick of my tail.

"But it's the truth, my lord." The servant touched my arm, not shrinking from the texture so foreign to human fingertips. "The failure was not his, but mine. I brought the wrath of his trading partners down on his head."

"And how did you do that?"

Another faint smile. "I flooded their cargo."

"And why did you do that?"

"Seemed like a good idea at the time?"

I laughed aloud for the first time since my form change. It was a strange, hissing sound. The merchant cowered. The servant joined me. I felt . . . human for the first time in countless seasons.

I couldn't let this young man leave. Not yet.

"Fault or not, thief or not, he's insulted my hospitality. He will remain here until he convinces me of his penitence."

"But, my great lord." The noise arose from beneath my tail. "I'm most sorry! I do regret my hasty, ill-thought actions. I'll never-"

"Oh, shut up. While you're in this humble mood, however, try apologizing to this loyal young man you've so wrongfully treated."

"Never!"

Any stray thought of forgiveness vanished.

"Very well." I waved a hand-very grandiose gesture and utterly meaningless-and the room transformed into a dark cell. "Good-bye. Come, lad, I'll find you a bath."

"Wait!"

I turned to the merchant.

"You can't leave me here."

"Can't I?"

I was out the door before I realized the young man hadn't followed, but was beside the merchant, helping him to rise, being cursed and cuffed for his efforts.

"Boy?"

Eyes lifted to mine, eyes brimming with unshed tears.

I held out my hand, but the young man shook his head, though he winced from the fingers biting deep into his flesh as the merchant used his arm to gain his feet. He ducked his head under the older man's elbow, holding him upright, steadying his steps to the pallet of a bed I'd left him. He eased the merchant onto the pallet, covered him with the blanket, then straightened, his back pressed to the cold stone wall.

"I-I can't, my lord."

"Why not? You've done nothing. If you fear your master's wrath-"

"He's not my master, my lord. He's my father."

There was nothing for it, then. I had to let them go.

A month passed. The garden blossomed, a final burst of brilliance before winter set in. Fall colors filled the woods.

And I had a visitor.

"Why'd you come back?" I asked the young man, whose name, he said, was Khendar.

"I owe you my life. I've come to repay you."

"And how much is life worth these days?"

"You mock me."

"I tease you, lad. My own life is quite cheap, I assure you. Now, what are you offering?"

"Not money, since I have none." Khendar went to the window, stared out across the maze to the garden beyond. "I've come to offer you the life you salvaged."

"Doing what?"

Khendar shivered, then turned, his eyes wide but unwavering. "Anything."

"Anything."

A quick nod.

"Tell me, Khendar, why did you flood that cargo?"

"I objected to the price they demanded."

"That price being?"

Lips tightened. The proud chin lifted. "Me."

"I thought as much." I watched him a moment, judging, then: "Truth, sir: you aren't here of your own accord, are you?"

Lips tightened. "I wanted to come, yes."

That surprised me, but what followed surprised me even more.

"Truth, my lord? Truth is, my father discovered my desire to repay you, somehow. He fostered those desires, and now the entire plan is tainted. I hoped to serve you, to tend your garden, perhaps help with your estate's books-I'm good with numbers. And I'd keep your confidences, despite what my father-"

He broke off and turned away, tension in every line of his body. Clean, with an obviously new set of clothing, his fine dark hair a shining veil about his face and down his back. I'd scarcely recognized him when he arrived at the newly repaired gate.

But I'd known the proud stance, the expressive mouth.

Of a sudden, he struck the wall with his fist. "Dammit, I won't do it!" He spun to face me. "He wants me to steal from you, too. Not your things, but your knowledge. He wants to know who you do business with. He wants to know

the source of those jewels he found. He wants to know your finances and the secrets of your magical home. But I won't do it, I tell you! I won't!" I blinked. The thought of estates and balancing books so foreign to my experience I had to laugh.

Khendar glowered.

"Oh, lad, I'm not laughing at you. Forgive me. If it's trading knowledge your father seeks, perhaps we can give that to him, but we'll have to look for it, or make it up. I'm no merchant."

Khendar blinked. Charmingly confused.

"I'm no merchant, but I am lonely. Bored, too, if truth be known. I'm tired of my own company. I'll have no servant, but if you'd care to guest here, you may consider the house yours for as long as you care to stay."

Another confused blink.

I smiled and headed for the door, not sure which of us I tormented more with that offer.

The following months were dreamlike in their splendor. Khendar did have his ideas about the markets his father dealt in and began feeding his father advice based (supposedly) on my nonexistent ledgers. His father's business prospered, and Khendar at least seemed content.

But if Khendar ever received thanks from that ungrateful wretch who had sired him, I never heard about it.

For me, as the cold white of winter descended around us, I cared for nothing but the smile on Khendar's face when I materialized each morning.

Of course, he didn't know I materialized. He didn't know anything about his monstrous benefactor. But he smiled and welcomed me, and for a time, I felt less monstrous than ever in my life.

At night, I'd call up his image from the pool, the bed in which he lay in the room he'd chosen, which was my room, though he didn't know that. I'd call up his image and watch him sleep. Sometimes I'd enter the room itself, moonshadow that I was, and insubstantial as the moon. But as the moon waxed, so did my substance and I longed to touch him, to lie next to him, to feel the wonder of human hands on human skin.

On those nights, I watched from the Fountain.

And on the night of the full moon, I fed the Fountain, draining myself to oblivion to keep myself from crawling into that bed beside him and taking advantage of a nature I knew would refuse me nothing.

And would never again look on me with that welcoming smile, should I ever give in to that desire.

The Fountain glowed now with color. The garden, dormant for the winter beneath its snowy blanket, required little more than enough warmth and damp to keep the small roots from dying in their sleep, and Khendar was blessedly easy to keep, laughing when I tried to give him jewelry and clothing, asking rather that I teach him to read and write, that he might enjoy the books in the library.

With numbers, he was beyond my comprehension, but his rather had never allowed him to learn his letters, except as symbols representing companies. What he knew of markets, he held

in his head, the "letters" he sent his father no more than coded advice on what to buy and what to sell and for how much.

He was an eager student and learned quickly, and thus we spent the winter sitting beside the fire made of wood Khendar gathered, working our way through the library built and stocked by my predecessors in this house, a library I myself hadn't touched since I'd discovered lovers.

The house had been the place I lived after Mother found me. The garden was my passion, the Fountain my responsibility.

That winter, Khendar and I made it a home.

We found a book, a journal that the earliest owners of the house had kept, folk of the valley, not the hills as were Khendar and I. They'd built the tower to defend against invaders from the East, and when the battle was won, they'd returned to their distant villages.



Or so I'd heard. Those were ancient times, not our times, and the journals were in a language I didn't understand.

But the old book raised questions. Paging absently through its aged leaves, Khendar asked me about my father, and about the house and about my predecessors, and I fled when I realized I had no answers.

The next day, I returned ... to a quietly penitent Khendar, who asked no more questions.

But when I took him at last to the caverns, to the rejuvenating pools I'd shunned since the day I died, it was Khendar who had answers.

"Tamshi," he whispered, running his fingers along the glowing rock, and as he slid in beside me, those fingers traced my scaled arm with the same fascination. "That's what you are, isn't it, Tarn?"

I just stared at him, lost in my ignorance of my own existence.

"Why don't you answer him?" Mother, whom I hadn't seen since before Khendar had entered my life, was sitting there on the edge of the pool.

Terrified of a repetition of my last visit here, I lunged for her. But she stopped me effortlessly, twisted me about in her hold, forced me to face . . .

But the pool wasn't empty. Khendar was drifting closer, watching with that wide-eyed curiosity I'd learned to treasure.

"I didn't know Tamshirin came in pairs." Khendar said, and above my head, Mother hissed.

"We don't. This is my child. He's very lonely. Do you like him?"

"Very much."

"Rather silly looking, don't you think? Scary, perhaps?"

Khendar laughed, that wonderful, ringing sound that filled the air with joy.

"You're baiting me, mother-of-the-ley. You know he's beautiful, as are you.

Frightening . . . yes, if I were a wolf. I'm very glad I was not. I'm also very glad he was there to frighten wolves and save a foolish traveler."

"Sensible lad."

She kissed the top of my scaled head, and then she was gone.

I fell back against the stone, filling the spot she'd vacated, staring at Khendar, waiting for him to speak, mesmerized by his look of wonder.

But I didn't want wonder. I wasn't what he'd called me. Mother was, perhaps, but not I. I was human. I needed to be human again. I was lost and getting farther away with every passing moment.

I could stand it no longer. I bolted from the pool and up the tunnel to the surface, hoping Khendar would find his own way safely, trusting his good sense.

I was freezing. I wrapped myself in blankets, hiding the scaled glitter from myself, burrowing, waiting for nightfall. I'd be shadow, but I'd be human, too. Warped and twisted beyond words to describe, but human.

And for the first time since I died, I cried.

When I awoke, I was no longer alone. Night had fallen, and I was a crescent-moon shadow, the blankets had begun to drift through me, my substance sufficient to slow their progress, but not to stop them altogether. Under the blanket, drooping somewhere around my shadow heart, was a strong, human arm. Khendar had sought me out, had joined me in my burrow, comforting, as Khendar would.

I winced as he stirred and pulled his arm and the blanket too fast through me. But I held steady as he settled again, his arm and the blanket atop me rather than within me. For the moment. I dared not move but rather had to wait while arm and blanket once again sank through me. And when I was free, I darted away, leaving my sweet friend to his dreams.

"Tell me about the Tamshi?" I asked the next day as we settled near the fire with our current book, and Khendar looked at me, then closed the book and set it aside.

We hadn't spoken about Mother or the pool or last night, but Khendar's large, curious eyes had followed me all morning.

"You really don't know?" he asked, and I nodded, looking away, ashamed of my ignorance.

He held out his arms; I stared at them, not understanding. Touches had been brief between us, last night's invasion of my blanket unprecedented.

"All I know are children's stories. Being held is part of the telling."

I frowned and shook my head.

"They get pretty scary if you don't have arms around you." He lifted his hands a degree farther. "Come, my gentle host. Indulge me."

I edged over, reluctantly, though it was not onto his lap. We sat on the floor, a fur rug beneath us, the fire before us. With my back to him, I draped my tail over my legs, and leaned against his chest. His arms closed around me, and I acknowledged my Khendar's wisdom as his voice drifted magically overhead.

He told me of wondrous beings, shape-changers, lightning-dancers, and of the source of their great magic, the ley-touched water, the caverns filled with the purest of the magical ley. I sensed Mother in these stories, and our rejuvenating pools, but not me, not even in the changelings, though that had been the judgment cast upon me by the village women who left me to die in the woods.

Khendar's changelings were normal human children taken and raised by the Tamshi, returning to their villages having gained wondrous powers. While my Fountain might bear some resemblance to Khendar's ley-touched springs, and while Mother had certainly taught me to use its lifeblood to feed and to clothe me, there all resemblance ended.

Besides, it was not what I'd become under Mother's tutelage, but rather what I was beneath it all that made me different. Human, but so warped my own mother had hidden me, and the village women had set me out to die.

As Kendar's stories grew ever more fantastical, I began simply to drift on the sound of his voice, to think more of the touch of his arm against mine than any connection I might have to any of his tales.

"You aren't listening."

It was a moment before I realized he was speaking to me, not for one of the creatures he'd brought to life for me.

"I'm sorry," I murmured and the words came more easily than they should.

Dismayed, I looked to the window.

Night was coming. Soon, I'd be shadow once more.

"I must go." I shifted my weight and with a final, lingering caress of his arm, I deserted him and the nest we'd made beside the fireplace.

"I've bored you," he said, and the color rose in his cheeks.

I envied him that heat.

"I just have to leave."

"Stay. Please?"

I shook my head. I saw the pain my rejection caused, saw the burning desire to question these nightly disappearances, but I felt myself changing, fading, and I had to escape.

"I'm sorry ..." I whispered, and ran from the room.

I tried not to hear his calls, begging me to return.

But my determination had been undermined. I could no more stay away from his room, my bed, than I could cease to feed the Fountain. I lay next to him, atop the covers until the moon waxed sufficient for me to slip beneath them. Not solid, but enough to touch, however lightly, and beneath that touch, Khendar sighed and twisted, asleep, but not. It was an invasion of his dreams, and in his dreams, he reached for me, grasping with fingers that slid painfully through my insubstantial flesh.

I wept, not for the pain but for want of that touch.

During the day, he looked on me with lustful eyes, but what he saw, what he wanted was no more me than the me my other lovers had welcomed into their beds. He was a lover of the fanciful. He told his stories with the awe and delight of a true believer. He felt he had one of his mystical Tamshi in his thrall, or he was in its, and he was ready, eager, even, to sacrifice himself on that altar of fantasy.

And yet, a part of me asked, what could this be, but love? Khendar wanted me,

human or not. I ached for him, wanted no one but him. But if this was true love, Mother's curse should be broken, and I should be returned . . . To that warped human form. And seeing me thus, would not Khendar leave me as quickly as those others had? I'd survived their departure; I am not at all certain I could survive his. . . .

\* \* \*

The journal entry ended there.

Khendar closed the ancient tome and sat, hands crossed on the well-worn leather cover.

His eyes misted; he blinked them clear.

So many questions answered, so many more asked.

He shouldn't have read it, shouldn't have invaded Tammerlindh's privacy, but- Oh, to have the answers to those sweet, searing, impossibly real dreams he'd begun to have. In his heart, he'd known Tarn was responsible, but the blunt-nailed, oh-so-human touch had not belonged to the Tamshi lover of his waking fantasies.

But the curse . . . he knew even if Tarn avoided the truth, why Tarn hadn't been set free. The Fountain needed an heir. He and

Tam together could never, not with all their wishing for it to be otherwise, give that gift to the mother-of-the-ley. And so the answer was simple: he must leave.

\* \* \*

Something happened last night.

Ink sprayed. Tammerlindh set the pen down, gripped his hands together until he had his shaking under control and dipped the pen once more.

The moon was full. . . .

. . . and yet I couldn't stop myself from entering his room. He'd announced that morning that the thaws had come and he must go home, for all that the thought brought him no joy.

I hid my pain, and told him he was welcome to return, but I knew he would not. This was his final night in the home he'd created, and I wanted only to kiss him, to feel, once, the firm flesh beneath my lips. But as I leaned over, his still form came to life. He reached up and pulled me down, bathing me in sweet kisses.

He called me Tarn, though I swear I'd never given him my name.

I protested, but my heart was not in my objections . . . until his eager kisses reached my waist and traveled lower. And stopped.

I looked down, saw those wide, wondering eyes staring at what he'd found, there in the moonlight.

Terror filled me. I had no glamour, not even Mother's magic now, to hide my hideous deformity. Unable to bear his revulsion--worse, his pity--I thrust him aside and ran from the room and from the house, out into the awakening garden. I reached the Fountain, sought the knife I kept there, and slashed both wrists deeply, not caring now for nerves and tendons, seeking only release from the world.

Let Mother find another.

Red blood gushed black in the moonlight. Within heartbeats, my knees went weak and I slipped to the ground. I braced my arms on the stone edge, buried my face in my arms, all to keep my wrists from falling into the pool when I lost consciousness.

But release was not to come from death.

"Tammerlindh!"

Beloved voice through the buzzing in my ears, as the scent that filled the air around me was dearer to me now than my roses' perfume. Hands grabbed my arms above those wounds, forced them into the pool.

"Stop!"

Mother's voice, and Khendar's hands left me.

I jerked my arms free of the healing pool.

"Well, child," Mother said, "which is it to be? Love? Or death?"

"M-monster," I whispered, watching the steady drip of life-blood. The arteries

had healed in the brief contact, but blood still ran.

I willed it to run faster.

"This bright lad doesn't think you're a monster. Do you, child?"

"Scaled, moonshadow, or flesh, he's Tammerlindh, and Tammerlindh is no monster."

"You can s-say that-" The words came with increasing difficulty, breath and blood deserting me equally. "After seeing . . . what you've seen tonight?"

"What are you talking about? Mother? What's he mean?"

"I'm certain I don't know. He's an idiot."

"Damn you, Mother," I gasped. "How can anyone love something which is neither man nor woman?"

A long silence during which, despite my efforts, my wrists continued to heal, the lifeblood maddeningly slow to evaporate in the damp night air.

"Is that what all the fuss is about?" Khendar asked.

"You mock me. Damn you both, let me go. Mother, find another. I'm done."

"The hell you're done." Khendar's hands gripped my shoulders, lifted me, forced me to look at him. "So you're a child of Rakshi? So what? All that means is we-we-can provide the ley-mother with her heir. / don't have to leave now!" His arms slipped around my shoulders, forcing me to face Mother. "Lift the curse! Lift it now!"

"You don't understand. Neither of you has ever understood. The curse is not of my making, but his own. I but loaned him the power to achieve his desires. Until he accepts what he is, loves what he is, true love can't touch him. By his choice."

"Then I'll make him accept it. I'll change his damn mind!" Defying Mother's orders, he thrust my hands into the pool, kept them there as he whispered another tale in my ear, the tale of Rakshi, a human child given to the forest at birth-because it was neither male or female, but equal parts of both. Reared without human contact and without human morals, Rakshi was kept alive by the ley-mother, but grew wild as the mountain itself. S/he danced to the forest melodies, hearing rhythms no normal human could imagine. And Rakshi loved- oh, how Rakshi loved. Male, female, all were drawn to the wild, beautiful creature who danced like the wind and the clouds. Women who knew Rakshi had beautiful, equally ambiguous children; men who loved Rakshi found such children left on their hearths in the middle of the night.

"And when at last Rakshi died," Khendar's voice whispered in my ear, "the ley-mother sent him to join the ley. He filled the mountain itself with his joyful, wild essence. Now, when we love, when we dance, when we laugh, we join with Rakshi." He drew my hands from the pool. The cuts were gone, healed even to the weakness. He pressed his lips to the invisible wounds, first to one, then the other, then looked me in the eyes. "And you, my wonderful, beautiful love, are one of his children. You were born to love and laugh." His lips pressed mine. "Come home and laugh with me?"

I was still unconvinced, but I followed him, mesmerized, to the room we'd shared in so many ways. In the remaining hours we had, I opened myself to him, and in opening, began to discover myself.

We fell asleep, tangled in each other's arms. And when dawn touched the Eastern window.

Arms curled around Tammerlindh's neck, crossed on her chest, and teased the tiny nubs.

"Put the pen down, and come back to bed," Khendar's voice whispered, and Tammerlindh, not the least reluctant, obeyed.

She cleaned the pen, closed the journal, and set her hand, pale-skinned and blunt-nailed in the golden morning light, into her lover's.