

Ivaldi: Book 2 Chapter 11

Strange Tales in the Hills

A few days later, Teja and I sat on the balcony, watching slow rain drip among the trees. The view of the valley below was obscured by a white-grey wall of cloud, and the cold, dim light turned nearby trees to black skeleton silhouettes. Those further off faded, ghostly, into the fog. I leaned my elbows on a table, warming my cold hands around a cup of hot soma. Teja sat sideways in an overstuffed armchair, legs hooked over the arm and feet dangling towards me. Though our chairs were close together, her position put her face as far away from me as possible, and her voice, too, seemed distant, muted by the rain.

“Do you want to hear the rest of the story now?” she asked tentatively. “You have the right to know.”

Uncurling my right hand from the cup, I turned my wrist upward to look at the scar, still red and slightly puffy.

“Yes,” I said slowly, “I suppose I’ve earned the truth.”

“What I told you before was true, but not the whole truth. Truth can be dangerous.”

“So can ignorance,” I replied.

She nodded. “Yes. Perhaps if you had known you would not have left Ivaldi to come with me.”

“Perhaps. But if I hadn’t, you might be dead by now.”

She smiled. “Yes. So, in return for my life, I give you my life, as near to true as I can make it.”

“That will be true enough for me.” I managed a half-smile.

Teja stood up and drew her chair around so that it faced mine at right angles. She then sat in it cross-legged, hands folded in her lap, and took up her story:

Up to Duvalye’s entrance into my life, everything I told you, however strange, is fact, and you may soon have opportunity to verify it yourself in Stanets. This is what happened afterwards:

Duvalye visited me several times, and told me many things, about Ivaldi and the rest of the world outside Stanets, and how people lived there. But he did not say much about himself. I knew, vaguely, that as a lover he was a little unusual (*she flashed me a sly smile*), aside from his prodigious climbing abilities. He never ‘took’ me as I had heard a man should do, but rather made love to me with hands and mouth.

Especially mouth. And afterwards I would always find a small wound,

like a bite, usually on my throat. His strangeness never worried me, however. He was so generous in his passion, so utterly unlike Tash, or any Meshvid. I realized later that he could have had intercourse as a normal man would, but he chose not to, knowing how brutalized I felt by Tash's assaults. I was still a virgin, but whenever Tash got near me I felt... defiled.

One morning, *not* after a visit from Duvalye, I awoke from dreams of blood. When I opened my eyes there was blood everywhere, matted in my hair and dried on the sheets. I thought at first that my moon-bleeding had finally come, and had a moment of panic that I would now have to marry Tash. But, as I looked down at my body, the blood seemed to be in all the wrong places. My thighs were sticky with it, true, but there were small, oozing marks on my breasts, and my throat felt raw. I wanted to get up and look in the mirror, but the floor moved and my knees would not support me. By leaning on the wall I was able to grope my way around the room.

In the mirror, I could see why my throat ached. It was torn in several places, and blood still trickled slowly from the raw wounds. I watched in horrified fascination as a thin, red stream snaked over my collarbone and down my breast. There was a knock at the door.

I moved too quickly, and nearly fell, gasping out, "No, don't come in!" "What is the matter, mistress? Are you ill?" It was the maidservant with my morning tea. Fortunately, my door was bolted from the inside. "I - I am not feeling well. Just leave the tray. I wish to... be alone."

The tea tray clinked on the stone floor outside the door, and her steps died away down the spiral stair.

I struggled to the washstand where a jug of water and a basin stood. Wincing, I dabbed away the worst of the bloody smears, though my throat continued to drip. The basin full of pinkish water seemed very heavy, but I carried it carefully out to the battlements and tipped out the water. Resting my forehead on the cool stones, I finally cleared my mind enough to think a little.

What had happened to me? The throat wounds were somewhat like the tiny bites Duvalye left, but he had never been so brutal. And he had told me he was going to Ivaldi on business. Surely some wanton cruelty had been at work, but whose? And why could I not remember? Had I been unconscious?

I could not show my injuries to anyone in the harem, but how else to explain the blood, which soaked my bedding in random patches? They would think my female bleeding had begun. I sank back on the bed

without collecting the breakfast tray. I was not at all hungry, though I felt terribly weak. I thought in circles until I dozed off.

The maid came several times, but I woke scarcely enough to send her away. I came fully awake at dusk, feeling more alert, but still weaker. I had the sudden conviction that I must get to Duvalye. He was somehow responsible for this; he would know how to help me.

I felt feverishly purposeful, and strangely detached from my aching body. I dressed in dark clothing, with a scarf wound round my neck. The hood of an old grey cloak of Askhvan's would hide my hair. When I had dressed, I sat on the bed again, thinking of nothing, a heavy brass candlestick in my hand. My mind drifted, seeking Duvalye, but he seemed very far away.

There was a rap on the door, the maid again. I rose, slid the bolt.

"Mistress?" The maid's head craned in, peering into darkness. The candlestick thudded dully against her temple, and she dropped like a stone. Still feeling not-there, I dragged her inside, clumsily stripped her of her servant's robe and turban, and bound her with the fancy belts from my formal robes.

The maid was large, so her robe fit easily over my clothing. The turban hid my most distinguishing feature, though my skin was still too pale. I rolled the cloak under my arm, picked up the basin and jug. Carrying them would complete the disguise, I hoped. Or at least give my hands something to do.

I left the harem easily. The guards, chatting or dozing, barely noticed me. I was pleased with my successful imitation of the servants' lazy shuffle.

Once out of the harem, I was lost. I could find my way in the palace, but where was I going? To Duvalye. I must get to him.

The obvious starting point was the stables. In a dark corner (there were many; the palace seemed half-deserted. I recalled hearing that the king and court had gone on a hunting trip) I took off the maid's robe and turban, donning the cloak. I touched the heavy signet ring my brother had given me, and smiled a little.

I slipped into the stables and accosted the first groom I found. "King's business," I whispered, showing him the ring. "A horse and feed. Quickly!"

The groom was not accustomed to questioning his superiors, especially messengers or spies who carried the royal insignia. He saddled a mountain pony, filling the saddlebags with grain. I mounted without another word, and rode off into darkness.

It was fortunate that the pony knew the terrain. My vision was clouded, and I had only an obscure instinct to guide me. He found a path in the direction I chose, and carried me forward willingly. I don't recall much of the journey that night. In the morning I pulled the pony into a thicket, removed his bridle, and spilled grain for him. I dozed off while he ate, and when I woke it was dusk again. I felt weaker, and terribly tired. My throat burned, although, when I removed the scarf to cool it, the wounds seemed to have healed. I was too dazed to think much of it; my only coherent thought drove me to Duvalye.

The pony did not mind travelling by night; our mountain ponies have long been bred for midnight raids. Nor did he complain when it rained the following night, hard enough to soak us both to the skin within minutes. The monsoons had come early, which probably saved me from capture. On the second day, while we were hiding in a thicket, I dimly heard a party of horsemen pass, but the heavy rain had already washed away our tracks, and the dogs could find no scent.

Some days later, I never knew how many, I found myself in front of a wall, the wall that encloses this house. As the pony's nose touched the gate, it swung open, and Duvalye came hurrying to meet me. I pulled the pony to a halt and looked down at him.

"What have you done to me?" I whispered, and crumpled from the saddle into his arms.

"I have not done this, my love," he said bitterly. "I only wish I had." He carried me into the house, but I was not conscious long enough to see the interior.

I woke some time later, feeling warm and secure. I was in a large bed, larger than any I had ever slept in, with soft white sheets and thick blankets. I could see the monsoon rain pelting against a window. Duvalye moved into view, sat on a chair beside the bed.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"All right. Tired." I felt thin, nebulous, almost non-existent. But I no longer cared. I was safe. I closed my eyes, wanting to drift off again, but Duvalye summoned me back, squeezing my hand sharply.

"Teja," he said insistently, "We must talk. I need to know how this happened." I slitted my eyes at him.

"That's what I came here to ask you," I said. "Whatever happened, I do not remember it. All I know is that I woke up covered in blood. I had to run away before they saw me. I was afraid they would think my bleeding had begun, and marry me to Tash." Later I realized that this was preposterous. More likely they would have thought me attacked by demons or some such nonsense. Which would hardly have been

better; with their fear of magic, my ignorant kin would probably have killed me.

Duvalye shook his head. "I know what has been done to you, but not who has done it. Nor do I understand why. I can only assume it is an attack directed at me, but I cannot imagine who would know of our... relationship, or go to such lengths to harm me through you." I was too dizzy to follow this, and closed my eyes again. Duvalye gripped my hand.

"Teja. Teja! You must listen. You are about to undergo the Change, and you must understand it if you are to keep your sanity." That got my attention. With effort, I focused on his face.

He spoke slowly, haltingly, always watching me with great intensity. "Teja," he said, "You know that I am not a normal man." I nodded. "Many years ago I was. A normal man, and unhappy, for many reasons that I will not speak of now. Then I met a woman, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, until you. She, too, had red hair. I loved her deeply, and she gave me the greatest gift she could, that of immortality. I had hoped, eventually, to give this gift to you, if you wanted it. But there are disadvantages, and I wanted you to be free, out of Stanets, with other hopes for your future, before I asked you to make that decision." He paused. "Apparently, someone else has made it for both of us," he said with bitter anger.

"I do not know who has done this," he continued. "There are others like me, and any of them would be capable. But this person went to a great deal of trouble to reach you, even to know of your existence, and I do not know why. I have enemies, but I had no reason to expect this sort of malice from them. It is unprecedented among our kind."

"But it is done, and the process cannot be reversed. You are beginning the Change which will make you like me, immortal, and in certain ways extraordinarily powerful." He smiled briefly, showing teeth. "It has its uses."

"I am going to put you in a safe place where you will sleep, undisturbed, for several days. You will feel nothing, no pain. And when you wake, you will be Changed."

I said nothing; what was there to say? And I felt so tired. I had listened, but barely understood what he said. Except that I would be allowed to sleep for several days, which sounded wonderful.

"Are you ready to go?" asked Duvalye. I nodded. He picked me up and carried me out of the room, through a hall, and down a flight of stone stairs. A narrower passage lay beyond, carved out of the rock of the hillside, and at the end a low door, opening into darkness. Duvalye, stooping, carried me inside and laid me on bare earth. It felt

welcoming, almost warm, with a comforting scent. He laid on top of me a cloak he had had slung over one shoulder, which carried his own spicy smell. Lying with my cheek in the dirt, I felt perfectly comfortable, and my eyes closed immediately. Duvalye stroked my hair, saying, "I will see you soon," and I slept.

The door opened. I woke, feeling sharply alive and energetic. I rolled over and got to my feet, bumping my head on the earth above. Duvalye stood silhouetted in the doorway, but I could see his serious expression.

"How do you feel?" he asked softly.

"Fine. Wonderful." I flashed him a smile.

"Come out, then, and let me see all of you." I followed him into the hall, shaking back my hair. It was a mess: matted, tangled, and earthy. Apart from that, following Duvalye's intent gaze up and down my body, I could detect nothing different about myself. He nodded approvingly.

"The Change went well for you," he said. "There is nothing to worry about." And he led me upstairs to bathe.

Later that evening we sat in the salon by a roaring fire. He combed out my hair as it dried. I felt wonderful, excited, tingling with a wild strength that flowed like fire in my veins. My sight, hearing, and even sense of smell were far keener than they had ever been, and every sensation was exquisitely sharp. In spite of the pelting rain, I wanted to go out and run up and down the hillside. But Duvalye wished me to remain hidden, because there had been search parties from Stanets looking for me. He said very little but watched me constantly, with a sadness I could not understand. I was here, with him, alive and at last free. But he looked as though he had lost me.

Manton came in with a small ceramic jug and cup on a tray. The scent rising from the jug was inviting, something I did not recognize, yet knew I craved more than any food imaginable.

Manton placed the tray on a small table next to me and went away.

"What is that?" I asked Duvalye. "It smells wonderful."

He smiled. "Have some and see if you like it."

I poured from the jug into the cup, and was surprised at the color. What beverage could be such a beautiful shade of red? I had seen wine before, and even tasted a little, but this color didn't seem right for wine. And when I brought it to my lips it was warm. I drank slowly, savouring. In my mind I sought a comparison with favorite dishes I

had eaten at banquets, but found I could no longer remember how any of them had tasted. This wonderful new stuff blotted out all memory and desire for other foods.

I drained the cup with my eyes closed, and sank back in my chair with a sigh. I felt replete, utterly content. After a few moments I opened my eyes again and smiled at Duvalye.

“What was it?” I asked.

“Blood.”

The shock was so great that I very nearly vomited. I gulped down the sickness and blurted out, instead, the first question that came to my mind: “Whose?”

“One of the ponies. Don’t worry, it was hardly enough for him to miss.”

“But- but why? Why did you give it to me?” And why, I dared not ask, had I liked it? Even now the memory was so delicious that I knew, with despair, that I would want it again.

I had risen from my chair, staring at the cup I still clutched. Duvalye stood and took me gently by the shoulders.

“Teja, this is part of what you are now. You will live on blood and nothing else. If you cannot get it, you will die.”

“Animal blood?” I asked hopefully. But I already knew otherwise.

“For now, for the first few years. But later you will need human blood, and that of animals will no longer suffice.”

“Is that why you came to me? You needed my blood?”

“Teja, I could have gotten blood anywhere. Would I have climbed that damned tower so many times if I hadn’t wanted *you*?”

“But you needed the blood,” I accused.

“Yes. I need the blood. But need was combined with desire. For us, feeding and lovemaking are the same act. You must not doubt that I loved you, and still do.”

“Do you?” I said desperately. “Then make love to me now.” I clung to him, seeking his mouth with mine. I had never been so wanton. Or so afraid.

“Ah, Teja, I cannot,” he said sadly, pulling my arms away from his neck. “You are now of my kind, in a sense my kin. For us to make love would be worse than incest. It would kill us.”

I was bewildered. “First it is life, now it is death. What do you mean?”

“It is all in the blood. It has a life of its own, and requires other blood to feed it. But now you carry your own strain of the living blood, and to mix it with mine would create a reaction that would kill whichever of us drank from the other. Believe me, it has been tried.”

“And you cannot make love to me without taking blood?”

“It is very difficult. The temptation is too great, especially when there is love. Better not to torture ourselves.”

“So in return for this great gift of immortality, I must lose you?” I asked bitterly.

“I will always love you, and will stay by you for as long as you need me. But for lovers you will have to seek elsewhere. It is the absurd tragedy of our kind.”

We never discussed it again. I drank horse blood, which Manton procured for me. I didn't need much, nor very often, which was a blessing as I enjoyed it every time, and then hated myself for that. I was free of Stanets and Tash, but I paid for it with this peculiar malady, and I had lost Duvalye into the bargain. I wondered if the price had been too high.

After a few weeks of brooding here at Hillhouse, Duvalye judged it safe for us to go to Ivaldi. We rode down out of the hills, and at Prayag took a boat for the city.

In Ivaldi I was introduced to others of my “kind.” Duvalye, not wishing to expose me to the unpredictable reactions of the vampire tribe, let them believe that he had Changed me. He guessed that my rape had been intended to hurt *him*, but he could not identify the enemy. He had been out of touch with vampire society too long to recognize the increasing danger of a cadre of young malcontents who were busily swelling their own ranks. He now began to piece things together, with the help of Peter, a blood-child of his from some decades previous, who had been living in Ivaldi and was more aware of what was happening among the vampires. But to me they said nothing, until later.

I matured as a vampire, and began to crave human blood, without wanting to admit that that was what I needed. And I wanted it, oh how I wanted it. But to take human blood meant to take lovers, and the idea was difficult for me. Raised in the harem of Stanets, I had never imagined myself having any lover at all, let alone many of them. Even marriage to one man had had no appeal: the period of my engagement to Tash had destroyed any romantic, harem-bred notions I might have had about marriage. Duvalye, well, he was different. He had come to me, and I had needed him, and I loved him still. To actively seek

lovers - worse still, to use them, to deceive them and drink their blood - it horrified me.

I was vaguely aware that Duvalye had lovers of his own; he had candidly admitted that he needed human blood to survive. But he still bitterly regretted the premature loss of our physical intimacy, and did not wish to remind either of us of that loss, so he was very discreet about his new lovers, and, at home or abroad, it was always just the two of us together. The Ivaldin all assumed that I was his mistress; what his real mistresses may have thought of the arrangement I never cared to ask.

I was still shy of crowds; after my life in the harem I could never go out among strangers without feeling that they were all staring at me and laughing. Even in Ivaldi they did stare at me - and still do, because of my hair. I suppose I am becoming accustomed to it at last.

So Duvalye and I spent a great deal of time at home together, and he taught me many things. Though I stayed indoors, I did not feel imprisoned as I had in Stanets; here there was so much to learn! Duvalye had lived a long time, and had much to teach me. Healing, herb lore, history. The ways of weapons - sword, knife, bow, body. Philosophies and strange religions from far-off lands. I took it all in as eagerly as he taught it; it allowed us to avoid more painful, personal topics. I even regained a sort of contentment, spending my days and nights in a quiet but intense routine of scholarship.

We had to attend some social functions, though I was painfully shy of all the glittering strangers, and would have preferred to stay quietly at home.

It was at one of these parties that I met Manju, and I knew immediately that it was he who had Changed me. He repulsed me in every particular: brash, cocky, reminiscent of Tash, though without Tash's edge of desperation. I did not remember him or his assault, but the blood-bond was there; I felt it, and he himself was eager to acknowledge it.

"Well met again at last, little Teja," he said, leaning to kiss me. His moustache smelled of old blood. I jerked my head away.

"Do I know you?" I tried to bluff.

"Certainly you do," he leered. "We met on a night I'll not soon forget." I was growing angry, and was relieved when Duvalye appeared at my elbow. Manju gave him a sardonic bow.

"I am Manju. The lady and I have a certain... relationship," he said in a low voice, mockingly conspiratorial.

Duvalye looked at me. "Is this true? Is he the one?"

I nodded miserably.

Duvalye stared keenly at Manju. “Who is your master? Dakini? I suspected as much. We must talk with her.” He took my elbow with one hand, Manju’s with the other. “We’ll go right now,” he said.

“I have no intention of leaving this party,” blustered Manju. “I have... business to conduct here.”

“It will have to wait,” Duvalye said briefly, staring into his eyes. The contest lasted only a moment; Manju lowered his head and dragged along with us.

We found Dakini at home; she and Manju had evidently expected our visit. I had met her before - she was a great party-goer - and I now remembered the arch little glances she had been wont to give me, full of a meaning that I had not then comprehended. But when confronted with the misdeeds of Manju, for whom, as his blood-master, she was ultimately responsible, she smilingly claimed to have known nothing until he had returned to Ivaldi after Exchanging blood with me. She pretended to treat the episode as an indulgent mother would a small boy’s pranks.

Manju recounted that he had been on a visit to Meshvir, and had learned of Duvalye’s obsession with someone in Stanets. Vampires are terribly curious about each other, in part because their safety is so dependent on each other’s behavior: the recklessness of one is enough to put the whole tribe in danger. Duvalye’s excursions into the Meshvid palace - by means that would appear supernatural to the notoriously magic-loathing Meshvid - would surely be dangerous to himself and his kind if discovered. Manju had climbed the tower, he said, to see what Duvalye was taking such risks for, and found himself overwhelmed by my beauty. He thought me a prime candidate to join the vampire race. “Why you had not done it yourself, Lord Duvalye, I could not imagine,” he smirked. “So I told her what you were keeping from her, and she was only too happy to accept my gift.”

“That’s a lie!” I cried. “I never even saw him that night. I was asleep, or unconscious, and he violated me!”

“Well, of course you say that now, now that you are under Duvalye’s protection,” sneered Manju. “But you can come back to me. I’ll take care of you.”

I turned to Duvalye, who took my hand.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I believe you.”

Without commenting on this exchange, Dakini took up Manju’s tale: “When Manju came back to tell me what had happened, and you two arrived not long after, I thought it best that he leave the City for some

time, until the mess could be sorted out. After all, he had been poaching on your territory, Lord Duvalye, and I couldn't be sure how you would react."

Duvalye fixed upon her a stare that made me shudder. After a few moments the cool and collected Dakini ducked and twisted her head away from him, gasping.

"This- this is a matter for the Elders to decide!" she stuttered. "You have no right to judge me."

"I am *your* elder, Dakini," he growled, and she flinched away from him again. "But," he continued after a pause, "as you say, it is your right to have a hearing before the Elders. I will request an audience."

When we returned home that night, Duvalye explained to me his suspicions about what had happened.

"Dakini has hated and resented me for centuries," he said, "the same way, in those countries where inheritance is based on primogeniture, a younger sibling hates the older who will inherit everything. By accident of 'birth,' if you like," he smiled grimly, "I am that eldest sibling, and heir-apparent to the Elders. Someday it will fall to me to rule over the vampires. Dakini, though the next oldest and the acknowledged leader in her generation, is much younger than myself. She is greedy for power, and would like to diminish or eliminate me. Manju is her blood-child, and would never have dared what he did had she not planned it, urged him on, and promised to protect him."

"Can you do nothing to punish him, and her? You have told me yourself that one of the prime Laws is that no human can be Changed without his own consent. I did not consent to... this."

"I could insist on strong retribution, and I will if you want it. But I think we would both be better served by pretending to believe Dakini's story, and waiting to see what she will do next. Whatever I do to her now would only be a provocation to her followers, who might try to further injure me through you. I do not want to expose you to any more of their plots. And what is done, is done. I regret it deeply, but punishing Dakini and Manju will not change what you are now."

The summons to the Elders came several days later. I knew nothing then about them, and it is safer for you, Seaborn, to continue to know nothing. They were the most terrifying beings I have ever beheld, and I hope I need never see them again. My only comfort was that Manju was at least as frightened as I was, and even Dakini seemed cowed. Only Duvalye stood before them as if he were in any city salon, and described the situation with calm assurance:

“Teja was my lover, and I risked my life to visit her in Stanets. I intended to get her out of there before offering her the Exchange, judging that she could make a decision more truly her own once she was free of slavery in the king’s harem. Manju came without my knowledge, and made the Exchange while she was unconscious - she had no idea what was happening to her, and certainly did not agree to it as was her right under the Laws. Then he abandoned her. There was already enough of a bond between us that she was able to find her way to my house, and there underwent the Change. We did not know until recently that Manju was responsible.”

Manju stuck to his story: I had agreed to, indeed demanded, the Exchange with him, and denied it now because I feared Duvalye’s jealousy.

“But why,” asked the Elders, to whom this was the most important point, “did you then abandon her? The Meshvid might have killed her, and you would have been responsible for that death.”

Manju gazed at the ground. “She was so eager, she nearly drained me. After a night like that I was so tired I could scarcely make my way back down that damned tower before her servants arrived in the morning. I came back the next night, but she had already panicked and fled. The bond was too new for me to track her.”

“You were already so far away I could not even sense you!” I muttered. A few of the Elders turned their eyes to me, and I stopped speaking.

It came to Manju’s word and Dakini’s versus mine and Duvalye’s. The whole situation was unprecedented. The Elders deliberated at length, and finally decided that I would go on living with Duvalye, since that was my professed wish, but that it would be unnatural to deny Manju’s rights as my blood-master, however attained. Manju’s punishment would be that he would make no further Exchanges for at least a century, and then only with the permission of the Elders. It would be up to Dakini to enforce this command.

Manju’s escapade, in spite of the punishment, enhanced his status among his peers of his own generation, none of whose blood masters yet allowed them to Exchange. They even began a rumor that Manju had done what Duvalye no longer could. After all, Duvalye, though nearly an Elder, enjoying all the rights pertaining to his status, had not Exchanged since Peter, many years before, and he had allowed them all to believe he had created me.

I would have liked my life to continue as before, and let the storm of gossip blow where it may. But my growing hunger would not let me rest. To seduce an unknowing human, use his body and drink his blood

- this was using people in much the same way that my father the king had used my mother, and Tash would have used me. I remembered the delicious joy of my nights with Duvalye, but that was different - I loved him. Now he was seducing and taking blood from women he did not love, and I was repelled by the idea. Also, I had been a virgin until Manju, and since I remembered nothing of the experience except its aftermath, I might as well still be.

Duvalye had planned to introduce me to love slowly, enabling me to savor each act. Manju had wrecked that plan, as so many others, leaving me frightened by what I should have enjoyed, and indeed would depend upon for survival. After my Exchange, Duvalye could not make love to me in the vampiric way; my blood was now vampiric, and to mix it with his own would kill him. This was one of the saddest facts of vampire life: the Exchange was the beginning of a new life, but also the end of the physical relationship. For two vampires to make love would be as if you were to have sex with someone you loved, but with both of you denied, forced to deny yourselves, orgasm. For us, the climactic pleasure of sex is in the blood-taking, but we cannot take from each other. The blood is too vital, and once it has adapted itself to one host, it does not mix well with other strains.

Reluctant and unprepared, I continued to resist the needs of my maturity. Manju's unwelcome visits did not help, but by the order of the Elders I could not refuse to see him. He soon grew exasperated, for the bond between us made my hunger palpable to him; even Duvalye felt it, though the bond we had shared since he first took my blood had been weakened by Manju's intervention.

Manju was never one to resist his impulses, and he could not understand my reluctance. Over the course of months my body grew weak and feverish, and animal blood stilled the cravings for only hours at a time. Neither Duvalye's pleas nor Manju's threats had effect. Duvalye tried bringing me human blood in a cup. I trembled at the scent of it, but refused. It is rare for a vampire to starve herself to death, but I could not bear what I had become, and what it required of me.

Manju came one night with an adolescent Islander, one of my mother's people, a pale, pretty youth. Manju had told him that I was a daughter of the Goddess who needed his help to reach my full powers. I was horrified but tempted, more painfully so when Manju pierced the boy's throat and urged me to drink from that red stream.

Duvalye sensed my agony, and came on the scene. The anger he had pent up for so long burst free at last, and he took and killed Manju. I was bathed in Manju's blood, and shared the pain of my bloodmaster's

death. But I was glad to be free of him. I screamed at Duvalye: “Now! Now it can be what it should have been! Give me your blood!”

Duvalye held me off: I would not survive the battle of two bloods in my veins. But in the shock of Manju’s death, I was not listening to reason. Duvalye himself was in shock, and as he thought out the full consequences, his grip loosened.

I hesitated, looking into his face. “Will you not share with me what is rightfully mine, now that I am free?”

Duvalye nodded wearily, and scored his thumbnail deep across his breast. I felt with him the surge of ecstasy as my lips touched his welling blood, but his eyes were already shadowed by death.

Dakini, accompanied by Elders, found us in this attitude. Manju lay across the Islander boy in a pool of their mingled blood. I fainted as I was dragged from Duvalye, and remained unconscious. Only Duvalye could have reached me where my mind had fled, and he did not try.

So the situation was interpreted as Dakini had found it: Duvalye, in a fit of jealous rage, had killed Manju and forced me to share his blood, which would surely kill me as well. The penalty for killing another vampire is death, and it was swiftly carried out. Still unconscious, I cried out once, and those who heard me shuddered.

Duvalye had arranged for his house and all his affairs to be left in the care of Peter, in trust for me should I survive. He had explained nothing, nor had he needed to. Peter, himself in mourning for Duvalye, nursed me carefully.

But I did not, after all, look like dying. I confounded all the vampires when, morens later, I opened my eyes, and was wholly sane.

With Peter’s help, I underwent one brief but merciful second infancy as a vampire, subsisting on animal blood and regaining some of my strength. But the craving for human blood returned all too quickly.

Peter was gentle, but inexorable. Duvalye had told him, “Do not let her kill herself. If she survives this second Exchange, she must not die by her own will.” Peter brought his own lover, Janno, and together they made love to me. And, when the moment came, I drank Janno’s blood. I no longer fought; I had no energy to resist, and had become resigned to my needs. I even mutedly enjoyed the experience; it was gentle, loving, quiet, as befit the mood of all three. We repeated it a few times,

until, not wishing to intrude on their relationship, I announced my readiness to find my own lovers.

I was not, however, ready for the emotional involvement of exposing my true self to a human being; such relationships called for a degree of trust I felt I could never give anyone, and indeed have not, until you. Peter taught me the techniques of making love and taking blood, with my lovers aware of only the former. Peter and Janno escorted me to a party, where I quickly made a conquest of a young man who looked enough like Janno to make me feel a little less shy. I took him home and took him to bed, and he never knew he lost a little blood, except to remark the next day, laughing, that my love bites left fierce bruises.

This young man would have stayed with me as long as I desired, but I soon drifted to another lover, and another, sampling men in celebration of my freedom, but running from them for fear of loving them. In time I learned to enjoy them, though my pleasure was always mingled with the oppressive memory of what I had lost with Duvalye. I kept company sometimes with Peter and Janno, but usually I preferred to be alone. I felt that I gave off an aura of sadness which might mar their contentment in each other.

My lovers saw my sadness as an intriguing mystery; it was part of what made men come to me, thinking to solve a beautiful riddle and free me of my pain. But I eluded them all, taking what I needed, giving what they wanted, but never too much.