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# Boys Can't Be Witches

Philippa Peters



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An 'Adult Tv' E-BOOK

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# BOYS CAN'T BE WITCHES

**by Philippa Peters**

## **I. A WITCH'S SON**

"Dedrick?" asked my aunt, studying me intently with coal black eyes. "Surely not. Dedrick would be, what, eighteen years of age, and you..."

Her voice trailed off as my mother's sister, Orissiana, stared at me; I knew what she saw. While she had black hair like my mother, I had fair hair like my Seafarer father. I took after him as well, I was told, being small and slim.

"Wiry," my mother had called me when I cried to her at the jibes from other lads in Doxford where I had

grown up. She had smiled. "You're just like your father," she said, giving me a big hug while her eyes misted over at the memory. "He was slim and fair and blue-eyed, a true Seaman."

My father had entranced my mother, lived with her for a season and fathered me. He had gone back to his people, promising to return with seven kinds of fabled pearls in a necklace for my mother but his setting out on a summer's morning was the last she ever saw of him.

"You're not a hairy brute like me and the people of the Lowlands," laughed my mother. I had to smile at that. My graceful mother was no hairy brute. She was beautiful with dark brown eyes that helped her laugh her way through life. She was a witch like my aunt, or at least people called her that. She prepared potions for ailing cattle, love philtres for the loveless and concoctions that many a grand lady sent her maid to purchase, some to aid in fertility and the production of heirs, others to prevent or control the birth of the unwanted.

I wasn't even as tall as her, my mother, when I reached my sixteenth year and maturity. We were living then in Malesia, in the seaport of Terraire, where I saw the great ships of the Seafarers putting into dock. I was taken for one of them, the Seafarers; when a ship was in port, I got many enquiries everywhere I went as to the name of my ship and the line and clan I belonged to.

Several Seamen waylaid me one night to ask me who I was. I caught a salty aroma from them as two held my arms and two more interrogated me. "You're a Cunian spy," one said, giving off an odor of saffron that he must have eaten with a meal. He wasn't as tall

as me I saw in surprise as he jabbed my thin chest with a bony finger.

"I'm no spy," I protested while the others grinned at me.

"Only Cunians leave spies abroad after they sail," said the other, soft-voiced and, I realized by the aroma of seaflowers and sweetsoap, a girl. "What is your ship?"

"I have no ship," I said and they all smiled broadly at that.

"Your mother's name and line," said the first. Yes, he was wiry as my mother had called me.

"My mother is the Lady Airene," I said.

There was silence as they all looked at me. "That's no Seafarer name," one said and the grips on my arms relaxed.

"Your mother is landed," said the woman in surprise.

"Well, she was the witch of Doxford," I told them. "And she once had a Seafarer as husband."

The arms fell from me. "A Turling," one said. The Seafarers almost ran away from me, leaving me even more shocked than when they had quietly circled me on Wharf Street and pulled me into the quiet little square to question me.

"What's a Turling?" I asked, running after them. They had fled from me. Much later, I discovered that it was a bad word in their older language which only the most island-bound used. The word was used for half-breeds like me, ones who would never be accepted on their ships, the ships of those who ran from me as if I had a pox, that is. To those Seafarers, I would never

have been accepted and allowed to land in the Islands, no matter that I had bred as a Seafarer. On the islands they came from, I couldn't have landed if it was known that I was a Turling.

To Seafarers, I was unclean, more so, I was told in the bars by Black Sea sailors, because my mother was a Malesian witch. That was a lie and I should never have believed it. Crossbreeds did not breed true, an old, grizzled bar denizen, pungent with poorly fermented grape and spilled ale, told me. But crossbreeds weren't unusual on the waterfront. There were red-headed and brown-skinned Malesians as well as the tall, black-haired 'true blood' who looked down on all the other varieties of hair, eye and skin colors along the docks of Terraire.

My sweet-smelling mother never told me my father's name. "You'll find out when he returns," she said, smiling as always. One reason, but not the only one, I think, was that after we moved to Terraire, I grew, so I reminded her more and more of him. There, in Terraire, I thought, she could search for him among the crews of the great ships that came to call at Malesia's largest port.

I was sent out about the city one fateful day to deliver potions for her. I took my time, as always, stopping in at new inns I'd never been to before in the Merchants' Quarter. I got home on the supper hour; the fact that the door was unsealed should have told me that something was terribly wrong.

In horror, I recognized the smell of the draft in the glass on the table beside my mother's dead hand. I lifted it and smelled the brandy and bitter aloe aroma that she used only to conceal the parasane cordial, as she called it. I had only tasted it once when I had lied to

her about running wild in the hayfields outside Doxford. Cory, Lenne, and I had destroyed twenty stacks in the exuberance of an early summer's day. The parasane paralysed me. A weight pressed down on me and when my mother's voice asked her questions, I answered fully with no ability to lie, even though I wanted to.

That's when I had realized how powerful a witch my mother was. "I rarely use it," she told me later when I had recovered. "My sister now, Orissiana, she concocts that cordial and other potions like it as well, some that would allow me to see where my love lies. But to walk that path of knowledge..." She had shivered then.

"Should I die before you, Dedrick," my mother said to me. "You must not let the parasane or any of the dark bottles," they were of some special kind of glass made on Glassblowers Street by only one tradesman, "fall into anyone else's hands but those of my sister."

So, after I had had my mother's ashes placed in a vase for me, I set out on our small cart with the vase and my cargo of bottles and vials for the hills and my mother's sister, Orissiana. There was a hate in my heart then for all things Seafarer. I was a short Seafarer blade that was stuck in my mother's back. The glass told its own tale. She seemingly had drugged a Seafarer, one whom she had left the Golden Casket tavern with, something I found hard to believe she would do, but several people assured me that she had, herbalists whom I hardly knew.

I wonder if my mother had found out where my father was or what had befallen him in her questioning of the Seafarer. Roddin, our neighboring herbalist, had seen a Seafarer stagger away from our tenement and

then saw three more return and leave later. By the time I informed the Watch of all this, the only Seafarer ship in port that day, *The Breeze of Far Oceans*, was rounding Beachy Head and heading out onto the Black Sea.

Unlike my mother, my aunt was known throughout the Middling Hills. If ever anyone deserved the title of the Witch of Malesia, it was she. When tavern-dwellers heard that I was headed to her, they made the warding-spell sign at me and didn't converse with me any more.

I was glad to be going to such a powerful witch, one who was feared all along the River Road into the Hills. I hoped she would be able to avenge me on the Seafarers who had killed my mother, her sister.

I went to her dark, tree-circled home with pleasure, noting how the house sat, brooding, well out of the hamlet-town of Birchwood. I almost felt at home after a week on the road as I smelled the hazel, wortbanes and collane that my mother, like my aunt, had used to keep the rooms free of infestations.

"I have eighteen years," I told my aunt, quivering a little as her eyes held me, not allowing me to look away. She didn't have the same scent as my mother. Oh, the sweet honey was there but there was something else, a musky aroma that I associated with polished hides and something more, a hint of something sharp and metallic, but unlike anything I had smelled before. "My mother, the Lady Airene, is dead and she bade me bring the items in my cart to you before I return to Terraire and hunt down the Seafarers of *The Breeze of Far Oceans* who killed her."

"No need," said my aunt, standing in her black robes, a head taller than me. "The murderers of my sister already swing in iron cages on Traitor's Gate in



Terraire. Your neighbor, Roddin, and his apprentice, have confessed to the Watch Commander and he has carried out my request with despatch."

"Roddin?" I asked stupidly, all the hate that had sustained me on my journey to the Middling Hills evaporating. All I could think of was the man's kind smile and gentle touch as he had commiserated with me on my loss.

"My silly little sister," my aunt said contemptuously, stroking my shoulder as she spoke in a sugar-sweet voice. "Still chasing romance and rainbows. You found your mother's silver vaults almost empty, didn't you? Roddin has returned the coin in hopes of an easier death. Little does he know how hard his death would be should I have had to descend to the Lowlands to settle with him. Still, my dear, my sister's wealth awaits you in Terraire at the moneychanger you know as Serrill."

Bile had grown in me as I thought of our neighbor and his gaping-mouthed, gangrene-odored apprentice and how they had treated me so obsequiously in the months I had resided in Terraire.

My aunt frowned at me. Her hand, its fingernails long and red, reached out and touched my hair, yellow in summer, between her fingers. She was staring at me most intently. "So, my nephew, what is it that you do?" she asked me, her smile fixed. "Are you a witch like your mother?"

"Only women can be witches," I said huffily. I don't know why but I thought of the children's games we had played in Doxford. There were only boys on the street on which I lived; whenever a witch had been needed in a game, I had been the witch.

"Well, you know how to play the part," Cory had told me. "In your mother's shawl and her hat, you look like her. Well, what she would look like if she was a Seafarer."

So, I had been Sherrene the Witch in some of our games. I wasn't allowed to 'battle.' I had to sit in splendor and cast spells and potions on the prisoners, who died most horribly. Always, as well, the best of the plunder, the choicest cakes, were reserved for me, Sherrene. Cory was always my Servant Knight. He treated me with proper deference; if anyone forgot that I was to be called 'she,' he made sure they got a good, hard thump.

I started to recall the last time that we had played Sherrene but I forced that memory away as my aunt looked down at me as if she was reading my thoughts.

"Seafarers use a salve on their faces and skins. It is made from a bivalve they dig up on faraway beaches," said my aunt as she touched my face and the thin hairs that were so fair as to be nearly non-existent on my skin. "That is why Seafarers never have mustaches or beards. I'll get you some. You are a Seafarer, after all."

I wanted to protest. I didn't want to be bare-faced like a Seaman. I didn't want to have to smile at black-bearded Malesians who teased Seafarers, even on the streets of Terraire and invited them to come and be kissed as they were smoother than their wives.

"Garling," I heard a Seafarer mutter once. Now I knew it is a word for a bushy-quilled type of tree-climbing rat. So, I guess all the smiles and sunny expressions Seafarers were famous for, didn't show what they really thought of us.

“So what do you do when you’re not being a witch?” asked my aunt, taking my hand and leading me through what she had called her parlor and into an organized and sweet-smelling kitchen where a pair of vacant-eyed drudges prepared a meal of soup and bread for us.

What did I do? I gulped and didn’t want to talk to her at all. I did nothing. That was the truth of it. If I tidied my mother’s vials, she would smile at me and pay me two silver coins. A drudge would have cost her only coppers a day.

She would shoo me out of the house then, claiming that her customers did not want to see anyone at home but her. Always she made sure I had coin to spend on entertainment. I was used to long perambulations about the town, spending coin freely like a Malesian noble son.

Actually, my mother was Lady Airene, a title of nobility but we didn’t live like nobles and she only used her title when she had to do something for someone she disliked. But I did sometimes think that I was a noble’s son myself when I saw how hard all my friends were working. But my mother wouldn’t let me take up a trade.

“I need you,” she would say. “I need someone I can trust with my potions when I’m not here.”

I felt important at first but I knew it wasn’t a real trade that I did. Sometimes I saw dandies in taverns, loud and swaggering. I avoided them as I could, despite their flowery pomanders. I noticed, though, that several stared after me when I slipped out of taverns where they flattered barmaids, girls with hair dyed the color of mine, with their attentions.

I mentioned it to my mother and she patted my hand. "Quite right," she smiled at me. "Best to avoid rowdies in the taverns. But really you have nothing to fear here in Terraire. Osgard," the local count, "maintains a stout Watch. Run to them if ever you must, Dedrick, and you'll find fair treatment for all, Seaman, Russet or Lowlander."

No, I did nothing of consequence, only an errand here and there for my mother, for which she paid me richly, and treats for my 'friends,' anyone who didn't mind talking to the local witch's son. Oh, I helped on occasion, mixing and checking her potions for her. I knew the differences between heronwing and heronsfoot, one a fern and the other a poisonous toadstool. I knew that heronsfoot with the innocuous greybirch leaf increased in toxicity tenfold and that weaver's thatch had to be used to store it. I could hardly have lived with my mother for so long without picking up some of her basic lore.

My aunt questioned me while the vacant-eyed drudges stood silently while we ate. One stared at the wickerwork on one wall of the kitchen, seeming to trace its interminable patterns with her eyes while the other stared fixedly at the darkened glass window, her eyes flickering from cloud to cloud. Each smelled of collane and so I knew who kept the room so scrupulously clean.

"Airene taught you well," Orissiana said with a smile when I told her how I knew it was parasane in the glass by the smell of brandy and bitter aloes. "If you were a girl, I'd say that you would be more than half a witch right now."

"But men can't be witches," I told her and my aunt gave me a crooked smile. "My mother told me so."

"That's not exactly true," said my aunt, eyeing me as my mother used to when I asked a question interesting to her. I saw the family resemblance in my aunt to my mother. Then her features hardened and she didn't resemble my graceful mother any more.

"Too much of our work is involved with women and their petty complaints," Aunt Orissiana said. "We make them love potions, philtres, baby-making essences and special concoctions to ensure the birth of sons, cordials to prevent pregnancies, and then there's heronsfoot for the boring, former lover and new love potions for when the grieving widow wishes them."

I looked at her and some of the horror I was feeling must have shown in my expression. Orissiana reached across the table where we had moved to sit and took my hand in hers. I couldn't believe how strong she was.

"Not your sainted mother," she said with a smile, showing off a mouthful of very white, straight teeth. "She dealt with the health of mothers and children, and domestic animals, didn't she? And what man would be interested in that? New wives, new children, even new animals, can be made or purchased. Even new witches. Count Osgard has offered me five hundred gold to abandon my wiflings here in the Hills and to minister to him at Terraire."

I stared at her in amazement. "No, he must seek elsewhere for his new witch," said my aunt, turning to look at her inattentive servants. A flash of the ring on her finger and they were suddenly alert, studying her face. "Algoth, the supper dishes," she said. "Maris, prepare the Green Room for our new witch, little Sherrene."

I recoiled and stood up, heat flooding my face. How could she have known about that? She must have been reading my thoughts. If so, then she must have known, *must* have known, about Cory and the kiss he had given me.

"Forgive my little joke," Aunt Orissiana said, making an effort, or so it seemed to me, to soften her harsh looks, to be more like my mother. "But while I have you here, I will use you. I have need of a witted assistant."

I looked over at Algoth, who had completely ignored what was going on between us. She was staring at the painted wall as her hands washed dishes with a cloth, rinsed them and laid them gently on a tray to dry, never looking down at what she was doing.

Orissiana's eyes followed mine. "A failed assistant," she said. "But she has her uses." Her eyes glittered as she looked back at me. "But you won't fail me, little Sherrene, will you? I really do not need a third drudge around my house. With your mother dead, we have no other relatives, you and I. It's right that you come to me and I should teach you all that your mother refused to."

## **II. A WITCH'S ASSISTANT**

I tried to run away in the night. I never saw who or what it was that tackled me in the woods and sat on me, until a silent Algoth arrived with a lantern, took my hand as whoever it was released me, and led me back to the house and the Green Room. I would know my attacker again, however. His salty male aroma was threaded with the same metallic smell that my aunt gave off.

My aunt never spoke to me of it. She set me tasks the next day, subtle but everyday recipes to follow, all of which I had heard my mother chanting to herself. I had not thought of them as recipes for her potions until I was in my teens. My aunt seemed to think that I knew them but knowing wasn't the problem, my mother had said, when I sang them back to her, surprising her, making her laugh that I knew them so well.

It was knowing just the right amounts that fitted together, my mother said, that made the witch. The great witches could do it by smell, she told me, and tried to teach me how odors showed how changes were occurring with potions. If I knew how something should smell, she told me, then I could always make that potion on my own.

I had ruined many of my mother's more expensive concoctions by trying to do just that. My mother only laughed at my trying to be a witch like her and showed me how she did it. My aunt was different. She said nothing about how to make what she wanted, just telling me to make tellene, collane and other needed household compounds as my mother had undoubtedly shown me, and left me to it. Then my aunt retired to a dark, inner room from which emanated a sweet, honeyed aroma.

I looked at the open door and windows, the room being aired in the later days of summer. I moved towards one and Maris ran to the door, standing there, looking down at the floor, absently cleaning the heavy pot in her hands. I glanced at the window behind me. I picked up a chair and moved it to a place where I could climb out.

I was about to step up when the chair moved as Algoth pulled it away from me. She stood beside it,

frowning at the ceiling, while Maris, moving back to the kitchen area, was laying out all sorts of copperware and cleaning it neatly.

I sighed, went to the shelves and took down an unmarked glass jar of babyroot. I took it to the table as Algoth resumed a steady cleaning and dusting of the long workroom that led away from the kitchen.

The mild aroma of babyroot floated up to me as I released the cord holding the greybitch leaf about it. I found the mortar and pestle, spotlessly clean, in the cupboard beside the side table with its bowl of clean water and towel.

As I turned back to the worktable, Maris brought a jug of water to the table and set it down very, very carefully as if it was the most precious thing in the world. All the time, her eyes were focussed somewhere else. I doubt she saw the table top. She looked almost pretty as she stuck out her tongue and beads of sweat broke out on her forehead as she strained to do it perfectly. I loved the little smile on her face when she had done it.

I was standing there watching Maris staring into space when Algoth came behind me and put an apron about me. It was a clean apron, pink and frilled around the edges. She pulled up the edges over my shirt and persisted until she had the frilled straps over my shoulders and down my back to connect with the frilled waist band.

I tried to push her away but Algoth persisted. When I pushed at her, a tear rolled down her vacant expression as if something a long way away had hurt her. I stopped and let her put it on me, I could always take it off later, waiting for the smile like Maris's. It came to



Algoth when I stood at the table in my pretty pink pinafore.

I found the featherbane and scraped the sticky emanations from its rotting core onto the babyroot. Algoth came behind me again. I nearly jumped as I felt the silky touch on my cheek but it was only a clean, pink ribbon with which she was tying back my longish hair.

My mother had always worn ribbons about her hair and wooden barrettes as well. "One mustn't get a human hair in this prescription," she had told me, making a flea-ridding potion for the shorn sheep and their wool. "That would make every shepherd who handled one of my sheep violently ill. Some might even die if they were flea-infected as well. Always keep your hair out of the soup, your grandmother used to say, or you'll never marry."

Then she would laugh and say that she must have scattered armfuls of cuttings into her soups since no man ever came near us any more.

Maris came after Algoth and she had a cap and barrettes for my head. I got tired of the dodge-and-weave and hide-and-seek and let the silent girl put it on me. She was very pretty when she smiled like that. I hugged her after she had finished and kissed her but I might as well have hugged a stone statue and kissed a block of wood. The smile only seemed to be there for a job well done.

I got used to my new apparel in the next few hours before a tired-looking Orissiana came out of the room she had disappeared into all day. Her metallic aroma was considerably lessened. She raised her eyebrows after examining the work I had done and complimented me on the tasks she said I had performed well.

“Your mother taught you well,” my aunt said. “And thank you for co-operating with my girls. I see they dressed you like me when I work in our workshop. I like ribbons in my hair. They make me feel pretty. Do you get the same feeling?”

I shook my head, blushing furiously as I felt the soft, silky touch on my cheeks.

“Oh, the salve,” said my aunt and she reached into her black dress and brought something out of a pocket. “You will bathe in the morning. Algoth will prepare the bath for you. Maris will bring you clean clothes and dress you. You aren’t all boyish and silly about having girls clean you and dress you, are you?”

What could I say? “No, of course not,” I said as the drudges served us again with a tasty, aromatic stew that could have disguised any kind of drug my aunt might have wanted to serve me. Orissiana saw me watching that Maris served her from the same dish that she had served me from. She smiled as I waited for her to eat first.

“You are cautious as well,” Orissiana said and her face broke out into a huge smile. I could almost have liked her then. “But, consider,” she said as I tasted the delicious stew then. “If this was King Tatheren’s table, he would already have taken the antidote as he urged his nobles to eat the poisoned stew as he did.”

I was stunned. But it was his chancellor that had tried to poison the King’s stew, that was what everyone said, and succeeded only in killing half of the courtiers as the King had been delayed by his wife going into labor. Everyone knew that story and about Chancellor Ellard’s death in the iron cage while the nation mourned the Queen’s death in childbirth along with her infant son.

Luckily, the King had married again, my mother had said, and now had two fine sons. His new Queen had given him a third.

Orissiana watched my spoon dawdle along the side of the dish. "You have not cuckolded me by fathering a son with my conniving wife, unlike Ellard," she said, and the sharp, metallic aroma about her rose considerably. "And the only time you would have to fear me and my poisons, little Sherrene, is when you insulted me by refusing my food and my assistance."

I ate more than I normally would have after that.

Orissiana and I sat in what she called her parlor after supper, my cap, ribbons and apron were spirited away by the drudges who worked silently elsewhere in the house. My aunt didn't tell me what she was working on but she did tell me all about 'Good' King Tatheren who didn't seem quite so good with the stories she told me. She told me of other high counts in Malesia and in the Hills and it seemed to me that almost all of her stories involved treachery in one form or another.

In a lull, I asked her, "Did you know my father, Aunt?"

Orissiana smiled. "That must wait another day," she said; in her tiredness, I seemed to see a grimness. But I thought that I was imagining it. "Now, to bed."

I thought she would warn me of venturing out but she didn't. She had a much subtler way of defeating my attempt to steal away. Maris and Algoth took me to my bedchamber, the Green Room. One helped me take my clothes off and disappeared with them, to clean them I thought, as the other brushed my hair.

The woman's nightdress was over my head and floating down my body before I scarcely realized it. The girlish thing had ribbons and puffy shoulders and it tickled me all over as it touched me and billowed out about my thighs and calves. Maris tightened the ribbon about my chest as Algoth opened the bed. Only then did I realize how Algoth had divided my hair and put ribbons there so that when I was gently pushed into the bed, I was dressed as a girl would be going to bed.

I felt so strange to be in a girl's nightie but it did no good to argue with them so I endured it. It was actually kind of nice how soft it was against my skin. When the maids were gone, I searched the room for my pack, for my own clothes. Naturally, my pack was gone. The only clothes that I could find in looking in my room and the only other empty room next door were racks of maidenly dresses.

I could have sneaked out of the door in my light and airy nightie but my boots were gone. Slippers, silvery and strapped, with elevated heels, mocked me from the place I had set my boots. Slip them on my feet, put a robe about me and try to get away down the street in a nightdress and ribbons? I thought about it and thought of the somebody who had caught me in the woods. What would he do to me if he thought I was a girl escaping from my aunt's house?

I shuddered at the thought and Cory's kiss came to my mind and how I had fought him at first, but how as he had pinned my arms and kept on kissing me so ardently, the strangest of feelings had overwhelmed me and I had started to kiss him back. I was feeling that way again as the faint aroma of perfume on the nightie reached my nose.

Even when Cory was dirty, he still had this subtle smell of hyssop about him and I loved the aroma of mint as a child. As I kissed him back, Cory stroked me, releasing my arms, and I had put my arms around his neck and kissed him as hard as I could. I knew he liked it because he didn't let go of me. He was quivering like me as he stroked my hair and whispered to me. I had felt for just a few moments that I was Sherrene and that it was right to be kissing my Knight Servant.

I had felt Cory's manhood then against me and been on the edge of panic when my mother suddenly called into the hay barn for us. Cory had been as frantic as me in getting out of the hay and getting my mother's old hat and shawl hidden. My mother had spoken to me pleasantly as I met her, flushed, I'm sure, thankful that she had come in and stopped us and also disappointed that she had stopped me being Sherrene, me with all the hay in my hair. I thought she'd have known nothing but within the week, we moved to Terraire. I hadn't seen Cory since.

I was hot in bed, hugging my nightie about me, as I thought about Cory, how he had kissed me and told me that 'Sherrene' was a beautiful name and did I know what beautiful hair and eyes I had and that he must kiss me, once at least. How I had kissed him back and how his hands on me made me feel so strange. I had felt that I was Sherrene, the witch of Haybarn, the imaginary castle that he and I had defended against Lenne and his Russet bandits. If Cory, so much bigger and stronger than me, had seen me in the hay as I was now, in a nightie and ribbons...I shuddered at the thought.

My mother must have known. I took her concoc-tions and pastes and potions to all the women's places

in Terraire. I felt the women looking at me speculatively. I had gold in my pockets and I could have had many of the women. I think now that my mother had intended me to. I'm sure now that, if she had lived, she would have taken a more direct intervention into my life, one quite different from that which her sister took with me.

So, I lay fretfully in bed, thinking I would never sleep in such strange, enervating clothes. But I did. And in the morning, Algoth and Maris were there to insist that I bathe and be covered with the hair-removing salve, my head hair still in ribbons. And when I was cleaned of all hair on my face, body and legs, and dried, Maris brought me the clothes I was to wear for the day, and, of course, they weren't mine. They were girl's clothes, with silky underthings and airy gowns and tight-fitting stockings. They smelled of mountain flowers and of a jasmine perfume, not of manly things like clean wool and starched linen.

"Sherrene, you look lovely," said my aunt, the witch, holding her arms wide as if I was supposed to rush into her arms, my skirts floating out about me, and hug her with gratitude.

"What are you trying to do to me?" I asked her anxiously, feeling absurd as I stood there completely dressed as a girl. My skirts floated about me, touching the stockings on my legs, letting me know that I was entirely dressed as a girl, even to panties and a garter belt. I was a boy and I knew that I shouldn't be dressed as I was.

The drudges ignored me in my flickering dress and went straight to familiar tasks in the kitchen. My discomfort meant nothing to them.

I had fought them and discovered what I hadn't previously known. The drudges were stronger than any of the boys or men I had fought as part of Cory's gang. They had held me down with ease on the bed, or Algoth had, while Maris put stockings on my hairless legs and a garter belt about me to hold them up. She hadn't seem to care how I felt, so weird and hot as her rough hands caressed me as she did it.

I had on women's panties and breast bands as well, with pads inside so that when they put on the gown and its many petticoats, pulling it tight at my waist, I had a girlish figure. My hair was brushed and ribboned again, there were earrings clasped to my ears and a cold, dark-glass necklace resting on my exposed chest.

I had been dressed as a girl, just like them, unable to think why I had to have my chest padded in such a way. The petticoats flowed about me and made strange noises. I would have been humiliated if Cory could have seen me dressed like a girl. I shuddered as I wondered if he would have kissed me then.

Worse were the shoes with the elevated heels in which I tottered in front of my aunt. My dress skirts swayed against me, loosing the strangest feelings of lightness and airiness against me.

"My darling Sherrene," said my aunt in an attempt at sweetness. It looked to me, however, like the smile on the maw of a dire wolf just before it seizes its prey and rips it apart. "Think of your situation and mine. You, a young man, in a house with three women. Me, a maiden aunt, with a young man whom I say is my nephew.

"No, when my guests call later today, they will have no cause to gossip about me behind my back. Today, you shall be Sherrene. I trust that you will not for-

get in just a day in skirts how to be Dedrick. Or are you so afraid that you will like being a young woman that you won't want to go back to being misfit Dedrick again?"

"I'm not a misfit," I said through clenched teeth, sensing all the gentle flutters of my dress against my silky legs. A day in a dress? A day to be Sherrene? It actually sounded rather nice but I couldn't let my aunt know that I wouldn't mind being Sherrene for a little while. But I really wanted Cory to be there. How his eyes would grow if he could see how my chest was tented in my dress. He wouldn't be able to keep his hands off me, I thought smugly.

"No, not a misfit," agreed Orissiana. "Your mother saw to that, easing and greasing your path through Malesian lower society. She bought you friends and companions and security. Have you ever thought for a moment how a lad like you passed so easily through a society that is vicious and cruel? But here you are, at eighteen, a virgin, and worse than that, a know-nothing!"

I stared at her and the hard expression now on her face. All feminine feelings evaporated as she tucked my hair back from my face and pinned it with a barrette.

"Oh, you know your witchery well enough," said my aunt. "You could serve any village in the Lowlands well, up to a point. But you don't know a thing about the real world. I think, Dedrick, that you have gone through the first eighteen years of your life with your eyes shut. Now, come and hug me like a good girl should."

I stumbled and rustled forward, obeying her command like one of the drudges. My skin tingled and I thought of the rose aroma of the bath water and how it



seemed to be disguising something else. My aunt hugged me as I felt her breasts push against the pads on my chest, letting me know how tightly I was bound. I felt the little sleeves around my upper arms and the tight belt at my waist but most of all I sensed the skirts stroking my stockinged legs and swirling femininely about me, wafting violets and roses up to my nostrils. I shivered in dismay.

“Beautiful,” said my aunt as she kissed each of my soft, cheeks, breathing in deeply my rose petal fragrance, “and Maris has shaped your eyebrows so well. I wasn’t sure that she could be trusted with such fine work. They’re really well done, a feminine touch.”

I reeled under such praise, the earrings shivering at my ears, my chest lifting the necklace as I searched for breath. My aunt called Maris and gave her something from her pocket. Maris’ eyes lit up and for a moment I saw an attractive, young girl there, playfully innocent, as she took the reward from my aunt’s hand. My aunt patted her on the head and Maris looked at her with absolute adoration.

I shuddered, earrings and scented skirts shivering, reminding me of my dreams of being a real Sherrene to Cory and I quivered more. I didn’t want to end up like Maris, I thought, as I watched the other girl do everything but wag her tail at her pleased mistress.

“This is better for her,” said my aunt, her eyes still studying me, “than the alternative, months of great pain before every internal organ explodes and she dies in a sea of blood. It’s what happens when you try to do something on your own you’ve been warned you should never do. But you, I think, will not have that problem. Being inquisitive doesn’t seem ever to have been Dedrick’s problem.”

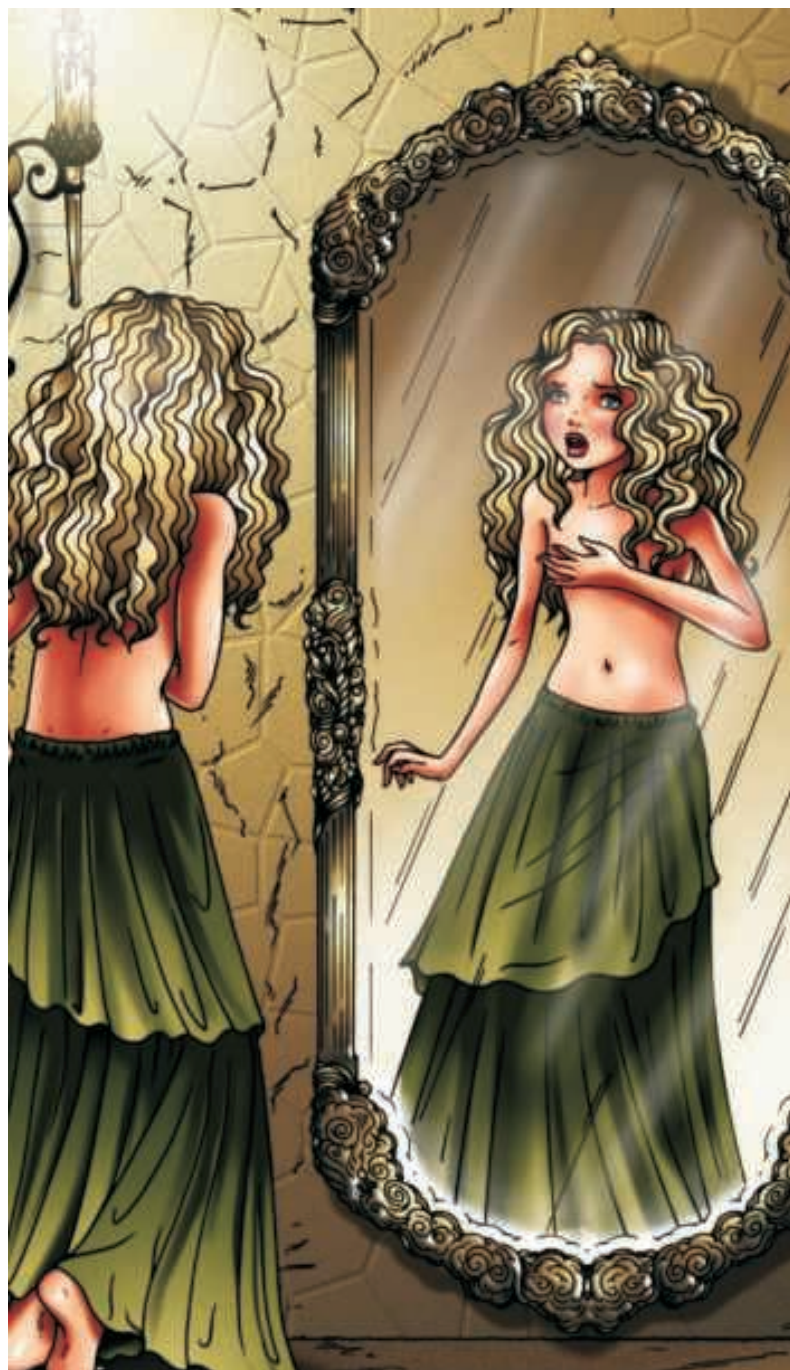
I had to wear an apron to breakfast, a very light meal. I had to sit daintily, soft, silky material against my legs and all my skin. I sat in a cloud of femininity, trying not to quiver as my aunt spoke to me and questioned me as if I was a girl. I felt the light pull on my stockings and I tried not to fidget as I sat.

Then, I had tasks that my aunt wanted done. She recited several recipes to me and retreated to her room again. She had added the names of other solutions to the list from the day before that I was to prepare, baronselle and collis, that required seven ingredients apiece. I was hard at work, ignoring the touch of my dress and earrings, heating a solution of swivel eggs, buds of the wortlebane, when I sensed her watching me.

"You will make a fine witch, Sherrene," Orissiana said, smiling at me. Shameful feelings of being feminine before her went through me. She was calling me by my female name. "I was thirty before I had such a light hand with heat and alloying. Finish that and join me in the parlor."

I did and my aunt had me stand before her, my hands clasped behind me, the mounds on my chest thrust forward. She smiled as I tried to look at her and ignore the feelings running through me. I felt weird and wondered how the 'actresses' of the Middle Theater could stand to be like this in every performance as women weren't allowed on the stage. Yet, the girls I had seen there had seemed so real, at least until they talked.

Then you could tell it was a man swearing undying love to his soldier friend. But the 'actresses' always smiled as they swayed in their dresses, the young men who played the heroines. They had seemed to love be-



ing in frillies and dresses and face makeup. I shuddered as I thought of how I was dressed. Yes, I could play a part in a theater. I could be a heroine and have a man kiss me as the crowd cheered. I shivered and wondered why I had never thought of it before. Maybe the dress was making me feel all girlish, or was it the panties and breast bands that held me so tightly? But I mustn't get to like this, I thought wildly, as my aunt opened a philtre on the table in her parlor.

I smelled the lovebane as my aunt opened the small vial.

"You know this?" my aunt asked in surprise.

"My mother made many concoctions with heartyearn or blossom seasoning," I told her. My chest rose and pulled on the breast bands, making it thrust out like a girl's. Aunt Rissa didn't seem to notice as she frowned at me.

"Yes," my aunt said. "But a pretty girl like Sherrene must have her own perfume. This lovebane has the dew of the morning and stars of the evening." I shook and tried to protest but my clothing was infusing me with feminine feelings. I had to wonder, a feeling of nausea coming to me, if my aunt had bewitched the clothes I was wearing to make me feel as girlish as I did.

Orissiana laughed as she dabbed the perfume on my chest, at my ears and on my wrists as if she was preparing a maiden for a dance. Yes, it had the perfumes known as dew of the morning and stars of the evening but there was something else as well, something that prickled me as I don't think I had sampled it before. But it didn't matter as I was enveloped in the smells always associated with pretty women. I shivered and tried to get used to the idea that such a fra-

grance was now coming from me, someone who looked like a woman at least.

"Now, sit in the chair, Sherrene, and let Algoth prepare your hair while I complete your lady's toilette," my aunt ordered me. My body did exactly, femininely, as she wished, even though I tried not to obey her. I shivered as I realized how much I was already be-spelled by her.

I sat there in my rusty skirts as she painted my face and my lips. Algoth curled my hair, layering in masheen, which would hold the curls tight as she arranged them. I tried to protest at the way my hair was being brushed into a female hair style but it did no good. I could only sit there in my skirts and panties and stockings and feel how silly I was, what a figure of fun I would be for Aunt Rissa's friends who were supposed to be coming to see her.

Maris brought in a great looking-glass which showed me to myself from head to toe. I stared at the blonde, curly-haired girl in astonishment. She couldn't be me. She had pink, shiny lips, shaped, girlish eyebrows, and thick, dark eyelashes. Her skin was clear and powdered lightly. I shivered and she did too as if she sensed the delicate scent of upland violets, the stars of the evening, about her. She smiled as I did, disturbing me that she was so real a girl, no, that *I* was so real a girl.

"This is you, Sherrene," my aunt said then, as I shivered and my earrings did as well. "This is the girl you were meant to be and whom your mother tried so hard to prevent you from becoming." She had a cordial in her hand. "Drink this," she ordered. I did so without being able to stop myself. "Can't have you looking like Sherrene and sounding like Dedrick, can we? Don't

speak for a few moments and let the cordial do its work."

I sat and stared at the girl, moving my head slightly and she moved hers. I stood, tottered, and the girl did as well, her light green skirts swaying about her, her garter belt pulling on her stockings as she, like me, tried to control the high-heeled slippers she had to wear.

It came to me then that I was a girl. I was a femininely-scented young girl. No attentive man would know that I wasn't a girl, not by my fragrance, and a girl could be a witch. Oh Cory, I thought, admiring myself more than a little. If only I had looked like this for you in the hay barn. I could just feel how tightly he would have hugged me.

"How do you feel now, like a Sherrene?" asked my aunt, cutting into my daydream, making me recall who I was and what I truly was.

"No," I stammered. My voice was all squeaky, my throat feeling as if it had been closed up. I was lying. I felt like Sherrene, I did, and I wished that, for a little while, I could really be her.

"Explain," said my aunt, waving her hand to urge me to speak.

"My, my voice," I told her anxiously. "It's, it's as if I have a hand about my throat." It wasn't me speaking but someone else saying the words I spoke, a female someone else.

"Beautiful," said my aunt with a smile on her face. "And just in time, as you will hear."

Maris took away the large looking glass and along with it, the image of the beautiful girl. But Algoth stepped into the room, looked at the ceiling and said

the first words I had ever heard her utter, making me want to disappear under the table.

“My ladies,” Algoth said in a strained voice as if unused to speaking, looking at me as she said ‘ladies’, making me feel as if I had a lump in my throat. “Your guests have arrived.”

### **III. A WITCH’S NIECE**

I panicked. I stood and would have fled from the parlor, even with a lovely, scented dress swirling about me, but there was a noise in the outer room, the sound of voices, male voices. Men were coming in and they were going to see me as I was, in a dress, with my hair curled and my face painted. They would see me with earrings pinching my earlobes. They would see me teetering on my heels, a woman’s dress swishing about me. They would see me with my absurd, padded figure, a parody of a woman. They would hear my squeaky little girl’s voice. If they got close, they would laugh at the aroma I was giving off, the aroma of a woman.

What was worse was that I felt that I liked it a little. I liked being a marionette or a doll with my strings in the hands of my aunt. Then it was all her fault and not something wrong with me that I could like being dressed as a girl. Aunt Rissa turned and smiled mockingly at me. She adjusted my necklace across my chest, and teased the neckline about my budding, padded mounds. She finally adjusted my hair about my ears to make my earrings prominent and tingle at my neck. She knew she was rousing feminine feelings in me and she touched my hands to stop me from trembling so much.

"Sit down, my dear," Orissiana ordered me and so I sat, my nerves jangling as I looked at the woman ordering me. I had to be a girl, I thought, as I knew others were coming in to look at me. My dress swirled about me and I loved how the skirts felt so light and airy about me.

My aunt motioned to me though to sit and I did, pressing my skirts beneath me. "Do as I do," she told me, crossing her legs in her dress with infinite grace. She smiled at my clumsy efforts but I don't think she had to contend with the unexpected tugs of the garter belt on my stockings or the feel of my stockinged legs sliding over each other. It was terrible and strangely pleasant that my skirts rustled as I did so.

I had much admired girls, the way they moved and controlled their skirts and the way they looked so delighted with the touch and feel of their soft clothes as they did. I had to do it now myself but it wasn't really delight that I felt as noises from outside reached me. It was terror, sheer terror that threatened to overcome me as the male voices came to the door of the room where my aunt and I were seated.

"Now stand," my aunt ordered me cruelly, "and remember how to do it. Brush your skirts beneath you, my darling, and always, always, cross your pretty legs for the handsome men."

My senses were reeling in fright as the Count of Mustay came in. He had to duck to come into the parlor where I stood, teetering fearfully beside my aunt. He saw me and smiled appreciatively; I felt agony seeping through me as I recognized that he admired the way I appeared to him.

Oh, please don't look at me, I thought, but I didn't dare to look away or to look into space as Maris and



Algoth did. I felt awful as I stood there and joined in my aunt's deception. I tried to remember how I had seen girls stand and how they had smiled at men whom they met. I am a girl, I told myself fitfully. I *am* a girl and I must behave like one.

"Rissa," the Count said to my aunt. "Who is this beauty whom you've been hiding here? Not one of your concoctions from primroses and honey, is she?"

My aunt smiled at me, squeezing my hand. I shook and my legs felt so bare as light silk touched and caressed me. The dress should have delighted a female, not an impostor like me. I struggled to overcome my fright as my aunt lifted my hand with feminine grace for the Count to bend over it and kiss the back of my scented wrist.

The glaze in his eyes I recognized almost immediately. I had seen it in others who had used my mother's lovebane potions liberally and tested them on themselves in my mother's presence. I didn't want the Count to raise his head and look at me in the way that I feared he would.

I didn't want him paying me silly compliments, not to me, a boy, standing there before him, waiting to be shamed by my aunt when she exposed me to the man's laughter. The effect of lovebane had always caused my mother great mirth, especially when the affected men pressed extra payments on her for her philtres, never understanding how they had been manipulated to lust after her by their own choice of drug.

An older woman followed the Count in, a displeased expression on her face. The man who followed her looked like a bodyguard or soldier of some kind. He made an instinctive jerk as if he would rush forward when he saw the Count kiss my hand. Then he

shook his head and a small smile stole across his face as he looked at my aunt. I panicked, sure that the man had read who and what I was and was about to expose me to his companions. I felt my heart begin to race and was frightened that someone would see my it beating beneath my exposed chest.

"Lady Starane," said my aunt, introducing me to the woman first. I had seen women bow to each other and curtsy. I couldn't curtsy so I bowed. The mass of golden curls that Algoth had made of my head fell over my chest with such a caress that I quivered as if a person had touched me. "May I present my niece, Lady Sherrene, my late sister's daughter."

Oh, how I trembled at such words. I tried so to be womanly, my dress swinging about me, sending chills through me as I quivered and flushed so wildly again. Oh, I couldn't do this, I couldn't, I thought wildly. Whatever does my aunt expect me to be doing, dressing me like this and calling me 'Lady' as if I was of noble birth? She was proclaiming me to be a woman to another woman who was looking at me most peculiarly as if she had read me right away, as my aunt had.

"Yes, Lady Airene is dead. We heard," said the woman, looking at me with marked interest. "But a pretty, Seafarer daughter? We had heard a son."

"Easier for my niece to travel alone through the Hills," said my aunt smoothly; my skin broke out in goose bumps as the woman referred to me, a boy, as a 'daughter,' not contradicting my aunt. I tasted my lip paint and the lovebane perfume rose and infected me a little as well, so heated was my skin. "If you had come two days ago, you might have arrived together. I don't think, however, that you would have been fooled by her disguise."

"No, certainly not," said Lady Starane. She turned to the third man as the Count of Mustay was fondling my hand, making me shake all over as I heard my aunt call me her 'niece' and my mother's 'daughter.' But the perfume was having an effect on me as well as the Count of Mustay. I found his touch and the besotted look in his eyes quite beguiling. I wished I dared to respond as I had seen girls do to men who favored them. I fought back at the sensation, biting the inside of my lip. A modicum of control came to me, enough that I could look up at the sea-grey eyes of the second man to enter the room.

"The Count of Torthard," said the soldier, introducing himself, and winking to me. "And, Lady Sherrene, I would love to kiss your hand, milady, but only if your perfume doesn't have the same effect on me as it has done upon Mustay."

I inclined my head to him; my curls once again fell forward. I had to do what I had seen girls do many times and flip it back without using my hands since the Count of Mustay had lifted them to his mouth and was kissing each in turn, sending chills and thrills through my closely bound body.

"Oh, Orissiana," said the older woman in distaste. "Can't you stop this disgusting display?"

I thought that Lady Starane meant a man kissing the hands of a boy like me.

My aunt laughed and waved the pair of latest arrivals to chairs. She brought out a small bottle with a bulb on one side. "I always carry an antidote to whatever potion I launch upon the world," said Orissiana. She fired the spray in the Count of Mustay's direction. Some of the antidote fell on me. The Count was splut-

tering in a moment, while I felt as if I had been dipped in a cold shower. It was quite a sensation.

"Oh," the Count said, shaking his head.

"Sorry, Milady Sherrene," said the other man as Mustay looked at me strangely. "I don't think Ruval's in love with you any more."

Thank goodness, I thought, a shudder passing through me. I don't know why but I felt as if I had lost something then, something that saddened me. But the Count of Mustay was staring at me as if he had suddenly realized what a fool he was, holding on to a boy in a girl's green, silk dress.

"Don't believe that," said the Count of Mustay sharply to his friend but looking at me still, holding my hand. I quivered under his stiffening touch. "I'm as much in love with you, Sherrene, as I was when I walked into this room. You don't need any love potions to bewitch me."

I knew that I was blushing. I was shaking openly; everybody in the room was smiling at me, my aunt's eyes glinting. I had to say something despite the sickness I felt threatening to overwhelm me. I could sense the others waiting.

"Th-Thank you, my lord," I said nervously. How could I answer him? I thought in stunned amazement. But I recalled the beribboned girl I had seen in the long mirror and I blushed wildly at the thought. Cory would surely have loved to see me as a pretty girl. He had always been urging me on, I realized then, to bring more of my mother's things and put them on when we played the Witch game. I shuddered and wondered what he would have done if he could see me as I was in my aunt's house. I could feel him, in my imagination,

stroking my arms, as he had when I asked him what he was doing to me in the loft of the hay barn. Then he kissed me.

But now it was the Count stroking my arms. I was being observed by two other women and another man who all seemed to expect me to respond as any girl would in being stroked by a man.

“Enough games, Rissa,” said the older woman firmly. “We all know your skill with love charms and hexes. That’s not our concern. Is the truth compulsion drug ready or not?”

I glanced then at my aunt, feeling my earrings and my curled hair move with me.

These people wanted parasane? I recalled my mother’s warning not to let it fall into other’s hands, save for those of her sister. I thought of them trying it out on me and I began to quiver as I thought about the kinds of answers I would give to their questions.

My aunt lifted the front of her skirt and began to move out of the parlor, indicating to me to do the same.

“The truth drug is ready,” said my aunt, giving me a smile. “But it isn’t me you should thank for that but my niece.”

Three pairs of eyes suddenly looked at me intently, my anxiety level rising even more if that was even possible.

“I told you that my sister had the secret of that concoction,” my aunt went on. “Luckily, she had passed that on to Sherrene before she died. Sherrene has spent the last two days preparing samples for you. How do you propose that we test her work for you?”

I didn't understand my aunt. She knew that I had only brought to her what my mother had concocted. She knew that I wasn't a girl and yet she was making me behave like one in front of these important people. Each movement I made reminded me that I wasn't a girl and yet each movement reinforced that I was dressed like a girl. Worse, each movement made me love being dressed as a girl.

My mother had never told me the recipe for parasane and I had never thought to ask her. She had said that my aunt would know how to make it, that she knew how to do many things that my mother did not. I also knew that my mother didn't always approve of her sister and what she did. I knew, my teeth clenched as I quivered in my petticoats, that my mother would not approve of me now. She wouldn't have liked me to be a pretty girl and she would have hated me enjoying being a girl.

"We have to test it," said the Count of Torthard. "Absolutely. We have to know that when we give it to the prisoner that he is telling us the truth."

"Bring in my steward, Brost," said Mustay suddenly. He squeezed my hand. I wanted him to stop, I did, but his unfeigned interest in me was quite uplifting in a strange sort of way. "He's been robbing me blind for two years and I haven't caught him yet. I'd like to know how he does it."

"To the workroom then," said my aunt. She glanced at the Count of Mustay. "If you would be so kind, Count, as to attend my niece. She should never have worn new shoes to greet you and she's far too suspicious of my potions to allow me to ease the passage of her feet in such unyielding new high heels."

"My lady," said the Count, almost lifting me through the doorway of the parlor, me trembling in my high-heeled shoes. It gave him an excuse to put his arm around my waist and make me feel silly and female as my skirts rustled and caressed me. My chest pressed against him and the Count of Mustay gave me a leering smile at the touch. He seemed to think that I had fallen against him deliberately. I was annoyed by his expression but only a little. I did like the way I felt with a man's arm about me. It was as if I was a real woman. For some moments, I was exactly that, a real woman, in my mind.

Upland violets seemed to surround me as I moved, making me tremble all over. I knew I smelled like a girl and could sense that the Count was enjoying my fragrance even more than me. I took smaller steps and it seemed to work. My lovely dress moved about me and I felt distinct pleasure as the Count squeezed my waist and my hair fell over my demurely, cast-down eyes. I remembered to loft my skirts as my aunt was doing as she walked and so I broke my hand free of the Count's. He still held me, though, and I felt my body stiffening against him, my breast bands even tighter than they had ever been since I had donned them.

My aunt led us into the workshop where one packet of parasane awaited on the pristine, clean table. She motioned to me and I swished to the table, shaking nervously as three pairs of intense eyes watched every move I made in preparing the brandy cordial for human consumption. It seemed to me that my fragrance was filling the whole room. It certainly was enchanting me. It was a wonder that I didn't spill the mixture all over the table.

Brost was sweating when he came in; my aunt told me, almost offhandedly, to give him a drink of brandy to settle his nerves. I poured from the brandy bottle into the cup, pouring raw brandy as well for each of the Counts and Lady Starane. They took them from me with cool smiles, talking on about a tournament and whether Brost knew the best of the men-at-arms who would wear the Mustay colors.

Brost gave me a tentative smile and looked at my chest. It was weird and alarming that he did so. I'd done it all the time until a girl in Terraire had told me not to do that. It was uncouth, she said. Yes, I could be interested but I should check out her body more surreptitiously. She wasn't a woman of the streets, she said firmly.

Brost checked me out as if I was a tavern girl; I quivered under his assessment. "Would you prefer wine, Aunt Rissa, Lady Starane?" I asked as my aunt had told me I should. They both took brandy to allay Brost's fears as he sat a little apart from the group of nobles who had requested his presence.

"What do you think, Brost?" asked the Count of Torthard, stepping away from the others and holding out his glass for me to pour him more from the bottle I held. He smiled at me and I felt a strange fluttering inside me. I couldn't believe the sensation and what it did to me inside.

It was how I felt once before, so strange, so female, so wanting and not wanting, as I kissed Cory back. He had put his arms about me and pulled me tightly against him, hugging my waist as I put my arms about his neck, enjoying his kiss and the way he made me feel. Yes, for just a little time, I had felt that I was a girl.



I had the same feeling coursing through me as the Count of Torthard looked into my eyes. If he had put his arms about me and pulled me to him, as Cory had, well, I would have kissed him most eagerly. It must be the heat, I thought in a panic. It had to be. The lovebane perfume my aunt had put on me was working its way into my system. That was why I was reacting to the men who looked at me or touched me. You are not a woman, I began to recite to myself, as I felt my skirts quivering about me. My dress shivered against my legs gently as I poured Torthard another drink.

"A toast," said the grey-eyed Count, slipping his arm through mine.

My aunt had insisted that brandy was too strong for her. Altho silently brought wine for her and for me, though the Lady Starane had refused 'virgin's water' as she called the white wine Ossiriana had produced.

"To a victory in the Bedford Lists," proposed the Count of Torthard.

"Well, I'll drink to that," said the Count of Mustay. "But I dare-say Brost will think it impossible in the short time we have left. Is that not so, my man?"

"Aye, milord," replied the man, picking up and draining his glass.

"We need another potion, my lady," said Torthard, holding on to my arm as Mustay came and took my other, both men stroking my quivering arms. They were trying to compliment me on my femininity and I loved it, not wanting Torthard at least to stop at all.

If I had seen it in a play, it would have been amusing, as it seemed to be to my aunt. Here were two men competing for the favor of a female-dressed boy, who was desperately trying not to be discovered. I swayed

my dress against my stockings and felt deliciously female.

"Your numbers, Brost," said my aunt suddenly.  
"Say your numbers, Brost."

The expression on the man's face was unholy as he immediately began to recite. He could not stop and his eyes seemed to roll in his head as he tried to control his tongue.

"Stop," said my aunt when he reached fifty-six.  
"Now, Brost, count backwards."

Brost had difficulty. In the twenties, he could no longer keep the numbers straight.

"Ask your questions, Count," said my aunt. Mustay reluctantly let me go and began to formulate questions for the luckless, jabbering man. Just like when my mother had used it on me, he wanted to answer everything in greater detail than asked for. Even my aunt had difficulty keeping him to the point of a question.

Torthard took advantage of Mustay's interest in finding out how his steward was cheating him to slip his arm firmly about my waist. He hugged me just a little, not understanding, I hoped, the female feelings he was arousing in me. He still held my hand in his as he blew gently against my ear, sending a desire for his touch, through me. If I had turned my head, I could have kissed him. I so much wanted to do that. I felt the pressure of his head on my curled hair; I thought he was going to turn me and take me in his arms. I could feel my breath becoming very restricted as my body stiffened.

I couldn't help it. I clutched his hand as he held mine, willing Count Torthard to get the message not to go further in raising forbidden feelings inside me. He

kissed my hair then and I was on the point of swooning in his arms. Luckily, my aunt intervened.

"There," said my aunt, standing and coming to take me, which I both wanted her to do and didn't want her to do. "You gentlemen and lady have what you came for and you gentlemen have amused my niece enough for one afternoon. It is time for all of us to return to the projects we have in hand."

The Counts seemed to want to stay but my aunt compelled them all out of the house. I was left alone, shivering in strange disappointment, in my dresses and curls until she returned.

"Maris. Alloth," she called lightly and her drudges appeared. "How do you feel, my niece?" Lady Rissa asked me.

How did I feel? I was humiliated and ashamed of what had happened, of how I had felt towards the men, how I still longed for Torthard to come back and hold me again. I lifted a stray curl from my face and shook my earrings and hair against my face as I tried to say what I wanted to her, but I couldn't speak. It was as if my throat was closed to anything but a woman's squeak.

"Now, you know how lovebane makes a woman feel to any man within a room's length of her," my aunt said. "It's why we make it for the brothels. No husband would want his wife to wear it. She'd have the hired man to bed before a glass had passed. And that's what it's like to be that kind of woman, Sherrene. I'm sure you've always wanted to know that and now you do."

"How-how could you d-do this t-to me?" I babbled. I felt like dancing in my skirts, swirling and prancing

about the workroom. I shook my head, wanting to feel my necklace and earrings move with me, glorying in the touch of my curls at my neck. I knew how fragrant I was; I wanted a man to come and sense the woman in me and tell me how lovely I was and how delicious I smelled.

"It will wear off and you will be greatly depressed tonight," said my aunt grimly. "But your mother was right. She communicated with me about your little problem. She thought it was little, didn't she? She thought I might know a potion she could use on the son of a friend. Such a transparent excuse. I knew it was you. How many men a night did you have in your stay in the brothel? Ten sometimes, she told me, but always at least three a night to sate yourself."

Me, with men in a brothel? I was shocked out of my mind. "I've never done that," I said, my painted lips quivering before her. My aunt had it all wrong. "My mother wasn't writing to you about me but someone else."

My aunt seized my quivering wrist at that point and looked me in the eyes. "Well, I'll be," she began harshly. "My little strumpet tells me truth. Lady Sherrene was not you?"

I found I couldn't lie. It wasn't parasane but I felt a compulsion to tell her the truth. "It was a child's game. I wore a shawl and pretended to be my mother. My men-at-arms fought battles for me and I was the witch and the general," I squeaked at her. Well, it was true sometimes. I fought the urge to tell her how much I wanted to be dressed like a girl, how much I enjoyed it. "Sherrene was just a name we used when anyone was the witch. It wasn't always me."

My aunt smiled at me, a fierce, unpleasant smile. "And we have hours before the feeling will leave you."

I shuddered and my skirts swished. I lifted my head, pushing back my hair. No, I mustn't like this, I mustn't. "The antidote," I begged of her and Orissiana smiled and shook her head.

"We must use what we have," she said. "And I sense that the womanly feelings are intensifying in you. Let us use them as we can."

Aunt Orissiana then retreated to her room. But when Maris came out from being instructed, as it seemed to me, she was focussed on what to do with me and how to instruct me on being a girl. And so I spent the day in my dresses, curtseying and dancing in my terrible shoes. The feminine feelings intensified; it was a good job that the men had not stayed or I would have flung myself on either of them if they would have had me.

I had to talk and recite pages of womanly poems the two drudges brought for me. They hugged me woodenly and made me do dances that I knew but now I had to dance the female parts. I teased them by not doing it right and Algoth threatened me with a switch. But she really didn't have to. I loved doing everything they wanted me to. They didn't laugh or criticize me as my squeaky voice declaimed how much I loved my handsome man or when I slipped on my heels in a curtsy or in a dance.

When my aunt came for supper, I curtsied properly to her. I walked easily in my high heels and she complimented me on the female sway of my hips which I barely noticed that I had developed. It was thrilling how I felt like Lady Sherrene as we dined and I answered her in my girlish voice.

My aunt coached me for a while. "A girl does not say that, she says this," and I would learn to say it right. I almost hated to take off my dress and go to bed but I had my nightie to wear and panties. I was allowed that along with ribbons in my lovely hair.

I went to sleep thinking of Cory seeing me as I now was. I awoke with a head like a pounding drum. When I thought about what I had said and done and thought the previous day, I had to head to the nearest biffy and throw up. I threw up a hundred times over the next few days. Well, maybe not a hundred but many times. Just thinking of Cory or one of the Counts would make me start heaving. I'd have to run for the bathroom in the new, frillier and shapelier dress that was ready for me each morning.

#### **IV. A WITCH'S APPRENTICE**

My aunt had made a mistake but she was in no hurry to correct it. "Mithera," she told me at the end of the second ten-day I spent with her. "You remember Mithera, son of a master on Baker's Street."

"We bought bread at Athell's," I told her slowly.

My aunt nodded. "Now the man has a daughter in the brothels and not a son," she said with a self-satisfied smile.

"He's become a she?" I asked stupidly.

My aunt laughed. "Not entirely, my sweetie," she said to me. "Not entirely. But soon he, no she, *will* enjoy the changes I will make in her."

"You, you're not going to do the same things to me, are you, Aunt Rissa?" I asked her, my head still throbbing ten days after the visit of the two Counts and Lady Starane.

"You don't want me to?" my aunt laughed at me. I shook my head forcefully, forgetting that I was wearing earrings; my hair swirled about my neck. I felt effeminate as my skin and clothes covered me with feminine scents. I shivered as I knew that I must look effeminate as well.

That day, the drudges had held my hands and manicured my nails like my aunt's, painted my fingernails a bright red, the same color as the paint that Maris now brushed on my lips. My eyes were also painted and I recalled the vivid eyes of the blonde girl I had seen in the glass. I hoped I didn't look like her still. I wanted to get back to being who I was, Dedrick. I said it to myself from time to time, but I did enjoy being Sherrene as well. I loved the beautiful dresses and soft underthings ready for me each day. Sadly, I knew I would have to be Dedrick again some day.

But my aunt seemed to have other ideas. Not only was I to be a girl just for her but I was to be a girl for others as well. Excitement rose uncontrollably me as I was prepared as a young lady to go out and appear in front of others as Sherrene.

Apparently there was a market in Birchwood. With a silken scarf about my curls, barrettes to hold it them place, a long, shaped woman's coat over my rustly skirts, I had to accompany my aunt into the little town and shop with her. Wind whipped about me and I was outside. People looked at me in a strange sort of awe as I swished into town like a girl with my aunt.

I thought they could see right away who I was, a changeling of sorts, but no one said that to me. I felt womanly as I minced along in my high heels and tried not to stare at the people who stared at me.

“Lady, lady,” the vendors called to me; I flushed as they called me that. Many had glassware about their carts so I saw myself. I thought it was someone else at first but it was me in the glasses. Golden curls framed my scarf and face. My lips were indeed red and my eyes were darkly fringed and outlined, altering my face greatly. With my thin eyebrows, I didn’t look like me any more. I looked like a blonde, Seafarer woman.

I rustled through the stores and carts on my aunt’s arm. She made me enter a woman’s shop where a seamstress eagerly showed her fine examples of women’s underthings in different colors of silk. I could scarcely look but I did want to. It was what women did. If I wanted to be thought a woman, I must do what women did so I tried to take an interest in pretty, colored panties and frilly garter belts.

I flushed when my aunt held them against me, flowery scents assaulting me again, and shook when she ordered delicate underthings for me, her ‘niece.’ She seemed to be enjoying herself immensely. She bought me earrings, long slender things and big hoops, as well as necklaces and glass rings. Oh, it wasn’t so bad. I actually began to like shopping as a woman after a while, particularly since my aunt was paying for everything that I nervously said that I liked.

Orissiana had me stand before a seamstress, quivering as a woman measured me as a woman. She sized me for dresses my aunt ordered in styles that I had seen in Terraire, low-cut things that, luckily, I could never wear, being a boy like I was. Oh, but I would so love to wear them, I thought enviously, as my aunt told the seamstress to go ahead and make the ball gowns they had talked about.



The worst was in a stocking store. I had to remove mine and I felt the woman's hand, cool and soft, caressing my hairless, smooth legs, the rose petal scent intensifying as she caressed my calf. Aunt Rissa tried me in the thinnest of silk stockings, fastening my garter belt while I desperately tried not to betray myself to the stocking maker.

I was shivering, as much from how the touching made me feel as from the cool air about my legs when I raised my skirts. I was shamed and exposed as the woman and her assistant looked at me in my panties, praising me and wishing they had such slim, shapely legs.

The shoemaker caressed my stockings absently as he took measurements of my feet. HE promised my aunt to make me several pairs of dancing slippers. "Your niece will be the belle of King Tatheren's ball," the shoemaker said. "And my shoes will help her to dance the night away in comfort."

"What did he mean?" I asked my aunt, shivering as we left the shop. I copied her every step so we were two handsome ladies shopping in a market. It was a mundane thing but exciting and thrilling to me, I was finding.

"Gottleaf always was too much of a gossip," my aunt snapped at me. She signalled to the drudges who had been waiting patiently, a large empty space about them. They began to move through the stalls and the things my aunt had purchased began to be loaded into the sacks with handles that they carried.

The next day, my aunt gave me the recipe for parasane and let me assemble the poultices that would mature to become part of the final mixture to make the drug. She stayed and watched me as I worked, admir-

ing my long red-painted nails, insisting that I keep my arms by my sides as I worked. She showed me several female gestures that I must use from time to time.

"In a month, we travel to the capital," said my aunt. I felt a sudden great apprehension. I didn't want to go anywhere until I could get back to my own clothes but my aunt seemed determined that I shouldn't. She was definitely changing me to look like a girl, I knew. I got up each day in my nightie and felt pretty as soon as I was dressed.

"Tatheren has summoned me," said my aunt, "and he will send a carriage for us. Maris will be your maid and Algoth will attend me. I think that you are enough of a young lady now to attend court. Your mother told me she had never stressed to you that she and I are noble-born, as are you, on both sides of your parentage.

"So, it is right and proper that you be Lady Sherrene and learn to curtsy as you must to the King, his sons, his Queen and Court." I shivered but didn't dare to protest. I already knew the degrading punishment that that would lead to. "The King will ask you to stay and be his witch. He has a male apothecary," she had been about to say something else, I was sure, "to see to his male needs but he is wary of the unholy trio you met here. He suspects them of treachery but their motives in questioning his messengers, I have tried to assure him, are entirely venal. They need to know who to trust in the plots they are fomenting for the King's benefit."

"I am to go to the capital like this?" I asked my aunt in fright, wishing I could stay in the town to look more intently at the pretty girl, the pretty girl who was me. I loved seeing her fleetingly in store mirrors and glasses. Since I was forced to practice, I was even more femi-

nine in my walk and talk than I had been for the two Counts and Lady Starane. It was thrilling to see how pretty I was as a girl. I only wished that Cory could have been in the audience of men and that he had seen me.

I had been called 'milady' so many times that first afternoon in Birchwood that I was starting to act like one. My aunt insisted I accompany her again to the market's second day. I enjoyed it as well, the flow of my skirts about me, the admiration I saw in women's and men's eyes, the compliments, and most of all, the flashes in looking glasses of the lovely woman that Lady Sherrene, me, was becoming.

"Of course, my darling, you are to go to the capital like this," laughed my aunt, trapping my arm against hers. "That has been the plan from the start, since I saw how pretty you looked. Now, don't start flushing and going all boyish on me or I may have to douse you again in lovebane. We must save that until we get to the capital. You will be besieged by women there asking you to make potions for them. I must teach you how to say no easily and gracefully. Such a skill will come in handy as well with the type of men you inevitably meet in a capital like ours."

I swished back to the house with my aunt. I had always wanted to go to the Royal Palace, Hillaire, and visit the great, white bridges that spanned the river at its upper limit of sea navigation. A Seafarer ship on the river was quite a sight, everybody said, particularly in the morning mists. I had longed to see one when I was a child, imagining that my father would be aboard, the captain, of course, come to claim his bride and long-lost son.

I trembled with shame as I thought what my father, if he even existed, would think if he ever saw me, dressed as I was, curtseying to him, as all women did on meeting a lord in the capital. Would he be proud that I was becoming a witch like my mother? Yes, boys couldn't be witches, I said again weakly to my aunt.

"We'll have to change that then, won't we?" my aunt said.

My routine was changed. I spent the mornings only in the workshop, completing whatever recipes my aunt wanted that day. I worked quickly, my mother's sing-song rhymes in my head, the shelves of ingredients for potions and salves filled since my aunt's visit to the town.

I wore an apron and cap to protect the potions and myself. I would have hated to spoil one of the dresses I wore, even if they were just work dresses. I wore long, grey dresses in the mornings; in the afternoons, my aunt left off whatever she was doing and attended to me and my preparations for the evening.

At first, until my dresses started to arrive, she had me dress in ball gowns meant to fit her and her ample bust and tiny waist. It was incredible to imagine myself like her as she told me of the balls she had been to and which Count she had danced with in the lovely dress she put on me. I danced with Maris and Algoth, they taking the masculine part, as I thrilled to being a woman in a huge, rustling ball dress.

I was bathed in richer, muskier fragrances, and my hair was teased, combed and pinned. I had my ears pierced and my hair was drawn back to expose the light tassels hanging from my lobes. Sometimes, it was large, golden hoops; other times, little bells chimed when I moved my head. My chest was always heavily

scented and was taped until it appeared that I had a bosom. I wore a body shaper, a corset, that made my curves appear womanly. A bustle in some of the dresses gave me shape that let me wear dresses that left my shoulders bare.

I scarcely recognized the Lady Sherrene who strolled past Maris's large mirrors, so elegant a woman was she. It was thrilling in a perverse way to feel my aunt's beautiful dresses move about me, change me, make me seem to be a woman. My aunt flattered me, pouring praise on me as well whenever I did something fluttery. She told me what a good girl I was becoming. I loved being praised and told what a lovely girl I was. There was no reason, she teased me, why I shouldn't be a true witch like my mother and her sister.

My aunt would have no squeakings out of me; my throat was dosed and I had to speak with an accent and in a manner that made me squirm in shame. I didn't think that a girl should be as cute as I sounded, but it pleased my aunt and she said that I would soon be accepted as a Lady of the Land.

The worst thing of all was that I couldn't figure out what my aunt expected of me in the capital. Clearly, I was intended to fool everyone. At my aunt's, I had to behave each evening as if I was a Lady of the Court. I had to flutter about daintily in my skirts. Maris and Algoth danced with me; sometimes even my aunt would. She insisted that I keep my chin up, that I wear flowers or ribbons in my curled hair, and that I always curtsy to my partner before and after a dance, with my skirts held properly, my high heels unwavering and I had to talk.

I had to wear perfume all the time. I became so used to the scent of upland violets that I felt unclean without

that fragrance enveloping me. At times, I was worked so much that I didn't enjoy being a girl as much as I did at the start. It was hard work being a woman.

I had to talk about silly things. How charming was the ball, milady. How delightful was the company, milord. How unseasonable was the weather, Your Highness. How frightening to a silly girl like me it was to hear of fighting in the Hills between the Russets and the Malesians. How droll it was that the King could tolerate a jester like Gresser, Your Honor. How coarse was the little man, Lady Rissa.

If I wasn't light and airy, and feminine in speech or dance, then I must do it again. The drudges didn't complain about the repetitions I had to make and I couldn't, either, even as I wept inside with what my aunt was doing to me. I was being trained to be a girl and I knew it. She complimented me all the time and I knew it was wrong. But that didn't stop me looking forward eagerly to changing from my grey dresses into her gorgeous ball gowns each evening. I trembled with the anticipation of having my hair curled, my ears clamped and my false breasts fitting tightly around me.

Even without my heels, I found myself walking with a swing in my hips. It made my skirts flow so wonderfully about me. I had my toenails painted like my fingernails. I swirled and whirled in my gowns as if I was in a ball. I floated in clouds of female fragrances, changed so frequently during the day that I actually started to wonder whether I really was a boy or a girl.

Could I really change what I was? I asked of myself when I had a moment to reflect on what my aunt was doing to me. But I knew, shamefully, that it was with my approval. I loved going to bed in a nightdress, my skin covered with my aunt's creams, my hair braided

and in ribbons, jewels still at my ears. I found that I could not resist her commands, or her compliments, at all.

Each day was much the same. I realized, after the third month, that I was so used to my skirts, hair, jewellery and fragrances that I wore them without a second thought, even beginning to like to wear certain styles of bodice that fitted me well and made me shapely. My hair was in braids during the night and early morning. Aunt Orissiana had me try new perfumes that she told me were perfectly natural, not any of her 'special' concoctions. She kept asking me to describe the scents and adjusted them until, finally, she said that the violets, roses and apple blossom seemed to suit me best. I spent the last week before we went to Hillaire wearing nothing else.

## **V. A WITCH'S EXCURSION**

I sat in the carriage, on a padded seat no less, trembling nervously as we entered the great, walled city, trying to pretend I was a Lady. My skirts touched me so seductively that I could barely stand. And any time I did stand, I sensed the new, white silk panties and underthings my aunt had clothed me in. Each time we stopped, I could hear people talking outside the carriage, asking who was within.

The true witch, Lady Orissiana and her niece, Lady Sherrene, was always the response from the coachmen, ignoring our silent maids of course. I shuddered at being described so, expecting at any time to hear someone ask who was the boy wearing a dress.

"Sherrene must be the pretty one," I heard someone shout to the drivers of the carriage. I heard people try-

ing to shush whoever had said it but my aunt just smiled at me.

“That is what they should be saying,” my aunt said to me in satisfaction. She seemed inordinately proud that I was a girl, while all I felt was shame and despair at what I was doing. And yet, it was so elevating to be thought to be a girl by everyone and to be called pretty as well. That made me feel delightfully dizzy.

I knew now how to act girlishly much of the time and my aunt encouraged me to do so. She never called me Dedrick any more or reminded me that I was a boy. She had even taken me out as her niece on short visits to her cronies who had thought me ‘darling’ and ‘such a pretty little girl.’ It was funny to be treated as a woman all the time. I had Maris as my maid to assist me in clothing and primping myself. I sensed by my aunt’s friends’ household aromas that they were not witches even though my aunt had said that they were.

Orissiana smiled even more broadly when I hesitantly asked her why she had said that they were witches. “How would you know that they weren’t?” she asked me.

I had told her that they didn’t smell like witches, then I had had to tell her what she smelled like. My aunt was silent for a time, then she said to me, “Your true witch can distinguish and hold in her memory maybe thirty scents. But she is always betrayed by a deep draught of one substance. It takes time to clear an aroma so a witch can identify fallere as collane after using collane an hour before.”

“But they’re so different!” I exclaimed.

“Not in looks,” my aunt said with a grim smile. “But you can tell, can’t you, right away? Not one witch



in a thousand has a talent like that. Your mother didn't. She told me that she gave you all the confusing concoctions we have to make and you were never wrong. You corrected her mistakes at times."

I felt suddenly bereft as I realized then that I would never see my mother again. I had to weep which pleased Orissiana. I felt weak and silly doing that, particularly as I had such a dainty, scented handkerchief which was all my aunt would allow me to dry my eyes.

"Yes, you should show your tears openly, my darling," Aunt Rissa told me as I grieved for my mother as if a dam had broken inside me. "A girl must be sentimental. It makes the young men come flocking. If Mustay or Torthard saw you now, they would be at your feet to kiss them and make you feel better."

The idea of men kissing my feet only made me feel worse. I shivered as I thought of a man caressing my stockinged feet, running his hands up my legs. Oh, I had to bite my painted mouth and taste the waxy, honeyed salve of my lip gloss. That is how it felt to my tongue. I had to control my thoughts and it was getting harder and harder to do as I sat in my skirts, with my legs crossed, pretending that I was a woman like my aunt. I dabbed at my nose with the scented handkerchief; shivers went up and down my spine as the essence of violets enclosed me for a time.

"I-I wouldn't want a man at my feet, my aunt," I whispered to Orissiana but she only gave me her impeccable look. It was a look guaranteed to awe even the most forward of commoners who might reach into our carriage as we did not travel with a retinue of soldiers. We scarcely had need. My aunt carried a cornucopia of powders and melanges that would instantly incapacitate any person who had the temerity to attack her.

Maris and Algoth also were equipped with witch's weapons while I had nothing, nothing, that is, save for my appearance. My hair was curled and honey-colored in the frilly bonnet I wore. Stars glinted at my ears, diamonds from my aunt's jewel case. A soft, silky blouse rose inside my fitted dress to conceal my padded bosom from display; as I moved and felt the bands about me, it was as if I had breasts in every way.

I was also aware of the tape now between my legs that would conceal my gender from any man who looked up my skirts. Such thoughts kept me permanently on edge but I could get no relief as flowery scents reminded me constantly that I was the picture of a pretty, young woman, a Lady of the Court.

And once someone saw how richly I was dressed, in white silk and petticoats beneath my tight, silver bodice, being a lovely young girl would be defence enough, or so said my aunt. I quaked as I thought of her or the maids defending me, the only boy in the house. But they were all so much stronger than me. I wasn't a man at all, I thought miserably, as I settled back in my frilly clothes.

"Tatheren has called this conclave with just one purpose in mind," said my aunt as we proceeded through Hillaire. "He intends to have the council support a war fleet and raise the taxes to pay for it. He will demand that we supply him with the means to overcome any and all opposition to his wishes."

I stared at my aunt and shivered even more. "But I thought..." I began.

"That you were here to party and dance with enchanting young men and thoroughly enjoy being the belle of the great balls you attend," Aunt Rissa scoffed at me. "Well, there is all that, of course, and two hand-



some princes to turn your lovely little head. As I keep telling you, Sherrene, we are nobility, the daughter and granddaughter of the Count of Perisord, though that county is long perished. No matter, our nobility remains and so we can do what other great witches can not do and that is to mix with the great lords and ladies of the realm as they play. The ballrooms and bedrooms

of Hillaire are where the real fate of the kingdom will be worked out."

I didn't fully understand. Her words filled me with both dread and eager anticipation. I couldn't really understand why I had to attend the balls as I was, as a young woman, even though I felt a rising excitement at the thought of dancing in my new dresses and being complimented by young men who would want to dance with me.

I didn't want to question my aunt, however, to tell the truth. I didn't want her to change her mind and make me become Dedrick again. I felt so wonderfully girlish as I practised before my aunt on how I was to converse with young men and how I was to receive their gallantries. I wanted so much now to go to a ball in one of my beautiful gowns.

I had finally recognized the commanding drug that my aunt used on me and on Maris and Algoth, to make us do as she wished. It was in my bath water and in my perfume. It was a sweet, honeyed, almost unobtrusive aroma. I had named it 'honeybane' and wondered whether it was a natural substance or a concoction and how it worked.

I didn't dare not to bathe as she wished me to. My aunt always checked to see that I was dressed and bathed properly. I knew that she would know immediately if she could not control me, if I was not giving off the fragrance of honeybane.

Aunt Rissa also was dressing me in the evenings, ensuring that I wore the underclothing that I should. It was totally humiliating to have her soft hands ease over my legs and around my panties and body shaper. She knew it and it didn't deter her in the least that I was in intense discomfort.

"This is taking longer than I thought with you," my aunt had said to me a night or so before we left the house in Birchwood. "Mithera is much more advanced. I could coerce you, you know, into doing what I wish but then what would I have? Another Maris? I don't want another girl who looks to me for her every thought and action. Tatheren and Bredden would see right through such a ploy."

I didn't dare to interrupt her as she had Algoth prepare my hair in some new, female styling. I must admit to having loved the ringlets Algoth had given me. I loved the way they clustered on my bare shoulders and bounced as I moved and swayed in the dance.

My aunt had laughed at me, at the evidence that I was pleased with my hair. "My girl," she said to me as she was fond of addressing me, knowing how it shamed and thrilled me to be addressed in such a fashion. "You will wear ringlets when you dance at Hillaire, I promise you that."

And now here we were in Hillaire, wending our way to the Herbalists Quarter and Apothecary Street. Everyone in the city, my aunt told me, called the section the Witches' Den, and stayed well clear unless they had business there.

We turned onto Apothecary Street and the noise from the streets almost immediately receded. I was able to hear the sound of the horses' feet and the rattle of the wheels on the bricks of the pavement. We stopped and the driver came around to open the door of our coach. I was immediately assailed by a cacophonous collection of aromas, fragrances and smells, some instantly painful to me.

For the first time, Maris and Algoth changed their expressions. It was almost a delight that came over

them. I frantically covered my nose with my handkerchief, looking over at my aunt who was doing the same, and something else. She was laughing at me.

"My innocent virgin," Orissiana teased me, pulling her dark cloak about her. "What should you expect when a Conclave of Counts also brings together their witches familiar and apothecaries to the capital? Come and we will see what new wonders have been created to astound us all."

The coach driver, in the light blue livery of the King, bowed to me as I set my high-heeled shoe on the step of the coach. My stocking and my painted toes showed through the open toe of my shoe. "My Lady," he murmured, not even looking up at me. My skirts swirled about me as I minced down from the coach and sashayed after my aunt towards the hallway of the great house where we were to be housed. His words reassured me. I felt so wonderful to be admired as a woman, even by a lowly coachman.

An older man in black was bent over my aunt's hand and welcoming her to his humble establishment, then he turned to welcome me. "Oh my lady," he said to my aunt as he straightened up. "You did not tell me that your niece is so beautiful a young lady. When the princes see her..." He stopped then as my aunt's hand squeezed his arm. I felt a flutter again in my chest.

Orissiana looked at me with a strange smile on her face. "No more, Ismar," my aunt said lightly. "I do not wish Lady Sherrene prejudiced in any way against either of those very worthy young men or any of the other young men I intend her to meet in the balls and parades we must attend."

Other young men! My heart skipped a beat as I wiggled femininely after my aunt. Oh, I wanted so

much to dance with young men like my beloved Cory. I was blushing as I tried to conquer such a betraying thought. Ismar was nodding and smiling to my aunt as he studied my feminine flushing.

"Of course, milady," Ismar said to my aunt, bowing again and looking like a balding squirrel to me, the way his nose wrinkled each time he spoke. Later I noticed that many in the Witches' Den quarter were the same. I had never smelled air so redolent with familiar aromas.

The second floor of the three storey building was ours. My aunt was entrusted with the only door key, which when Ismar had bowed his obsequious way out, she deposited in Algoth's pocket.

"Now, my darling, you must bathe and change as any young lady would after such a tiresome journey." Tiresome? We had stayed in an inn, not four miles from the capital the night before. I had bathed there and dined in isolation with my aunt but she had not allowed me to dress lightly. I wore makeup, jewels and had my hair in curls, my body in a dark, evening dress, one of hers that she had given to me.

"Wear the black again tonight," said my aunt pointedly to both me and to Maris, whom I still didn't know to understand the spoken word at all. "I suspect that we shall have company and you should be dressed in your finest and most imposing."

I knew better than to protest too much. I had tried contradicting my aunt once. She demonstrated how much control she had over me with the honeybane on my skin. Her words of command made me lie on a sofa and raise my skirts over my head. Then Maris and Algoth with their hard, callused hands had smacked my bottom as if I was a little girl.

I tried to get up but a simple direction to "Lie still. Lift your pretty little bottom to the sky" had to be obeyed. I finally cried, not at the pain, which was considerable, but at the shame and degradation of it all.

My aunt applied a soothing salve to my quivering buttocks while I whimpered, my face in the cushions. "How many times shall I do this?" asked my aunt. "Your mother never learned. This was a ten-day ritual for me so I've always kept fallase on hand for such occasions. Maris used to need it as well until she tried to pay me back once too often. I hope that Sherrene is much more compliant."

I swore that I was and thanked her for the salve. She frowned at that and told me, from then on, to use the throat cordial in the morning and evening. If I was going to behave like my mother, my aunt added, I might as well sound like her.

So, I obediently did as Lady Orissiana Perisord, as Ismar had called her, instructed me. My lady's maid, Maris, prepared a bath for me. I let her undress me, as a maid should, pin up my hair and remove my jewelry, my makeup and my tapings from my slim body. I let her re-do my nails and toes as she wished, knowing that my aunt had communicated her wishes to my maid.

Maris seemed not to notice that I had a male appendage. I was embarrassed to be seen by her but she never showed any sign that she knew that I was a boy at as she bathed, clothed and cosseted me as any female might expect from her maid. When my aunt told me that I must hide my male members in the same way that actors on stage did, I had no idea what she meant. Maris would show me, I was informed.



I didn't realize that a man's things could be so set back into the body and held in place with a wide strap or cording. My panties fitted me snugly after that. I once changed in front of the long looking glass and saw how I looked with my parts thrust back.

In my panties with my hair in wet curls about my face and on my shoulder, my waist pinched in after being in the body shaper for so long, I looked like a young girl. I had seen many in my friends' houses in Doxford when I was younger so I knew what a girl should look like. Save for the bandage between my legs, I was a girl.

As I put on my panties, garter belt and stockings, I felt like a girl. I wanted to have my breasts taped and my body shaper back in place. I was Sherrene, I thought to myself as Maris made me do my eyes darkly, my lashes thick like a girl. I enjoyed making myself into Sherrene.

It was the most enjoyable time of the day, luxuriating in a scented bath and making Sherrene appear at her prettiest. I curved my thin eyelashes and rouged and powdered my face now. My aunt was pleased with me when she saw that I had learned something every girl in the Free Quarter at Terraire could do, apply her own makeup. But, really, the pleasure was all mine.

I had wondered why it was called the Free Quarter when I was younger and didn't understand. It was 'free of all social convention,' my mother told me. I learned later from a loud-mouthed oaf that it meant that the girls there were free to charge whatever they wanted. There were other laws and conventions that were free to be broken as well, I found out. Apart from an occasional visit to the theaters in Terraire, I usually stayed away from there.

It was from my aunt I learned that not all the girls in the Free Quarter were girls. "But we don't have to go into that now, do we, Sherri?" she asked me. I was rooted to the floor in shock at what she had suggested to me, how I could entertain a man who was interested in lying with me as a girl? "Later, when you need to know, we must discuss it, of course. But it may never come to you having to know what those special young ladies have managed to find out."

I spent several tortuous days and nights until the binding became expected and became part of Sherrene's daily rituals, of *my* daily rituals. Was my aunt attempting to turn me into a 'free' girl? I was in terror most of the time as I pondered that, prancing about the house in my high heels and airy dresses. She didn't raise a subject without following through on it so I had to think about men and what they would expect from a girl like me.

I found myself dwelling on what it would be like. I found myself imagining myself back in Cory's arms, imagining what he would have done to me if he had been able to see me as I saw myself in the looking glass.

I was horrified at the direction of my thoughts and one night I decided that I must run away. Surely, I was not being looked for again. I got as far as three steps from the front door when a rustle in the dark bushes and a growl that seemed to be a warning froze me, then sent me scuttling back into the safety of the house. My chest was heaving like that of a young girl at the panic I felt.

I went to the window later and saw a dark figure stand up under the fir tree. It seemed to be staring right at me. The dark shadow sent chills and terrifying sensations through me as I hurtled back to my bed, my

nightie, and my scented pillows. Escape seemed as far away as the capital of the Kingdom. I shivered as I thought about the great city. I should find a chance to get away from my aunt there, shouldn't I?

I thought of myself as an actress on stage, as they called the men who appeared there. I imagined myself as the heroine of one of the great plays and about the appreciative whooping that always occurred in the love scenes that most plays had. I had felt queasy seeing one man kiss another on stage and thought it was because it was men doing that and seeming to enjoy doing it, which made me ill. Maybe it wasn't, though, I now thought as I wondered what it would be like to be doing that, kissing Cory, in front of a cheering audience.

I went to sleep for several nights imagining myself in Cory's arms. Oh Cory, I thought, why couldn't you be like the golden knight and come and rescue me? I imagined myself as the maiden rescued by Cory and being grateful to him while the crowd of stage-goers cheered me on.

I thought of Cory as I bathed and let my maid prepare me as if for a banquet or state ball. Algoth came to me with a hairpiece that matched my own blonde color and attached it to the back of my head; my back was shivery and tingly as it fell below the level of my breast bands. The shivers had the effect of firming up my chest muscles and thus emphasizing my womanly figure. It would be so nice if the mounds on my chest were real, I thought, as Maris gently patted the rosewater from me.

I scolded myself on the direction of my thoughts as I put on the dark stockings and dark panties to make myself once more into Lady Sherrene. The black dress

rustled as I walked, a stiffened petticoat making it flow outward from my legs, stressing the tiny waist that Maris had drawn in mercilessly in the corset my aunt made me wear.

Algoth put black ribbons about my hair, pinning it back save for the curls about my forehead. Maris brought me a looking glass; I did my makeup, thickening my lashes once more and painting my lips pink to match the nail paint my aunt had decreed for me. A dark stone descended on my chest, pointing to my cleavage and Maris brought me heavy, matching earrings that dangled from my ears. A ring on my slender finger, its stone matching the one at my supposed breasts, completed my jewellery and made me look like one of the great ladies I had seen come to call on my mother.

I smiled tentatively at my image in the looking glass. Dedrick was nowhere to be seen in my look. It was Sherrene who smiled back at me. It was Sherrene who arose and rustled in her lovely dark dress after her maid, her aunt's shoes a perfect fit to her feet now. I loved being Sherrene. I loved the heightened feelings that ran through me, heightened female feelings. I was ready to play my part.

My aunt insisted I wear dark bracelets on my bare arms, then had me turn so she could look me over critically. I saw myself in the window glass of the main room and she had Algoth close the curtains. It didn't matter. I had seen myself and knew how gorgeously I was gowned and made-up; my hair glittered under the light of the candlelit chandeliers.

"Maybe a little too brazen," muttered my aunt, adjusting my neckline as she always did. She was staring

at me as the tap on the door announced Ismar. His eyes bulged.

"My ladies," he gasped. "My ladies! The Queen is here! The Queen is here!"

"Where else would she be, Ismar?" snapped my aunt. "Convey her here to my chambers immediately."

I don't know what I expected. I didn't expect the youngish woman with blonde hair like mine who entered. She took off her gloves and coat and handed them to a woman behind her as she came forward to grasp my aunt.

"And who is this delightful creature?" the Queen asked. I shivered and found myself automatically going into a deep curtsy. I don't know whether it was my aunt who made me do such a deep welcome to the beautiful woman who entered our room in a low-cut, light blue ball gown.

My aunt, in grey, looked quite old beside the woman. "My niece, Sherrene, Airene's daughter," my aunt introduced me; I quivered all over at such an introduction. I felt the touch of a cool hand and rose unsteadily on my high heels.

"Yes, I heard. My condolences," said the Queen, looking at me in surprise. "Count Osgard is here." She rolled her dark brown eyes dramatically. "But I thought he said that your sister had a son?"

"Yes," said Aunt Rissa, smiling at the fright I was sure I was displaying. She stepped over to me as I stood there simpering in all my feminine finery, feeling foolish as the Queen smiled mockingly at me. "I am *so* glad that my sister had a son," my aunt said. "Isn't he just the sweetest boy you have ever seen, Your Majesty?"

The Queen's eyes widened even more as my aunt put her arm about my waist and hugged me.

"Oh, you have been playing one of your cruel jokes again, Rissa," said the blonde-haired Queen. The women who attended her were smiling. I stood there like a fool, swaying in my high heels and body shaping dress and wished I could be anywhere else in the universe at that moment.

"Not me," said my aunt. "My sister. She disguised this little tomboy easily when she was younger but the boys in Doxford began to be interested in her and see through her disguise which is why my sister moved to Terraire, under the view of Count Osgard. Sherrene would have made her debut at his Midwinter Fete but it was a different, sadder kind of fate that brought her to me. Her tomboy disguise served her well on her passage through the hills. Now, I get to be the doting mother in my sister's place."

"Oh, how old is this lovely child then?" asked the Queen, Larussa. Yes, that was the name of the King's third wife, and hadn't she recently borne him another son, his third?

"Sixteen," said my aunt before I could say a word to the Queen. I flushed at that. In higher society, sixteen was the age of passage to womanhood; special parties were often held for the heiresses of noble houses in a girl's sixteenth year.

"Oh, wonderful!" said the Queen, looking most excited. I stood there, screaming in anxiety inside, fearing what sort of game my aunt was going to put me through. "Oh, she must have a special Announcing Day here in Hillaire. She must, Rissa! Even if she has had one before."

"No, she hasn't," said my aunt, squeezing my quivering arm. "My niece has not been acknowledged as woman yet. We will be most pleased if Your Majesty would attend an Announcing Day for her while we are here."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," giggled the Queen while her older, elegant female companions smiled indulgently at her. "Oh, Rissa, it will be so much fun. You must let me sponsor it in the Palace. Really! It will show Tethry that you aren't here just to be tiresome and spoil all his plans as you usually do. You should hear Bredden going on about you. I think the court alchemist is actually afraid of you, Lady Rissa!"

"Tethry," began my aunt with a smile, guiding me to a sofa so that I could sit like a lady. "I mean His Majesty, King Tatheren," she went on in more formal language, "may have something to say about that. Let us just say that if he approves of my niece being Announced from the palace, then I will not be opposed to it for her sake."

"Aunt Orissiana!" I pleaded with her. I had heard a noble girl in one of theaters once say to a partner that her wedding day had been like her Sixteenth, but not nearly as much fun, as she had had to share the lime-light with her husband. On her Sixteenth, every man had adored her and been hers to command.

"Then that's settled," said the Queen, quite ignoring my feeble objection to my aunt. "We must definitely scotch all rumors about your niece, Lady Rissa, not that there have been any. But it's always so delicious to welcome a tomboy to our world of crinolines and potent love perfumes, isn't it? Maybe we should have you be-spell one of the older Princes for your lovely niece? Or maybe even Bredden?"

There was definitely a chill in the room then as the Ladies-in-waiting looked at their Queen in dismay.

I trembled in fear at the thought of a Prince looking at me as a woman and a dance partner. My aunt quickly intervened. "Larussa," she said firmly. "You are not the youngest daughter of Count Beverell any more. You are Her Majesty, Tatheren's Queen."

"Oh, auntie," said the Queen, pouting. "You're no fun. I hoped you'd at least give me a puffball for Melleren. He's such a pompous, little prig. I'd like to see him romping through a meadowful of ewes as you made my father's principal ram do that one time."

The ladies' ears seemed to perk up. My aunt sighed as there was another tap on the door and a table weighed down with succulent foods was brought in. In moments, Maris and Algoth had chairs about the table and my aunt was inviting us to dine.

"No, Your Majesty," my aunt said sharply then. I felt a prickling in my nose. I felt gauche and ill-at-ease as I sat opposite my aunt, at a table of women, of whom I was one as well. She passed a dish of small chicken pieces in front of me. "The sauce, Lady Sherrene."

I felt the other ladies look sharply at me as I tried to sit demurely in my dark dress and long hair. I had been playing this game for the last month with my aunt. I caught the toxic heronsfoot easily but it ruined a plate of honeyed melon that I would otherwise have liked to taste.

The toxins were easier to find than the mood changers and euphorics, or their opposite, the sleep trance-inducers, but I was more adept at finding what I had termed honeybane using only the aroma. I was used to



heating a sample of anything I was unsure of over a candle flame. The aromas that rose to my nose I could classify very quickly; most were harmless.

Or so I thought, until my aunt had me in a trance and entertaining her like a puppet on a string. That was when she taught me about how two inoffensive substances, fallare and heartsease, when combined could be a potent controlling agent.

I shivered as the other women looked at me and awaited my approval of the dishes on the table. My aunt was so much better at this than I was. I almost approved of everything until I recalled my lesson with the heartsease. The salads had been lightly powdered with arenine, which always perked up a bland salad with a piquant spicy flavor. But arenine and something in the caramelized eggs called to me. I didn't know what it was. I looked at my aunt who was smiling at me. I brought them over a flame and a putrid smell hit my nostrils as the heat united the two.

"Phe-yew," said the Queen and one of her Ladies wrinkled her nose as well.

"Well done, my darling," said my aunt approvingly to me. A shiver ran through me as all the ladies smiled at me. Orissiana signalled to Algoth who silently left the room.

"Either the eggs or the salad but not together, Your Majesty," said my aunt to the Queen who was staring at me.

"She's a witch," Queen Larussa said then. "Your niece is a full-blown true witch?"

"Raised by my sister, what else would she be?" asked my aunt. I found myself the object of intense scrutiny that made me feel certain that I was being

measured in a fashion that must reveal who and what I was. I looked down but my bosom was there in front of me, heaving slightly as I breathed in rapidly and nervously. My cleavage looked so womanly as I tensed inside at the femininity I was displaying.

Ismar came in uncertainly. Algoth must have powdered him with honeybane because he reeked of it. My aunt merely pointed at the two offending items and he immediately took massive spoonfuls of each, his eyes beseeching us all to assist him.

Within seconds, Ismar was rolling around on the floor, clutching his stomach. Algoth's pail caught his vomit as he was led from the little room. "Abriss will have her little jokes," said my aunt. I found my appetite disappearing fast and two of the other ladies looked quite white-faced. "She is Ismar's favorite client when I am not here."

"What a pity," said Larussa wistfully. "I love caramel. I could have eaten the plateful. They had such a delicious aroma. Thank you," she said to me.

My aunt then served the Queen a platter of food and the other women began to help themselves. Larussa refused to be called anything but Lara then as informality reigned for a while.

The conversation all had to pass through her, however, as she was the monarch's wife. I tried to be womanly as I sat there with the Queen and she accepted me easily as a woman. Very quickly, I gathered that her visit to see Orissiana had a purpose other than chiding my aunt to be her husband's supporter in Council. My aunt in Council, that was a new thought. It explained why the Counts of Mustay and Torthard had treated my aunt as an equal and why no Count's men had ruled the market in Birchwood.

"I do want another child," Lara said at one point to my aunt. "And it must be a daughter. Tethry insists on that. Please, Lady Rissa, help me in this. Bredden is useless with female essences. It was you, after all, who aided me with my son."

"About which you lied to me, Lara," said my aunt. "Tatheren wanted Kennen to be a daughter. He has enough sons. He needs marriageable daughters. You wanted a son for your own dynastic ambitions."

Lara went quite red in the face. The other Lady with her reached out her hand as if to prevent her from making a hasty reply. "And why should I not?" the Queen asked, her pout returning. "Tell me that Melleren or Tathally will make a king as strong as Tatheren when the time comes. Kennen is a fine boy and he will make a fine king in his time."

By the lack of response among the Ladies-in-waiting, I guessed that they had heard that before. "Only after a succession dispute," said my aunt.

"Which a true witch could control," said the irrepressible Lara. "You've always answered my father's call when he has asked it of you. You were there when I needed you before."

"Larussa," snapped my aunt. "There are six of us Ladies here. This is not a secure place or the right time for this kind of conversation."

Six of us Ladies. That made me quiver. I was so easily included with women now.

"You will help me with a daughter?" the Queen persisted and my aunt agreed to that.

I curtsied again to the Queen as she took her leave. She smiled at me, promising me a Sixteenth I would never forget. My nervousness seemingly ap-

pealed to her; she went off smiling and planning an event for me that would make every man in the kingdom, she said, desire me. I loved to hear her say it but embarrassing thoughts swept over me as I thought about what that might mean.

"That went well," Aunt Rissa said to me when they left. "You know that Lara will approach you soon about being her witch entirely. She will lavish you greatly in the Sixteenth she will plan for you, then ask you to stay when your gratitude is high."

"She was sensitive to the toxin," I said nervously to my aunt, avoiding the topic I would have loved to talk about. "As was the Lady Renneth."

"Very good," complimented my aunt. She reached out and caressed my smooth cheek. "I wish you were my daughter at times. What a witch you are going to make. Some man, well, some man should be found for you."

My aunt didn't go on with that thought; I felt myself shaking all over in my long dress. My earrings danced at my neck as I shook in response to her words.

"And now there's Abriss," my aunt said. "It was a clever but nasty ploy on her part. I missed it at first myself until you delayed over the eggs. We might have had the Queen as sick as Ismar and my reputation would be in tatters on our first night here. We must prepare something subtle for Abriss."

"Who is Abriss?" I asked her.

"Algoth's sister," my aunt said. "She blames me for that. You and I will secure the kitchens against her tomorrow."

"This Sixteenth," I said hesitantly. "I'm eighteen, Aunt Rissa."

"But every girl must have her Sixteenth," said my aunt with a smile, touching my shoulders and arranging the neckline of my dress once more. "And once you've been Announced as a woman, no one will ever question you again. You can even marry if you wish. I will show you how to be-spell a husband in subtle ways that your mother never knew. Come into my dark room, Sherrene, and I will show you the witch's arts that your mother always spurned."

I could marry? I could be a woman and marry? My mind reeled once more. I could be-spell a man so that he would love me as if I was a woman. I trembled in a sort of ecstasy at such a thought. Then sanity returned. No, I didn't want that, did I? My aunt was smiling at me as if she had seen my eagerness to grasp the nettle she had offered me.

"I-I can't," I told her, casting my eyes down and seeing the thick lashes descending in front of my eyes.

"Your mother has taught you that there is a good and bad side to witchery," mocked my aunt. She had taken my hand in hers and was showing me how my hand looked just like hers with its long, colored nails. "But there is no such thing as good and bad in witchery. What I keep from you in my dark room is only witchery that can be, well, unsafe. You have no need to look further than Algoth and Maris to see what can happen if you wander my house and grounds alone at night. They both got into areas they were ill-equipped to get out of. You have been more circumspect."

"What did they do that was so bad?" I asked my aunt. I wondered if I truly wanted to know. Was she hinting that she knew about my escape attempts?

"A witch's first subject is herself," said Orissiana. "She tries to make herself more beautiful, or youn-

ger-looking, or she tries to change some part of her that cannot be changed." She saw my face and the direction of my thoughts. "Try to change your sex," she said simply, "and you will end up like Maris."

I shook my head, my earrings and hair caressing, reminding me how I was dressed and how my aunt must see me.

"It's much easier to change the perceptions of those close to you," said my aunt. "Let me show you how to do that."

## **VI. A WITCH'S ANNOUNCEMENT**

Thus began the most hectic time of my life, the whirlwind days of being the young woman I had been trained to be. It was a whirl of parties and receptions and simpering like an empty-headed young girl. My aunt insisted that I play that role and I tried, often quaking inside as young men seemed to love me being as silly as I was. Sometimes, I tired of all the parties and dancing and my aunt supplied me with a teragol compound that revived me within seconds. But when I slept, I slept like a corpse in the graveyard.

We met Abriss on a visit to the Queen which my aunt said a Lady like me must make, since the Queen had visited me in my room. It wasn't Rissa, my aunt said with one of her sly smiles, whom the Queen wished to have visit her. Abriss looked like Algoth, an older, heavier version of the entranced maid who served Orissiana but there was an anger that radiated from her even though she smiled courteously to my aunt.

I recognized the collane compound that wafted to me. It was bound by maracine, which my aunt had predicted she would wear. Abriss was waiting in the

Queen's antechamber with a faint smile on her round, almost plump cheeks. I could imagine her in a story book telling tales to a group of enthralled children at her feet.

"My niece, Lady Sherrene Perisord," my aunt said. Abriss's smile grew wider as she looked at me. She had beady, black eyes that seemed to see deep down inside me.

"How fortunate," murmured Abriss. Her plain dress was without decoration as if she was proud of her peasant ancestry. She clutched a basket of trinkets in front of her, a gift for the Queen in there for certain along with defensive devices like those my aunt carried in her pockets. "To have a niece and not a nephew," she went on, sending shivers of guilt and shame through me. I was sure she was on the point of exposing me to the Queen. "But a girl cannot restore Perisord. You lose that."

"Yes," said my aunt as Lady Renneth came into the antechamber and smiled at my aunt and me. I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Lady Orissiana, Lady Sherrene," Lady Renneth said as Abriss rose. "The Queen was frantic when she heard that you are without. Please come in and join us. Oh, Abriss, my apologies, but you know how young girls are. She wants to have time with her new play-mate."

Abriss sat furiously as I bounded forward eagerly and brushed against her, doing what my aunt had said that I must do for her. I handed the clasps and buttons I had substituted, in Abriss' basket of 'trinkets' to my aunt as soon as we were inside Larussa's day chamber. Then the Queen left most rudely several older women she was talking to, bounding over like an eager puppy

to greet me with great warmth. Her other guests looked on in startled amusement.

My aunt had sprayed me with some new substance as we entered the Palace. "You'll need it if you hope to keep up with Lara," she said. I wiggled and squirmed in my dress and female underwear as Larussa reverted to little girl behaviour with me. I couldn't help myself. I felt that I wanted to be a little girl and dance and hop and be boisterous like Larussa. I giggled with her and we quite forgot Abriss waiting for an interview the Queen had summoned her for.

We went out for a stroll about the battlements of the castle-palace at the center of the Kingdom of the Baracts. "Majesty," whispered Lady Renneth. "Abriss is still within the antechamber, in response to your call for an audience."

"Is she?" said the Queen carelessly as ears pricked up all around us. "After she tried to poison me at Ismar's, she should be grateful if I even see her before I prepare for the Lady Nilloweter's Ball. Oh, you must come, Sherrene, you *must*. Say she can, Rissa. She and I speak the same language about men, not like the old biddies Nilloweter always invites."

"We must leave you to your business, my Queen," my aunt said firmly. "My flighty little girl," she meant me, "is a wicked influence on you. It is best that the pair of you be separated for the next few days while I prepare her for the formality of the Royal Ball at which you are favoring her." I saw the startled looks on the faces of the older women.

"Oh, and do be kind to Abriss, Majesty," said my aunt, taking my arm and putting it firmly beneath hers. "The joke at Ismar's was simply a poor thing that got



out of hand. Involve men in witchery and it always ends up with unfortunate consequences."

Three days later, I was presented to the Court at Hillaire, so that on the ten-day of my arrival in Hillaire, I was announced as a woman to the over eight hundred people who flooded the Great Hall of the Palace. I did have my hair in ringlets and I did wear a white dress trimmed in pink. I had white and pink flowers in my hair and I danced with the King and both Princes. Both of them hugged and kissed me and told me I was the loveliest girl in the kingdom and that I must marry them and be the next Queen. I assured them that I would and I meant every word at the time.

I danced with Count Osgard who told me that he remembered me as a boy but much preferred me as a girl. He also hugged me and kissed my cheek. I let him smell the lovebane perfume Aunt Rissa had insisted I wear. Poor Osgard. He followed me around like a little puppy after that, besotted with me. When I danced with him again, feeling sorry for him, he begged me to marry him, my sixth proposal of that wonderful night.

I told him I couldn't as the Prince had already asked me. Osgard was so befuddled that he didn't think to ask me which one.

The Queen was right in her assessment of Melleren. He was a prig. But that didn't mean that he wasn't a little nice. He had lovely manners, most of the time. It was just his opinions that I couldn't bear.

Tathally was a year younger than me but thought that he was a year older and so he patronized me. He wanted to take me around the city and show me the places no one else would show me. I gathered that I would have to go with him alone in his carriage and

that we would visit many spooky, dark places where he would console me if I was scared.



Tathally's grin was infectious; he couldn't believe that I wouldn't instantly want to be the 'bosom companion' of a Royal Prince. It was the phrase he used with an impish grin, making me wonder how it would be if the two of us actually did become Lord and Lady.

I saw the look then that Tathally gave his elder brother as I danced with Melleren and he proposed to me as well. I was scared that there would be violence between the brothers. I nervously powdered them with the antidote to lovebane as I felt it beginning to consume me as well. As time wore on at the great ball of which I was the center of attraction, so many handsome men lined up to dance with me. It was the most wonderful evening of my life; I was toasted and gifted by many people and always there were men there to hold me and compliment me on being the most beautiful woman in the room. I felt quite light-headed as the ball went on and on.

I could feel myself getting enraptured in being a woman just as the Count of Torthard claimed me, brushing aside other lovesick swains, swirling me out elegantly into the middle of the floor.

"So it does affect you as well," the Count murmured as I melted into his arms in the Lovers' Waltz that the Court musicians chose to play at that moment.

"Oh, yes," I murmured. His strong arms whirled me about the floor, my beautiful dress swirling about us both. Trust one of my aunt's cronies to recognize that there was lovebane in the air but I didn't care that he knew. He just had to hold me and tell me what a woman I was and I would love him right back.

His hand gently caressed my back. "We all know that you are enrapturing us," the count murmured in my ear. He pressed his head against me and I felt his

lips on my cheek. "And we don't mind. Every man here wants to dance with you and be enraptured like the Princes. Does a lowly Count stand a chance of being your favorite with such august competition against him?"

In the chandelier above us, I could see my reflection a million times over. My red, ruby lips pouted at the image of the girl I saw, snuggling into her man's arms as he directed her effortlessly through the suggestive steps of the Lovers' Waltz.

"Not such an innocent girl," whispered the Count. "Oh, what a woman you are going to make some man."

"How about you?" I whispered back, frightening myself as soon as I said it. I averted my face to avoid showing him my shame as he pulled me even more tightly to him.

"Oh, I hope it is me," Count Torthard murmured, his lips caressing my hair.

And then it occurred to me that I was the one being overpowered by lovebane and not him. He must be wearing the antidote. I lifted my head from his shoulder and looked into his face in alarm. He kissed my forehead, then my nose, finally my chin. I longed to feel him on my lips.

"Later," Torthard murmured. Then he was gone and I had to meet the lusts of other men, sons of Counts and officers and courtiers of the King's Court. I was kissed on the cheek by at least two hundred men that night but the only one I remembered was the one who kissed me so gently on my forehead, nose and chin.

The King and Queen themselves came to see me off after the most wonderful night of my life. The gifts I had been showered with would have to follow in a coach all to themselves. "Oh, Sherrene," babbled the Queen, hugging me and kissing my cheeks, which was mercifully free of the lovebane perfume. "You must come and join me in the palace. I love the way you have your hair done. I must have ringlets like yours. You must come and show me how you do it so quickly."

The Queen had seen me at Ismar's at noon, telling me how the rooms would be festooned with white and pink carnations in my honor. She had brought me flowers for my hair and wanted to talk about girlish things with me. She had told me scandalous stories about the men of the Court, some of whom she told me to avoid as their manhoods were not impressive. Well, neither was mine, I thought, faking female dismay as she told me of the afflictions of poor Count Stenerwell.

"Oh, but you're a witch," teased Larussa, hanging on to my arm as she explored the dresses hanging in my bedroom and admiring them all. "You could probably cure him."

"I'm not really a witch," I said lightly. I couldn't be, I wanted to tell her, because boys can't be witches. But Larussa brushed aside all the openings I tried to create to tell her why I couldn't attend the ball at the palace, why I couldn't possibly be announced as a girl of sixteen.

"You're more of one than Renneth or I will ever be," Larussa had laughed. "Oh, what is that perfume you are wearing? It is so tantalizing. It makes me want to hug you all the time. Is that how you make all the men love you?"

I protested but she had seen me with the two Counts, Mustay and Torthard, who had joined my aunt and me as we sauntered through the silk merchants' lane; my aunt found it a great joke to buy me even more silk underthings. I tried on new cosmetics daily and new hair styles so that I scarcely knew myself day by day. The men had been so gallant, joking with me about what I bought and why they would never see it. I had been so flustered I missed that it was the Queen passing by in her carriage. She had waved to me as Mustay put his arm so familiarly around me until he was rebuked by my aunt.

The Queen, however, was delighted that I flirted with handsome men and wished she could have joined me, she said. I hadn't realized how young she was until the day before the ball when she came over with her maid and Lady Renneth and wanted a makeup lesson. It was an excruciating afternoon as she tried on all my clothes and had me change in front of her, admiring my silk panties and underwear, noting that I was increasing my cleavage by padding. It didn't faze her at all when Maris removed my bra and she saw my flattish, taped chest.

"I did that until I had Kennen," the Queen told me. "Oh, put on that blue gown, please Sherrene. Oh, I wish I was as thin and shapely as you. And don't look so embarrassed. Some girls are just later than others to grow. Your nubbins will grow bigger soon, just you wait and see. But you are much more shapely than me, save for that one area alone"

Shapely? I had wondered at that. I wasn't wearing a corset and I was just in a bra and panties with my stockings. I had looked at myself in surprise. She was right, of course. My shape had changed. I was much

thinner overall but my hips seemed to be a lot wider. I really had to stop wearing so many girlish underthings. They were really having an effect on me, or so I thought, and arching myself femininely to make myself appear even more girlish to my new playmates.

It was hard not to be coquettish with the Queen as she was that way herself and encouraged her Ladies-in-waiting, maids, and me to be that way with her as well. She touched me a lot as well, more than anyone else had touched me. She hugged me and kissed me quite openly as if I was a friend of hers. My aunt had encouraged her to see me every day. I found myself acting quite giddily at times with the Queen.

It was amazing how the merchants tolerated her and went with the joke, calling her 'Lady Zatessa' and ignoring the men-at-arms who shadowed us and tried to be inconspicuous. They were as inconspicuous as a Seafarer tall ship arriving in port. Lady Zatessa pretended not to know why so many handsome men were following her and engaged me in flirting with them, telling them how I had said that this one had fine eyes and another had such big muscles.

With the old, grizzled King behind her, however, as we said goodnight after the ball, Larussa was somewhat repressed. She babbled on about how lovely my dress was and how I must come to see her the next day and tell her every word every man had said to me at by dance.

I thanked her for the ball, for allowing me to be the center of attraction at Lady Sherrene's Ball. I looked up from a fit of the giggles as she complimented me on how I had danced with Torthard to find the King staring down at me. Torthard was the one I must dream about, the Queen proclaimed to the world. Her hus-

band looked me over with a care that I thought was not proper, whether I was a boy or a girl. Of course, he must think me a girl.

## **VII. A WITCH'S PLOT**

Aunt Rissa saved me from doing or saying something out of place by taking me by the arm as Larussa reached over to whisper to me as the King smiled at me. My aunt pulled my shawl about me and, saying that she hated long good-byes, bundled me into the carriage. Oh, how the King had looked at me, studying my body in my dress as if he could see every feminine underthing that caressed my smooth body.

"You felt the King's interest in you?" my aunt asked me, a smile on her sharp features.

"I did," I said with a tremble, drawing the shawl about my arms for the short ride to our lodgings.

"When I am in council," my aunt told me, "you will be invited into the Queen's quarters to play for a while. Only it will not be the Queen there who wishes to play with you, but the King."

I'm sure I blanched as I looked up to my aunt, dismayed and sickened by every word she added.

"He has a penchant for little girls," said my aunt, as she instructed me on the point of our visit to the capital. I sat there like a stone as she told me how I was to seduce the husband of the girl I was beginning to like. "Maris could not do this," she said. "Nor Algoth. So your arrival on my doorstep was a gift of the goddess."

My aunt had made me into a girl but Larussa had made me feel like a girl. She had been so excited for me on my Announcement Day. It was as if she was the one who was being welcomed as a marriageable member of



the nobility. The proposals of marriage may have been made jocularly to me by the men I had danced with but that made no difference to what would now take place.

The doyens of the families of the Landcounts would even now be considering me as a marriage partner, I thought, as I wriggled in my lovely, virginal dress. Cards would arrive at the house I was staying at, the first indication of interest and acceptance of me as a woman.

In the morning after the card day, negotiations would begin to make me the wife of some family, at some level, depending upon how much a family would want the favor of my aunt, a witch whose appearance at any gathering seemed to chill the life out of the grey-hairs. Even flighty Larussa had noticed that.

"It's a pity the heiress to Perisord can never inherit that blighted county," Lara had said to me. "You would be so rich, richer than my husband. Do you know what your grandmother used to blight your inheritance so completely?"

I had no idea what she was talking about. I had only heard my mother speak occasionally of my grandmother. Always she grudgingly admitted that she was not the great witch that her mother had been. Other than that, she would never speak to me of Perisord and why she kept the name for both of us.

Long betrothals were the fashion with long negotiations preceding that as well. It would be two years till I was betrothed as a woman, I thought, my breath speeding up at such a thought.

As we rode in the carriage, I crossed, then re-crossed my legs and my aunt put her hand on my leg to stop me. She caressed the white and pink silk

over petticoats of pink and white, trimmed in lace. She knew where the tops of my stockings were and my garters and she caressed me. That made shudders run through me as I tried to think of myself as a marble statue carved by some ancient artist of the fallen Russet Empire.

But I couldn't sit still, not when a slight breeze blew on my ringlets and they darted and fidgeted about my neck and bare shoulders. My heated skin chilled rapidly and I had to clench my mouth to prevent my teeth from chattering. I could not do this. I could not do what my aunt was proposing that I do.

"Everyone will know," I whispered to my aunt; she sat still and composed beside me on the carriage seat. "Everyone will see your hand in everything that I do. And Abriss will strike back at you."

My aunt's fingers felt like talons as she turned my head to face her. I looked up at her dark hair and vivid features. "If she does, it will have to be from beyond the grave," my aunt said, her eyes coal black again. I had to wonder what drug could make her look like that, so extraordinarily beautiful, but it was the striking beauty of the sinuous black cobra before it strikes from ambush.

I felt my ringlets heavy at my neck. "H-How?" I managed to gasp. It must be connected to the objects I had switched in the older witch's basket, the objects my aunt had given me to switch. I expected no answer and I got none. My aunt had other things on her mind.

"Tatheren's first wife who died in childbirth was a Seafarer. She resembled you or you resemble her. And so you should," said Orissiana the Terrible. There, I have given the name I heard mentioned so often in the

taverns of Malesia and the Middling Hills. "After all, you are the child of her brother, my sister's husband."

I quivered and quaked in my long dress.

"If for nothing else," Orissiana commanded me, "this to avenge my only sister and our family upon the cruel man who had your father and mother murdered."

I stared at my aunt in total shock as I sat there. I felt a pounding in my skull and knew what it was. My aunt was hammering on me through some concoction she had placed on me, in my fan, I suddenly realized, as fragrant honeybane came to my nostrils.

My aunt must have been aroused by it as well. She must have felt my resistance to obeying her, to believing her implicitly without question. My headache increased as I raised the fan which seemed to have a mind of its own and gently fanned myself with it.

I felt myself in the King's arms. I recalled how stiffly I had danced that very first dance in his arms as all the women of the Court looked at me and I felt the wave of jealousy directed at me through the fixed smiles. Everyone had been fixed in their jealous glances save for Larussa, my Queen and my friend, who was genuinely pleased that her husband had given me such an honor.

And all I had felt was not gratitude but simple humiliation in passing myself off as an ingenuous Sixteen. My painted smile was as fixed as the bows down the back of my dress. King Tatheren smiled, kissed my cheek to some gasps in the lines about the dance floor and handed me on to Prince Melleren. He was eager where his parent had been polite to fling me into a series of spins and pirouettes that made me flush with

excitement. Melleren then complimented me on the color in my cheeks.

All of my aunt's stories, however, told to me since I had journeyed to Birchwood involved treachery; now I was to be involved in just such a scene. I was to betray the Queen's trust in me. I would betray the girl with whom I had romped around my room in short underslip and bra, dancing the Gay Maiden's Waltz.

But why should I do what my aunt wanted? I should talk to the King, I thought. I tried to resist whatever compulsion my aunt had put on me. I could find out about my father but that idea no longer had great appeal. I knew what a father would say if he saw me as I now was, no longer very much of a son to him. It had been my mother's dream to find him again.

Then, what my aunt had said registered. She said that Tatheren had my father and mother murdered. She knew so much more about my family than I did. My mother hadn't seen fit to tell me anything about my family. I didn't even know the names of my grandparents who had once ruled lost Perisord, according to my aunt.

Could I get my aunt to tell me what I wanted so much to know? Not unless I used compulsion potions on her, I thought in dismay. Orissiana would recognize anything I did to her and I would end up like Maris or Algoth, just another of her catatonic, female maids. I shuddered at such a thought.

"Come to the palace," Larussa had whispered as I entered the carriage. The King stared at my false cleavage while I was being showered with rose and flower petals at the end of the ball by the Ladies of the Court. "I want to show you my baby. He is such a darling boy."

Larussa had brushed rose petals from my breasts, not knowing how the touch of her hand, lightly caressing my chest, made the bindings between my legs seem to tighten. She seemed to feel something amiss as she gave me a tremulous smile and so I hugged her, an awful breach of proper manners but I felt that I should. She beamed at me and hugged me back, woman to woman. This was the woman that my aunt now wanted me to betray.

I found the collane, the single light brushing I had made at the base of the fan, and that was enough. I was able to feign that I had succumbed entirely to my aunt and leave the carriage as an elegant female.

"Lady Sherrene," Ismar greeted me enthusiastically. Rose petals fell from me as he took my shawl. My high-heeled dancing slippers clicked on the shining boards of the entrance hall into his establishment.

"Will you wait for me, milady?" asked my aunt lightly as we crossed the hallway and I felt the command ripple over my skin.

I didn't dare another jolt from the collane so I stopped as gracefully as I could while Ismar looked at me with unconcealed delight.

"Oh, Lady Sherrene," Ismar began fulsomely. "Never have I seen a more enticing picture of womanhood. Your hair, your face, your figure and such a perfect dress." He turned to my aunt. "She was the belle of the ball, wasn't she?" he said eagerly. My aunt blithely agreed while I stood there.

"Tell us about Abriss," said my aunt. Ismar's demeanor changed immediately.

"M-My Ladies," Ismar stammered. "L-Let us not spoil this wonderful night."

"You will not," murmured my aunt, flicking her fan at the guesthouse's owner.

"It is unbelievable," said Ismar hurriedly, the words seeming to fight themselves to burst from his lips. "The Watch has called for aid from all the greatest apothecaries of the Kingdom. I hear that Master Bredden has attended the scene. That the stall-owners would rise in such a mass against the Count and his witch is unheard of. They're saying it's because she killed her own sister and that the miners of Sharben have no minds of their own because of her."

My aunt touched my arm and I shuddered as I thought about what she had said earlier. "No, she didn't kill her sister," said my aunt thoughtfully. "I know that to be true and you can tell anyone you wish that I said that. The Watch Commander will be here soon to consult with me. Let him come right to me, whatever the time. I shall be ready to help him in any way that I can."

"Yes, my Lady," said Ismar.

I was ashamed of myself that I said nothing. I allowed my aunt to usher me up the stairs, our gowns making frightfully feminine noises as we entered our rooms and our maids came silently to the door and let us in.

Algoth came to assist me with my hair, removing the pins she had used and combing out my hair as mechanically as ever. I stood in my shift, the front of my chest tented like a girl's and spoke to her urgently when we were alone.

"Abriss is dead," I hissed at her in my high, feminine voice. "Your sister is dead and Rissa killed her somehow."

There was absolutely no reaction from Algoth, whom my aunt had called the dead witch's sister. She continued brushing my long, blonde hair over my shoulders. Maris then came in and brought the salves and lotions I had to put on to satisfy my aunt that I was feminizing myself.

"Abriss could not defend herself, could she?" I whispered to Algoth, but it was as if my words dropped into a deep, bottomless well. Of course Abriss couldn't have defended herself or anyone else who was relying on her to defend them. I had stripped her of her guardian powders and lotions.

I wondered what my aunt put in their places in the vials I had exchanged. Terromal could tear off an arm if kept in an explosive shell. In a confined space, it could have destroyed a mob. But terrothen looked just like it and what was it good for? It was nothing but a plant fertilizer. I imagined Abriss trying to defend herself with plant food and colic-easers. Depressed beyond words as I slipped out of my silken, woman's underwear, I knew that I had had a hand in that, disarming a rival witch.

My makeup removed, I moodily put on my flimsy nightdress and the frilly panties that went with it and got into bed. Maris braided my hair, then laid the two long plaits on my chest as she put ribbons about them. That was when I felt a tingling in my chest. My breast bands were so tight at times that the padding chafed my chest.

It was so itchy, my chest, that I had to massage it and I made a frightening discovery. Larussa had said that my nubbins would grow; I had thought she was just being kind. I had loved her for it as she and I put on fresh stockings and clean breast bands and she told

me all about how the King's beard tickled her so when he put his head between her legs.

Lady Renneth had tried to shush the Queen but my new friend wanted to tell me everything about loving a man and I was eager to hear her. "Rissa will tell you herself very soon," Larussa whispered to me then as Renneth found us matching panties and slips to wear, "but I would never have conceived Kennen without her help. The philtre was perfect for Tatheren. We spent the month at Dingle Castle and he had me twice a day. He likes to mount women as the bulls and stallions mount their females," she added with a laugh. "And I like it that way. I don't get his sweat and spittle all over me. With Rissa's draught in him, he reaches into me further than any of my other lovers."

"Lara!" I had hushed her, flushing as she told me private things the King liked her to do to him to make him big enough to fit inside her.

"Haven't you rolled in the hay with a handsome boy?" the Queen asked me as Lady Renneth, bare-breasted herself, began to dress us in the soft silky underwear my aunt had purchased for me.

I had thought of Cory and being in the hay barn with him and flushed deeply. My face, cleaned of makeup to experiment with another type of girlish look with my friend, Lara, gave me away.

"Oh, you have, Sherrene, you have!" the Queen crowed in delight. "You *have* had a boy in the hay. Or, rather, a boy has had you. Oh, tell us about it! Tell us, Sherrene. You must! Your Queen commands it!" She spoiled the order by giggling and falling on top of me, her bare breasts on my 'nubbins' as she hugged me. She rolled me over to where Lady Renneth quickly and easily fitted me into my breast bands and paddings as



my smooth legs tangled with Larussa's. I felt weird as the binding at my groin seemed to grow and I became hotter and more flustered than ever before in my life.

"Oh, your mother was a real spoilsport!" wailed Larussa as she arranged the soft underslip about my neckline and Lady Renneth brushed my hair. "You should have lain quiet until she was gone, then you and Cory should have done it."

"Oh yes," I said, my thoughts strained and brittle. "And what if I had become pregnant?"

That made Larussa burst into laughing. "Oh, you silly goose," she said, rolling about on my bed, squeezing my waist with her bare legs. "You're a witch's daughter, aren't you? I bet your mother would have known a hundred ways to get rid of an unwanted pregnancy. I bet it's one of the first things Orissiana the Terrible taught you."

That was not the first time I heard my aunt described that way and it frightened me.

"How many ways do you know, Sherrene," asked the Queen, her eyes shining at me, "to terminate or prevent a pregnancy?"

I thought for a moment. "Seven or eight," I admitted, flustered by her stroking my soft, smooth legs. "And once you make stannisane, there are fifty ways to disguise how you might take it."

Lara looked at me sharply then. "I thought so," she'd said, glancing to Lady Renneth in triumph. "I told Rennie that Lady Rissa is training you. I wonder in whose place she intends to put you. She controls all the witches of Malesia, you know. Tatheren and Bredden say that we will have to curb her power or one day she will be curbing the King's! It would be wonderful,

though, to have a witch of our own, one who could match up to Orissiana."

"Don't look to me then," I had told her seriously. "My aunt controls me, too, when she's a mind to."

The Queen smiled at me then in a most friendly fashion and hit me with a pillow. The pillow fight led to a glorious romp about my bedroom with the Queen of the Baracts, as she stroked my stockings and tugged on my garter belt in play.

"Oh, we did this when I was a little girl, didn't we, Rennie!" Larussa giggled, rolling me over and over across the floor in a heap of soft, smooth legs and rounded soft-skinned humps. I hung on and hugged her, my inner self in a frenzy as I desperately tried not to touch her as I so much wanted to.

"Didn't you do this too as a little girl, Sherrene?" Larussa asked me.

"Of course she did," said my aunt then, coming into my bedroom. We scrambled to sit upright. "Sherri was quite a tomboy, though, so it wasn't little girls she rolled with but little boys."

That set the Queen off into another fit of giggles and teasing. Larussa hugged me and kissed me as she made her leave, whispering to me that I mustn't worry about the size of my breasts. One child and my husband would have pleasure, and so would I, pleasure like I had never known. It would help my marriage to last, she added with a sad whisper that told me much about her and the King.

But on the night of me becoming recognized as a woman, I lay in my nightie and found that there were definite mounds of flesh growing on my chest behind my nipples which were firm beyond anything I'd expe-

rienced before. And when I stroked my nipples, my groin enlarged and I found myself rolling and twisting in bed in my nightie.

I thrashed about on the bed, knowing that my aunt must be doing something to me. I stroked my derriere and it seemed that I had grown there as well. I seemed to have expanded and put on flesh in that area, perhaps what I had lost from my waist and stomach.

My aunt must have heard me thrashing about because she was suddenly beside me in bed. "Mandane," she said and gave me a sweet-smelling draught in a long stemmed wine glass.

I smelled nothing inimical in it so I downed it after an initial hesitation.

"It soothes men's urges," my aunt said to me. "I sense that you need it tonight."

She sat at the end of my bed, looking down on my rumpled bedclothes. "It's a pity that I cannot spell Maris to warm your bed for you," my aunt said, her face bare of makeup. She seemed older and more like a hag than she did when she was made-up and her hair was dyed and styled.

The passion in my groin seemed to subside and finally I became numb. It was both a relief and a regret that something had passed; I was feeling more weary than anything else.

"The Watch Commander is here and he is quite satisfied that I had nothing to do with fomenting a riot that unfortunately led to the deaths of a great witch and an even greater Lord," my aunt said slowly, stroking my trembling arm and smiling sweetly at me.

"You defended her reputation," I said, unable to keep the sarcasm from my lilting, feminine voice. "But

you left her defenceless. You said you would take a subtle revenge."

"She deserved that," said my aunt stiffly, looking down at me, watching the passage of the drug through me, I was sure. "Sometimes, the most straightforward of attacks is the most subtle." Orissiana touched my nightie and smiled. "This is very becoming," she said of the light blue silk. "Your husband would find you darling in it but he will never see it because by that time, you will have new, finer, more tantalizing nighties than this old thing."

"I-I can't betray the Queen," I told my aunt, finding myself reluctant to mention what was happening on my chest.

"That little scamp?" asked my aunt. "Where do you think she is tonight and who do you think is warming her bed for her?"

I didn't answer. I didn't want to enter into any conversation with my aunt but I didn't know how to ask what she was doing to me. I didn't have to answer as my aunt said the things that were on my mind.

"You've found that you no longer need pads at your hips," said my aunt, "and you know that I am to blame entirely for such changes in you."

"It's not just my hips," I told her. She inched up the bed and took my hands as I tried to fight her off.

Aunt Rissa eased down the neckline of my nightie and checked me out thoroughly. "Oh yes," a female voice said breathlessly and it took me a moment to realize that the voice was mine. "What is it that you are doing to me? My mother would never have approved this, Aunt Rissa. She wouldn't have wanted me to be changed into a girl."

“Don’t be silly, Sherrene,” said my aunt then. “No one has ever done that and likely no one ever will. But your mother had an idea that we could. Yes, it was all her idea. Mithera and some other silly boys have shown us that your mother’s speculations were right. We had to catch you at puberty, just as you were about to become a man. The ganasate prevents you’re becoming a man.

“But you Seafarers,” Aunt Rissa mocked me. I tried to block my ears to all the lies she was telling me about my mother. I knew that she would never do this to me, never. “You mature so late. Yes, you’ve noticed the changes in you. I couldn’t have done that in the short time you’ve been with me. Your mother started you out on ganasate in the nightly draught she brought you. I’ve had to be more constrained because as you’re becoming more like a woman, sensitive to every aroma in the air or dissolved in water.”

The grief that I had tried to dam away at my mother’s death welled up inside me. I couldn’t help it. I began to cry and my aunt consoled me. She was using me like she used the two drudges, I knew, but I couldn’t help it. I clung to her and she stroked my hair and my bare arms, hugging me as if I was a little girl. I wished that I had a knife just then. My aunt examined my chest, pushing the little mounds there together.

My aunt was lying, I was sure of that, but one thing I knew was true. My mother had not let me cut my hair as fashions in boys’ hair changed. She liked me to look like my father, she told me, giving me string to tie my hair back when it threatened my eyes. I had noticed that the sleeping draught she gave me had tasted different from when I was younger. I had told her about it, fearing that the milk was being spoiled. She kissed

me and told me how clever I was to sense her preservative in my drink. It was such a pity, she said, that a clever boy like me could not be a witch.

## VIII. A WITCH'S TREASON

I don't know how I slept but I did. I was awakened late in the morning by a great clamor in and around my room.

My aunt opened my door and checked me; I stirred before I could think to play dumb. Maris came in with the familiar draught for my throat and suddenly I knew how my aunt must be getting the drug she had called ganasate into me.

I sat up in my nightie, my braided hair almost down to the growing mounds on my chest.

"Sherrene," said my aunt, standing in the doorway. She watched me pushing down my nightie as I saw her looking at me. There was amusement in her voice as I sipped on the familiar cordial. I couldn't tell if it was drugged with anything other than the throat-clasper. If there was a distinctive taste to ganasate, I couldn't tell it at all. "Come to my room, Sherrene," said my aunt with a warm smile. "This is something you should see."

I swallowed the draught and got out of bed, the light nightie falling gently about my smooth, hairless body. Shivering, I put a light robe about me and followed as my aunt beckoned me.

At first, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. A man with a banner seemed to be riding across the sky in front of me. I blinked and gasped in astonishment as I watched, then I realized that the man was sitting in a

lookout and the voluminous clouds about him were not clouds but sails.

I was watching the arrival of an enormous Seafarer ship under full sail into the port at Hillaire. It was an imposing sight. Where could they find trees so tall to make such masts?

Algoth came behind me and began to unbraid my hair as I stood beside my aunt. The breeze that was driving the massive ship reached us and my hair began to blow across my face. I felt the wind on my legs, whipping up my nightie.

"Smile and wave, Sherrene," my aunt said to me.

Confused, I looked at her. She pointed to the second tall mast where several men were hauling in sails, like squirrels clambering in blossom trees. One, however, was seated in a cross frame and was pointing something at us. His arm stretched above his head as he waved.

"That's a spyglass he has," said my aunt. "Ismar is really remiss in not having one available for his guests. We could have as close a look at Seafarers as they are having of us, or, I should say the close look they are having at my darling niece. Your legs are definitely more shapely than when we first converted you, my dear."

I hated my aunt. I hated her snide comments and there was nothing I could do about it. I went to my bath, my nipples as hard and as engorged as they had ever been. Maris bathed me, bound me, scented me and clothed me and said not a word to me though it was clear to me that my nipples rested on softer, thicker tissue than they had when I had first put on my breast bands.

Since I was now acknowledged as a woman, I could have gone out with my maid. I was determined to do so when my aunt left and joined the other Counts and Ladies in the conclave they were having. But then I thought of Abriss. I thought of my aunt's reputation, Orissiana the Terrible. And I was her niece.

No, I wasn't, I suddenly realized. I was her nephew. Aunt Rissa was following some terrible program with me, one in which I was clearly to be a girl. I wanted to thwart her plans. I wanted to avenge myself on her for all the lies she had said about my mother. I wanted to know how to defend myself if a mob came upon me. I knew that my aunt carried packets in the coats she wore everywhere, almost like an armored uniform, while she was out.

My coat had no pockets. It was narrow at my waist and flowed down to my feet. I looked like a rich, fashionable girl and I was scented and made-up like one. With trembling fingers, I went through my aunt's cupboards in her bedroom after she had left. I found vials of collane and tellall, and wonder of wonders, a dark powder that my mother always kept out of the light. She called it 'swamp gas' though it was a powder.

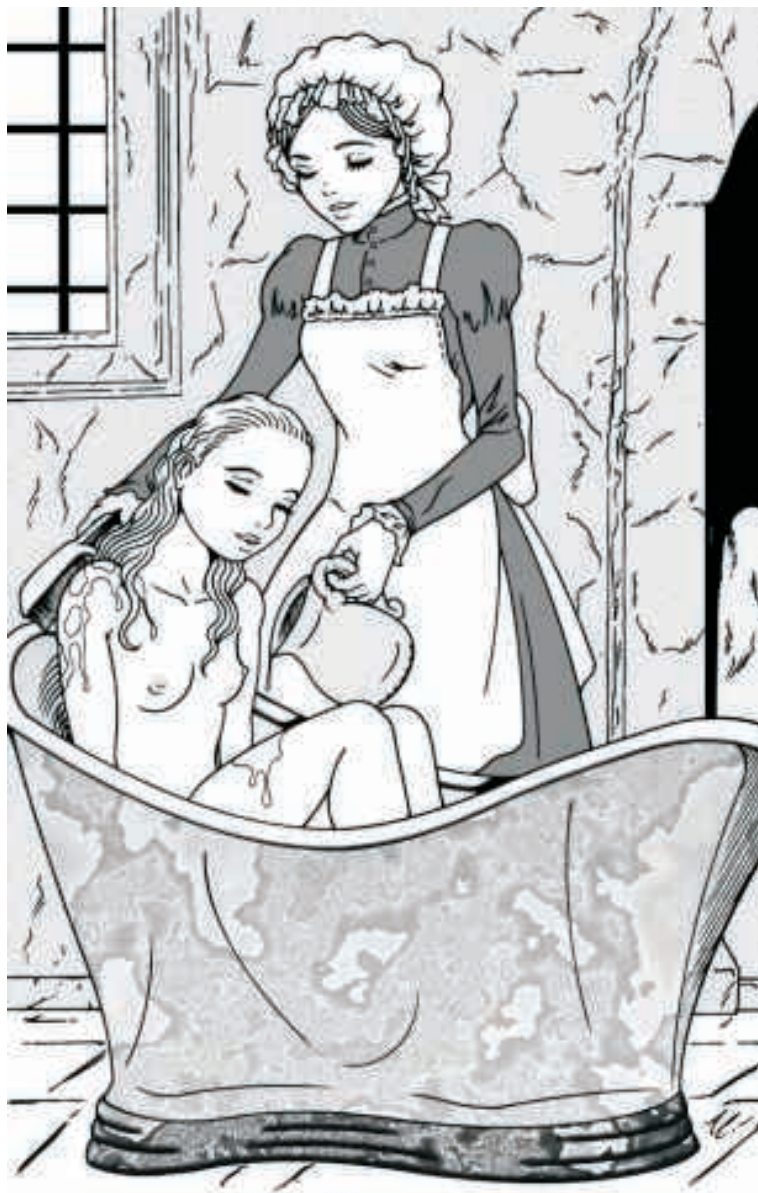
"Expose it to sunlight," my mother had told me, "and you would certainly demolish us and this whole street."

I had laughed at that. The street on which we lived in Doxford needed to be blown apart, I said, and my mother had laughingly agreed with me even as she stored the tiny envelope of paper in which she had kept the small amount of the powder.

My aunt had two vials and I took them both. If a mob attacked me as it had Abriss, I vowed I would not shame my mother's memory by being pilloried for



what I was, a boy in a girl's dress. No, I would trust what my mother had said. I would expose the vials, open them and take us all to the Grey Fields to be judged by the gods, if they indeed existed.



Just as my aunt had predicted, she was barely gone when a messenger and a royal carriage appeared on the Street of Apothecaries. I was called to the palace to wait on the Queen while the contentious conclave met in the same Great Hall where I had been the belle of Lady Sherrene's Ball.

Algoth had pinned my hair back leaving my neck and ears clear to be seen like my long, thin chain-like earrings. A true girl could not have dressed more femininely than me. My hair was curled and set back in a soft net behind my head. It had been parted at the front, in a boyish style, pinned close to my head so that the dark kohl about my eyes emphasized how blue they were, how thick and feminine my eyelashes were, how clear and smooth was my skin, how pink and full my lips were.

I knew why I had been made so girlish, why I wore such a thin dress that hugged the contours of my body beneath my red, womanly coat. Even my shoes were elegant and matched my stockings, though no one would see that. Nor would they see my pretty, red silk panties, would they, a gift from someone at my Announcing, my aunt had said. I had stupidly not thought to ask her who would send me panties on the day I was made into a woman.

Maris accompanied me to the palace, her attention elsewhere as it always was. A tall, thin man, in black robes and black goatee beard awaited me at the top of the steps at the entrance to which I was brought. He was pockmarked and observed me silently as I raised my skirts with my feminized hands, and tippy-toed up the steps towards him.

"My name is Bredden," he said in a deep, bass voice. "Before anyone can be admitted into Their Maj-

esties' presence, I must make sure that it is safe for them to meet with you."

I wanted to giggle and tell him that I had already romped almost nude with the Queen of Baracts and had done nothing to her. I said nothing and lifted my skirts again to rustle after the alchemist. I followed him into a private room into which he invited me alone, closing the doors on the grim men who seemed to inhabit this part of the palace. Maris stood with them as silent and vacant as ever.

I could not stop Bredden looking into my purse. "Collasolane?" he enquired, raising the vials of swamp gas then very carefully placing them back into my purse.

I had not heard it called by such a name. "After the attack on Lady Abriss," I said, giving her a rank that I knew she had not yet attained, "it seemed wise to me to be prepared to defend myself. I had no time to consult with Lady Orissiana when the summons to the Queen's chambers reached me."

I was fascinated by the strange aroma the alchemist gave off. It was like honeybane, the controlling agent, and yet it wasn't. I recalled how my aunt had used her voice to control me at times. I lowered my voice as the alchemist checked the collane I had brought, opening the vial and sniffing at it. What a silly way to behave. I recalled what my aunt had said about confusing concoctions by being overpowered by strong smells. For a short time at least, Bredden would be able to smell nothing but collane.

I took the handkerchief from my purse; Bredden took it from me and sniffed it. I held my breath but he said nothing, merely passing it to me so that I could put it in my sleeve where it served as a pomander.

"You hardly have need of that," said Bredden, slipping my nail file, sharp enough to be a stabbing instrument, into his pocket.

"There are odors and odors," I told him. "My aunt has taught me to cover myself at anything strange I have never sensed before."

"Most wise," said Bredden, leaving my purse on his desk, before taking me by the arm and escorting me out through a back door and into the castle part of the royal residence.

My high heels clicked as I was walked through narrow stone passages to an unmarked door and into a luxuriously carpeted and furnished room where the King of the Baracts sat a writing desk, at work on some parchment.

"She has your seal attached to her?" rumbled the King in a deep voice, the equal of his alchemist's.

"Yes, your majesty," said Bredden, looking at me squint-eyed as he departed.

"My Queen has withdrawn for a little time," said King Tatheren to me then, while I stood in front of him, trying to control my frantic thoughts. "She was suddenly taken unwell. Something she ate or some such thing. It was too late to send you back, Lady Sherrene Perisord, but my wife wanted me to give you a private interview anyway. She believes that one day you might be a true witch."

King Tatheren was one of the oldest men I had ever seen. He must have been several years past fifty, his hair streaked with white and grey. He had been shaved most cleanly that day but the beard beneath his skin showed. It gave his features a grey, faded appearance

but there was nothing faded about the dark blue eyes that studied me.

On the Street of Apothecaries, I had decided that I wouldn't be scared, no matter what the King of the Baracts did to me. I would remain calm. It had been easy to think that until I reached this room and looked at the man studying me, a girl of sixteen or so, as he must have thought.

Trembling, I curtsied to the King and he smiled at me. This old man smiled at me while I tried to think of something coquettish to say to him.

"Your, Your Majesty," I said in my squeakiest girl's voice. "You do me too much honor."

Tatheren smiled again at me. He reached back to the table he had been working on and took down a wineglass, filling it in part before handing it to me. He took a partly filled glass and brought it to his own lips.

"The belle of Lady Sherrene's ball," the King toasted me.

I brought the glass nervously to my lips. Honeybane filled my nostrils and something more, something wilder, something barely concealing its presence behind the honeybane, another controlling agent of some kind.

"I-I don't drink strong wine, Your Majesty," I said nervously.

The King smiled at me. "This is not strong. Try it, my dear." He smiled genially. "Your King commands it. I intend to loosen my tongue and it is only fair that you should do the same. And I am half a bottle ahead of you."

I had no choice but to sip at the adulterated wine. My head spun as I applied the antidote to honeybane from the little handkerchief with which I patted my fevered lips.

"There. Isn't that delicious?" asked the lecherous King of the Baracts, watching me carefully. I had the suspicion that whatever the second drug was it was meant to be much more fast-acting than the first.

"Yes, Your Majesty," I murmured nervously. My King stood up in front of me and put his hand out to me. I found my hand jerking up quickly to take his.

"Before we go to the bedroom," the King rumbled, looking down into my face. I roiled inside as three drugs fought for the control of my senses, "there is something I wanted to do last night but decorum prevented me. And I must do it before you become too insensate."

And with that, my King, the Lord of the Clans and Estates of the Baract Nation, put his arms about my waist, drawing me to him as he began to kiss my soft, full, yearning lips. Almost immediately, his tongue flickered over my lips and I parted them in a fervor for him. It was a fervor that encompassed me like a flood. I knew, in one of the few rational thoughts I had, that it was not a natural fervor.

The King kissed me but I was already responding to him, flinging my arms about his neck, pressing my body against him, welcoming his hands caressing my rounded derriere. A surge of desire rushed through me, overcoming every sensation I told myself I would resist.

"My darling girl," mumbled the King. I kissed him as furiously as he kissed me, wanting him in ways I

had sworn I would never degrade myself into doing with a man.

I was only vaguely aware of the war going on inside me. The honeybane was overwhelming but it was the desire drug that was coursing through me, unchecked. It should have been intended for females only, I thought, and have little effect on me. The King buried his tongue in my mouth but that wasn't what I was experiencing at all. I was overwhelmed by strange, thrilling emotions that I had to have requited. And my feelings required me to sate myself with a man, *any* man.

I clung to the King and lifted my legs up about him as I frantically kissed his face. I could feel him smiling as I kissed his shaven face and warm, harsh lips. I wanted him to bury himself in me even as part of me was telling me that I was being stupid. I wasn't a girl but I thrust that thought aside. The King stumbled so I had to cross my legs behind him and let him carry me through the curtained doorway to his bedroom and the magnificent, canopied bed beyond.

Tatheren deposited me on the bed and pushed my legs apart as he climbed up on me. I fumbled feverishly with the drawstring of his trousers as my fingers closed about his manhood. At least I remembered to run my little handkerchief over his arm as he lay on top of me. I put his arms upon my breasts and he began to kiss me as eagerly as I was kissing him.

His hands caressed my skirts, lifting them. I felt his manhood on my thighs as pleasure coursed through me and I held him to me, quite willing to have him force his way into me.

"Oh, damnation on that Bredden!" the King said thickly. Pulling away the top of my dress, he exposed

my breast bands and they were broken in his urgency. He was already coming on me, flooding all over my dress and panties. I wriggled beneath him, his mouth and tongue caressing my alert nipples.

"Damnation!" Tatheren said again as he kissed and hugged me. I clung to him and realized as I got all wet what he was doing to me.

"My, my lord," I stammered.

Tatheren lifted his head and was all apologies. I wiggled beneath him, his hands caressing my rear as I tried to keep him loving me. He tried, kissing me and stroking me. I trembled anew and tried to guide him to my breasts again.

Almost as soon as he was come, however, Tatheren went all flaccid and partly sat up over me. His face was turning a violent red and his eyes seemed to pop out of his head.

"Your Majesty," I gasped up into his face, wanting him to go on loving me and holding me even if his passion was spent.

The King suddenly twisted, seizing my arm, scattering my handkerchief out of my sleeve and onto the bed. "Treachery," was the last word the King ever said. He slid to one side of me, his trousers about his ankles, his manhood exposed, while I tried to hold on to him, wanting him to keep on making love to me.

I couldn't hold him. Tatheren slipped to the floor, staring at me, as he died. The door to the bedroom opened and I heard Larussa's voice saying firmly, "Yes, of course my husband will want to see the Lord of the Seafarers. He is only here resting this afternoon after the vicissitudes ..." Her voice faltered as her head turned and she saw me in her husband's bed.



"Sherrene!" Larussa screamed in a shriek that would have woken the dead. "You strumpet! You trollop! You gutter slut! Oh, my husband! What have you done to my husband?"

I could scarcely answer her as my mind was in such confusion. "N-Nothing," I stammered, trying to pull on Tatheren's arm.

"What have you done to my husband?" screamed the Queen and suddenly men were pouring into the room. "Oh, Sherrene, how could you do this to me? To my kindly, gentle husband. And what is that all over your dress? Oh, you whore of a witch! You've seduced my husband. Oh Tethry, Tethry, what has this witch done to you?"

A tall, dark-haired man came hurtling past the men-at-arms and knelt down beside the King as Larussa began screaming and tearing at her hair. She had ringlets like mine and a part of my mind, a clearer thinking, wondered how she had got her hair into such wonderful ringlets.

Bredden was the man and when he stood, his face was pale with shock. "The King is dead!" he said, staring at me.

"She killed the King?" shrieked Larussa. Her hand came up and quavered as she pointed at me. "She killed the King, my husband," she screamed.

"No, I-I didn't," I tried to say. But I had little chance to say more; two of the men who had come into the room charged across to me, seized my hands and hauled me off the bed.

"Strumpet!" screamed the enraged Queen as the men held me. She charged at me and slapped me viciously across the face. "Treacherous harlot!" she

screamed, slapping at me until Bredden and another man pulled her off me.

The screams and taunts of the Queen followed me as I was marched out of the bedroom and down the hallways of the castle, past startled servants and down a narrow flight of stairs into what was clearly a dungeon.

"She's a witch," said one of the soldiers as they hauled me into a cell.

"Right," said the other. I was manacled to the wall, my hands awkwardly and painfully pinioned above my head.

"I didn't..." I began to say but a heavy fist smashed into my face and jolted me out of the feverish state I was in. I became aware that my breasts were exposed and that they were aroused. My skirts had a huge stain over them, the King's last emission, while parts of my dress were torn.

"A little something from the Queen," sneered the soldier as I felt blood run down over my face.

"What do they do to treasonous witches in these parts?" one man-at-arms said to the other. They left me and the turnkey locked me in the cell.

"The executioner has a turn with them," said the other, smacking his lips. "A good tormenter can put the pokers in her and have her squealing for an hour and begging to die."

I almost fainted then at the shock that suddenly overwhelmed me. It came to me in a rush what I was, what I had done, and how I had been betrayed.

## IX. A WITCH'S PUNISHMENT

I languished in that cell for days. The turnkey came in and fed me a cup of water on occasion. I thought that he was not talking to me on orders until after the third cup he opened his mouth and showed me that he had no tongue.

"My aunt!" I pleaded with him. "This is all a mistake."

The shaven-headed man just looked at me sadly and left me until the next time to come and water me. He brought me a bucket on which he forced me to sit to do what I had to on occasion. He undid one arm, what a phenomenal release it was, then the other, and so allowed me to remove my panties beneath my thin skirts and do my ablutions. In that way, I preserved my dubious status as a female. I saw him looking at me and wondered if I was being foolish to be so delicate, so feminine in front of him. I expected him to come in and take me as a woman. I was on the edge of terror all the time, but he never did come near to me.

I was allowed no water to scrub myself. I had no companion. It darkened at the window in the jail door and that was how I was able to track the days. In my manacles, I slumped as tiredness took me. At times I thought my arms would break right off. The Queen came to see me on the fourth day.

"You traitorous whore," Larussa said to me, her tone even. "Here you sit in your filth like the harlot you are, and here you will stay until you waste away."

"Lara," I pleaded with her. "It wasn't the way you think it was."

"Tatheren was my husband," the Queen said to me. The turnkey hovered near, but I could sense that there were other women and men outside the door come to look upon my misery and listen to her accuse me. "You could have had any man in the Kingdom, Sherrene, any man. With your witchery, you could have ensorcelled any man you chose. Why did you choose to bewitch my husband? I thought we were friends."

I tried to explain to her but she wouldn't listen to me.

"You wanted a man inside you!" Lara sneered at me bitterly. "I see the remains of how you were dressed, how you have drawn your breasts up tightly to entice a man to favor you. Did you enjoy his hands upon you, Sherrene, under your skirt and about your thighs? Did your lust for my husband make you into a woman? Oh, I forgot! This wasn't the first man who has topped you, is it? There was the wonderful Cory! And to think that I believed your story that he only touched your panties and didn't enter them!"

"That was true!" I cried. I had begun my explanation that I had been called to the palace to see the Queen when Lara contemptuously swept out of the cell. I was left alone in abject, frightened misery for two more days.

I expected that my aunt would come but it was Bredden, the King's alchemist, in black and silver robes who arrived next to see me. I quivered as he stood over me, examining me in my dress, even the torn places where he could see my tattered, female undergarments. He ordered the turnkey to bring me gruel from the turnkey's own meal. The startled man looked at me in dismay as I forced myself to eat his supper while the alchemist looked on.

"It is to be an execution. The Counts demand it," Bredden said in his deep rumble. "Your execution is set for ten days hence." He shook his head. "No one will believe that you enticed a King to bed without witchery if they see you like this, your dress so besmirched, your hair in such tangles, being marched to your funeral pyre. Of course, when your figure is exposed to the crowd, well, they will want to see your nakedness. It is a tradition, Milady. I think, though, that I shall have to recommend to the new King that you be cleaned and properly attired as a Lady."

"I didn't kill King Tatheren," I said hoarsely, thinking of the men or women who came to clean and dress me and what they would find. I shuddered as I thought of the laughter and scorn that would be directed at me as I went to my death as some effeminate, perverted male. Without my cordial each day, my voice was beginning to change so perhaps that discovery was not so far away as I thought.

"This says differently," said the alchemist, taking out my dainty handkerchief. It took me a moment to realize he was talking about whether or not I had killed the King. "Do you know what it was that you gave the King to bring on his convenient heart attack?"

I shook my head. My curls weren't really curls any more. My hair must be matted in filth. "Dorospell," Bredden said briefly. "A Seafarer poison. And you are a Seafarer, are you not, my Lady? And a Seafarer ship is in port to try to negotiate a trade treaty before we build a war fleet and clear the Black Sea of their ships."

"I'm no Lady," I said faintly, thinking of the lies my aunt had told me about Tatheren and the handkerchief. It was supposed to protect me by making him come so quickly that he would never be able to expose me. I

was supposed to go along with him, I thought, wondering why I had continued with my aunt's plan to fool the old King that I was a woman. I should have known that that wouldn't be all of it.

Now, perhaps because I was so weak, I could smell the metallic taint in the handkerchief, as well as the lovebane. I should have thrown it away. But then Tatheren would have controlled me and made me do for him all the things that a woman does for a man. I almost wept in despair at the thoughts of what he would have made me do for him.

My aunt had let me know in great detail what those services would be. I wanted to weep as I thought what an idiot I had been in listening to my aunt and believing I would be able to control a King like Tatheren. But this alchemist was looking at me, and not unkindly, so I tried to contain myself.

"You got by me with the handkerchief," said Bredden. He watched me squirm on the end of my chains, trying to keep the dress about my legs to preserve my femininity even though it was all a charade now. One hem seemed stuck to my panties. With a toe, he released it, his mouth curving with distaste.

I told him about the trick with collane. I was going to die. There was no point holding anything back. I thought of trying to beg some killing poison from him.

"The Queen has a new Witch," said Bredden calmly, suddenly changing the subject. "The Queen says I failed her. She wants a woman to advise her now. She has forgiven Lady Orissiana for bringing you to the capital. Your aunt did not know of your desire to become the next Queen. It is a pity that you confided your plot to one of your maids."

I gaped at the man before me.

"No, I didn't think so," the alchemist said. He moved close to me and squatted on the floor, staring at the dirt on me, taking in how awful I must have smelled. He used a pomander to prevent my odor from overcoming him. "Even here, in all this filth and squalor," Bredden murmured, "I can still see the loveliness that Tatheren saw in you. He had you for a short time, didn't he? Did he actually manage to make love to you? He seemed to cover you with a month's worth of male essence. Your pretty dress is still quite ruined by his male attentions, isn't it?"

I shook my head, quivering at the look in his eyes. He reached forward and patted my bare leg and I shuddered. Then he leaned over me as I tried to avert my face, and kissed me. I stopped wriggling as I felt the little packet he was pushing into my opened mouth.

I felt his kiss, however, and it was more than just gifting me with some essence. I felt the ardor there and my insides churned as Bredden released his kiss. His hand caressed my thigh and I shivered with suppressed, thrilling, emotions passing through me. The turnkey objected with a grunt to his touching me. Bredden stood, waving him away irritably, but not before another little package slid beneath my skirt, out of sight of the turnkey.

"The Seafarer Lord is still here in his great ship," said Bredden as he paused in the doorway. "He leaves in two days whether King Melleren and he have reached a new trade agreement or not."

When I was finally alone, I used my feet to get the package from my mouth. I thought it would be a concoction that would kill me. Well, decollane would have

done that, had I ingested it. As it was, with saliva, of which I almost didn't have enough, it could become an acidic solution strong enough to cut through my rusted manacles. I tried it over the rest of the night. I was sure it wasn't working as it acted with agonizing slowness. Morning was breaking when my tugging at the manacles was finally rewarded. I was free in my cell. Free to go through agonies as I tottered to my feet at last.

A puffball of merenthe from the package left on the floor and the turnkey slept. It nearly caught me as well but I used the sleeve of my dress as a mask. But my head swam all the same and my escape attempt nearly ended there. The wood of the door about the lock was no match for the few drops of decollane I put about the lock. It worked so much more quickly on decaying wood. But I still had to kick my way out of the cell, finally splintering the suddenly weakened wood about the door lock.

The turnkey had bread and ale. It was fantastic to taste real food. It left me as light-headed as the essences the alchemist had given me which lingered in my taste buds. I had no looking glass to tell me what a sight I must be in my dirty dress. It had been pink but now I could not tell its color. I smoothed it down anyway, feeling the breast bands on my chest. Perturbed, I felt the mounds on my chest. They must have doubled in size. King Tatheren would have loved to nibble on them now, I thought crazily.

I knew that my body odor would give me away if I went down the passageway and was met by anyone. A candlelight search of the package Bredden had left me, however, revealed a collane powder and musin, used to cover the smell of decomposing bodies by cemetery workers. Bredden had clearly come to my dungeon



prepared to allow me to release myself. I didn't know why he would do that but I didn't care. I gathered the tatters of my petticoats in my hands and took off down the passageway.

I moved towards the stairway and a strange but not unpleasant odor came to me from the door. I had sensed that on Bredden's clothing. A touch of collane and the odor dissipated. I did that to all of the marks I met which led me on a circuitous route along passageways, just a smudge of collane eating away the set markings. At least, no other witch following me would know I was following the trail the alchemist had marked for me.

I went through several doors and up several flights of stairs, my heightened senses finding the next marked doorway and the next. In that fashion, I was led through the castle into the servants' quarters. Another puffball of merenthe took care of a drudge and her lover in an alcove on a night escapade. Now I had a cap, a shawl, a new dress and her new slippers as I slipped out of the servants' door and into the shadows of the castle's innermost wards.

I had not thought at all of taking the clothes of the drudge's male companion. I should have done that, I realized, as I swished along the marked passageways in my wonderful new dress and heeled shoes that made a faint clicking as I sped along the empty hallways.

I looked out once from an arrow slit in the wall and down on the inner ward of the castle. I had to shudder as, in the moonlight, I could make out a great pile of wood being assembled for a bone-fire in the center of the courtyard. I could guess who that conflagration was intended for.

There were guards and it didn't surprise me at all to find many fast asleep at their posts. There was a distinct odor of merenthe and that other, stranger odor I was following. And so I was led back to the apartments of the King. A maid slept outside the door. A maid I knew as Algoth.

I went quietly past her sleeping form and into the room. The curtain to the bedroom was drawn back so that the bed and its occupants were visible. Bredden, I thought grimly, wanted me to see this. Holding my skirts out from me so that they would make little noise, I moved towards the far door and the passageway that led to Bredden's office.

But I had to look. There where the King had died, a new couple had taken possession of the bed. The Queen shifted restlessly, her arm across my aunt's bosom. My aunt moved and I thought that she must see me at the crack in the door. I held my breath as I expected her to sit up at any moment. But all she did was lean over Larussa and gently kiss her shoulder.

I edged out past the curtains into the office where Tatheren had first kissed me and where I had climbed over him in such ecstasy. My new skirts fluttered about my bare legs and set my nerves on edge. I was ashamed of myself for listening to my aunt and her description of the fate I faced if I did not made love to the King as a woman. She must have be-spelled me. I wasn't so naturally stupid as I seemed to have been. Yet here I was, dressed entirely as a woman, still thinking foolish womanly thoughts, still moving my hips like a woman as I swished down the inner hallway.

I followed the passageway out of the dead King's chambers down the narrow stone passageways that I had first followed with Bredden. His aroma was there

all along the passageway and soon I was at the entrance where I had arrived by carriage.

I thought I was lost when a hand closed on my shoulder. But the sentry stepping from an alcove bent over me and began to kiss me, his hands pawing at my thin body.

“And who are ye?” the man asked me as he pressed me against a wall. His hands caressed my legs. I gasped and breathed rapidly as I felt a strange desire rising inside me.

“Maris,” I murmured and it seemed not to bother him. I was far too weak to try to overcome the man. “I should have gone out the postern gate but the sergeant wouldn’t let me go.”

“The big man with a scar,” the sentry asked me and I sensed the trap in his words.

“No,” I murmured, forcing myself to stroke his unshaven whiskers, kissing his scabbed lips. “The other one.” I paused. “At least, he said he was a sergeant.”

The sentry’s mouth eased into a smile. “This is no time to be leaving,” he whispered to me.

“No,” I agreed. “Do you have a room where I can nap till the gate opens? I don’t want to go back to the sergeant. He isn’t very nice, not as nice as you are.”

I trembled inside as I tried to flirt with such a man, forcing myself to stroke his rough arm with my smooth hand. It worked. Dakkard hid me in a store room, plying me with kisses as my skin crawled. I kept myself under control, kissing him lightly back as he threatened to bruise me everywhere with his passion. But he soon had to go back to his patrol.

When he left, I followed him as daintily as I could and moved to another storeroom nearby, out of the castle itself but nearly at the postern gate, among a collection of baskets, ropes and leathers. Soon I heard Dakkard come by again, hissing eagerly for Maris to attend him. I snuggled down, baskets covering me, hiding as best as I could and he didn't find me.

The castle finally stirred as morning light seeped through the dirty, cloth-covered window of my hiding place. As I had hoped, the postern gates opened and drudges and other servants came up from the capital and into the castle to work. I watched from a half-open door; when I saw some maids heading out with scraps for the beggars and for planting in the onion fields, I grabbed a basket and followed them. The guards on the gate were bleary-eyed. I made it worse for them by releasing my last phial of merenthe which had some of them sleeping, clutching their short pikes in their hands.

Dawn had not broken completely when I joined the sleepy drudges going about their assigned tasks just outside the castle walls. No one challenged me as I headed into the city, my head bowed. No one shouted, "Stop that boy." I tried to walk as I had learned to from my aunt and my subterfuge seemed to work. I must have looked like a woman from the rear.

## **X. A WITCH'S ESCAPE**

I took one of the precious coins Bredden had thoughtfully put into my pack and spent it in a bath-house close to the docks. I gave extra to the old woman for sweet soap and had the most wonderful bath of my life. Up to the point where I cleansed my breasts. Yes, I

would call what I had on my chest, breasts, and I didn't understand how that could be. I wasn't taking any drugs that I knew about and yet I was growing, becoming more womanly by the day.

I was drying my hair with the female clothing I had stolen in the night all about me, when trumpets from the castle announced that a prisoner had escaped. I had been thinking of stealing male attire but I didn't have a chance as people ran from the bathhouse to see what was going on. It would have been useless anyway with the way my body now seemed to curve over my chest.

I wanted to start weeping again in frustration at what had been done to me, that I had allowed to be done, but I had to think how to escape. I carefully stowed my bound manhood in my panties, flared out my dress and my hair and edged after the stragglers. The bathhouse attendant frowned after me as I left.

I was in the crowd that lined Castle Street as the Queen went by in her carriage. I saw her smile as she leaned forward and touched my aunt who was unsmiling, seemingly out of sorts. I sensed the annovare in the air being scattered from the coaches that went by us and knew then why everyone was smiling.

I took a deep breath of the mood-lightening powder and I felt well too, waving to the Queen's coach like everyone else as she passed by in a splendid procession headed to the Street of Apothecaries. My cap concealed my damp hair and I turned away as my new skirts swayed against me. I stumbled right into the arms of the sentry who had let me past him the night before.

"You clean up really pretty," Dakkard growled at me. I saw the comprehension dawning in his face of who I must be. I had eaten a crust with warm milk at the bathhouse as well as secreting about me all the con-

coctions Bredden passed to me. There was something like lovebane, something like whatever it was that the King had succeeded in infecting me with, in the packet I had retrieved from the cell floor.

Dakkard reached for me as I broke a packet in my pocket. Lifting my fingers, I blew the contents into his face. The look on his face as he realized that he had been be-spelled was terrible. I hadn't done that before, taken complete control of another person and it was a terrible power to have. I put my arms about his neck and held him as the effects of the powder I had flung at him began to take effect right away.

"No," he cried at me as people turned to look at us. "Get away from me, you witch."

"Oh, darling," I squeaked as girlishly as I could, willing myself to cry. Tears came easily. "After such a night as we had, now you don't want to pay me."

Around me, there were smiles then as I stood there, lowering my hands to my hips. Dakkard struggled to walk away from me.

I followed the aroma of breakfast. Dakkard couldn't help himself; he followed after me, as the compulsion was on him. There were more smiles as I pulled my shawl about me and headed towards the enticing smell of food being cooked.

Dakkard said something like he was arresting me. I gave him a big smile and took his arm, cuddling to him. "Oh, darling," I said hoarsely. "If only you hadn't drunk so much when you and the other men were on sentry duty."

I don't think anyone paid us any heed as I led Dakkard, completely under my control, into a breakfast room. I found his money purse and let him pay for our

meal. It was delicious. He didn't feel like eating, his mouth was agape and he just stared at me, so I finished his eggs for him.

Having fun at his expense soon palled, however, as I was faced with the problem of what to do with him. I had no idea how long Bredden's alchemies would persist. Finally, I took him to a little green space before an alehouse and had him sit under a tree. I had him lie down and told him to sleep. But that was beyond the scope of the drug. He did lie down and his eyes were shut, but I don't think he was asleep.

I really had no idea where to go; the Ismar house seemed out of the question. People were heading into the port area so I followed the crowd, finding a market in full bloom near to the piers where the great Seafarer ships were being held. Several men winked at me as I passed them. I tried to walk as much like a girl as I could. One man even pinched me and his companions guffawed.

"Pretty girl," the man said to me.

"Come on, Allet," one of his friends called. "She's a two or three silver girl from Nerren's. She's beyond your poke."

The man smiled at me broadly, however, as I anxiously rubbed my fleshy rear, wishing I had one of my aunt's salves to take away the pain. I ducked away from him and went nervously into the market. Fascinated by the number of people milling around, I suddenly came upon groups of Seafarers, their hair gleaming golden, sauntering about the market.

I watched one group bartering with a Russet merchant over what appeared to be statuettes of dancing girls. They were all smiling. One turned and looked at

me, then frowned so I hastily moved on. At spice stalls, I used the little cash that I had from Dakkard, as well as from Master Bredden, to buy herbs that I knew contained the essences I wanted.

If only I could find a kitchen, I could soon have an array of potions and powders with which I could defend myself. I was thinking how my throat seemed to have improved. I sounded like myself as I dickered with the spice traders. They called me 'Miss' as if I was a ladies' maid, and had smiled at my blushes at the mannered way they had treated like a girl.

The arrival of soldiers scattered the crowds. I edged out of the general fuss going on as the soldiers seemed to be targeting the sailors from the big Seafarer ship. It was then that I saw the Royal carriage approaching. I knew who would be in that.

There was a tavern behind me; without thinking, I ducked in. I remembered how I was dressed and tried to get back outside but a golden-haired Seafarer stopped me.

"Shouldn't go out there, girl," the Seafarer said to me with a smile. "I know you shouldn't be in here with the likes of us but you were right to get off the street. Look at the way that bunch is treating the women out there."

I couldn't see much but other men came in from outside and they were seething at the way the soldiers were behaving toward young women on the streets.

"You sit right down here," said the Seafarer, making a place for me at a table of other Seafarers. Several of them had with knives in their hands, I noticed with alarm. "If the spittle comes in here, you'll say you are



my wife, buying," he looked into my basket, "spices for cooking on the long voyage home."

"You got the eye, Baro," said one of the Seafarers also seated at the table, a huge flagon of ale in front of him. "She's pretty enough to be a lass from Cunian Isle itself."

That made the four others about the table start to smile.

"I think they're coming house-to-house," called a young, blonde boy, his face reddened by days in the sun. He was stationed by an outer window, keeping up a continual stream of observations on what was happening outside. "Yes, they are. Oh, Baro, you ought to see this! They just threw that girl on the ground and ripped her clothes from her. Oh, the vendors aren't standing for that." He suddenly jumped away from the window and ran to the door. "Callo and the mid-riggers are joining in!" he shouted over his shoulder. The table where I sat erupted as one, the men almost jamming the doorway in their eagerness to get out.

I was left alone at a table loaded with flagons of ale. I headed to the back and the landlord leaned out of the kitchen alcove to stop me.

"They're attacking women out there," I sobbed to him, surprising myself with how easily I could produce tears. "I-I can't get out that way."

The landlord stepped out of a kitchen where older women were preparing tankards and plates of fish in spicy marinades. He opened a back door with a gentlemanly gesture and I was able to step daintily out into a back alley.

“Oh, Cled, don’t you go out there!” I heard a woman screaming at the landlord but he was bellowing for his men, whoever they were, to attend him.

I picked up my skirts again, hugged the shawl about my breasts. I scurried along the alley, away from the fighting, towards the piers, the only places where there wasn’t fighting.

I saw other people doing the same. “Get off the street, girl,” one woman said to me. “Can’t you see what the soldiers are doing and that the Queen is urging them on?”

I shook my head, hugging the shawl about me.

“They’re saying that witch who killed the King wasn’t a witch at all,” the woman gasped. “They say it was a warlock who could disguise himself as a girl. They’re debasing every woman of the town along the dock to find him. Hide yourself, girl, or you’ll be stripped for every man to see, at the Queen’s command.”

Fear gripped me then. I no longer could count on my female appearance to save me. I saw others running away from the markets and stopped. A soldier went running by me, whooping as he chased two terrified, squealing girls into a shanty house behind a warehouse structure.

I scurried forward, my skirts rustling on my smooth, bare legs; there was nowhere else to go but past the warehouse. There the buildings ended. There was just open space and the planks that led from the great ship beside the pier. I turned back; the soldier who had chased the young girls spotted me, shouted and began to run towards me.

I darted forward again. The ranks of Seafarers coming off the ship halted, looking at me as I ran towards

them. I pulled off the servant's cap, knowing that my golden hair would flow out. I dropped my shawl so that my breasts would show. I hoped that the Seafarers would see a woman, like one of their own, in distress.

"Help me!" I called as seductively as I could to the Seafarers and, to a man, they did.

I heard the yelp of the soldier chasing me as a sailor hit him with a short wooden club. Several more joined in, then more men-at-arms came round the warehouse. A huge fight began as the soldiers drew their swords.

I stood there, my hair loose and blowing all about me. "Miss!" said a voice urgently beside me. A boy, no older than me, was touching my arm. "Top says to get you safe aboard, Miss." He indicated the planks to the ship.

I had to lift my skirts as I was escorted onto the Seafarer ship. I smiled tremulously at the young man, feeling like a fraud as he led me quickly to shelter. I was escorted into an eating room of some sort, the deck moving slightly under my feet.

"Wait here, Miss," said the young man. As I watched from the unshuttered holes in the wall, the young man went running into the fight, braining a man-at-arms who was using the flat of his sword on a Seafarer choking a downed soldier.

I hugged my skirts to me as I watched the fighting all over the dock area. I turned as another girl was brought in, followed by a second, by bloodied seamen.

"Stay here, misses," said one of them. "You'll be safe here. If you like, we'll take you all with us down the coast. Soon as this ruckus is over, we'll be on our way. You ladies will all be as safe as can be, mark my words."

I clung to the other girls and tried to behave like a frightened kitten which was the way they were behaving. Then, it came to me, I had escaped. I had escaped my aunt at last. And, when this ship got under way, I would be a girl of this ship filled with many men. It was a frightening and, at the same time, an exhilarating thought. Me, a girl like me, trapped on a ship of men for some time. It was certainly better than a dungeon, I thought. I smiled as one of the girls offered me ribbons for my hair. Soon I looked as girlish as they did.

\*\*\*\*\*end of part one\*\*\*\*\*