



Reluctant Press presents:

Only Women Can Be Witches



A 'NEW WOMAN' E-BOOK

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ONLY WOMEN CAN BE WITCHES

by **Philippa Peters**

Concluding *Boys Can't Be Witches*, *The Captain's Seawife*, and *A Witch In Spite Of Himself*

XXXI. A WITCH'S SUBJUGATION

The townsfolk of Birchwood turned out in force to see the captured warlock. I must have looked a dreadful sight as I was paraded with my head hanging down from a dusty horse, clearly female in my dress and body shape. Another time they had applauded me as a witch. The officers riding with the Count of Torthard

used my rounded tush for target practice with their long whips, delighting in hearing me squeal as they stung me again and again.

The townspeople, whom I had once thought so polite and shy, cheered each of the whacks I received, even the occasional misses that ripped away parts of my dress, exposing my breast bands and my petticoats to public view.

“Didn’t know a man wore pretties like that,” taunted one man, running forward to lift my head by the hair and then to kiss me. What else could I do but spit back the saliva he’d left all over me. He slapped me then from side to side.

The Count of Torthard rode forward at last and intervened, using his horse to knock the man down. The tanner, I recognized his smell, was screaming at me, spitting at me in turn.

“Serves you right,” said the Count as we passed the seamstress’ shop where so many of my prettiest dresses had been made. I didn’t know if he was addressing me or the man he had knocked down with his horse.

Oh, if only I had had a little swamp gas vial about me and could reached it, I would have annihilated the town of Birchwood, the town where my aunt lived and reigned.

Torthard’s horse prevented me from seeing more. It didn’t stop the taunts of the crowd, however. My aunt and the Queen Regent had told the world that Lady Sherrene was a man, a warlock, not a witch. And yet I was paraded as a woman, my high heels still on my feet, my dress still clinging to me, my long hair still uncut.

One of the witches in the carriage ahead of us with the Queen had promised Count Torthard to cut off my golden hair. The Count had told me that when he had kissed and caressed me outside Terraire, letting me escape from her. Lady Renneth had said that she would shave my head like one of the men at arms walking so stolidly and silently beside us.

Something to look forward to, I thought grimly, forced to shriek again as one of the whips caught me right on my upper thighs, between my panties and the tatters of the stockings I was been wearing.

I was a man and men did not ride in carriages, proclaimed the Queen Regent. Nor, I gathered did they sleep inside buildings on beds. I was just cut loose each night when we stopped and flung to the ground to eat and drink from bowls like a dog.

Though the witches might snigger and jeer at me, at least I didn't have to put up with the taunts of the men. Only Count Torthard and his riders were not ensorcelled like the others, the notorious Grey Men. The Baract Kings would fling the Grey Men into battle without a care for them, knowing that the ensorcelled men would walk forward silently as instructed and fight everything in their path until their wounds bled out and stopped them or they were killed by some unlucky blow that evaded their grey-colored armor.

Going through Birchwood, I was spat at and jeered by the crowds. But they mustn't have believed what my aunt had told them about me because they called me whore and slut, strumpet and harlot, sow and bitch, all feminine insults.

"Is she a man or a woe-to-man!" screamed one wag as urchins ran beside my horse. One threw a stone and squealed even more loudly than me as a whip caught

his hand, pulling him forward almost under the hooves of the horse I was tied to.

“No hitting the horse,” the mounted soldier threatened with a snarling voice and brandished whip.

Several youngsters dropped stones and clods of earth then.

“Is she a man or a woman?” one child called after me.

You answered your own question, urchin, I thought, as my horse was pulled after the carriage. When it finally stopped, my bonds were unceremoniously cut. I was allowed to fall on my head in front of my aunt’s house.

Count Torthard jumped down from his saddle and cut the rope around my skirts and my legs. He lifted me to my feet, my hands still tied behind my back. I tried to see if there was anything left of the man who had said he wanted me as a woman the last time we had met.

My hair was so matted and dirty, however, that I couldn’t see through it at all. I felt his arm under mine as I was dragged into a house that had been so familiar to me a year ago when I had come here as a young man to deliver my dead mother’s dangerous potions to her sister-witch.

I hadn’t known that my mother was noble-born. I had thought the Lady part of her title, Lady Airene, was honorary and applied equally to all witches. I was wrong. My mother, murdered in our home in Terraire, had been noble-born like my aunt. My aunt ruled at Birchwood and the surrounding county because she was a Lady, the equal of a Count, in her own right.

My mother had never aspired to rule. She had always been some Count's witch. I hadn't known how rich she was. It had never occurred to me to visit the moneychanger's to find out what sort of money my mother had stored away.

I had been astonished to find out that my mother had always kept in touch with her sister and had told her all about me and my problem with Cory. Pretending to be a witch in our game, I had started to make love to Cory after he kissed me. I would have done it with him in any way that he wanted me, so in love was I with Cory at that time.

My aunt used that as a wedge to begin to change me right away. She began to change me into a girl. I still really don't know why with absolute certainty. Part of it had been to entice the King of the Land, Tatheren, to seduce me. He had had no chance to avoid his fate, I realized later; my aunt had access to very powerful concoctions.

Tatheren had taken me in my disguise as a girl celebrating her Sixteen into his bedroom to make love to me. My aunt and the Queen arranged it so that Tatheren died in the bedroom with me, trying to make love to me. I was accused of murdering him. I was imprisoned. I would have been burned to death but Tatheren's alchemist, Master Bredden, had set me free. He left a trail for me to follow through the castle at Hillaire that allowed me to see my aunt and the Queen in bed together.

The next step in my degradation was when I was hunted through the streets of Hillaire by men at arms who stopped and stripped women on the streets to find out if they were truly women. Luckily, I had fled across

the docks to a great Seafarer ship which gave me refuge.

I became a seawife to the captain. Since women were not allowed on great ships except as passengers, my duties were to be a woman to my husband, Anjaro.

I loved that the period of my life. I loved Anjaro as a woman loves a man. I had been a woman for Anjaro as he taught me to be. I still cried a little when I thought of how he betrayed me.

I was hurled into the reception room that I knew so well. It was in here that I had bespelled Count Mustay and where the Count of Torthard recognized that I was ensorcelled myself and so had avoided touching me at first. But later I felt Torthard's intense interest in me, his hand raising feelings in me that I had thought only Cory could. My interest in him sharpened as I felt a weird desire arising, something a lout like Mustay could not arouse in me.

A grim-faced Count Torthard lifted me to my feet in my aunt's antechamber. He wasn't afraid any more of touching me and falling in love with me, I noted. His strong hand pushed back my matted hair. There, standing in front of me, her hair as black as ever, her features as marked and dynamic as I recalled them, was my aunt.

Aunt Orissiana had made Lady Sherrene, the witch in the game I had played with Cory and other boys, into a real person. I had loved her compliments of my growing womanly talents. I had loved the effect my perfume had upon the Count of Mustay and even on the Count of Torthard. I had loved the admiration in his eyes, in particular, admiration for me as a woman. There was none now, though, as he flung me onto the floor of my aunt's living chamber.

"Why does my nephew come back to me in such a state?" my aunt asked the Count of Torthard who stood by the door with one of his men who was not under the berserker influence. The softness of her tone shook me more than if she had ranted or had me beaten.

"It's the way he was dressed when we took him at Febry's Inn," said the Count shortly. "The Queen Regent would not permit Lady Sh-, that is, your nephew, milady, within the carriage as a carriage ride is for ladies. Your nephew was been brought here across a horse."

"And has slept on the ground at night for eight days," snapped my aunt, turning her gaze from me to the Count. Her indignation made it sound as if she actually cared for me and my comfort.

"My men slept on the ground," said Torthard. He didn't say that the Queen Regent had declared it the only fit place for a man like me. She had designated one of her witch companions to check on me through the night to see that I was being treated like the dog that I was.

Torthard stepped to one side as the Queen Regent of the Baracts swept into the room, several of her sycophants at her heels.

"My goodness, Orissiana," said the Queen, lifting a delicate nosegay to her pretty mouth. "Whatever is that awful reek in your antechamber? Oh, I see that you have met Lady Sherrene again. How like a man to bring such fetid odors into a real Lady's house!"

The Royal Ladies in Waiting tittered at me on cue.

"Lara, Lara, Lara," sighed my aunt, giving me hope for the first time that I might yet survive this meeting

with her. But I couldn't help looking up at her in disbelief. All the threats she had made to me over the listening devices that witches used appeared to have been set aside. I shuddered. Whenever my aunt had been nice to me, it was because she was going to do something terrible to me or have me do something terrible to someone else.

"You think that I should have lodged him with me?" sneered the Queen. "The murderer of my husband? I wanted to have him burned right away. But Torthard wouldn't obey me. He fears the wrath of my witch more than he does that of the Queen Regent."

"And rightfully so," said my aunt. She waved at Count Torthard and his man to leave us. The Queen's ladies left with much alacrity and with hopeful looks at the Queen but she didn't disobey my aunt and invite any to stay, I noted.

"Now, between us," my aunt said smoothly, going to her favorite chair and waving to the Queen to sit beside her, "we do not need the pretence of your high dudgeon, Lara."

The way that the Queen sat denied the words that my aunt had spoken. "She killed my husband," Larussa pouted.

"Only because the dorospell worked so well," murmured my aunt, smiling at me, another hopeful sign. Despite the dirt clinging to me, I was able to feel the dress about me. I knew that I was shaped as a woman should be. My breasts began to tense as my aunt softly explained the effects of the Seafarer poison on her lecherous husband to the Queen. "Now you have what you wanted, Lara. You rule the land alone. Did not Sherrene bring back Prince Tathally into your clutches?"

I give you leave to tantalize that one in any manner that you see fit.”

“I already am,” retorted the Queen. “And I do not need your leave to do anything I please, Rissa!”

I noted the oddities in the situation. My aunt never referred to the Queen Regent as ‘majesty’ or ‘highness’ and Larussa had said ‘she’ when she referred to me having killed her husband. I loved to be called ‘she.’ I wanted to be acknowledged as a woman even by my enemies.

Algoth and Maris, my aunt’s maids, appeared silently then. I still don’t know how my aunt controlled them with such precision. She had been fingering one of the black stones in her long necklace at the time. It must have been a device that triggered something like the listening devices we both used.

“Release Lady Sherrene from her bonds,” my aunt instructed Maris. “Bathe her and clothe her as she was when she left my house for the capital.” I was sure my aunt had something large she wanted from me. If I could survive long enough, though, I might be able to fight back and destroy her instead of being destroyed by her.

XXXII. A WITCH’S REAPPRAISAL

The bath was set up as it had been so many times before. Maris and Algoth worked with the same silent efficiency as always. They stripped my grimy, soiled clothing from me, down to my panties. I had lost the bindings between my legs somewhere in the hedges I had been consigned as a latrine on the road.

I had been enraged when I was first debased like that. But the soldier who had the duty of stripping off my panties appeared to see nothing odd about it. Maris and Algot were the same. They stripped my panties away and never made any comment about my obvious male features.

They made no comment about my obvious female features, either. They poured water over my long hair and cleaned it thoroughly before drying it, braiding it and putting ribbons and barrettes in my lightened hair, the ends darker where the brown dye was disappearing from my blonde locks.

My maids soaked my breasts and salved my armpits, my legs and body so that no unsightly hair appeared. As I stood and was cleaned, I thought of Mithera, the woman I had helped to create from the ravages of the male she had been.

I looked down at my rounded hips and femininely shaped, female thighs. My legs weren't male legs any more. They were smooth and soft to the touch. I had loved it when Anjaro kissed them gently and worked his way up to my panties where I wiggled with anticipation about what he would do next.

My waist seemed tinier than ever and that made my breasts seem much larger, I thought. Maris casually cupped them as she dried me. I recognized the lovely scent of upland violets that my aunt loved on me. The essence was strong enough to conceal the honeybane compound that she also used as a controlling agent. I absorbed it through my skin in the frequent baths my aunt insisted that I have.

I smelled again like a lovely girl just I was dressed like one. It was thrilling to put on silky stockings and a frilly garter belt to hold them on my legs. Maris knew

how to apply the bindings between my legs before she put me into panties. I wished I had a looking glass as Algoth worked with masheen to style my hair.

The breast bands were tight and I wished that I had Choni with me. The former cabin boy on the great ship, *The Tempest of Distant Shores*, had proven to be a wonderful seamstress. Choni had made very comfortable breast bands for me and the other cabin boys I had transformed.

Choni would have lengthened the straps of my breast bands but Maris didn't so I was pushed up and forward in the bands I had to wear. My breasts were incredibly prominent in the light, female undergarments I wore, their gentle touch about incredibly pleasant after what I had endured.

A dark blue dress, made by one of the seamstresses in town, who had been jeering at me and calling me a whore, fitted me without me having to resort to the tight strapping of a body shaper as I had had to once before.

My breasts bulged at the low neckline even before the pretty necklace was put about my neck.

Algoth then brought me a looking glass and cosmetics. She knew that I could make myself up as a woman should because she and Maris had taught me. I had struggled so often to make my eyes vivid and my eyelashes thick. I had learned how to shape my thin eyebrows, where to rouge and where to apply eye shadow before applying a lady's face powder.

All the familiar scents brought goose bumps out on my skin as I painted my lips and looked at myself with my fair hair in braids and ringlets. It was me, Lady Sherrene, as I had been going forth to Hillaire, eagerly

looking forward to the great balls and the men who would dance with me and cover me with compliments on being so femininely attractive.

Well, it had happened but I hadn't been able to enjoy it long enough. I had caught the King's eye and he wanted me. Even though he was married to Larussa, he still dallied with young, attractive girls and I had been presented as such. I had deceived Master Bretton, the King's alchemist, with a potion that my aunt said was purely defensive.

I used it on the King as he tried to love me and the effect had been catastrophic. He came violently and prematurely all over my dress as his sexual ardor had not lessened. He recognized it before I did. I lay terrified beneath him in his bed as the King poured his essence all over me in my pretty, white silk dress. Then, King Tatharen fell, his eyes bulging, onto the floor beside me and died just as his wife came marching into the bedroom to find me with her husband. I had killed him, she accused me.

So, how could she accuse me of being a man as well? A man who had been woman enough to arouse her husband to excess? Surely the Counts would see through that if ever I was brought to trial. But that was not going to happen, not when the witches controlled the Grey Men, the berserker fighters, and could transform any men they wished into such a group.

I stood in my dark blue, high heeled slippers and swished my skirts about me with a satisfied sigh. Let Larussa call me what she liked. In a dress like this, with my breasts so prominent and shapely before me, I could bear her snide comments.

I swept out into the crowded main room of the house where one of the ladies, I think it was Lady Renneth, gasped aloud at my appearance.

“Oh, Rissa,” said the Queen petulantly, still seated beside my aunt, who sat back from trying to explain something to an unwilling Queen. “You could at least have had our prisoner dressed in his proper clothes.”

“I think that she is,” murmured my aunt, smiling at me. She patted the seat beside her on the sofa.

I minced across the room and sat as gracefully as I could, conscious of every eye in the room on me. The Queen got to her feet.

“I am not staying in here with this abomination, Rissa,” the Queen said, shrugging off my aunt’s weak hold on her arm. “If you think your nephew,” she made it into a sneer, “can assist you in getting Perisord back, you can have him. But if he comes back from there, I promise you, I will have the order spread over the land to have him burned by the first Count or Commander of the Grey Men who gets his hands on him.”

Then the Queen Regent spat at me, luckily missing me and my beautiful dress completely. “My wonderful husband would still be alive,” Larussa said theatrically, “if it hadn’t been for him, your nephew, going to my husband’s room and enticing him into bed with his warlock disguises.”

Warlocks were insane and dangerous, everyone knew that. The royal ladies got up and fluttered after the queen, casting venomous looks at me. I felt my color rise at the speculative looks I got from several of the Counts. Mustay was openly looking at my breasts, his mouth gaping open like a dog on a hot day.

"You'll have to excuse the Queen Regent," said my aunt, reaching over and taking my hand. She smiled at the pink, glossy polish on my newly shaped nails. I couldn't believe that she was still treating me so warmly, not after all the threats she had made to me, gloating over the things she would do to my companions if I did not surrender. I felt very uneasy at her apparent warmth towards me. If she wanted to play at that game, though, I could do it just as well and just as insincerely as her.

"I do, milady," I said clearly to my aunt, knowing that my voice, so light and girlish, would astound some of the men grouped about Torthard. Several looked astonished by the way that I spoke. "I just hope that in time she may come to see that I am the most unfortunate victim of circumstances and that the protection of my virtue led to the most unhappy events in King Tatheren's chambers."

Even the Count of Torthard looked staggered by my words and how I femininely batted my eyelids at several of the other men close to him. He glowered at me but I noticed that several others seemed disposed to talk and to question me. My aunt wasn't going to give me a chance, however, to charm Baract nobles. She had control over me and she didn't mind demonstrating it.

"Say no more, Lady Sherrene," my aunt said. "We shall get into such matters at the next conclave of Counts."

"If it ever meets again," someone muttered.

I didn't mind acting as if I was under my aunt's control. I crossed my legs, loving the feel of my skirts and smiled vacuously as the Count of Mustay bluntly asked Orissiana what she intended to do with me.

“We are both Perisords,” my aunt said taking my hand. “Do you need to know more?”

“You cannot break that curse on your old county,” said Mustay with a snort. “That’s what you’ve said many times in conclave. You refused Tatheren because your power was not great enough, you said. You said that witches and warlocks cannot combine their powers and we’ve believed you. So, what is this, this Sherrene, to do that you cannot? Is she a greater witch or warlock than you?”

Orissiana smiled coldly. The Count of Mustay stepped back a little but Torthard put his hand on his shoulder and held him there, his eyes slitted as he looked at the pair of us sitting so daintily and femininely together.

“What do you say to that, Lady Sherrene?” asked my aunt gently. I could feel the slight pressure of the honeybane-like controller she had used on me. It was much stronger than what she had used on me before, but then, I was a much stronger witch or warlock now. I couldn’t help shaking, however, at the way I was being used by her. I felt like a goldfish swimming in a pool in which I could sense there were sharks on the loose.

“There is no witch more powerful than my aunt, Orissiana,” I told them all, smiling as I said it. I noted the intensity on the faces of the two Counts who had vied for my hand and my attention as a woman in this very room. Let them believe what they wanted of me. I was going to survive them all but only by clinging to my aunt, I was certain.

“There you have it,” said my aunt sweetly. “Now why don’t you men leave my, my niece, and I together for a little while? We need to have a little girl talk, as

you might expect. You can tell Lara, my dear Counts, to come and join us if she is over her fit of pique."

The Counts and the other men with them bowed then to my aunt and withdrew. Not one of them bowed to me. I didn't expect them to. But many of the men were looking me over, I noted, from my bulging breasts to my curvy hips. Some must have been reconsidering what they had flung at them by the Queen. Clearly my aunt's new attitude to me must be adding to their confusion. Several of them I had seen at the ball on my Announcing. I think that I had kissed many of them, those that I had danced with, anyway.

"Not the reception from me that you expected, I suppose," drawled my aunt when we were alone. "Hmm, I must get Algoth to procure you some new breast bands. Did you see Mustay? He's always been attracted to fine breasts and yours, my girl, have become quite magnificent. In fact, your figure is so much improved since I saw you last that I think I will have to rescind my story of you being a warlock. I don't think anyone is going to believe me if I say it again."

I kept my head up, my earrings brushing my neck as I turned to look at my aunt.

"What happened to all the threats?" I asked her in my lilting, female voice, the one she had trained me to use. "Surrender or all those travelling with me will be butchered most cruelly by your minions?"

My aunt smiled at me. "But you have surrendered, have you not, Sherrene?" purred my aunt. I felt quivers running all over my body as if I had been stroked like a little cat. It was hard to sit there beside her in my tight-fitting dress while she demonstrated how much control she had over me.

"You are so different from the Sherrene I knew before," my aunt went on, mocking me by caressing my hand and then my dress. "Being a woman has matured you, hasn't it? I think you must have loved the sea captain who made you his seawife. Prince Tathally thinks that you did. Niccuro, we should give Nikki his true name, shouldn't we, thinks that you loved that Captain Anjaro. You were his goddess in some sea ceremony, Nikki told me.

"He hates you, does that poor, little catamite. Niccuro thinks you deliberately replaced him in the sea captain's affections. But he is so proud that he enticed Anjaro, with his new feminine wiles, to betray you before the voyage you made reached the Inner Isles. He doesn't even thank you for what you have given him, his lovely breasts, his womanly figure and his lilting voice.

"But you knew that, didn't you?" my aunt went on. Her voice was soft and coaxing as if she was trying to mesmerize me and I was enthralled by her knowledge of me. "You must have found out that you were betrayed by a lover. What a revenge you took! You struck a blow for all womankind there, my darling girl. But what did it tell me about you? You controlled collasolane, swamp gas, the grains of which you stole from me.

"You must have discovered some means of listening in to others' conversations. And on your voyage back to the Black Sea, you controlled a whole shipload of sailors, confusing them about what they were doing and where they were going. Yes, my dear, you have grown enormously as a witch and as a woman. As I once told you, the first thing that a witch works on is

herself. And, I must say, I sit here marvelling at the results you have achieved."

"Please," I gasped as I seemed to feel my aunt's hands about my breasts although she sat apart from me. She gripped only my long fingers in her hand, stroking the shaped fingernails that made my hands look so feminine.

"You are not incestuous at all?" mocked my aunt. "A young man should react to a woman's loving touch, you know, De-, no, I will call you Sherrene. I had no idea that you would grow into such a lovely young woman. You quite outshine the Queen, if you must know, which is the reason for the high temper that she is in."

"Lara, Lara th-thinks," I stammered, meaning to say that she still thought that I had killed her husband.

"No, she doesn't," said my aunt sarcastically, "which is the reason I am beginning to find her very tiresome. It might be time for me to try someone new on the throne of the Baracts. Do you think, however, that Tathally would serve me any better than Larussa?"

"Treachery," I managed to stammer. My aunt extended her hand and touched my garter belt where it joined my stockings on the leg I had crossed over its smooth companion.

"Of course not," said my aunt, moving closer to me, her musk perfume threatening to overwhelm my senses. My skin was aflame with the gentle caresses that seemed to flow over my body and my legs. I wished that I knew how my aunt could do that.

"Tathally is the rightful King, as Mustay, Torthard and their coterie have informed me on several occasions," Aunt Rissa said. She assaulted me mentally,

showing me how she could make my legs move, sliding easily over each other as I changed the way my legs were crossed. "He may prove, however, to be as sickly as his elder brother."

My aunt's wry smile reminded me that King Melleren was dead, just a few tendays after I escaped from Hillaire. I hadn't found that out until I returned to the Kingdom of the Baracts. I only knew as I left on the Seafarer ship that a frightened Prince Tathally had run from the capital to the same boat I was sheltered on. He had been certain that his father's Queen was out to have him killed.

"Larussa is getting to be so tiring with her need to feel secure," my aunt went on. "I wish I had never shown her how to produce the Grey Men and taught her how to control them. She's filled the country with them, frightening all the Counts half to death. If one protests, she has the Count enlisted in her army as a Grey Man himself. It's all to protect her power and keep her whelp, Kennen, on his throne. Thus, we have a huge army we have to feed and equip. Our neighbors are quite frightened about it all."

"Such an army must be used somewhere," I said nervously. My aunt renewed her actual hands-on stroking of my legs and stockings. "Any little border disagreement could lead to widespread war."

"Something everyone sees but the Queen Regent," said my aunt.

"Are you two still lovers?" I asked her bluntly, gasping at the intimate things her touching was doing about my panties.

"Lovers?" asked my aunt and the touching relaxed as she laughed at me.

"I-I saw you in b-bed t-together," I stammered again as my aunt lifted the skirts of my dress and ran her soft hand over my stockings and smooth, hairless legs.

"Yes," said my aunt softly. Ripples of emotion passed over me as I was caressed again by my aunt through the controlling agent. "I love to have a soft, womanly body against me at night. Algoth was beginning to pall when Lara offered herself. Her price was very reasonable. All she wanted was the kingdom. What would be your price, darling Sherrene?"

"The real murderer of my mother swinging in a cage on Traitor's Walk," I said as her hand passed up my skirt, between my legs and caressed the soft, warm skin between my panties and stocking tops.

My aunt's assault on me stopped very suddenly. "I told you," she began. I felt the control of my movements being restricted as she tried to make me stand up. I had visions of me lying over her lap with my skirts up over my back and my panties taken down while Maris and Algoth beat me as my aunt instructed them.

"You told me about an herbalist and his apprentice," I told her through gritted teeth. I was unable to resist her hand on my frilly panties although I was fighting against her desire to have me humiliated once more. "I would like the truth for a change."

"Oh, the truth," mocked my aunt. Our little mental engagement ended as she stopped trying to force me to stand and bend over her knee. She regarded me intently and with a fair degree of surprise. "Come willingly to my bed tonight, sweet little Sherrene, and the truth will flow out of me."

“You, you’re my aunt!” I screamed at her, forcing her hands off my panties with a monumental effort of will.

“So you do think that that matters. Good,” said my aunt, standing. With a new impulse of her will she forced me to stand also. My skirts fell about my legs, giving me a momentary relief from the intense caressing I had been receiving. She gave me a smile and lifted her arms.

“Come,” she snapped. I went to my aunt and let her wrap her arms about me in a womanly hug, a smile of triumph on her red, glossy lips.

The Queen Regent chose that moment to sweep back into my aunt’s house. “Rissa!” she exclaimed, walking straight up to us and taking my aunt’s hands in hers, ignoring me as if I wasn’t there. “This is intolerable! I cannot take this any longer. This, this, this girlie boy has to be exposed in public. I want him! I want to take him back to Hillaire and have him paraded in his frillies to the executioner! I want his male and female parts removed. I want him burned as a warning to all warlocks and to men who ape women in public that this will not be tolerated.”

“And what brings on this fit of passion?” asked my aunt calmly while I quaked at the venom in the way Larussa now spoke of me. My aunt released one of her hands from Lara’s grip and reached over to me. I was still rooted to the spot by the force of her will and the controller agent she had used on me.

“The conclave proclaimed your nephew a regicide!” protested Larussa. Her thin face regarded me with great hostility.

It was hard to think that I had once admired Lara and romped in my girl's dressing room with her. She loved me to wear outrageous female frillies and had told me not to worry about being small-breasted. I would grow, she promised me, as she had once she had a child. I would as well as soon as I was married.

Lara was the one who had urged me to be Announced at a great ball in the palace and had sponsored me on my Announcing Day, when I had become Lady Sherrene Perisord. How was I to know it was all a ruse to make her husband notice me, notice me enough to draw me into his bed where his death could then be laid at my feet?

"Conclaves have been wrong before and changed their minds on the issue of who is and isn't a witch and who is a murderer and who is not," said my aunt. "Now, this is quite enough, Larussa. You have your kingdom to play in. Go play. I have not yet acquired what I was to get out of the bargain I made with you."

"What!" shrieked an astounded Queen Regent. "Haven't I made you the Count of Perisord as you demanded, against all custom and practice?"

"But I do not yet have Perisord," snapped my aunt. "Only an empty title that is laughed at by the men of the Counts' Conclave when I am announced as the Count of Perisord. I want the land where I was born back in my hands, where it was meant to be."

"Sherrene cannot get it for you," said the Queen Regent wildly. "Give her to me, Rissa. She can share the same funeral pyre as Tathally and his catamite."

"Lara," said my aunt firmly. "You know that I have put no limits on what you do in this kingdom but, if you ever do something as foolish as that, I will have to

limit you severely. You will not burn Prince Tathally or my niece. If I hear you say it again, I will gag your mouth."

The Queen Regent staggered back. "You-You cannot speak to me like that!" she hissed at my aunt.

Despite my constricted state, I recognized the aroma that came from the balloon my aunt destroyed. I was able to fight off the effects of the controller compound that engulfed the queen. Larussa was not, however, a strong witch, no matter that she dabbled in and was sensitive to the workings of witchery.

The compound had elements of the concoction I had already used in capturing some of the Grey Men from Orissiana's witch in Werhaven. I saw the Queen's jaw slacken as the control elements took over and she lost command of herself to Orissiana.

"Go and proclaim your tiredness to your Ladies," ordered Orissiana. "You will sleep at the *Pitchfork* tonight. Sleep well, Larussa. Do not speak of Lady Sherrene ever again." Underneath her breath, she whispered to me. "We'll just see how long this spell lasts. The one I did for the last Master Alchemist was over before it really started."

"Master Bredden was the King's last Master Alchemist?" I asked my aunt.

"Now, don't be so coy if you are asking me for truth, my lovely young woman," said my aunt. "I know very well how you escaped from the Queen's dungeon, Sherrene." She sighed. "Bredden quite spoiled the wonderful surprise you would have had on your execution day as I appeared, in all my wrath, to rescue my niece from her evil accusers."

“You would have accused the Queen of that!” I gasped, looking at her hawk-like face.

“Of course not the Queen,” said my aunt with a sly smile, “though that would have been of benefit to the Land. As it was, I wouldn’t have minded having Lady Renneth burning in your place for treachery, along with Master Bredden and a few others. I intended to have Abriss named in the plot against the King as well. I would have saved you and you would have been grateful to me.

“I would have found you a safe, controllable husband. You would have undergone all the wonders of womanhood, my Sherrere. You would have been betrothed. You would have received chaste kisses from a handsome young man whom the Queen would have made a Count when he married his beautiful bride.

“But you spoiled all that by running from me. And the Queen had the story out about you being a warlock before I could counter it. Since I thought you were gone, I let it stand. See how a moment’s weakness for this woman has come back to haunt me.”

I felt the brief touch of the controller my aunt used on me to make me believe what I knew wasn’t true at all. I knew there was a hunt going on for me in the Kingdom. I also knew that my aunt had not only been in the Queen’s bed but in her carriage as I was hunted through the streets of Hillaire. I knew she had been on the docks as well and had been one of the elements in quelling the riot involving Seafarers and Castle men at arms, dockside merchants and port dwellers.

“So I am back,” I said with a tremble.

“And for your help in restoring me to Perisord,” my aunt said softly, “I will do what I originally planned.

Your accusers, those silly, twittering females from Larussa's homeland, will be immolated and you will become the Lady of Mustay. The Count is an indefatigable lover, my dear, and very easily influenced, as you have no doubt noticed."

"I would prefer the Count of Torthard," I said, thrills going through me even as I said it.

"Torthard?" asked Orissiana. "But he hates you and the thought of what you are. He seems convinced of it after interrogating Nikki and Tathally. That has made him an enemy of yours and a supporter of the Queen's."

"Which is why I want him," I told her. "I wish to teach him to respect me as I am. I want him to feel himself under the effect of lovebane and know that he can do nothing but love me as I desire before I finally cast him aside."

My aunt looked at me in amusement. "You do know that Torthard is sensitive to witchery, don't you?" she said.

"Yes," I agreed. "A minor warlock, I would have thought." My aunt's eyes went wide in astonishment. So, Torthard hated me. I had sent all my friends to his county to escape my aunt's wrath. I had to keep him away from that place and close to me if I could. Let him hate me all he wanted. I had ensorcelled a shipload of men to love not only me, but boys like me, as if we were women, on the long sea trip from the Inner Isles to the Kingdom of the Baracts.

"I so want to teach that arrogant buffoon a few lessons," I told my aunt, meaning every word.

“Oh, that’s wonderful, my dear girl!” said my aunt. “Lara, go, go, go and tell your ladies how tired you are and where you will retire to, tonight.”

The Queen Regent turned and walked to the outer door of the house. I thought of Maris and Algoth, who were mindless maids of my aunt. Larussa walked as if she was a third maid. Many times my aunt had warned me that she didn’t want a third maid and so I should be successful in what I did for her.

XXXIII. A WITCH’S EVASIONS

My aunt acted in the next tenday as if I had some bargain with her. She had seamstresses visit me by the score, including the women who had jeered at me and spat at me on the streets of Birchwood.

The fear in the women was almost palpable as they entered my aunt’s antechamber and saw me in my flowery dresses awaiting them. They were completely nonplussed and ill at ease when I disrobed and they had to measure me as any woman should be measured for her new dresses.

My aunt watched over the sessions, admiring the process that she had started in me. I stripped down to just my panties in front of the women who had heard me called a man by the Queen Regent and they went about their tasks of making me new, soft, women’s breast bands and new frilly women’s underthings without any comment at all on what had happened on the streets of Birchwood.

My aunt interfered all the time, ordering my garter belts be made of brighter materials and frillier. I was a young woman, after all, and I must have some enjoyment from my clothes; so should my lovers, my aunt

proclaimed. I only smiled at such remarks and pouted for the women watching me. I knew they must be completely confused by the woman, me, whom they saw and had heard called a man.



I spent all my time, it seemed, for two tendays doing nothing but disrobing for women and trying on the clothes they made for me. It was so wonderful to not have to try to be a woman. All I had to be was me. There was no man around whom I was trying to convince that I was anything else. I was a witch. I made potions again for my aunt and the seamstresses saw me do that in my underslip and breast bands. I always wore a garter belt and silk stockings with my panties. I could be as natural as I wanted to be, letting my enjoyment of my feminine clothing show to its fullest extent.

I had shoes to try on as well, each pair daintier and more elegant than the previous one. No boots for me, only delicate high heels that I had to walk in at all times as I practiced dancing with Algoth and Maris. I whirled and swirled and smiled and my aunt was so pleased with me. She wanted me to trust her, I knew, and she was going to gain my trust by making me into the woman that I longed so much to be.

My new dresses accentuated my femininity, my aunt insisting on lower necklines and more lace and frills. Every bodice had to be tight to show off my figure. I wore body shapers and tight bindings until I was used to the numbness in parts of myself. I wore new clothing that didn't have straps over my shoulders and which had little in the way of backs.

"Girls are really dressing like this in Quarrence?" asked my aunt doubtfully to one seamstress who made one dress that barely covered my breasts and was tight to my waist before flowing out in light, gauzy layers. I had never felt as womanly as I did being whirled by Maris as Algoth beat a dancing rhythm. My mass of long ringlets whirled I slowly became aware that we had an audience.

“Well, what do you think, Mustay, Torthard, Berrit?” asked my aunt. I stopped in confusion, then had to curtsy to the men who had entered the ante-chamber. With no strapping to support my breasts, the men could see right down the front of my dress . Mustay was grinning as he helped me rise and kissed my hand. Berrit, a young boy no older than me, was blushing as I curtsied to him.

Torthard did not kiss my hand. I would have been surprised if he had. But the touch of his hand sent thrilling sensations through me. I shivered as my necklace swung above my breasts and my earrings danced about my neck. I kept my painted eyelids demurely down as Torthard brought me up from my deep curtsy.

“I think Lady Sherrene would outshine every Court Lady in Quarrence just as she outshines every young lady at the Court in Hillaire, milady,” the Count of Mustay said gallantly. Count Berrit eagerly agreed.

“Torthard?” prompted my aunt.

“The Lady Sherrene is a jewel, milady,” Torthard said, through clenched lips I noted.

“Well, a compliment,” murmured my aunt. “You must be satisfied with faint praise, Sherrene.”

“I always am, Lady Rissa,” I said girlishly to her, giving her a half curtsy as her rank demanded of me.

I saw Torthard flush and glower a little at me while the other young men smiled. They would have gone on and complimented me outrageously, I knew, but my aunt did not give them a chance.

“Well, Torthard,” said my aunt. “Tell us what the Queen Regent has to say to my proposals.”

"The Queen Regent has quite recovered her senses, milady," said Torthard in a flat, unaccented tone.

"Pity," murmured my aunt, gesturing to me to swirl and swish some more in my lovely, scanty dress as I danced with Maris. Algoth took up a steady waltz rhythm, her eyes disconcerting to look at as she regarded the far wall with rapt attention though it was currently stripped of all adornment. "I take it then that she did not agree to any of my suggestions."

Mustay and Berrit half-turned and smiled at Torthard over something they knew but which he seemed reluctant to say.

"The Queen," Torthard finally said, "agrees to reinstate your beautiful niece as a woman. Lady Sherrene Perisord will be acquitted of all charges against her, the calumnies and lies about her gender will be denied, and Lady Sherrene will be restored to her previous good standing as an Announced Lady of the Land."

"And the immolations? How many will she allow to be burned?" asked my aunt.

Counts Mustay and Berrit looked a little uncomfortable at that. "None, milady," said Torthard.

"Not even Renneth?" asked my aunt, a wicked gleam in her eye. "I will light the pyre on that one myself after her terrible accusations about my niece."

I swished and bowed in Maris's strong arms as I danced. Now, with the men watching me, in my thin, rustling skirts, I realized why this day had been set aside for this ultra-feminine dress and hair style. My aunt had known these men would be here to look me over like the prize cow that I felt like. I smiled as I looked at my suitors, as I was sure that was what these were. Torthard looked at me grimly. If he didn't start

being nicer to me, I might have to choose another man in his place.

“Especially not the Lady Renneth,” said Torthard firmly, not even looking at me in my lovely dress, my breasts rising and bobbing with my exertions.

“Oh,” said my aunt, her eyes glittering. “Well, there are some matters that I can attend to myself, I suppose. Now, in the matter of my niece’s betrothal. There were over one hundred and fifty cards, asking for liaison meetings in the capital. We could, of course, set up a calendar for visiting every house.”

“Her majesty requests that you not do that,” Torthard said grimly. “That would only stir up unpleasantries as you alluded to in your proposal.”

“It is over a year since Lady Sherrene’s Ball,” said my aunt haughtily. “It is time for my beautiful niece to be betrothed. If she had not been so wrongfully accused, I could have had her married by now and possibly have a true Perisord heir on the way.”

“The Queen agrees to your other proposal,” said Torthard grimly. “She will accept your niece at court if you promise not to limit the Queen Regent by witchery as you did here two tendays ago.”

“I can agree to that,” said my aunt graciously. “I will even apologize for doing that to the Queen. I might even show her how to administer a new potion in recompense for the insult I gave her.”

It occurred to me that my aunt was not speaking just to the three men in the room. I think she had her listening device activated and was speaking to her whole witchery network, which would include Lady Renneth and the Queen Regent herself.

“So, the Queen agrees to my other proposal on betrothal?” asked my aunt sweetly.

“How could she do otherwise?” asked Torthard and the other two smiled and nodded.

“The three lines that will court my niece have all agreed?” asked my aunt. I felt my temperature suddenly begin to soar. I released myself from Maris’s strong grip and swirled to a stop beside my aunt. These men were here to court me as a woman, just as I had expected. If only my aunt were not acquiescing in this, I would have loved to have gone through such a contest. I had learned so much from all the cabin boys, my ‘girls,’ on how to tantalize a man.

“For me, it would be the greatest of honors to be allowed to court your lovely niece, Orissiana. When the terms of the offer are prepared by my family’s matchmaker, I don’t doubt that my love for your niece will be so evident that she will accept me first among men.”

I shook with embarrassment as Count Berrit, so earnest and boyish, swore the same and also swore I would soon be the mother of an heir to Perisord. Berrit would love me to be the mother of daughters just as lovely as myself. He hoped I would love being a mother as much as he would love being a father and a loving husband to me.

“Torthard?” asked my aunt again, far too sweetly for him not to know that she was goading him.

“I’m here because the Queen asked me to be here, to make the three, as you proposed,” said Torthard angrily.

“But you did send an Announcement card, my dear Torthard,” said my aunt with a sly smile again. “And you did return my niece to me in one piece when

someone else wanted her burned right away. Such generosity to my niece should not go unrewarded which is why we invite you also to engage your line's match-maker and make an offer for my beautiful niece."

If she had mentioned one more time that I was her niece, I might have stamped my pretty high heel on the floor and screamed at my aunt. I swished my skirts about my legs as the men stared at me, at two of my very obvious charms anyway.

My aunt didn't say it then, but she might have been trying to remind the men of what they were marrying. I was finally to inherit the money I had been left by my mother, another part of the proposal too crass to be mentioned, my aunt told me later. The matchmakers would do all of that sort of business and take a sizeable fee for the contracts they negotiated. I wouldn't need a great offer to attract someone to wed me, my aunt assured me. I could support a husband and family of no great fortune. Which is why she had included the Berrit line in the three who could court me now. If I should not be betrothed to one of the three in the proposal to the Queen, other families of all financial levels would be in the next round of marriage offers.

What was I thinking? I was a man and my aunt knew it even if she was forcing me to behave like a pretty young woman. I couldn't be betrothed to another man. I couldn't be another man's wife. This was my aunt's crazed dream for me. It wasn't mine.

It was absolutely insane for me to sit down daintily and have supper with my suitors while my aunt played the role of chaperone. It was absurd that I should have to change my gown and my hair style three times that night and hold hands with each of the

three men who sought to impress me with their compliments and soft words and touches.

Mustay, of course, entered into the affair with all the gusto of a man who knew he was irresistible to women. He tried to take advantage of me sitting beside him to put his leg against me and move it against my thin silk dress and silk stockings. He stroked my soft hands and put his arm about my shoulder, telling me how he loved my hair, done in ringlets for him.

Berrit was eager to court me. He made me nervous as he tried to be nice to me. His compliments, about my lovely perfume and soft skin, seemed so unforced and genuine that he sent shivers through me. He stood gallantly with me and helped me to my feet when my aunt decided I must change into the black dress that had just arrived from the royal seamstress that morning. Berrit walked me to my room, taking my hand and kissing it. I curtsied to him and he thanked me for allowing him to court such a graceful woman as I was.

If a glowering Torthard had not been there in the background, I would have flirted with the young Berrit. It seemed so unstilted unlike Mustay's approval which I sensed was forced to a degree. He, after all, knew better than most the power of my aunt. He knew the family he would be marrying into if he married a woman like me.

Torthard did not even try to compliment me as I came rustling into the room in the black, slitted dress that the seamstress had sent my aunt. It accentuated every womanly curve. When I sat, it parted along my legs to reveal my smooth, rounded, stockinged legs, an anklet gleaming above my jewelled high heels. Even my petticoats were exposed from time to time, frilled in pink and slitted like my dress.

“This will be the fashion in the capital in the fall,” Aunt Rissa predicted. I couldn’t look at her discussing such a topic, especially with a room full of men, the three Counts and me. I had never heard her be so gushing and condescending before. I knew that she was preparing me for something terrible. She was, after all her, known to all the people of the Middling Hills as Orissiana the Terrible.

Torthard kept a gap between himself and the exquisite dress I wore. He kept his eyes diverted from the low-cut front to my dress my new breast bands made so prominent and forward. I glanced at Berrit who was staring at my cleavage. He blushed and stammered and the reply he was about to make to my aunt about how pretty pink was on a young girl broke down into incoherence. It was after all only my undergarments that were pink.

I was encouraged to escort each of my suitors to the carriage that had brought them from town. “You may allow the young men to kiss your hand, my girl,” my aunt said to me. “You may curtsey to them but they are not to put their hands about you and kiss you or they will be replaced in the matchmaking.”

There were no men-at-arms about the house. It looked so easy to escape. But I had tried that on two occasions before. I knew that there was something in the woods and about the house at night that would never let me leave save in the company of my aunt.

Mustay took my hand and kissed it for a long time as I rested in my curtsey. He showed in his eyes an admiration for my rounded breasts. Berrit blushed and tried not to look down my dress as he slavered over my hand. I wished it could just have been the two of us there. I could have tantalized him a little more and, yes,

perhaps, have given him a little reward that would have made him want to come back and see me again.

Torthard let me curtsy to him and did not kiss my hand. As I came up, however, he put his arms about me. I thought for a moment it was just to steady me, but it wasn't. He drew me into him. My breasts pressed against his chest, and I sensed his wonderful aroma of dry, clean leather and distant woodsmoke as he kissed me.

Torthard kissed my eager lips with all the ferocity of a man finding water after days in the desert. I felt the same way as well. He pressed his lips firmly against mine and I yielded hungrily to him, thrills going through me like sparks. My whole body lit up with pleasure as he kissed me and my senses reeled just as they had when he had kissed me on the road outside Terraire.

"Unfair, Rebern!" protested Count Mustay. I heard his footsteps as he vaulted down from the carriage to separate Torthard from me.

"Most decidedly," sniffed my aunt, laying her hand on me as I drank in Count Rebern Torthard's gentle caress of my arms.

"He's definitely out now," said Mustay then as Torthard let me go. Torthard's mouth twisted in a knowing smile as he looked down at me. I could only stare at him naively as I realized why he had kissed me so lovingly.

"Yes," said Berrit from the carriage. "He has broken your rules, milady."

"Pah," said my aunt, putting her arm about my slender waist and pulling me back from the dark carriage that had arrived for the Counts. "Don't you

know, young man," she smiled at all three men in turn, "that all rules are made to be broken? You just have to be sure that, when they are broken, the rule-breaking is done with style and finesse. Well done, Torthard, but we shall make sure that such a breach does not occur again."

I was watching Torthard, my mouth still so wonderfully alive after his kiss. The look that flitted across his face was definitely one of chagrin. He had kissed me so that he wouldn't have to court me any further. The thought was like a heavy dose of cold water poured over me. I was glad to turn girlishly on my heel, take my aunt's arm, pout at the men and return to the house.

"It is definitely handsome young men you fancy, is it not?" murmured my aunt as we stood in the doorway and watched the lights on the carriage recede. She stroked my arm and tugged on my waist, then sighed. "A pity, really."

I was glad to go to my room alone and be changed into my nightdress by Maris, who was again my personal maid. I lay in my frilled bed, my hair in braids with ribbons over my shoulders and remembered how Torthard had held me and kissed me. I touched my lips and it was as if he was still kissing me.

Torthard had interrogated Prince Tathally and Nikki about me. The Queen had said that he had. Nikki had enticed Anjaro, the captain of *The Tempest*, back to her bed even when he was pretending to be enraptured with me. Nikki had been Anjaro's seawife. Such a boy stayed in girl's frillies and dresses for the length of a trip, serving the seaman as his woman in all things.

Nikki had been given to Lord Assonder, the clan elder aboard *The Tempest of Distant Shores*, to serve him

while Anjaro tried to worm the secrets of Baract's witches out of me. My maids had warned me that Nikki was jealous of me. I had heard it first-hand when I listened to her making love to the man who was supposed to be my lover. It had hurt even more than finding out he was trying to gather secrets I would freely have given him, so much in love with my sea husband had I been.

Nikki had been in the company of the other cabin boys on the ship I had ensorcelled to return us to the Kingdom of the Baracts. Nikki had undoubtedly told Torthard that I was a man. She might have embellished stories about me but she and Prince Tathally would know how I was regarded by the other girls. Nikki's and Tathally's stories about me would have the ring of truth. If they had been tested with parasane, the truth concoction, then Torthard would know she, Nikki, was telling the truth as she knew it.

Why then would Torthard kiss me so long and tenderly as I had pressed against him? He knew I was a man and had told me how much he held men like me in contempt. I shuddered and writhed in bed as I thought of what he had said to me, words I had been trying to suppress in my memory.

I was so humiliated at my thoughts that I couldn't sleep. I prowled about the house, getting a drink for myself. There was a bright moon outside. I'd lost track of the quarters by being inside so long. I went to the window to look outside. Almost instantly, a dark shadow moved under the birch that stood at the head of the short path leading to the main door.

I felt my hair rising in fear as it had when I had seen something like that before. But this time I stood there and looked at the dark shape that stood still, regarding

the window where I stood. When I had first tried to escape, something had jumped on me in the woods, knocked me down and knelt on my back. I remembered the odor the thing had given off, the wet green, the salt-sweat, and metallic tang so like my aunt's essence.

Almost without me noticing, the figure vanished. But not before there was a flash of silver about the figure's head as if long, silvery hair had spilled out about the creature's head, the moonlight making a nimbus about its head.

I couldn't tell if it had gone back into the trees or not. It had just seemed to melt away. I shuddered and went back to bed. I was so aroused as I got back into bed that my nipples were large and hard. I had gotten out of the habit of gratifying myself. I hated doing it but my emotions were far too intense for sleep.

I knew I had to release myself or I would not sleep at all. I thought of Torthard's kisses and the rest was easy. I stroked my breasts and the intensity in my panties grew. I barely had to touch myself and I was released. Then I felt worse than I had in the months of abstinence since I returned to the Kingdom. Oh, Torthard or Rebern as Mustay called you. You never gave me your personal name though you have mine. I just wish you didn't hate me so.

XXXIV. A WITCH'S PROPOSITION

"Perisord is our ancestral home," said Aunt Rissa as she walked me through a garlanded path that wound through tall rose trees and cultivated, clipped, greybirch saplings. She held my arm as if we were

women friends, our heels announcing our arrival to anyone a hundred yards away.

“Why isn’t it any more?” I asked my aunt. She stopped on a little bridge over a rivulet, pushing me lightly against the elevated arm rail.

“You cannot be that ignorant, girl,” Orissiana snapped at me, her dark eyes flashing. In her dark bonnet and dress, she looked ever inch a witch at that moment. I felt that I wasn’t a witch any more as I was carefully kept out away from complex substances by Maris and Algoth.

On this second visit to Birchwood, I was steered into other, feminine pursuits. I was stitching a bedcover. I had cut and made shifts for myself which I decorated with stitchery. I had assembled necklaces and earrings and worn them. I spent over half the day on my hair and cosmetics. My aunt left me to create certain looks and I discovered why there were so many wigs in the cupboard in my room. I think I had worn them all. I only made simple potions for my aunt. I wore my frilly apron and hat to do so but I didn’t feel like a witch at all.

“Airene must have told you about our mother,” my aunt told me icily as we stood on the little bridge.

“My mother only told me that I had a grandmother who was a witch and taught her everything she knew,” I told her.

“I don’t even know that I had a grandfather,” I said, running my tongue over my glossy, pink lips. “Neither you nor my mother have ever mentioned him. Until we went to Hillaire, I didn’t really know that we were noble-born or that our name was Perisord.”

“Idiot woman,” snarled my aunt. For a moment I thought she meant me. But she stepped back from me and indicated that we should keep on walking. I realized then that she must have meant my mother.

“Your grandmother was a great, true witch,” said Orissiana thoughtfully as we rustled together again down off the bridge. That made my breasts bounce most disconcertingly, rousing feminine feelings in me that made listening to my aunt, on the point of imparting knowledge, very difficult.

“Your grandfather was the Count Perisord. He persuaded Tatheren’s father to use the skills of the witches to drive away the Seafarers who kept invading our coasts, seizing everything the peasants and Counts had worked to produce. First, your grandmother produced the Grey Men. You’re a talented witch enough to have sensed the components in the concoction that compels them, haven’t you? It made our small forces fight to the last man but it wasn’t enough.

“Your grandmother then produced swamp gas, mounting it first in cauldrons that were launched by catapults. With the alchemists, she provided small casements, shells for the harquebus or to be launched from an arbalest like an arrow at the Seafarer ships. That ended the invasions. Since then, we’ve allowed them back into the large ports. They need the grain from Malesia, that’s very clear, but they must buy at the King’s Price.

“When Tatheren doubled the price in the first year of his reign, there was another war. Your grandmother was affronted when I stole a supply of the black powders and helped Tatheren defeat the Seafarers in the Mouth of Desseny and on the Black Sea. That brought the Seafarers to heel but your grandmother was so ag-

grieved with me that she cursed the county of Perisord, the richest, most productive county in all of the Kingdom of the Baracts. Its mines are the source of the swamp gas powder you stole from me and used so profligately in a sea battle, or so Tathally tells us."

"Master Bredden," I began, as we strolled arm-in-arm through the trees.

"Took the supply you stole from me," said my aunt with a grim laugh. "Yes, I know that now. Master Bredden fled at the same time you did. He threatened me with his arbalests and harquebusses from Castle Sorice. He should have been clearer about what he had. His men fired by mistake into his arsenal and set off a conflagration that has left the eight towers and walls of Sorice a pile of rubble bordering a deep pit that will soon become a stagnant pool if the Western Russets don't try to rebuild."

I didn't tell my aunt that the few grains of swamp gas that I used in the sea battles I had produced with a great effort that made me think that I was doing something wrong. But from her words, I gathered that she could not make swamp gas from terogal compounds as I had done. And yet, she reeked of terogal used as a fortifier.

"You want my help to rebuild Sorice?" I asked my aunt as we walked into the bustling little town of Birchwood.

"Oh no, my darling," said my aunt tensely. She hesitated a moment, then said what she had been dying to say for a very long time. "I want you, my dear, to lift the curse of your grandmother on our home land and restore me to the rich county over which I should be the true ruler."

“How can I do that?” I asked stupidly.

My aunt clutched my arm as we approached smiling people who had cursed me, spat on me, laughed at me and thrown refuse on me when I had been paraded through this town as a man in a woman’s dress.

Now, seeing me in my summery, green and white dress, with my blonde hair in green ribbons, almost everyone bowed and nervously invited me into their stores to inspect and buy their wares. One vendor offered me a carabet. His was of glass and not the seven fabled pearls of the Many Isles, made into a necklace named after the seven populated islands of the Inner Sea.

When Anjaro had given me the carabet, it had been a scandal that he should give it to a seawife. Little could Anjaro have known that it was through pearls that I had learned to make my own listening devices or that the black pearl on my carabet would enable me to listen in on my girls and the theater company and know what was going on with them.

“Buy some fripperies, some frillies for yourself and some beads for Maris and Algoth,” said Aunt Rissa, staring at me as I smiled and returned the carabet to the vendor who tried to tell me what a bargain such was so far from the Inner Isles. “Make yourself popular again as a pretty female with the people who live next to me. Your pardon has already been posted here. They will be eager to tell you that they never thought you were a warlock at all. A warlock could never be as pretty a girl as you are, Orissiana the Terrible’s beautiful niece.”

I felt her eyes on me as I worked the market, buying only trinkets as she had instructed me. I think that she had gotten carried away in her story about my grand-

mother and was regretting that she had told me so much, and so little about what she wanted from me.

“My lady,” said an excited voice.

“Count Berrit,” I said with a smile, curtsying to the excited boy. Like a true noble, he took my hand in front of everyone and kissed it much more passionately than he ever had before.

“I came with my matchmakers to Birchwood,” said the eager, young Count. I put my arm under his and guided him gently to the winery in the center of the most prestigious shops in Birchwood Market. A garden with flowers on every table lay on one side and I let the Count steer me there. I smoothed my skirts beneath my legs as we sat a little apart from everyone else. His eyes were rapt on my face as he talked on about all the details of the proposals his matchmakers were going to make for my hand in marriage.

“You shouldn’t be giving away all your secret proposals,” I teased him femininely, glad that I had worn a higher necked dress. It enabled Berrit to talk earnestly into my face for a change. “My aunt could leave you impoverished if she learns what you have said, from me.”

“Oh, but you have your own fortune,” said Berrit, almost wagging a tail like a little puppy dog. “Oh,” he flamed a bright red. “I shouldn’t have said that, should I?”

“Some people are talking about me,” I laughed at him.

“Oh yes,” Berrit agreed, trying to make up for one gaffe and making another. “You are all we talk about, milady. That is, milady, that everyone is interested and, and ask me, that is, how beautiful you are.”

“And if I am a man or a woman,” I said to him with a smile.

Berrit went the color of country beets in vinegar. “Oh, oh, no, milady,” he said, flustered. “That is, they do ask, yes, but I say, yes, I have to say, that, that if they saw you, so beautiful, that they would never doubt that you were a woman, never doubt it at all.”

I had to smile at that, particularly at the glance that Berrit made over my shapely figure. I sat back in my chair and let him admire me. “You do think that I am a woman then, dear Berrit,” I asked him. The young Count flushed and nodded at me.

“Don’t toy with the young lad,” said a voice over my shoulder. I wondered how the Count of Torthard had managed to come up so quietly on me. I surely should have sensed his wonderful aroma.

“T-Torthard,” stammered Count Berrit. His handsome, young face, brown-haired and brown-eyed like all true Malesians showed his exasperation at having our conversation interrupted.

“Now tell the lad that he is breaking the rules this time, milady,” said Torthard with a straight face. “Here he is with you and you have no chaperone, milady. Shame on you, milord. What are you trying to do here, cut me out of my lady’s affections?”

“That would be remarkably easy,” I said, noting the disapproval in Count Torthard’s eyes.

“But, but, Lady Orissiana,” said Berrit, oblivious to the undercurrent between Torthard and me. “She was right there. She waved to me and pointed over here.”

“Well, if Rissa has given her permission,” said Torthard, his eyes narrowing as he looked at me, “I

shouldn't interfere, should I? I should leave you two lovebirds to get more intimately acquainted."

Torthard stood as if to go. I felt a distinct pang of regret. Then, he sat down again. "No," he said giving me a cynical smile. "I can't do it. I have a message for you, Berrit. Your matchmaker is meeting with Lady Sherrene's matchmaker in the parlor of the *Pitchfork*. They have called on Orissiana and you to meet them, right now."

"Right now?" asked Berrit in surprise.

Torthard smiled agreeably. "I think that an agreement has been reached in principle or, something else needs to be agreed to by you."

The look of delight on Berrit's face was embarrassing to me. "It's probably a procedural matter," I said lightly. Berrit was already bounding from our table, exclaiming that he would be back right away and for me not to go anywhere.

"Come on," said Torthard. He stood and put out his hand to me as soon as Berrit was out of sight.

I stood as if I was under the control of some agent he had ensorcelled me with. "I should wait for Berrit," I began.

"No," said Torthard. He took my arm and walked me out of the garden area into the market. Within a block, he turned into an alleyway, dragging me behind him. We went left and right until he opened a large door and led me into a hay barn.

I shuddered as memories of Cory and me, some very good and some very awful, percolated through me. Torthard sat me on a hay bale and pulled up one opposite me. I tried to sit as ladylike as I could, cross-

ing one leg in front of me, letting him see my dainty shoes and my stockinged feet.



“We have to talk,” said Count Torthard, staring at me angrily

“That thing with Berrit,” I cut in, my voice light compared to his.

“Probably trying to figure out a procedure to discover whether you are really a man or a woman,” said Torthard sarcastically. I felt silly and stupid to be sitting there in front of him in my summer dress and with my hair in curls, my face made up like a woman’s, my arms gently touching my breasts.

“So you want to be harsh with me,” I gasped. “Go ahead. Insult me all you like. Then you can strip me and drag me out in front of the market and prove once and for all what I am.”

“Oh, I already know that,” snapped Torthard at me. “What I want to know is what your aunt wants from you. Why is she doing all this, changing course completely with you? What is she after?”

“She told me Perisord,” I told him. “But your Queen knows that. My aunt is annoyed with her for not helping her to lift whatever curse my grandmother put on the land.”

“But Larussa is no witch,” said Torthard scornfully. “She dabbles and uses potions that Orissiana makes for her. What else can she do?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t suppose that it matters anyway,” I told him. “Aunt Rissa asked me today to lift the curse so that Perisord will once more be ruled by her.”

“You can do that?” Torthard gasped. “You know how to do that?” He got up and came across the gap between us. “You would do that?” he asked, seizing my hands roughly and frightening me by the look in

his eyes. "Do you know the power that you would place in the hands of your aunt?"

His hands squeezed mine, hurting me a little. "She mentioned the swamp gas powder that she can't make," I said. "I didn't realize that I had stolen so much from her. I only wanted to protect myself. But Bredden took it from me when he gave me to Tatheren to amuse him."

Torthard stared at me rigidly. I felt the tickle of someone questing for me through the controller potion with which I was infused in my bath and in my food and drink each day.

"Master Bredden?" Torthard asked me, his face rigid.

"My aunt said it was an accident that set off the swamp gas at Solice," I said. A small headache began to grow; I had to report to my aunt immediately.

"Solice is just a hole in the ground," said Torthard grimly. "We thought Orissiana had fired on Bredden and Morn, the Solice witch, because they were part of our circle."

"Your circle?" I asked him. Torthard went very still, staring at me. I think he was wondering if he had said something then that he shouldn't have and was deciding whether to kill me or not.

"I already told you once about meeting my friends," Torthard said. I resisted the compulsion to attend my aunt right away. My head was starting to pound. "Morn was the mother of Enned, the witch of Torthard. There are many witches who do not wish the Kingdom to be in thrall to Orissiana, to have their every thought monitored and their minds destroyed if

they only help their counties survive against the depredations of the Grey Men."

I began to jiggle and my dress began to shake about me, its touch making me feel so womanly, as I sat there, held by Torthard, with him staring at me.

"What is it?" asked Torthard suddenly, alarm in his face, dropping my hands as if I was inflicted by some disease. "Why are you so cold and twitching like that? Are you ill?"

I shook my head, lifting my shaking hands to my blonde ringlets. "It is my aunt," I whispered to him. "She is seeking me out. She bespells me each day with controllers." Torthard stared at me blankly as I pulled the pins out of my hair and let it fall in a wild cascade about my face.

"She is on her way here," I managed to utter. I picked up straw; my hands shook violently as I fought her for control of myself. I tried to throw the straw over myself but I could scarcely manage it.

"She, she is very, very angry," I forced myself to murmur. Torthard stared at me with horrified eyes.

"You cannot tell her what I said," Torthard said, staring at me as I threshed the straw about me. I pulled on the laces of my bodice as he went on about having said too much to me.

"Then help me convince her you said nothing about your friends," I hissed. I put out a hand to him and pulled him towards one of the stalls that was filled with loose straw. "She knows I am with you."

Concern filled his eyes. Then he realized what I was trying to do as I fell away from him into the straw.

Torthard lay down suspiciously beside me. "If you are just doing this to tantalize me..." he said angrily as he gingerly put an arm about my waist. The thrill I felt as he touched me enabled me to counteract what my aunt was commanding me to do, to attend her immediately.

"M-Muss me up," I stammered at the Count, sinking into the straw. I could sense that my aunt was staring at the barn from across the alley, learning where I was and I couldn't stop her.

"Muss up my clothes and my lip gloss," I forced myself to say to Torthard in desperation. "She is about to storm through the door and she has Grey Men with her."

I raised my head and pulled him to me. He kissed me, though he didn't want to. But, oh, as he kissed me, I felt him all through me. I felt such intense and thrilling pleasure that I was able to push back at my aunt and command her to stop. She did, in absolute surprise, as her men rattled the barn door. Torthard jerked as he heard that.

"Oh, gods," Torthard said. He put his hands about me then and possessed my mouth as wonderfully as he had days when he had hoped to get out of being one of the suitors for my hand in marriage.

I struggled to open my dress. His kisses sent such thrills through me that I began to wiggle uncontrollably. Torthard felt what I was doing and released me from the top of my dress, pulling it down. My breast fell into his hand. Almost without thinking, he caressed it. Wonder of wonders, I was aroused immediately. My breast stiffened and my nipple hardened. I pressed myself into him and kissed him as wildly as I possibly

could, feeling my aunt giving orders to others to break into the barn.

I opened the front of my lover's shirt and pants. Well, I touched them and Torthard pulled them open, their ties snapping, and so my aunt caught us in the throes of passion. I knew it wasn't the same for Torthard as it was for me. I clung to him and didn't care who saw me with my breasts and hair loose, writhing in the straw, loving every touch of his strong, masculine body. I had covered his shirt, his face and his mouth with my lip gloss so no one could say that I was being seduced against my will.

What my aunt said as Torthard guiltily struggled to his feet, straw falling from all over him as if he had swum in it, was very clear. "Well, Count Torthard, I do believe that you have countered Count Berrit's proposals to marry my *niece*." It was incredible how she accented that last word, making it clear to both of us she knew that we knew it was untrue that I was her niece. "I shall expect you to send to the Queen at Hillaire right away that I have accepted your proposal to marry my niece and that we shall hold a betrothal ceremony at the Palace in a tenday's time.

"Come, my darling," my aunt said to me and I could sense her amusement through our link. "Once we have tidied you up, we must visit Mistress Ceseen's establishment in the Merchant's Quarter. She has just received some new fabrics and colors from Hillaire, off a Seafarer ship from a year ago. I think you know the one. I want only the finest materials to be used for you in your betrothal dress."

Torthard didn't look at me as he staggered up and away out of the barn. The intense Grey Men, staring at him, swords drawn, probably had a lot to do with his

silence. He couldn't feel my aunt's command as I could, I sensed in wonderment, not knowing how I could be doing that. She was smugly telling her minions to threaten the Count but not to touch or harm him in any way.

"So, what did you and the Count talk about," Aunt Rissa asked me after a crestfallen Count Berrit left Birchwood almost in tears after being informed that I had accepted another nobleman's proposal. I had been brushed down most thoroughly by Maris and Algoth, summoned from my aunt's house to do that at the broken doorway of the barn.

I swayed as I walked on my aunt's arm, remembering how Torthard's arms about me had felt so marvelous.

"What we talked about?" I asked her with a giggle, giving her as arch a look as I could. "Well, he didn't approve of me sitting and flirting with Berrit, which I wasn't doing anyway. He said that he had something in the barn that he wanted to show me. I'm so silly, I actually thought it was a horse, some kind of palfrey that he wanted me to ride. We were talking about that when we entered the barn. I was just asking him where the horse was, then he kissed me. I don't think that we talked about anything then for quite a while."

"You do understand what might have happened," Aunt Rissa said, hardly able to stop the laughter from coming out of her mouth. "If you had surrendered to Lord Torthard, he would not have been controlled. He would have known that you, my beautiful niece, have a little more in the way of equipment than a girl should have."

"Do you think it would have bothered him?" I asked ingenuously. My aunt stopped, pulled on my

arm and looked at me, aghast. "Oh, I do understand, Aunt Orissiana," I told her with a knowing smile of my pink, pretty lips. I swished my skirts and let her know by my girlish actions that I knew exactly what I had been doing, playing with fire.

"It will be such a pleasure," I murmured confidentially to my amazed aunt, "to have that man entirely under my control, milady. I hope you will let me have something really refined for my wedding night. I really do wish to have my husband so besotted with me that I can pay him back for every insult I endured on my journey to you from Febry's Inn."

Images of Torthard eating from bowls on the floor like a little puppy came to my mind. I tried to send them on to my aunt but the connection between us seemed to be fading.

"Perisord," said my aunt thoughtfully. "After we return from your betrothal to Count Torthard, we shall go there and I will show you how you can help me." She sighed. "I don't think you will be settling down in Quarrence or other foreign parts after all. Still, being the Lady of Torthard is a wonderful thing to be. It's amazing! I can hardly believe it that, you, my niece, is going to be a married woman before Winterfest!"

I quivered at that all through the measuring I had to succumb to, in Mistress Ceseen's store. I had to strip to panties, breast bands and garter belt for the seamstress who then had me remove my breast bands and delicately caressed me as she measured me.

"You must not sleep with this lover of yours," Mistress Ceseen said, slapping me on my exposed rump. All the soft flesh I had put on, under the influence of ganasate, wobbled a little. "I do not wish to have to

change my designs to accommodate a sudden weight increase that will continue for another nine months."

"That will not be a problem for a niece of mine," said my aunt as Mistress Ceseen pointedly brushed away a stray piece of straw that had worked its way into my underclothing. "She knows how to maintain her figure, I assure you. There will be no unforeseen accidents, mistress."

"I have seen too much," said the old seamstress darkly. She stroked me with soft, pudgy fingers that made goose bumps rise on my smooth skin, especially when she played with the garter belt over my panties and inner thighs. "The young girls come and before the betrothal is even made, they are back to ask me to let out their dresses. Girls these days, the pretty ones," she sniffed at me, "have no morals. They might as well be catamites, the way they allow their men to have them. And yet still they get pregnant."

"Not Lady Sherrene," said my aunt. I felt so humiliated again by the laughter that I sensed was threatening to engulf her at my predicament as the seamstress played with my panties, 'to make them fit better.'

"Yes, I know she felt you indecently," said my aunt as I stalked indignantly beside her. "Ceseen used to be a whore when she was young and pretty and you know how some whores are together. Ceseen has never learned to control her desires. But she will make you a lovely dress, my beautiful niece. Your betrothal to Count Torthard will amuse the whole country. Believe me."

It seemed that half the Kingdom was present in Hillaire for my betrothal to Count Torthard. I guess it was because I had become so notorious. I found people watching me everywhere I went. I didn't have to be a witch to figure out what they were looking at. I was studied and studied as noble and commoner alike tried to figure out whether I was a man or a woman.

Even the fact that one of the leading Counts of the Land had agreed to marry me did not stop the conjecture. I knew it all because Master Ismar, the owner of the house on the Street of Apothecaries, made sure that I learned it all in the gossipy sessions I spent with him while my aunt went about whatever business she had to attend to in the capital city.

Torthard I didn't see at all until I was ensconced in my light blue and white dress. My hair was twisted into an elaborate design featuring a small, blue hat and the feathers of a dozen birds, thanks to the work Algoth took with the hat and my blonde, feminine hair.

"Oh, my lady," gushed Ismar as I stepped gingerly down his main staircase and out into the waiting carriage to take me to the Palace. The pages he had hired scurried forward to take up my long train which they worked over the back of the open carriage. Yes, it was open and I was paraded through the city like any other young girl going to be betrothed to a powerful, rich Count.

Maris and Algoth arranged my petticoats so that I did not sit and crease any part of my long, fanciful dress. It wasn't strapless but it could have been as the straps over my arms were so thin as to be invisible. My breasts were prominently displayed, a tight gathering under them from which flowed long, delicate, light

blue panels while the white bodice beneath clung to me.

I wore long white gloves and my cosmetics were intense and exaggerated, or so I thought. My beauty was seen by everyone, even those all the way across the Great Square in front of the balcony where Count Torthard would accept me as his betrothed and set the day on which he would marry me.

My earlobes seemed to be about to fall off under the weight of the earrings I had to wear. Gold is so heavy. The necklace I wore was heavy as were the rings and bangles I had on, making the wealth of the Perisord family very evident.

One of the by-products of the betrothal I was to undertake was that Count Osgard had come to a financial settlement of my claims against him. He owed me a fortune as did my aunt. She knew that I must have hidden away the golds I had stolen from Count Osgard. If I let on where they were, I had no doubt she would have gotten them away from me and secreted somewhere in Birchwood where her own fortune, the fortune she had stolen from my mother, resided.

I kept a fixed smile on my face as the sun beat down on my golden hair. I blinked and thick black bats seemed to fly in front of my eyes. I could almost hear the conversations about me. I was flushing beneath my makeup but I only sat up more elegantly and waved. My aunt, following me in her own carriage, had insisted that I must do that frequently.

At the Palace, I had to cross the whole square with my pages holding up my train, moving slowly in my special, white flimsy high heels. I walked between the assembled nobles in their finest clothes. None, I think, outglittered me in my wonderful dress.

A Chanter greeted me at the steps of the entranceway to the highest tower of the King's Castle. At the top, a small boy and his mother awaited me. Larussa, Queen Regent of the Baract Kingdom, greeted me as I teetered up the steps in my high heels, making me pause while Lara greeted me with kisses on my cheeks. Then she introduced me to her son, King Kennen.

My gossip, Ismar, had told me Kennen was being called the Usurper as it was obvious that Prince Tathally should have succeeded his brother as King. Prince Tathally resided in the same tower where I had been cast into a dungeon after Tatheren had died with me in his bed. By all accounts, it was an easy imprisonment, one that he shared with a Seafarer maiden who had returned with him from his brief exile in the Inner Isles.

Ismar related to me how lovely the young maiden was and how much the Prince was besotted with his mistress. "You have the Seafarer looks," Ismar told me admiringly. "Prince Tathally is so taken with blonde hair and blue eyes that I'm sure he would have made you a proposal if he could. We did get his card here, you know, after Lady Sherrene's Ball, one of the first actually."

"Perhaps Tathry will soon be betrothed himself, to Nikki," I said but Ismar refused to rise to the bait.

"Prince Tathally can't do that," Ismar scoffed at me. "He's royal. He will have to marry dynastically. Which is why he should have married you, your Aunt Orissiana's niece. Nikki is very pretty and she'll be his mistress, for sure. It's what his grandfather used to do. Had mistresses in every great city of the realm."

I looked down and smiled at the young lad at the top of the stairs leading out to the ceremonial platform. He wore a white satin suit and could be seen anywhere across the great square.

“You’re pretty,” Kennen said, beginning to cough then. His mother came firmly over to him to urge him not to talk and tire himself.

“I don’t know why he’s so ill all the time,” said Larussa, her eyes narrowing as she looked at me and the dress I was wearing. There was almost envy in her eyes as she looked at my elaborate hair, long gloves and heavy jewels.

I sensed what was wrong with the King. My aunt clearly held the life of this child in her hands. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell Larussa that if she wanted the child to live she should move him far away from witches. But then I sensed the same aura from her that I had sensed on the King. It might have been my aunt who was supplying the concoctions to keep the little boy sickly but it was clearly the Queen who was actually applying them to her own son.

I went up onto the dais on the arm of the Royal Chanter then and, suddenly, there was the Count of Torthard, coming forward, with a fixed smile on his face. His eyes slitted as he looked at me. I wished I could explain to him that I didn’t want to do this any more than he did. But I hadn’t been allowed to see him or speak to him since the scene in the hay barn, a scene that everyone, especially Ismar, my gossip, knew all about.

“It’s so nice to be betrothed for love,” Ismar had enthused. “And to a young man as well. All the girls as pretty as you usually marry old, rich men in their first marriages. There were a lot of people after your Ball,

milady, who thought that Count Osgard would be your husband. He seemed to be completely enchanted with you at the Ball.”

The Chanter kept us apart and led us out onto the dais that overlooked the nobles below us. The horns and singers on the towers about us proclaimed that Lady Sherrene Perisord, me, was about to be betrothed. Any who still wished to contest should draw forth and challenge the groom.

It had been a great scandal, years and years ago, when a young man had done just that and challenged the eighty-year old, doddering, rich Count Mellit, his grandfather. The old man had been enraged and refused a champion, being killed by his grandson who then tried to be betrothed to the girl for whom he had killed his grandfather. But his own father hired a champion to oppose him and so the young Mellit was killed in his turn, never marrying the girl he called his one true love. Now the challenge was just a formality of the betrothal proceedings.

I was paraded to each corner of the balcony and challengers were exhorted to come forth and claim me. If I had been dressed as a man, I would have thought twice, no tenfold, before I challenged the Count of Torthard on the day we became betrothed. He looked so strong and determined, with an air of danger about him. I know that I could never have faced him in combat.

I shivered through the rituals, the binding of our wrists together, followed by our walk, arm in arm among the nobles of the realm. Women I didn't know at all came up to hug and kiss both my cheeks while men clapped Torthard on the shoulder and told him what a lucky man he was.

No one told me what a lucky man *I* was. References to my gender were carefully phrased I noticed but several did gush that they hadn't known before how gorgeous a woman I really was.

We served the betrothal feast to the guests in the Great Hall, starting with the King, then the Queen Regent. A faint aroma of annovare permeated the enclosed space so spirits improved.

Torthard noticed the way everyone was smiling after the seriousness of the earlier rituals. "Your doing?" he asked me, the first unforced words he had addressed to me.

"Yes," I told him, though it was my aunt who had supervised me in assembling the compound in the kitchen the last few days. "A simple compound in the air to make everyone feel so much better about themselves. I think that you'll see this party become very lively now."

It did. We had to unbind our wrists as so many people wanted to dance with us. It was Lady Sherrene's Ball all over again, only this time, it was Lady Sherrene's Betrothal. This time, I was kissed only on the cheek by the men to whom I curtsied before I danced with them.

Finally, as candles were extinguished and guests' carriages arrived, I was able to say to Torthard, "I'm sorry for all this. As soon as I've been to Perisord with my aunt, I will set you free from this terrible ordeal I've put you through."

"Perisord?" Torthard said through gritted teeth that he forced into a smile. "You cannot go there," he mumbled. "I will not permit my betrothed to go there."

I had to smile at that, sensing my aunt watching me closely. "Why not?" I asked him in a friendly, lilting tone. "It is the birthplace of my mother and ..."

"If you go there," said Torthard sharply. "You will be like everyone else who has tried to enter that accursed place. You will be dead."

I smiled, as if he had made a clever joke. My aunt was still staring at me. "It's just to look the situation over," I smiled, parroting my aunt's words.

"I don't intend to lose my betrothed in some ghastly fashion," said Torthard cruelly, "especially since we are not married yet."

"Oh, we're not going to do that," I told him.

"Tell that to her," said Torthard out of the side of his mouth as my aunt moved determinedly up to us.

"Now, Torthard," she said most pleasantly. "Why don't you head to your own estates for a while? I'm sure that the Queen Regent has kept you in our service for far too long. I think the last day of the second tenday after Harvest is a perfect day to wed. I will bring my niece to you then at Torthard. There will be a long cold Fall and Winter to follow. They will keep you cozy and indoors so that you get to know each other intimately and well."

"Oh, I want to see my betrothed a lot before then," said Torthard. He stared my aunt down as few men had ever tried to do. "I intend to visit her at Birchwood very soon."

"I hope we will be home," said my aunt stiffly to my betrothed.

Torthard bent over my hand then to kiss it. I was forced to curtsy to him.

“Look for me on the third day of your return,” Torthard whispered as he lifted me and leaned forward to kiss my ear.

A thrill went through me as Torthard whispered to me. I glanced at my aunt but she had turned to attend the Queen Regent who was approaching. Feeling highly exhilarated, I nodded briefly to my betrothed, who left us then with something akin to rudeness to my aunt.

“You are right about Torthard,” Orissiana said as we went in a single, closed carriage to return to Ismar’s. “He does need to be taken down several notches. You will have the full knowledge of how to tame a man like that as soon as we get home to Birchwood.”

My aunt then closeted in her dark room for the first three days of our arrival back at Birchwood. I was bathed and re-bathed, clothed and re-clothed by the maids, Maris and Algoth. My hair was teased into fanciful shapes, most of which involved piling it high. Masheen controlled the way Algoth’s creations appeared.

I was paraded in time in front of my aunt in my new silk dresses and extravagant hairstyles. I wore makeup of different styles as well, creating Russet and Seafarer looks as well as Malesian for my aunt.

Aunt Rissa was most pleased with off-the-shoulder dresses and the corsetry I wore. My waist was pinched in terribly and my chest manipulated by the strengthened breast bands of the body shapers I was forced to wear. I must say that I loved the touch of the silver of gold tasselled earrings I often wore. My aunt loved them on me as well.

“Such a beauty,” Orissiana smiled at me, putting out a hand and caressing my earrings as I stood before her in my lovely gowns. I felt delightfully feminine and I wondered how she was controlling such feelings in me. I was certain she was as I enjoyed being paraded time after time to my aunt’s room to be praised.

“Oh yes,” said my aunt with a conspiratorial wink. “You will break Torthard’s heart when he sees you in gossamer white. This is the dress you *must* wear when you are his bride.”

“But...” I began, biting my lip. I almost revealed to her that I was never going to be Torthard’s bride. I knew that she was planning to take me to Perisord in a tenday. She had been very snappy with a minion from Mistress Ceseen who had said that her mistress had many creations the Queen insisted she give priority to.

When the slack-jawed woman fled from the house, I heard the girl muttering, “Must be by New Moon; must be by New Moon.”

Aunt Rissa had come from her dark room then; the aromas that drifted to me of terogal fortifying and Grey Man controllers were mixed with others, like ferrase and collane and some sharp, metallic traces I had noted in the communications device I had destroyed.

“You will have your bridal trousseau ready by New Moon,” my aunt had said and I had noted the brief lines on her face. I also sensed primroses which she never emitted normally. I almost heard my mother laughing at me as she explained that she knew those who lied to her because they gave off odd odors, fragrance-like perfumes, that were not normally associated with them

“Then we go to Perisord?” I asked her and my aunt went very still.

“Maybe we’ll go to Torthard first,” Aunt Rissa said, looking at me critically while the aroma of primroses increased. I wondered if she could smell it herself. “I’m thinking that I need to teach your young man a lesson or two.”

The fragrance died. I shivered in the dress that pushed my breasts forward, making them appear twice the size they really were.

“Oh, yes,” said my aunt in delight when she studied how I was dressed, beckoning me to come to her. She ran her hands over my bare shoulders, then over my chest. I shivered under the caress. “Now this body shaper works perfectly for you. And this black lace makes you appear *so* desirable. Poor Torthard is not going to have a chance with you, not with the special lovebane cordial I am producing for him.

“You do want him to know, don’t you, how he is being used?” Aunt Rissa asked me mockingly. I nodded as I smiled. “You should be able to hold him aroused and have your way with him.” She hesitated. “And I also have a special treat for you. It’s what I give Maris and Algoth that binds them to pleasing me and doing exactly what I want them to do. It should work on a man as well. You shall be the first one to try it out for me on your wedding night.”

The smell of primroses returned. I shivered and hoped for Torthard to arrive soon so I could warn him. But he didn’t come though I looked for him every few minutes of that long third day at home with my aunt.

I finally went to bed in one of my prettiest, dark red nighties, my panties of the same material. My hair was

in tight golden braids and red ribbons as I went to sleep fitfully. Torthard didn't have to tell me he was coming if he hadn't intended to. It was wrong of him but I couldn't blame him.

I thought I was dreaming at first when I sensed him beside me. I felt his arms about my almost naked body, my nightie rising and exposing my legs. Torthard lifted me out of my bed as if I weighed almost nothing at all.

XXXVI. A WITCH'S REALIZATION

I lifted my arms about his neck, lifting my mouth to my dreamy Count Rebern Torthard. His fragrance was as clean and dry as always. "I was so ready for you to come today," I murmured and put my lips on his.

It was then that I felt a charge go through me as his lips pressed back firmly on mine. It wasn't a dream, I realized as his lips sent sensations through me. I felt his hand under me on my bare leg, turning my body into him. The light material of my dress fell down to expose the panties I was wearing.

"Shush," Torthard whispered to me. "Don't say anything."

I shivered and clung to him as he carried me out of my bedroom, down the hallway and across the ante-chamber to the main doorway. I had tiptoed before along this same route but had been brought back by the guardian of my aunt's house. I tried to ask Torthard about him but he shushed me again.

I sensed several strange scents about him then. Carpare, the antidote to lovebane and several controlling compounds I recognized but there were others, intriguing neutralizers, that had clearly worked to allow

him to enter my aunt's house, which would have to be the most guarded and protected in the Kingdom.

Torthard carried me into the woods behind my aunt's place. He stopped in a clearing and put me down. My back touched a pack that had been hung from a tree against which he leaned me. He put his hands on my shoulders as I shivered in the cold. There was only starlight to see by so I couldn't make out his face very clearly but I could sense that he was looking down at me.

"Enned, my witch, prepared me," Torthard said in a very low voice. "She's worried that I am casting away my friends on a fool's errand but I cannot let you go into Perisord for your aunt."

"Why?" I hissed at him. My femininity disturbed him and, before he could reply, the thing in the woods that had jumped on me when I had tried to escape before, jumped out of the trees onto both of us. I was flung to one side as whatever it was, man or beast, hurled Torthard to the ground.

Torthard fought back angrily but I could sense that he was losing as blows ripped around his head. Torthard seemed to be trying to shield himself but the thing, it was definitely man-shaped, was biting and kicking as well as swinging his arms. Torthard seemed to be failing.

I took the pack from the tree and swung it at the thing on Torthard. I didn't hurt it but I distracted it. Torthard, with a grunt, rolled and hurled the figure off him. I heard the slap as Torthard pulled something from a leather scabbard. The man, it was a man, a silver-haired man, stood up and leapt forward at Torthard. The man's feet came up in a maneuver I had

seen many a time on a Seafarer ship as a man came down from the riggings.

I smelled the salt and the terogal fortifier my aunt used. There was another aroma as well, that of water roses, the perfume that my mother had used.

Torthard fell under the kick and the silver-haired man sat on Torthard's back, pressing his face into the dirt. The silverhair turned his head to me as I swung the pack at him again. He grabbed it and effortlessly tossed it from me.

I flung myself at him and was clasped in a strong arm and thrust down beside the groaning Torthard. My face was up to the man who held me down so effortlessly. "Geryat!" I cried desperately. "Geryat, the Lady Airene says you are to stop. Lady Airene says you are to stop. Geryat!"

The pressure on the arm holding me relaxed. I think the Seafarer, I was sure the man-thing of the woods was one, must have lifted a knee for suddenly Torthard erupted, rolling the man over. His knees pinned the now struggling Seafarer. Torthard's arm reached down into his boot. There was a dull glint in his hand as he raised his arm to bring his knife down on the silent, struggling man beneath him.

I couldn't let him kill my father. A sob came from my throat as I grabbed at Torthard's arm, deflecting his aim so that his blade went by the man's head below him. His elbow landed in the creature's neck. The man gurgled as he wriggled but Torthard held him down.

"Geryat! Geryat!" I called to the creature and it stiffened again. "Lady Airene says stop! Airene says stop!"

"What is this?" asked Torthard, grunting as he struggled to control the man beneath him.

“I think he’s my father,” I told him. I shuddered as I realized, that if it was true, then my aunt had betrayed my mother over the years in a manner I could not even fathom, so despicable a treachery had it been.

“In my pocket,” muttered Torthard. “To control you if you hadn’t wanted to come willingly with me.”

I reached in, took the scarf and the honey aroma rose up to greet me. But it wasn’t a honeybane like I made as a controller. This was subtly different. I had little time to think about what it would have done to me as I pressed the compound down on where I thought Geryat’s face, if it was him, would have been.

He knew he was being bespelled. He thrashed wildly. I held the scarf in his face as he swung his head from side to side. I told him to stop. Geryat, if it was him, only seemed to get stronger. He hurled Torthard from him, picking up the knife as Torthard was thrown aside. I pressed with all my might. Geryat wavered a little just as Torthard hit his head on the tree. He was completely defenceless as the seaman stood over him with the short sword in his hand.

“Stop, Geryat!” I shouted forcefully to him. “Airene and her child say to stop!”

The silver-haired figure swayed as I kept saying it over and over again. Torthard pulled himself free and stood, tottering himself, as I repeated over and over again that Airene and her child said to stop.

Torthard picked up the pack and came to me, his arm protectively going about my bare shoulders. The Seafarer didn’t make any moves save to stand there. It was a shock when he suddenly dropped the sword.

“Gods,” murmured Torthard. “You’re controlling him.”

“Not well,” I told him. “Can you see the house from here? He has some way of calling to Algoth or Maris, or possibly my aunt.”

Torthard looked at me, took his hand from me, and I felt bereft. By the way he stood I guessed that he was silently questioning how I knew that as well as silently berating himself for putting his arm about another man.

“He’s captured me before,” I told him anxiously, “when I tried to escape from here.”

“Gods,” muttered Torthard again.

“If only I was armed with my own potions,” I gasped. My father began to sway, fighting the compound we had smothered him with. If I didn’t stop thinking about Torthard and what I wanted my betrothed to do to my thinly veiled, feminized body, my father was going to break free of me.

“In here,” said Torthard, reaching down and handing me back the pack. “Everything you had with you when we took you at Febry’s Inn. I made sure that Larussa didn’t get her talons on anything witchy, I can assure you. There are clothes for you as well.”

My father rocked back and forth. I shivered and took off my nightie, all the time telling him to stay still and obey only Airene and her child. The child was clearly the key as he seemed to jerk and go still as I said that.

It was dark so I didn’t expect that Torthard could see me as I put on clean breast bands, soft underclothing and what by its feel was my grey dress. The slippers were better than nothing for walking.

“You are slimmer,” said Torthard out of the darkness. “I had forgotten how womanly a shape you have.

Will I ever see you without your panties, do you think?"



A flash of hostility went through me as I set the ties on my dress. Almost in response, my father, Geryat, took several steps into the clearing towards where Torthard had moved to look back along the way we had come.

“Whoa!” exclaimed Torthard. I concentrated and my father went still again.

“Don’t block my concentration with your insults,” I snapped at him, feeling womanly again as my dress clothed me properly.

“Sorry,” muttered Torthard. “And I think that you are right about, about your father, if that is what he is, communicating with the house. I see lights that way that weren’t there before. I think someone is coming this way. Let’s get going.”

I pushed my nightie into the almost empty pack. I burst a honeybane balloon over my father and said, “Come,” softly, with as feminine a smile as I could muster. He came after us as a shivering Torthard took the pack from me.

“You can’t bring him with us!” stated Torthard harshly. He reached for my arm to guide me through the trees after him.

“I’m not leaving him for my aunt,” I told Torthard. I felt a pain welling up inside me as I thought of what had been done to my father and mother by my aunt. I wanted to cry like a woman. What other Seafarer would my aunt have put into these woods to extract a revenge so diabolical that it made me sick to think of it? All I could think of was my mother waiting and waiting for her husband to come home.

I thought also of what my father would think of me as well if he recovered enough of his mind to realize I was his son dressed up as if I was his pretty daughter.

We went a fair distance along a winding path. My thoughts were in turmoil, when Torthard stopped me as we went up a little rise. Looking back I could see a light in the middle of the woods. "A-About where we were," breathed Torthard, staring at me again.

There was a thrumming in the distance. "Men-at-arms," Torthard said, taking my hand. I could feel the tension in him. I didn't know if it was at the pursuit or because he was touching me so softly. "I wonder if Orissiana will send Grey Men after us. I hope she does. They can't ride and my commander, Leven, is up over this hill with horses for us. Can you control your father on horseback?"

"I don't know," I told him grimly. I didn't tell him that I was wondering if my father was still broadcasting in some way to my aunt about where he was in her woods. I didn't tell Torthard about the little tickling I had felt in my mind as we climbed the slope. I had felt the same thing in Birchwood when my aunt had searched for me and found me in the barn with Torthard. I swallowed a little terogal, a strengthening potion; the tickle seemed much weaker as I tried to compel it away and into the Pitchfork Inn in Birchwood.

It took us a while to reach the horses. I could sense them long before Torthard, and corrected his directions in the trackless wood so that we came right out on a troop of nervous riders. They became even more nervous when they saw that we had someone else with us, a silent Seafarer.

“Put him on Gela,” said Torthard, referring to a gentle mare that had been my intended mount. “If he doesn’t sit, tie his legs under the horse and his hands to the pommel. Lady Sherrene will ride with me on Toder. He’s the strongest horse we have and my betrothed weighs almost nothing.”

“Thank you,” I said to Count Torthard. It was so comforting to be in his arms. “Thank you for rescuing me and for bringing my father along with me.” I realized that I must sound very feminine and little girlish to him. He would think that I was trying to tantalize him.

Torthard grunted. “We’ll see what Enned says to me about picking up another stray,” he said.

“I seem to have picked up a lot of strays lately in Torthard as well, Enned told me,” the Count went on. I sighed in relief at the amusement I heard in his voice. “I seem to have a travelling company that is prepared to wait till Harvest celebrations to put on its plays. A strange company, my witch tells me, that is averse to anyone actually seeing them in Torthard. Possibly because Uthel’s Company, as they call themselves, is totally unknown to us.”

“I told them to use another name,” I said to Torthard. Now that I had all the things he had taken from me back I would again be able to listen in to my friends and find out how they were. I wondered if they were still keeping to the times we had agreed on for contact.

“It will be so nice to see all the girls again,” I told Torthard. He stiffened and sat up against me as we rode on. “In Torthard, I mean. We are going there, aren’t we?”

“Actually, no,” said Torthard then in a guarded voice. “I think that Torthard would be the very first place that your aunt would look for you, don’t you? She’ll use her potions and witchery on the men I’ve left there, I know it. We are going somewhere else, somewhere that your aunt will not think I would ever go.”

XXXVII. A WITCH’S MEETING

I remembered Lady Starane from her visits to my aunts with the Count of Mustay and the Count of Torthard. I didn’t expect that we would ride far from Birchwood and then double back on ourselves to arrive finally at Lady Starane’s estate, a house I recalled being a guest in with my aunt over a year before.

“Lady Sherrene,” said the older woman, staring at the Seafarer who followed us docilely up the steps and into the foyer of her house. “Do you want that one to be imprisoned? We use the far tower for that purpose.”

“We’ll see, Luray,” said Torthard. “We’ll see.”

“No,” Lady Starane said with a smile to me. “Things are not as they seem, are they?” Her tone surprised me. It was much changed from the imperious, impatient woman who had seemed to tangle with my aunt as much as support her. “We’ve all been playing a part, Torthard tells me.”

“I don’t quite know why Torthard brought us here.” I indicated my silent father.

“Well, where else would he bring his betrothed but to the house of his own aunt?” smiled Lady Starane. “But do we have to be so formal, Lady Sherrene? Surely, you call your future husband Rebern, or do you prefer Reb, as I hear Count Mustay call him on occa-

sion. You may call me Luray. If you want to know the hideous mouthful my mother called me, ask Rebern when I am not within earshot."

She smiled and took me by the arm into her home. My father followed me.

"Oh dear," Lady Starane murmured. "I was going to suggest a bath for you. Does he follow you everywhere?"

"Unfortunately, yes," I said miserably. On the ride, it had been most disconcerting in the bush to find him following me, pushing away Torthard's men, brushing off even brandished swords when all I was trying to do was a little, private female ablution.

Geryat followed me into the bathroom where one of Lady Starane's young maids had drawn a bath for me. "Sit," I told him as the girl fluttered and tried to drive him out. His stillness unnerved her so I was able to get rid of her and bathe alone in wonderfully, fresh-flowered scented water, knowing for the first time since I had been captured by my aunt that I was free from her enchantments and potions.

It was wonderful as always to dress in clean female undergarments. My father's eyes watched me stonily as I cleaned and dried my feminized body. He betrayed no reaction as I put on my panties and breast bands as well as using the limited cosmetics Lady Starane provided me with.

I did have masheen in the pack Torthard had brought me so I was able to brush and comb my hair into a mass of curls that hung down my back. Lady Starane had provided me with a dress that was a little too big for me. I had to belt it tightly about my thin

waist and pad the front a little to get some kind of fit about my neckline.

“I’m like my mother,” I explained to my silent father. “I’m not ever going to be very big in front. You must not be a man fixated on breast size or you would never have loved Airene.”

Maybe it was the words ‘love’ and ‘Airene’ in the same sentence but I felt a tremendous surge in the man who sat across from me at the looking glass table. I fought a battle of wills with him then, soothing him by telling him that Lady Airene’s child wished him to sleep.

I said it but he never did it. “Creepy,” one of the sentries told me as I rolled anxiously from the blankets I had shared with the Count of Torthard, my betrothed. “He never closed his eyes once,” the worried young man told Torthard who looked at me for an answer.

I might have thought that sharing blankets with Torthard, my betrothed, in a dark forest, would be romantic. Nothing could be further from the truth. I had only one dress and I had to sleep and ride in it. I was curled with my back into him for warmth and his heavy arms held me there. We were both tired and sore so I never held up my face for a kiss.

With the squad of riders and the sentries at night watching us, it was perhaps for the best. No point putting ideas in their heads, was there? It would be easier for Torthard to explain later why he had made no moves on me when he finally broke our betrothal. His men would understand that I didn’t excite him. Not in the way that he excited me and tortured me with his presence beside me.

I went into my pack and secreted a few things about me in my dress, bra and panties. I wasn't going to be defenceless in the home of a woman I had thought was my aunt's ally.

Torthard and Lady Starane had been joined by a tall, shapely woman, her dark hair and brown eyes showing off her Malesian ancestry.

"Sherrene," said Torthard, looking at me with almost no expression on his face. "This is Enned, the witch of Torthard, the county that is. This is Lady Sherrene Perisord, my betrothed," he said with a smile to his witch. Yes, it was the brown-eyed, handsome woman who received his favor and not me, Torthard's betrothed. "And the white-haired Seafarer gentleman she believes to be her father, Geryat, by name."

"How interesting," murmured the good-looking woman. Her scrutiny passed from me to my father where her interest seemed to peak right away. "I see the resemblance."

I curtsayed to her. "Lady Enned," I began. I was sure that she was going to say something such as, "Like father, like son." I floated my dress out from my legs, trying to make myself appear more female. I felt my breast bands tightening across my chest and my earrings dancing on my neck. Oh please don't say that I look like the man my father is.

"Oh, I am not noble-born," said Enned, smiling, her eyes remaining on my father as she spoke. "Enned is good enough for me to use as a name by itself."

"I was sorry to hear of your mother," I told her, feeling that this was a woman I would like to get to know. Empathy and warmth seemed to flow out from

her. I sensed the honey and clean aroma of high mountain flowers my mother had favored as well.

"It was a great loss," said Enned, frowning but still staring at my father. Enned breathed in deeply and half-closed her eyes. "Such interesting emanations your Seafarer gives off," she murmured. "But what is that final layering you have imposed upon him to trap his will?"

"I, I call it honeybane," I said nervously, recognizing that this woman had a far greater knowledge of witchery than me. Wishing to impress her with what I had done as a witch, I added, "My, my aunt was using something like this to control me gently. It was in my bathwater all the time. I, I needed to stop those who, who wanted to kill me. I gave it to my, my father to make him come with me. I want to stop controlling him but I'm afraid now of what will happen when I release him."

Torthard's witch turned her intense scrutiny on me. I became aware of all the interesting compounds in her fragrance. I felt strange as she studied my female protuberances. At any moment I expected her to say something about the male essences I must give off that she, a witch, should be able to sense.

"Your aunt gave you a recipe for caravane?" Enned asked me in astonishment. Beyond her, Torthard and Lady Starane were watching Enned with unfeigned interest. I shook my head. I suddenly wondered why I thought this woman could be trusted and took a deep breath myself. Ah, there it was, a trace in the air, something refined and lavender-scented, as if a perfume, *annovare* and something else.

I stepped back, anger rising in me, reaching into the fold of the dress I wore. I felt through the folds where I had hidden my defensive potions.

“Interesting,” said Enned, her eyes gleaming at me. She waved her hand as if to tell me she surrendered to me. “Oh, she is powerful is this witch, Torthard. You are quite right about that. She has detected the paravare, I fear. Please, my dear Sherrene, no poisons or other great agents in your defense. For someone like you, it will be a very easy concoction to master. It is an etherol, my truthseeker. But I believe that your link to your father is causing him distress. Your distrust of me has spread to him.”

Enned was quite right. My father had stepped quietly right up beside me and his hands had balled into fists. His face was intense, his wrinkles deep like crevasses as he stared at the Torthard witch. I thought he was going to pounce on Enned at any moment.

“Geryat, stop,” I told him and he began to shake. I said it again and his intense gaze at the other witch seemed to lessen. He stepped back a pace or two without me telling him to.

Torthard put his arm on the other woman as if to assure her that he would protect her. Bitter sensations coursed through me as I watched him, my man, stroke her.

“So interesting,” murmured Torthard’s witch, smiling wryly at me. “This controller is your aunt’s concoction?”

“My aunt didn’t give me any recipes,” I told her, watching Torthard’s arm squeeze her. Enned raised an eyebrow in astonishment. I could feel that she saw past the cosmetics on my face and my styled hair. I felt ex-

posed and naked under such a piercing glance, glad that I had taped between my legs using what was still stored in my old pack. "My mother gave me some recipes. She used to sing them to me when I was a child."

"So did Morn with me," said Enned, turning and smiling at Torthard looked at me, aware that I was watching his caresses of her. I could sense the affection flowing from him towards this woman. A strange feeling came over me as I saw her reach out a hand and touch Torthard's, smiling to him. He liked to have her touch him, I could tell. It took me a moment to realize what was spreading through me. It was jealousy.

I was jealous of the way Torthard looked at another woman. He mustn't know, I thought miserably, how it hurt me that he touched another woman. He knew what I hoped desperately that she didn't. That I couldn't possibly be 'another' woman. Despite how I looked in the padded dress, I was no woman at all.

"So you put together this, a new version of caravane, this controller, as you called it?" asked Enned softly. She let Torthard's hand go and indicated to me to come to a long dining table and sit beside her.

"I did," I said cautiously, my arms brushing my breasts as I moved with little feminine noises from my dress and shoes. I could sense a wave of female envy passing through me as I tried to lift up my dress and move like a woman to sit beside her.

"Then that aversion potion that makes me so ill to visit the theater company in Torthard must also be made by you?" asked Enned. Torthard moved quickly to take her chair and allow Enned to sit gracefully. I sat by myself, bending gracefully and sweeping my skirts beneath my borrowed panties and stockings. Yes, I must pretend that I was female. If this witch knew that

I was male and a witch, she would attack me, I thought.

“That was to get them all safely to Torthard,” I said. Lady Starane sat on the other side of Enned with Torthard, listening intently and quietly. There was another flare-up inside me of what I now knew was female jealousy. Well, Torthard had never been mine in the first place, despite my status as his betrothed, I tried telling myself. But, oh, it hurt when he smiled so easily at Enned, then regarded me so solemnly.

“Do you know what a rare find you are, Lady Sherrene?” asked Enned suddenly as the girl who had been my maid entered the room with a soup tureen.

I recalled what my aunt had once said to me about poisoning people at a meal and shivered as the soup was placed in front of me. Take the antidote first, had been her final advice. If I only knew what to guard against, I could have done that.

Then I realized I had forgotten my father. Glancing behind me, there he was beside the doorway, sitting on a chair, watching me from across the room.

“I don’t know of another witch, save for my mother and possibly Orissiana, who would have detected paravare as quickly as you did, milady,” said Enned with a smile, following my glance at my father. She nodded in approval as if I had done something well. “I know very few witches, save for your aunt, myself and two or three others, who would actually have the nerve to try to concoct something entirely new.”

Enned was intrigued by everything I haltingly answered to her about me, how aromas led me to figuring out the compositions of my aunt’s concoctions. I mentioned how the destruction of one of my aunt’s

communications devices had given me a new insight into listening to others.

“It isn’t the same as the system I was using aboard *The Tempest*,” I told Enned. “I only learned about vibrating surfaces by accident and I soon wished that I hadn’t when I heard what Anjaro was saying about me to his officers. He wanted all the secrets witches have, such as how to make swamp gas grains and how to control people like the Grey Men.”

“And you can do those things?” gasped Lady Starane. There was something hurried and anxious in her voice.

It was on the tip of my tongue to say, “Of course I can,” when I felt a foot against my leg. Torthard sat opposite me. I said nothing.

“I would like to see your communications device,” Enned said to me with a smile into the uncomfortable pause then. “I wonder if I will be able to hear what you do from your friends in Torthard. I miss not connecting into the Great Ring as often as I used to but Orissiana controls it so tightly these days. I fear every time that I use it or listen in that she will know where I am. She did, after all, make all of the devices that we use for long-range talking. Those that her mother didn’t make for her friends like Morn, that is.”

I wanted to listen in to the theater company I had abandoned when I had ‘surrendered’ to my aunt.

I hadn’t noticed that the Grey Men beholden to Carvy had changed. They didn’t behave as I instructed them to and Torthard and the Queen had captured me so easily. I had been such an idiot, oblivious to the danger coming at me.

I brought out the black, satin cloth from a fold in my dress and took out my carabet necklace. It had been in the pack that Torthard had saved.

I should have thought more clearly. My father leaped across the room and had his hands about my neck, my attempts to control him brushed aside as he tore the necklace from me. Then he stood there, ignoring Torthard. Geryat held my betrothed at bay with one arm while he stared in rapture at the necklace in his other hand.

“What?” began Enned, and several tiny balloons, like the ones I used to carry my own potions, appeared in her hands.

“My father promised my mother,” I said, choking as I saw the way Geryat studied the black pearl at the apex of the double strand of pearls that represented the seven main islands of the Inner Isles out on the Great Ocean. “He promised her that he would return with a necklace like this, a different pearl for each of the islands, a seven pearl necklace. The letters of their names make up the name, carabet.”

“Interesting,” said Enned, moving up then within reach of my father. “Perhaps you should let him keep it for a while.”

“I would,” I told her, “but for the fact that the black pearl he is studying so intently is the one I was using to receive messages from Sarlie, Mithera and Choni.”

Then I heard Hope’s voice clearly through the pearl. “Oh, milady, milady, milady,” she was saying; I think that she was sobbing. “If you can hear me, milady, I must tell you how much we all need you now, milady.”

My face must have gone white. Torthard was the first to notice.

“What is it, Sherrene?” Torthard said sharply to me.

“Shush,” I said to him, putting my hands about my father’s while all the time he stared at the necklace.

“Hope, one of the actresses in the group, is talking to me.”

“That little buzzing?” asked Enned, leaning in and staring at the pearl as if it might be heard more clearly by doing that. “That buzz is someone talking to you. Interesting.”

“Oh, milady, milady,” Hope was going on. “I don’t know how to tell you but they’ve taken Choni, milady. It was Nikki, milady. She was here with a troop of riding men with orange plumes as devices on their surcoats. Nikki was stepping out of a carriage as Choni was leaving a seamstress shop. Hedward wasn’t with her and she wasn’t wearing a treated cloak. No one has ever questioned Choni, as you know. Fee came running back to tell us and we’re all in a quandary. Hedward’s gone, looking for Choni. Sarlie doesn’t know if we need to move somewhere else. No one knows what to do, milady. We need you here. Oh, here’s Retter.”

Briefly, I told my concerned audience what was going on in Torthard.

“Gods and goddesses!” snapped Torthard in dismay. “I knew that Prince Tathally was moved from Hillaire before we left our betrothal ceremony but I didn’t know where. It must be some plan of your aunt’s, hatched before she even planned to have you go up to Perisord.”

“Hope only mentioned Nikki,” I said, wondering why Hope wasn’t talking still. “She would have said if

Prince Tathally was with Nikki.” But thinking on it, it would have been Nikki that the former members of the crew of *The Tempest* would have recognized first, not a foreign prince.

“Where the mistress is, so you’ll find our silly princeling,” said Torthard in disgust. The look that he gave me then made me shrink inside. I was so silly to be sitting there in my low-cut dress, trying to act like a woman while the man opposite me didn’t care whether I did or not.

“That has to wait, my love,” murmured Hope. I realized she had been kissing Retter. I didn’t tell Enned about Hope and that she was, in fact, a man, like me. Her voice was lilting and feminine. She had a feminine figure and she and Retter had been living together as man and wife, last I had heard from her.

“You’re trying to get a message out to milady?” asked Retter in his strong, baritone voice. Beside me, Enned gasped, having heard that one message at least.

“Yes,” murmured Hope, sounding fearful that she would be overheard.

“Gallern,” said Retter, ‘the cousin I left in charge,’ said Torthard as I repeated Retter’s words to him, “has closed the town and detained Hedward. There was a big fight and Hedward was smacked around a bit. Of course Hedward’s crazy that Choni’s been captured and driven off somewhere out the west gate.

“Gallern says that the apprentice witches here will send a message to the Count and the Count will get back Lady Sherrene’s maid, milady. Gallern wants to know so much that I can’t tell him, milady, if you’re listening to me. He told me that you’re betrothed to the Count now. I think he’s trying to do his best here in a

situation no one planned for. He wants us to stay put and I think we should.

“But why was Nikki here in Torthard, milady? And who’s got Choni and what do they want her for? We’re all in shock, milady. Everything’s been going so well here.

“We haven’t performed a play yet. Gallern’s men saw us practicing just once and he came round and told Sarlie that we couldn’t use women on stage. Sarlie, the idiot, said that we didn’t. We were a regular company. Gallern wanted to meet the actresses, of course. He met Grace and Lace and wouldn’t believe Sarlie that they were actresses, not women.

“So we’re in a bind, milady. Sarlie says you left him enough gold to get us past the winter so that we shouldn’t worry. He’s gone off with Mithi to try to get Hedward set free but Gallern’s determined to hold Hedward and his harquebus which has got the girls upset but they don’t say why.”

I heard Hope say that that was enough and that they should talk to me later. It would probably be late at night when I was listening in anyway.

“I didn’t want to make them hear me,” I told Enned, Torthard and Starane, regretting not doing that now. “I was certain that my aunt would overhear me and I wouldn’t know.”

“Don’t worry,” said Enned with a smile. “Asony and Byne know how to send me messages over the Great Ring. The first thing any teacher gives her students is the code she wants to use for private messages.”

I felt like such an idiot. Of course, there would have to be something like that. I had listened in on the Great

Ring, as Enned called it, and heard a babble of voices. Of course, there would have to be something behind the inane messages of babies, livestock and lovers' quarrels that I heard over the device I had taken from Mithera and which still worked.

Lady Starane went to get something in the kitchen organized. "It will be a long night, I think," she said, watching anxiously as my father sat where we put him, running the pearl necklace again and again through his hands.

Torthard was staring at me. I felt hot all over as he seemed to be studying me, comparing my womanly dimensions to those of Enned, a true woman, the woman that he liked more than me, I thought. I tossed my curls and told Torthard about Mithera's coin.

"You have it with you?" Torthard asked, coming about the table and moving a chair beside me. I nodded as Torthard tried to charm me as any man would, by telling me how lovely he thought I was. He said a lot more, telling me how my womanliness put the other women of the estate house in shadow. He loved my dress and the way I looked in it. He couldn't wait, he said with a wry smile, until we were married and he could bed me like the woman I was. I relented to the promise of his smile and the touch of his hand

"It's an open device," I warned him. "Anything we say will be overheard."

"I won't say a word," Torthard promised. I opened up the box that contained what he wanted. I used my long, pink painted nails to open the final black, satin wrapping in which I kept Mithera's coin.

I could hear intense buzzing as if a whole hive of bees was trying to communicate with the queen but all

were saying different things and speaking full out at the same time. If Enned was talking, I couldn't make out which speaker was her.

It was Lady Renneth's voice that I heard at last, shouting in excitement. Lady Renneth, the witch of Terraire, a long way from home, I gathered, communicated to my aunt that she had captured one of the disgusting cabin boys whom my aunt was looking for.

It had been a simple plan, I gathered. I listened to them talk, relating what I heard to Torthard from behind a pretty handkerchief to muffle my voice. Orissiana had sent out Nikki and Prince Tathally separately with different witches to visit all the major towns of what the Seafarers called the Foreshore. Nikki had earned her reward, Lady Renneth said by recognizing one of the women who had come into Malesia with me from Seafarer ships. Could she now use her Grey Men against Torthard? Renneth wanted to know.

"Reduce the town to rubble," said my aunt's voice and I heard squeaks and gasps of shock clearly. I heard many voices raised in protest, a clamoring directed at my aunt to which she replied by repeating what she had said to Lady Renneth.

I could not let that happen.

"My Lady Orissiana," I said clearly into the Great Ring; all noise died away as I spoke. Torthard, not hearing her side of things, looked at me in surprise.

"Ah," said my aunt, her chuckle over the Great Ring network sounding genuine. "So you are truly betrothed then, Lady Sherrene. You won't let Torthard's people be massacred, will you, milady? But I don't need you to run from me a third time, Sherrene. Go

ahead, Renneth. Gather all the troops Larussa has all over the east and raze Torthard to the ground."

"Give me Choni back unharmed," I said to my aunt, my voice rising to a squeak as the Count began to argue with me. "Leave Torthard untouched and I will give you Perisord."

"Hah," said my aunt scornfully. "You know not at all how to do that."

"No," I agreed. "But I do know now why you want me there." I didn't. "You need a witch like me. It's that or I start to make my own Grey Men. We can send armies against each other until we run out of men and women in the Kingdom. When was the last war of witches against witches, Aunt Orissiana?"

There was silence then all along the network.

"Meet me on the border along the Perisord-Birchwood road," snapped my aunt. "Lady Renneth, Queen Larussa, I know you are hearing me. Bring your troops to the same place, Perisord. It is time to find out if my niece is the great witch she tells everyone that she is."

XXXVIII. A WITCH'S TRIAL

"You can't go to her as you are," insisted Enned. Count Torthard stared silently at me. "I don't mean that you must wear more shapely dresses, milady. I mean that you can't go defenceless, Sherrene, if I may call you that. Your aunt won't let anyone near to her with anything like the arsenal I sense you have about you. She will try to trap you again," said Torthard, frowning heavily. "And then, there is your father."

“My aunt wants me,” I said to the others and they didn’t disagree. “She hasn’t said over the Great Ring any of the hurtful things that she could say about me,” such as about the ganasate that I took. “She still wants me to do something for her that she can’t do herself.”

“Orissiana can’t enter Perisord,” said Enned. “None of us witches can.” She shuddered. “There’s something akin to your aversion concoction at work in Perisord. You’ll find that when you get close. It’s painful for me even to look down on the valley. Torthard’s been there and can explain it.”

Torthard looked at me without any expression. “Morn, Enned’s mother, took a number of us young warriors up to the valley. It was easy for us to ride up to the archway, the old tariff station, that sits astride the road. I couldn’t believe how much Morn was suffering as we rode up to the gates. Tears were streaming down her face and she looked as if someone was torturing her.

“We went right up to the gate, then we saw the bodies on the other side of the gateway. Mustay recognized some of the colors, men we had known in the capital, boys, brave boys who had laughed and said that they’d come back rich from the gold that was just laying there, in the old moneychangers quarter, waiting to be scooped up. We couldn’t even scrape up what was left of them.”

Enned looked at me somberly. “Don’t terrify the girl completely, Torthard,” she protested. She came and sat beside me on the sofa I had perched on, opposite my betrothed. Enned hugged me and I took in the full force of her perfume and the antidotes she had smothered herself with.

"Yes, I know," Enned said, smiling into my face from just inches away. "It must seem that I don't trust you." She turned slightly to smile again at a puzzled Count Torthard opposite us. "Lady Sherrene senses my controlling potions against some of the concoctions that were in the pack you gave her, Rebern. I didn't know, you see, what your real intention might be, milady, in joining up with Orissiana."

"I'll never join with my aunt," I told her, feeling uncomfortable as Enned's arm stroked my shoulder and her fuller breastline than mine pressed against me. The femininity she exuded wafted all over me as well, making my own constrictions, at my breasts and between my legs, tighten, reminding me what I was concealing in my panties and the binding I had tried to secure there. Oh goddess, I thought wildly, she was trying to influence me as a woman influences a man. She must know about me!

"If she gains Perisord, Orissiana won't need to gain the knowledge that your grandmother had," continued Enned. Her face was taut and serious as she spoke to me. I could feel her intensity and the way that she was trying to influence me with more than one version of controlling love philtres.

"She would have the wealth of the dead in that blighted county," Enned said fiercely. I shuddered and tried to resist her potions that her nearness imposed upon me. "That would make her as rich as the King. Worst of all, she would have access to what Lady Airene called swamp gas. Such a childish name for something as deadly as collasolane.

"It is supposed to occur naturally in the mines of Perisord which is where your grandmother, Sairissene, got it. There, I've named her and set the Great Ring

echoing, I know. Never name yourself on the Great Ring, Sherrene, or you can be traced by anyone listening in.

“Sairissene recognized what was killing miners in their long, dark tunnels. She harnessed the killing substance and produced a compound to signal its presence in any mine, then had it mined and secured for herself.

“She was the first witch to become a Count in her own right. Count Berrit’s grandfather objected and one of her arbalests blew apart Berritford and the Count. How she was hated then but, after wiping out the great ships of the Seafarers when they tried to set up colonies in Malesia and the Lowlands, Sairissene became the greatest power in the Kingdom of the Baracts.”

“So, why the curse?” I asked.

Enned looked at me in surprise. She shifted uneasily and her hand dropped from my shoulder to take up my feminized hand, letting it rest for a while in her lap. She squeezed it as if that would make me want to favor her opinions.

“Her daughters,” said Enned at last. “Your mother never told you that she disavowed her own mother and ran away to learn witchery from Morn and her followers?”

My mother had never mentioned her mother willingly in my presence. I thought back to my childhood and wondered how I had never noticed how controlled my environment had been. I looked at the attractive woman beside me and saw that she had a sort of glamor about her. Enned was much older than she looked. I saw into her and the changes she had wrought in herself to make herself so beautiful. I remembered how my aunt had said that the first thing a

witch did was to transform herself, as I myself had done so much more radically.

I hoped that the probes that I seemed to sense Enned making were not revealing me to her as she was revealing herself to me. I didn't even know how I was doing it. I seemed to be taking what she was emitting and following the emanations back to the source.

I shook my blonde ringlets at my neck. "Orissiana?" I asked.

Enned stared at me sharply. "She has all Sairissene's worst qualities and only half her talent. She stole the collasolane that was the basis of her power from Sairissene. Your grandfather was killed trying to stop her. Sairissene didn't just put a hex on the county her daughters should have inherited after that. We all know how to do that and how to break such a hex. No, she put on a curse that drove the people out of the county, many of them made mad. Worst of all, the mines were closed and collasolane has been lost to us all."

I wished it was Torthard with his arms about me. I would have loved to have him stroking my hands in my own lap.

My betrothed, however, didn't look at me with love in his eyes as he had on that occasion when we had met outside Terraire. If I closed my eyes, I would have easily been able to conjure up memories of how he had kissed me so fervently and how I had responded in kind. He had completely replaced Cory in all of my thoughts of late.

But now, as I listened to his flat talk about Perisord, I realized that he really had no affection for me at all.

He couldn't have. Not now that he knew from interrogating Nikki that I was not a true woman at all.

I sensed then that Lady Starane had re-entered the room behind me. I snapped a command to my father and he grunted, drawing all the attention as he moved behind me. I saw the look of distress on Enned's face while a muscle in Torthard's chin tightened.

"You can't let me go to my aunt in case I succeed and give her Perisord and swamp gas?" I said lightly, lifting my skirts as I stood up.

"No," said Enned, trying with all her might to control me.

"No," said Torthard huskily, caught in the side wash by some of the powder that Lady Starane tried to fling over me to control me. "We do not want to see you dead."

"Like Sairissene?" I asked him. The two at the table looked at each other; Starane's powders clearly had no effect on me. My father warded her away from me.

"A curse should die when the witch who cast it dies," said Enned intently. A chill ran through me and I felt exactly what I was, a boy in a trembling woman's dress. That was when Lady Starane drew her knife and lunged at me.

My father knocked Lady Starane to the floor.

A weeping Enned got up and ran to Luray, leaving me to face the surprised man to whom I was betrothed.

"My love," said Torthard thickly, holding out his arms to me.

Perhaps Torthard had no hand in Lady Starane's attempt to kill me. But I had to do something before my love for him made me do something really wrong, like

going to bed with him now. I think he would have sacrificed himself to do that, even though he loved Enned more than me, to keep me away from my aunt.

Merenthe, the sleep potion I had copied from my aunt, did the job as I broke one of my few remaining balloons into the air which was already suffused with some kind of honeybane that Lady Starane had flung at me, likely to help Enned control me.

“Oh no!” wailed Enned, succumbing, as did Torthard. He sank to the floor, his hands running down my body, caressing me, pressing my dress about me as he fell.

My father was on his knees, resisting, but the antidote on the dainty pomander I applied to his face brought him back, squinting, to full attention on me.

I used the last of the merenthe I had with me to stun the night guards on the estate gates. My father was useless at getting a carriage ready to travel for me. I couldn't steady him on horseback; the tears I was shedding for leaving Torthard in the arms of a true woman blinded me.

I had no betrothed to hold me lovingly this time in front of him on a long ride, so no saddle horse. I had driven a cart from Terraire to Birchwood before when I left my mother's funeral to travel to my aunt's to deliver dangerous potions to her safekeeping. Then I hadn't had skirts to slow me down, long hair to get in my eyes nor had I been weeping with every high-heeled step that I took.

XXXIX. A WITCH'S CONFRONTATION

One woman of whom I asked directions to Perisord lied to me but I sensed primroses immediately. "Anyone who lies to me as you just have," I told her, "is in trouble." Her stupefied children clutched their heads where Geryat, my father, had clouted them. They shouldn't have lifted clubs and shovels to attack me with. It wasn't worth the reward their unconscious father who had threatened me with a harquebus had proclaimed he would get for me. "Anyone who lies to me," I repeated, "I will curse as only a Perisord witch can curse those who will be forbidden the Grey Fields."

The threat was nonsense. I couldn't forbid anyone an afterlife, if it existed. But my threat did lead me eventually to the right road. I used a fortifier on myself to stay awake; my father didn't seem to need sleep. We didn't stop. We ate in the carriage as we went. My father watched me put bread in my mouth and followed suit. Meat was more to his liking but we quickly ran out of that.

I could sense the Grey Men across the road as we topped a small rise and looked down into a brilliant, green valley. I felt the aversion charm, or whatever it was, coming in waves up the steep road that led down to what seemed to be some kind of structure in the trees. I stopped for a moment and considered.

My father would come with me when I entered that seething torment of a place. I began to tear my petticoats into strips. I soaked them in collane, the cleanser, and honeybane, linking them to me. I placed one in my father's hands where I could reach it and put it on him like a mask when the time came. I backed the carriage a little from the top of the hill.

My aunt came forth from a moving cloud of defensive concoctions and confronted me. As I expected, the Queen Regent was with her. Lady Renneth I recognized, too. There were several others emanating sensitivity as well.

A wall of Grey Men advanced before the protected sedan chairs that carried the witches and their potions into battle. I gave an order to my father. He raised the harquebus and pointed it at Orissiana, her maids and the Queen beside her.

“Make him point it at her!” screamed Larussa, fright clear in her voice.

I smiled as the line of Grey Men faltered, then stopped. The horses I had controlled began to fidget as I concentrated on holding my father under my tightest control.

“You want your maid back?” my aunt called scornfully.

“Why not?” I answered. “Considering what it is you want me to do for you.”

“I give you Nikki as well,” said my aunt, stepping out of her chair. She waved to some of the riders behind the wave of Grey Men. I heard a loud jeering and the ranks of the Grey Men opened. Two figures ran towards me.

I would scarcely have recognized either one of them, not with their shaven heads, their armored breastplates and the fact that neither one wore pants or a dress, their manhoods completely exposed to the elements. They were crying as they ran to me, their hands lashed to the belts they wore.

“Oh, milady,” wept Choni, her cheeks tear-streaked. Despite the way she was dressed, her

thin eyelashes and wide hips made her appear womanly to my eyes. Beside her, Nikki looked at me with a fear as great as that which Choni showed when she looked over her shoulder.

While the riders behind the line of Grey Men and witches jeered and heckled, I wrapped each girl in a shawl and let them climb into the back of the cart where they huddled down together. Choni's lilting voice tried to assure Nikki that she was safe now, and that Lady Sherrene would save her.

"Take a mask from the pack," I ordered Choni. She was quick to do so, not hesitating to pour over the masks the potions I had prepared for the attacks against me.

My aunt came through the ranks then, her two maids beside her. They set up a chair where she sat, for all the world as if she was in her parlor in the house in Birchwood.

I swished my dress about myself and minced up the roadway to confront her. "You didn't have to do that to my maid," I told her.

"If I had been Larussa, I wouldn't have," said my aunt. "I'd have gelded the pair of them and seen if your skill could have saved them or made them into young women like Mithera, or what she is called now, Mithi. A pretty name for a pretty boy, don't you think, Sherri?"

"This will hardly get me to do your work for you," I told her as I looked at her almost black eyes. I didn't doubt that she would do what she had just said she would if I didn't co-operate with her. I had only to look at the state of Choni and Nikki to know what would happen to me if I fell under her control again.

“No,” agreed my aunt with her sly smile. “But I didn’t think that actresses,” she said the word disdainfully, “would give you the incentive I think you need.” She turned her head and waved to someone whom I recognized as Count Mustay, my erstwhile suitor.

Mustay rode up with someone tied and dragged behind his horse. “Don’t struggle so,” he laughed at the man he was dragging. “Never saw a man so unwilling to face his beautiful betrothed, mmm, what is that word, cata, no, that’s not it, not a catamount, surely, not someone so lovely. Ah, but all women are witches at heart, aren’t they, Rebern? And what a woman you have chosen as your own!”

Torthard was catapulted to the feet of my aunt. Mustay was laughing, waving to his men to jeer more loudly as he rode back to them.

My heart lurched as a battered and bleeding Torthard looked up at me. “Well, here he is,” my aunt said, producing great mirth among her supporters. “The man you want to humiliate and bend to your will on your wedding night. And after he rode so long and hard to catch up to you, wanting to save you, Starane says.

“See, Lady Sherrene, I have already prepared him for you. Such a pity that you and Cory, that was who it was, wasn’t it, couldn’t consummate your love because of my sister’s interference. Don’t worry, though, my darling niece. You may have Torthard all to yourself to play with and I won’t interfere at all. I won’t have him gelded like the other pretty boys you created. That was our bargain, wasn’t it?”

I saw Torthard’s jaw tighten. The look he gave me was one of pure hatred. I wondered how I could possibly get him free from my aunt’s clutches.

“But, who knows? Treachery is in the air about Perisord, isn’t it?” said my aunt, softening her voice so that only we two could hear each other. “I will keep your betrothed with me, Sherri, until you have rid the world of my tiresome mother.”

“What makes you think I can do that?” I asked her bitterly, pulling my skirts and my shawl about me, shivering as the air at twilight cooled.

“The curse on the border is aimed at witches,” said my aunt gently. “I would have been in tears if I had topped this ridge. But you stood there and looked down into the valley, didn’t you? Not a tear in sight, not a twitch of the pain that even Lara felt looking into the valley. You even had enough of your senses still with you to control Geryat and block my attempts to coerce you when we moved up on you.”

Orissiana stepped closer then. She spoke in a voice barely above a whisper, the message meant for me alone. “I have aimed you at this place since I realized my nephew was a warlock and what my sister was intending in teaching you and not having you culled.

“Yes, you, Sherrene, can enter Perisord and rid it of its curse by killing your grandmother, whatever is left of her.” Her lip curled. “She must still be alive or the curse would fail. A true witch could not do it. But you, darling Sherri, are not a true witch as we both know. You owe me for making you a woman and a witch, you know. You owe me for the stock of swamp gas I foolishly left behind on Apothecary Street. That stock you stole from me was all the powder left in the kingdom to defend it from Seafarer threats, save for whatever few grains you kept with you.”

Aunt Rissa nodded at the harquebus my father held. “You have that power now, not me, but I must

have it back or our enemies will tear us down. I have my own peculiar tastes, as all witches know, and I am delighted that you have your own unique tastes, as well." I knew that she was the Queen's lover, having found them in bed together. And I could tell by the gleam in her eye that I hadn't fooled her at all in what I had said about Torthard. She knew how much I wanted him as my own true lover.

"We can rule this Kingdom together," my aunt went on. "I think you should be a Queen. Prince Tathally will make a splendid King in name, don't you think? Your wedding will be the event of the year. And you can cuckold him with your handsome Torthard if your inclinations still run in that direction. Think on it, Sherri. A woman with my tastes and you, well, a woman with your tastes, supporting each other. All you have to do is find and kill one ancient old woman. Here, darling, is a token of good will."

The scarf from her neck suddenly darted forward, but it wasn't directed at me. It blew directly into the face of my father. Powerful aromas of healall and heartsease among many others reached my nose.

There was suddenly an awful gasp beside me. The harquebus that my father carried wavered and fell to his side.

If I hadn't been hanging on to control so intently, I might never have known what my aunt had done. I would never have known where the anguish came from as she withdrew what pressure she had kept constantly on his mind for so long. The anguish hit me as hard as it hit my father and I thought I was going to be attacked in the same fashion.

Bitter aloes and brandy wafted into my face, taking me completely by surprise. Queen Larussa, standing

beside my aunt, was holding on to a set of bellows and grinning at me in jubilation as she used them.

"How many pellets of swamp gas do you have left for that harquebus?" asked my aunt.

"Five," I said automatically. I felt the parasane, the truth concoction, working on me. I had never questioned that it was anything but a cordial and had to be given to its victim in a brandy drink because of how it tasted. Even here on the road before the bespelled area I was to enter, I still was finding out how much I had to learn about being a witch.

"Whom do you love the most besides yourself?" my aunt asked me, her eyes glinting at me.

"Torthard," I said in my lilting, little girl voice, fighting to say anything else. I tried to say something else but the compulsion was on me completely to tell her the truth.

My aunt smugly turned her back to me and signalled to two Grey Men, who hauled Count Torthard to his feet. "Don't do it!" the Count called angrily to me. "She'll betray you!"

"Such a sweet man," cooed my aunt, her lilting voice such a contrast to her dark, brooding presence. Her high-collared dress and slim figure dressed in black made her appear very alarming.

But what could I do, surrounded by the ensorcelled men-at-arms that my aunt, the Queen, and who knew how many other witches, had under their control? My father was groaning and rolling his eyes in his head as I eased him back into the carriage. Choni and Nikki stared at him in fright as his body heaved with racking sobs. They tried to lie quiet as I got up on the driver's seat and drove the horses forward, the jeers of

Mustay's riders about my true gender ringing in my ears.

If they got hold of me, I gathered, Mustay and his men would make the humiliation Nikki and Choni had suffered seem like nothing. They yelled out in graphic detail what they had forced the girls, as I still thought of them, to do to them. And for me, it would be worse. I would be abused as if I was a woman.

My aunt was annoyed and gestured to Count Mustay to quiet his men. She succeeded and turned back to speak to me again but I didn't dare to trust myself to more conversation. I could sense the parasites pressing down on my mind like a heavy weight.

I clicked the horses forward and they obeyed me right away. I went over the rise in the hill almost in a gallop even as my aunt was calling after me. I could hear the line of Grey Men marching right after me up the rise, over the hill and down the roadway. I think my aunt was screaming at me to wait but I didn't want to hear any more of her lies or her threats. I didn't want to reveal to her anything I would later regret. I could hear some riders coming after us but I was going very fast. At the last, however, I pulled up as we were about to pass under a wooden archway and enter Perisord proper.

One of Mustay's riders shot past me under the archway and into Perisord. The scream was terrifying as he clutched at his stomach. He pitched from the saddle of his horse which began to buck uncontrollably as it also made weird noises.

"Oh my," I giggled as girlishly as I could at Mustay who had drawn up beside me. I touched my hair femininely. His leering faded right away. "Two such strong men!" I simpered as Mustay and another of his men

climbed onto the front of the cart with me. They stared in horror at their writhing, choking, fellow rider on the overgrown road ahead of us.



“We can’t lose such female beauty to such a lost cause, can we?” asked Mustay grimly. He put his arm about my thin waist, staring down at my breasts, so exposed in the low-cut dress of Lady Starane. He wanted to kiss me, I could tell, so I let him. I hated the way he opened his mouth wide and the way his tongue attacked me right away. His hand slipped inside my low-cut dress and began to squeeze my nipples and my breasts. I felt revulsed but I had distracted him long enough. Choni had the mask from the pack over her face and had put them on both Nikki and Geryat, my father.

“Milord!” screamed the rider on my other side. The horses, controlled by me, darted forward as I instructed them to. The rider jumped back off the wagon in his fright. Mustay looked at me in terror. I couldn’t resist giving him another kiss before he fell with a scream beside the first, threshing rider. He was unable to withstand the tortures in his throat induced by the powders floating down on us from the archway and the trees beyond.

Choni and Nikki were rolling in the back of the cart as well until I doused their masks with fresh collane as I had doused myself when I first smelled the valley. Well done, grandmother, I thought in admiration. It was some kind of rot concoction, something akin to the discollane I had used on the chains in my cell. In someone’s lungs and stomach without an antidote, it must be terrible. What was worse were the other powders also present, the terror-inducing, hallucinatory miasmas stirred up by the agitated horses’ feet that I had difficulty controlling now.

I jumped down, took a shawl from my pack and tried to soothe the horses, but it was of little use. I un-

snapped the hitches that kept them tied to the cart, steered them back to the archway and let them go. Outside the archway, I could see riders milling about. Grey Men were marching straight down the hill and I could hear my aunt screaming, in pain as much as in frustration.

My father seemed as unaffected as I was. He didn't need the mask I had prepared for him. I breathed in deeply, trusting to the collane and the terogal and other fortifiers I had doused myself with each day we had headed into Perisord. I smelled the salt that now seemed to permeate my father completely. My aunt's compounds didn't control him any more. My own honeybane, however, still seemed to be working.

"Out," I commanded, pointing at Mustay and the other fallen rider, screaming and retching on the ground. My father picked them up and threw each one past the archway where the other terrified riders crawled up to them and tried to comfort them in their distress.

"Come," I told my father as an incongruous, shaven-haired Choni, resembling a cabin boy, with the shawl about her legs, dragged a whimpering, coughing Nikki out of the wagon. I went further on, past some buildings that were nothing but walls open to the sky.

"Look for towers, not necessarily of wood or stone," I told them. "Towers like dovecotes."

We found two very quickly. I fired one pellet of swamp gas from the harquebus I had given my father. We had been standing too close. The flash of light and sudden heat almost overwhelmed us. Both towers, however, had been vaporized.

Choni looked at me, clutching the pomander I had put in her hand, before her mouth. "The towers are the source of some of the windblown terror inducers and rots," I told her. "See how the outstretched arms move with the winds. It spreads the poisons along this roadway and through the woods."

It wasn't all. The archway had been coated with solutions. I could sense how they were intended to disintegrate slowly then pollute the roadway and nearby wooded entrances into Perisord. Another pellet and the whole archway and the structure beside it disappeared in a tremendous flash. My aunt should have done the same with the swamp gas when she possessed a supply. But, clearly, using it to obtain a future supply had been beyond her thinking.

There was what had once been a town just a short way from the archway. I hurried my little party towards it; I the only one still really resembling a woman with my long hair and ruffled dress. The town was totally overgrown with vegetation. Plants had invaded everything. Weather seemed to have collapsed some roofs while others still stood. It was as if I was breathing in a pestilence.

"Look," croaked Nikki. Her breasts were bouncing, though she did look like a boy with her shaven head and the mask covering her nose and lips. On a table in what might have been a moneychangers', there were lines of coins, laid out as if waiting for someone to scoop them up.

I let her take them and carry them in her shawl. She was quite oblivious to revealing to the world that she wore no underclothing, no panties and that she was a man.

I stood back further this time and directed a pellet into another long line of towers, to propel whatever awful, poisonous agents my grandmother wanted all over Perisord.

Nikki began to cough when she didn't keep the nosegay to her nose and mouth. I had to douse her again with collane. If I had to do it many more times, we would never get far in the valley. I could sense still the overall aversion curse directed against witches. I could also sense where it was coming from.

Nikki put her money down and began to look for a bucket or bag, anything to carry her loot in. I had, after all, said that she could have it. "Look for clothing, dresses to wear, sheets, bed quilts," I called to her and Choni went after her.

My father coughed and I was able to put a pomander about his lower face; he stood there, blinking at me in great puzzlement. I shivered as I thought of my Aunt Rissa and what she had done to him and my mother. My grandmother had been no better. Look what she must have done to this valley. This was my family, with me the worst of them all, a man who loved to be a woman, I thought miserably. I knew which one of us the world would think the worst of.

My grandmother must have concocted an aversion agent as I had done. But she had intensified and fortified it in her own unique way.

It was present almost everywhere and it was as Enned would say, interesting. It was on the buildings, the older trees and in weaker form in the new vegetation as if the seeds of the plants had been imbued with it. I could tolerate it, thanks to everything I had fortified myself with. I could tolerate the assault on my senses that other witches probably couldn't.

Which was sad because it proved to anyone who knew anything about witchery that I wasn't a witch. After all, boys can't be witches, can they? And my grandmother had clearly never thought that someone like me would ever be allowed to exist.

My 'girls' looked better in old, mouldy shawls and bedsheets. In our first camp, Choni, ever the seamstress, tore out threads and with wooden needles she had obtained from somewhere, fashioned skirts and tops for her and Nikki. She was working on breast bands and panties when she and the others fell asleep. I didn't intend to sleep. I used more fortifiers and so was able to wake them all the next day, even my father, from the terrible sleep they had endured.

It took us two days, with Nikki protesting that she wanted to go back with her loot all the time, till we came to the town of Perisord itself and the stone buildings at its center. I entered the main bedroom of the grandest house all by myself. The girls shook their heads and rolled their eyes as some sort of aversion powder wafted about and re-settled along the floors.

My grandmother, or what was left of her, was still in a dust-shrouded bed, her incredible will still directing the world around her. In the great bedroom, where she lay in bed, were all the heavily dust-encrusted implements, the stills and decantation devices of witchery. I thought it was just bones in the bed, the first we had seen, despite the tales Torthard had told us. There was no sign of living people, nor bones in any of the houses. Then what I had taken to be a skeleton in the bed sat up.

"How can you be here?" the scraggly-haired hag screamed at me. I hurried to the bed, with no will of my own. My high heels clacked on the bare wooden

floor, the shards of what might have been a carpet lying about the floor.

“Lady Sairissene,” I said in as soft a voice as I could, under some compulsion to talk. It was as if a wind passed over me, ruffling my long hair, flicking my earrings, pressing my skirts to me. I was caressed just as my aunt had caressed me with her controller. I felt someone test my body, my clothing, my figure, and the features of my feminized face.

“You’re a Seafarer witch,” croaked the woman in the bed. “Is that what has happened to the Land outside Perisord? Seafarers have overrun the Land of the Baracts. My curse can be overcome by Seafarer witches?”

“I-I’m your grandchild,” I said to the skeletal figure on the bed. “I am Sh-, Sh-.” The compulsion to tell the truth almost crushed me and yet I could not sense parasites in the air. “Dedrick,” my lipsticked mouth betrayed me. “I am the son of Lady Airene and her Seafarer husband, Geryat of the Yatcho.”

“Son!” screeched the woman in the bed.

“Grandmother,” I said. I popped a teragol balloon though it hardly helped.

The cackling from the bed was unbearable to my mind. A dessicated arm attempted to reach to a night table and direct some powders or solutions at me but whatever had been in the bottles and balloons had long since become just smears on the sides of vials and bowls.

“A girlie boy?” cackled my grandmother. I squirmed as the bony fingers took my soft, girlish fingers and held them in front of eyes so closed with cataracts that she could not have seen through them at all.

“And who’s bright idea was that? Airene’s? Airene had a son she turned into a daughter!” She cackled even more.

“She wants you to lift the curse,” I began. My grandmother, if that was what the figure in the bed was, cackled even more.

“Only way to do that is to kill me,” rattled the old woman who hardly looked to be human. “So do your best, little girl-boy!”

I was buffeted then as if great winds were pouring into the room. I was being pummelled all over the place. “Witchkiller!” gloated the almost motionless figure in the bed. “The same as killed my mother and hers before her. Your inheritance, Airene!” she laughed through toothless gums at me. She took something from beneath the ragged pillow beneath her skull-like, almost hairless head.

“I’m not Airene,” I began as a potion showered all over me that made my skin tingle and shake. If it was meant to kill witches, it didn’t work well on me. I just wanted to throw up.

“You’re not dead,” said the woman in horror from the bed.

I shivered. “Not yet,” I said, and eased up to her. I didn’t intend it. Really I didn’t. I had kept the Seafarer poison, dorospell, my aunt had had me give to King Tatheren and diluted its powers so that it was one of my fortifiers. I broke a package to fortify myself, my fingers shaking. My grandmother began to scream horribly as the powder wafted through the air of that fetid bedroom.

The scream that emanated from the bed was heart-stopping. At one moment, I felt my will being

controlled, then I was totally free from it. The rattling in the bed took some time to stop but, when it did, the skeleton in the bed seemed to shrivel into nothing.

“You’re so pretty, my granddaughter,” said an eerie voice. Nothing in the skeleton’s face seemed to move as I looked at my grandmother in horror. “So pretty, like your mother.”

I tried to talk to the skeleton for a while, crying, apologizing, but nothing moved. I tried a mirror and found no breath and could feel nothing beating in the dessicated body.

Quivering with distress at what I had done, I went back out of the bedchamber and found two scared ‘girls’ waiting for me. Of my father, there was no sign.

It was strange to think that this must have been the place where my mother was born and had lived as a child and young woman. And had fled from.

“Take Nikki outside,” I said to Choni. Nikki was searching through the upper rooms to find new loot to add to her heavy bag of jewellery and coins. I shook as the last words of a woman I had never known reverberated in my brain. I knew she deserved a better death and funeral than what I had given her.

I found my father in a portrait gallery. He had his back to the picture of a younger Orissiana. I think it was her though it might have been of any of my relatives. I felt a pang as I thought of what I was going to lose when I got him out of the place.

“Airene,” he said, standing before the picture of my mother as a young girl, mouth curved in her familiar smile.

“Yes,” I agreed, not pushing on him at all through the honeybane. “My mother.”

My father turned to me then. He looked at me, really looked at me, at my hair, so golden still, despite the dirt I had picked up on the walk into this old, abandoned town. He studied me and my female contours with a puzzled look on his face.

“I am your daughter,” I told him. How else could I describe myself to my father? I stood before him in a long dress, my female figure obvious. I just couldn’t say to him that I was his son.

Geryat frowned and turned back to the portrait of my mother. It was as tall as him; I took it from the wall and ordered him to carry it, leading him out of the mansion.

I had thought that it would take more than one swamp gas pellet to destroy the mansion and the malevolence that seemed to emanate from that terrible bedroom. She could not still be alive, could she, I thought in grief, as I aimed and guided the trajectory of the harquebus pellet tightly. There was more than one flash from the room, more than one outpouring of heat.

When I could turn and look, I could barely see what was left of the building in the conflagration the swamp gas had caused.

“Come on,” I yelled at the girls who were looking at the fire, which was spreading to other buildings. I had them run though Nikki wanted to stop. When a store of swamp gas, it must have been that, went off and flattened what was left of the main part of Perisord, we were just on the outskirts. We were bowled over nonetheless.

Scatched and covered in filth from the bushes I had landed in, I cast out my senses and almost immediately felt that the aversion malevolence was still not gone. I

could sense pockets of it. An older tree that had stood before what might have been a gateway still reeked at me to keep away.

A day later, our water bottles were empty, the collane was gone, the masks I had made for whoever went with us into Perisord were in tatters. We met a troop of Grey Men. Their heads were swathed in bandages and they lead the sedan chairs in which my aunt and her minions were being transported into and through Perisord.

I saw my aunt's hand flicker as it did when she gave non-oral commands. The little troop of Grey Men bore down on us. I hated to do it but I couldn't think of anything else to save myself. I fired the harquebus at them. Again there was a wave of heat and light as I incinerated over forty men. I was flattened again.

My aunt stepped out of her sedan chair and stood in front of the cowering Queen Larussa. Orissiana dragged someone else out of the chair and held him close to her. I felt as if I had been stabbed with a knife as I looked at the male figure she held close to her.

"Torthard," my aunt said, as if she thought by the way he was gagged and bound, that I might not have recognized the man I was promised to marry.

My aunt pointed at the forest away from us all. "Discharge the harquebus," she said.

I hesitated and my aunt pulled on the thin noose she had about Torthard's neck. I felt, through her, the pain he felt. I fired the harquebus into the trees and a huge swath of the woods disappeared. Fire began to appear in the distance as my aunt smiled at me.

"What is that thing that Geryat is carrying?" my aunt asked me.

My father still carried the portrait of my mother.

"Set Airene down," I told him in as gently feminine a voice as I could muster. He did so, leaning it against the broken stump of what had been a huge evergreen.

When she saw it, my aunt burst into laughter. "My sister!" she jeered. "Of all the treasures of Perisord, this was the only thing that you thought to save, little Dedrick! You're even worse than she was. What is the matter, Geryat? Don't you recognize your little boy in his dresses and long hair?"

My father looked at me. He had not said another word since uttering my mother's name. "Daughter?" he said in a croaking voice. My aunt gave off another peel of laughter.

"Daughter?" my aunt laughed at my father. "You and Airene had a son, you idiot. And here he is, in all his womanhood." She ordered me to prance towards her. I felt the compulsion on me to do so. I minced on what was left on the road like a trollop trying to make boys look at her. My skirts swung about me and I wiggled my head to make my hair flow about me. My breasts seemed to swell of their own volition as I vamped what was left of the sedan chair carriers. I needn't have bothered. They were vacant-eyed. Only Torthard seemed to appreciate the womanly display I was making.

"This is your son, Geryat," sneered my aunt. "Your son, who has restored to me the true land of my birth. Soon I'll have the mines open and more swamp gas powder than we used in the last war to burn your ships. Your son betrays you, Geryat, as did your own daggers. Why don't you tell him, Dedrick, of the dagger that killed your mother?"

“You killed my mother?” I said stupidly, staring at the hateful woman in front of me.

“Geryat’s dagger did that,” laughed my aunt, the scorn in her voice quite clear. “Such poetry, don’t you think, little Dedrick so gullible and swallowing every story that I ever spun him. Thank you for bringing Geryat back to me. Like all Seafarers, he’s very susceptible to barosane.” I had no idea what that was. “He’ll go back to thinking he’s a Cunian spy in my woods once more. You have to admit he was very good at it. But he can’t take that thing with him.”

My aunt’s hand flicked again and Algoth emerged from the little crowd that was edging down to the carnage about the path. The silent, vacant-eyed maid crossed the steaming carnage. The stench of burned flesh filled the air and without stopping at all, she slashed the painting of my mother with a short-handled, Seafarer knife.

“No!” I screamed, raising the arquebus. I could do nothing with it as my father leapt at Algoth and seized the knife from her hand. The blow he struck her drove Algoth down into the undergrowth where she lay, not uttering a sound

I turned the arquebus and pointed it at my aunt. My father ran at her and the four vacant-eyed chair carriers moved as one and impaled him on their short swords.

My aunt laughed and danced back in front of the queen and the witches who had followed her into Perisord. She had let go of Torthard’s noose as he struggled to aid my father in his fight. One of the men struck at Torthard and he fell back into the undergrowth beside a sedan chair.

“What are you going to do now, Lady Dedrick?” my aunt taunted me. Her hand flicked as her men turned in a file towards me, their swords bloody. “You’ve fired five pellets, my pretty boy.”

“Parasane,” smirked the Queen Regent behind her, as I writhed under the scorn and laughter directed at me from the witches coming closer. “You even made it yourself, my beauty. I think that we should bind her and give her over to Mustay’s men, Rissa. They deserve a reward. And her death should serve some purpose.”

I forced my will forward, thinking of my father and the composition of my aunt’s controlling potions. The swordsmen stumbled as I tried to run by them in my skirts, my will battling my aunt’s for possession of their minds. I pushed one and he impeded the others as I reached my dying father. His last thoughts reached me more vividly than I had ever received thoughts before in my life as a witch. He was in the Grey Fields. There she was, the girl in the painting, my mother, looking up in delight as he ran along the bank of the river.

“Oh, here you are at last,” my mother said to me. Her smile was wide, her arms outstretched. “I thought you were supposed to be here before me, my love. I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Geryat, in that moment, fell into her welcoming arms as she looked up at him. She touched his face gently. “Here, there is no witchery,” she said. I felt myself recede, flung out, looking at a young, fairheaded man, clutching my mother to him as if he would never let her go again.

I looked up and the world seemed to have stopped. It only started again when I regretfully let it.

"I'm sorry, Lara, Aunt Rissa, Renneth," I managed to breathe out at last. "I think the parasane is still working on me. I really must tell you the truth. I lied to you all."

They all stared at me as I brought the harquebus up level with my hips. "I lied about the number of pellets I had," I told them. I felt my aunt's outrage as I released the harquebus's charge. The flash was brilliant and I was looking right into it as it struck my aunt first and obliterated everything in the line behind her, the Queen, the Lady Renneth, and the witches who had supported them. It even took down the men advancing on me. I was caught up in the explosion as well, hurled backwards towards the trees.

I could feel that my dress was aflame and I couldn't seem to move to suppress the fire. Well, witches are supposed to burn, aren't they, I thought. Very soon, all the protective potions I had used on myself would break down and I would burn to death. If I couldn't live as a witch, at least I could die like one.

Something hard and smothering fell on me then. I heard someone crying for help. Something like a shawl was thrust over my face and another on my skirt. Then it was a great relief to feel nothing more.

XXXX. A WITCH'S RENAISSANCE

I didn't wake for a tenday. From what Choni told me, everyone was scared I had been ensorcelled by my aunt and that I would never awake.

It was a relief to get back into clean, soft undergarments, the touch of stockings on my legs feeling heavenly. Choni smiled at me as I gasped in the pleasure of

smoothing my stockings and attaching them to my thin garter belt.

"I felt the same way, milady," Choni said, bustling about to bring me a delicate, thin-strapped shift to cover the white, silky breast bands and panties I put on. The light touch of the short skirt, just below my knees, was absolutely wonderful.

Choni had covered her light blue, pretty dress with a long, white apron, with large bows in the back that matched the ones in the red hair she was wearing. "No one would lend Nikki a wig at first," she confided in me. "Not even when she offered them a share in the treasure she brought out of Perisord."

"How is Hedward?" I asked her. "I trust he likes seeing you as a redhead."

"He loves it," my maid said impishly. "He says that it is like being married to a totally different woman."

"Married?" I asked. My maid blushed furiously at what she, a cabin boy, had said to me.

"Count Torthard gave his permission," put in a subdued Grace, my other maid. "He had his recorder place the names in the permanent record. It's there in the square for everyone to see. 'The groom, Hedward, was married this day to the bride, Choni.' And Hope has married Retter. The Chanter comes up eagerly each day to find out who else wants to wed. Fee and Pell are getting married tomorrow."

"So now you know why Grace is out of sorts," said Choni softly in my ear. Grace heard her and stuck her tongue out at her fellow maid and the two of them began to giggle.

"I do need a man," she said. She began to draw my hair back and infuse it with masheen. It was long and

she drew it all on top of my head and tied it with a silky, green ribbon.

"You had a different man in your bed every night for a tenday before I was carried off," protested Choni. I could smell the scent of upland meadow flowers on her; a glance at her neckline showed her high, rounded breasts.

"I need a man who will make me want to keep him with me every night," sighed Grace. "I should have grabbed Hedward while you were away or the Count, perhaps, while Lady Sherrene was sleeping."

Choni giggled at that.

"You couldn't have had the Count," I told her as Choni began to try earrings on me. "He really isn't interested in women," I had to force that word out, "like you and me."

"But he's your betrothed," said Grace with a puzzled look on her face.

"That was just a subterfuge," I told the pair. "Don't look so shocked, both of you. Torthard is a very normal man. He wants a woman to be a *woman*."

I put on my high heels and felt the soft skirts float about me. I swirled and my maids smiled at me.

"It is wonderful to be a girl, isn't it?" they both said together. The three of us men giggled together and hugged, our girlish figures giving us all a feeling of intense pleasure.

"It's going to be mass confusion when you appear, milady," said Choni. "Everyone is going to want to talk to you."

"Well, I want to talk to everyone," I told her. Then Grace put a tiara of green and white stones in my hair

which sparkled when I saw myself in the looking glass. "Oh, I look like I'm going to a wedding," I said. The girls laughed at me and told me again that I was going to be mobbed.

The girls were quite right. I went out into the courtyard where the drays were assembled and I was deluged. I almost wished that the aversion potions had been left in place but the wagons were all as clean as new pins, with collane and ferrase in the air.

I was hugged by every girl who had been a cabin boy once, several of them clinging to me and crying, their girlish voices thanking me for saving them and bringing them to this wonderful place where they were free.

Sarlie, the man I had left in charge of the theater company, brought his wife to see me. I could scarcely believe that it was Mithi, the young man my mother had tried to convert to an image of womanliness. My aunt had apparently run experiments upon him in advance of the ones she ran upon me.

Mithi was radiant with womanliness as she held her husband's arm.

"How is it between you?" I managed to ask her. The revelry about us turned into a party, the musicians beginning to play, several of the girls dancing, shaking their long, golden hair free over their backs.

Mithi leaned over and whispered to me, "It is fantastic, milady. I don't need the glass jars any more to keep me open. My husband has taken on that task and, milady, I feel such pleasure when he enters me. I don't know what you did to me but I have orgasms now that Sarlie says are like those his wife used to fake with

him. But he knows I am not faking, milady. I love him so."

"You feel like his wife, then?" I asked her and she gave me a wonderful smile.

"I *am* Sarlie's wife," Mithi whispered to me. I couldn't get over how happy and sparkling she was. Mithi rose and melted into her husband's arms, the two dancing together as if they were one.

"Now that my betrothed is awake," said a voice from the huge chaos about me. "Perhaps she will do me the honor of dancing with me?"

I whipped around and there was Torthard, scratched, scarred and bruised, looking down at me. "Milord," I gasped, the word triggering me into an instant curtsy. He pulled me to my feet right away. Everyone turned to look at me with interest, smiling at us when they saw who he was.

I shook as his arm went about my waist and I was impelled out onto the raised dance floor. I couldn't believe the applause about us. Even the men who had arrived with him were applauding. I saw Grace leading a bevy of leading ladies, actresses all, in other words former cabin boys, over to engage the men.

Torthard swirled me as he had done at the Announcing Ball in Hillaire, taking control and directing me to twirl femininely about him. The musicians were disappointed when Torthard put his arm about me again and said that he needed a drink.

"We'll dance a slow waltz!" Torthard called to the leader of the musicians. "If you players know any!"

"You don't have to do this," I told the Count shakily. "I've already told my maids what a subterfuge our betrothal was."

I couldn't believe the look of alarm on his face. "Choni and Grace?" Torthard said, his hand squeezing me to him. "They are to spread the word, are they? You must get them to stop."

"Why?" I asked him.

"I have to go to Hillaire and attend the Conclave of Counts," Torthard said. Only then did I realize that he was mocking me. "If I am not your betrothed any more, then I cannot speak for you and I will not have a speck of the power that having you supposedly under my control will bring me."

"Oh, so this is all politics?" I asked him, suddenly feeling abandoned again. After all we had been through, I was still going to be used by him.

"You know we were supposed to marry at Harvest," Torthard said to me.

"That was my aunt's plan," I told him.

"Well, it won't work," said Torthard. I felt as if cold water had been poured over me once more. Absent-mindedly, I took a glass from Tess and didn't check its contents as I drank from it.

Just as I was contemplating that we seemed to have grown as a company, the music stopped and a grey-haired man I had never seen before stood forward. "I have the great honor," he declared eagerly, "to attend this stage once more, for the third day in a row, and I shall be here again tomorrow and tomorrow for the same ceremony," there were wild cries then and his words were almost drowned out, "to marry bride and groom before this august company."

Yes, there were definitely more people in the courtyard than before. It was as if a play was to start. Sarlie was waving to everyone to be ready to act their parts.

In a play, all the female parts had to be played by men. We, Sarlie's Company, had an abundance of male actresses to take on female roles.

"It is with the greatest of pleasure that I perform this country marriage and not a great court wedding with all the trappings that often seem more important than the bride and groom and their love for one another," said the Chanter.

Not a court wedding, I thought. But who could have demanded such a ceremony here? The thought had barely crossed my mind that this wasn't a play when Torthard took my arm and propelled me back onto the dance floor. The cheering about us grew and grew. I think the whole town must have been there, people even climbing up onto the roofs so that they could look down onto the well-lit stage area.

"We can't do this," I said to the Count in stupefaction as he smiled down at me. "You don't like girls like me."

"That's true," Torthard said. The crowd began to hush itself so that the Chanter could begin with his homily.

"You stand here, man and woman," the Chanter said, "to pledge your love for one another. Who is the man?"

"Rebern Torthard, Count," said Torthard in a very clear voice. "I declare my willingness today to be married to the woman beside me and to meet the bonds and duties I vowed when we became betrothed less than a month ago in Hillaire."

The crowd was applauding as my stomach was turning in knots. I looked at Choni and Grace, knowing why they had placed the tiara in Torthard's colors on

my head. They must have known, indeed everyone must have known, that this was to be my wedding day. I shuddered in my lovely, sparkly dress, as Torthard took my trembling hand.

“And who is the woman?” asked the Chanter. Wild applause broke out again as I squirmed in my dress, feeling how tight and tense I was. My nipples were so large and firm that they showed right through my dress.

“Say who you are, woman,” Torthard whispered into my ear. The touch of his head on my cheek and hair almost made me come in my panties.

“Lady Sherrene Perisord,” I said as I thought about what I was doing. And it was all a sham. Count Torthard had just told me minutes before that he did not like girls like me, girls who were really boys.

“And you declare?” prompted the Chanter in a low mumble.

“I, I declare my willingness today to be m-married as a w-woman to the m-man beside me,” I stammered. “And I do so to d-discharge all the b-bonds and duties I vowed I would do when w-we were b-betrothed in Hillaire.”

There was another outburst of cheering from the crowd. The Chanter had to raise his hand and signal several times for less noise before he began the formal invocation to the gods to bless our union.

“I now declare you to be man and wife and,” the Chanter said, the rest of his words buried under an avalanche of noise. The stage on which we were standing became engulfed with people wrapping us together with silk ribbons as Torthard pulled me against him, face to face.

The tumult became even louder as the Count bowed his head and kissed me in front of everyone. The cheering grew as did the thrills and wonderful emotions spilling out of me. "Torthard," I breathed. He lifted my hands and put them about his neck, my body pressing against his.

"You must call me Rebern," my husband said to me as the girls tied us together at the waist with tight ribbons.

I wallowed in his kiss as he caressed my back, my breast bands tightening as he held me closer and closer. His hand crushed my hair at my neck; we gave our audience a performance on the stage unlike any they had seen before. Or so I thought until the next night when Lace, who used to be Gorfey, and her man, Allor, a musician, were married in a similar, if not as heavily attended, ceremony as my husband's and mine.

"You said that you don't like girls like me," I said to Torthard as we tried to do a slow waltz to whatever the musicians were playing against the hubbub.

"That's true," said my husband, kissing my neck and scented hair, sending thrills through me that quite belied his words.

"I don't like girls like you, Sherri," he murmured in my ear. "I love girls like you, my darling."

The kiss that I gave him then awakened every nerve in my body. I didn't want to break away from him, but he lifted me anyway in his strong arms and a passageway opened to let him lead me to a little white carriage waiting for us.

I think the whole town of Torthard was out, singing and dancing as the little carriage took us up to his cas-

tle. He carried me up to his bedroom where he proved to me most conclusively that he loved girls like me.

“You were going to do terrible things to me,” my husband whispered to me. “Orissiana gave me all the details when we pursued you through the trail of destruction you left into Perisord. When are you going to start doing them?”

I wrapped my naked body about his, wiggling so that he could ride me. My breasts caressed his manly chest, his mouth was buried in mine. I wiggled and wriggled and writhed and he came intensely.

“Oh, now that was really terrible,” my husband mocked his wife, rolling me over. I squealed in pleasure as I sat tightly on his stiffness, his hands stroking me everywhere until we convulsed together. Don’t tell me about orgasms, Mithi, I thought. I let go while my husband hung onto me.

We scandalized the castle and the company by staying in bed until the next day’s marriage. I watched Lace stumble off in her man’s arms as I had done and wished her as wonderful a night as I had had. My energetic husband heard me and took me right back to bed for some more wonderful lovemaking.

Rebern didn’t go to his Conclave without me, either. He couldn’t bear to leave me in Torthard. It is a good job that we had discreet drivers for what my husband put me through in the carriage as we travelled was unrelenting pleasure. Which is the story of our life.

Yes, we do other things besides make love. And yes, I have had to make a few potions to ease some of the discomforts or pains he has been through on occasion by loving me too much. But I rarely do witchery any more. I have ‘converted’ Ressie, who so much

wanted to be next, so that now she is just like Mithi. Lace, Choni, Tess, Fee, Hope, Panya, and Esha so far have asked me to help them to follow Mithi and become true women. In a weak moment, I agreed that I would. Hope and Esha currently are being nursed back to health after I assisted Panya whose surgical skill Ressie or I must emulate when it is her turn to be 'converted.'

I found time to grieve for my grandmother and pay the Chanter for the Funerary Service for my mother, my father, my aunt, her maids, my grandmother, and all the nameless men I killed in Perisord.

I love the plays that were cycled at Torthard by the company that is permanently based there now. Enned wants me to assist her in teaching new girls how to be witches but I have so little time. I sometimes say to my husband that I should stay home and do things like that.

"Who declared himself a man?" he will ask me then.

"You did, Rebern," I tell him meekly.

"Who declared herself a woman?" he asks me.

"I did," I whisper to him.

"Well woman," Torthard will say, "when I reach for you, I want you there, ready for me. You must have encorcelled me," he goes on, smiling at me. "I was never like this until I married you."

Soon we are in bed again; even King Tathally has to wait when he visits us with his wealthy mistress, until my husband's desires are fully met. As a witch, as a woman and as a wife, my pleasure is unrelenting.

****end****