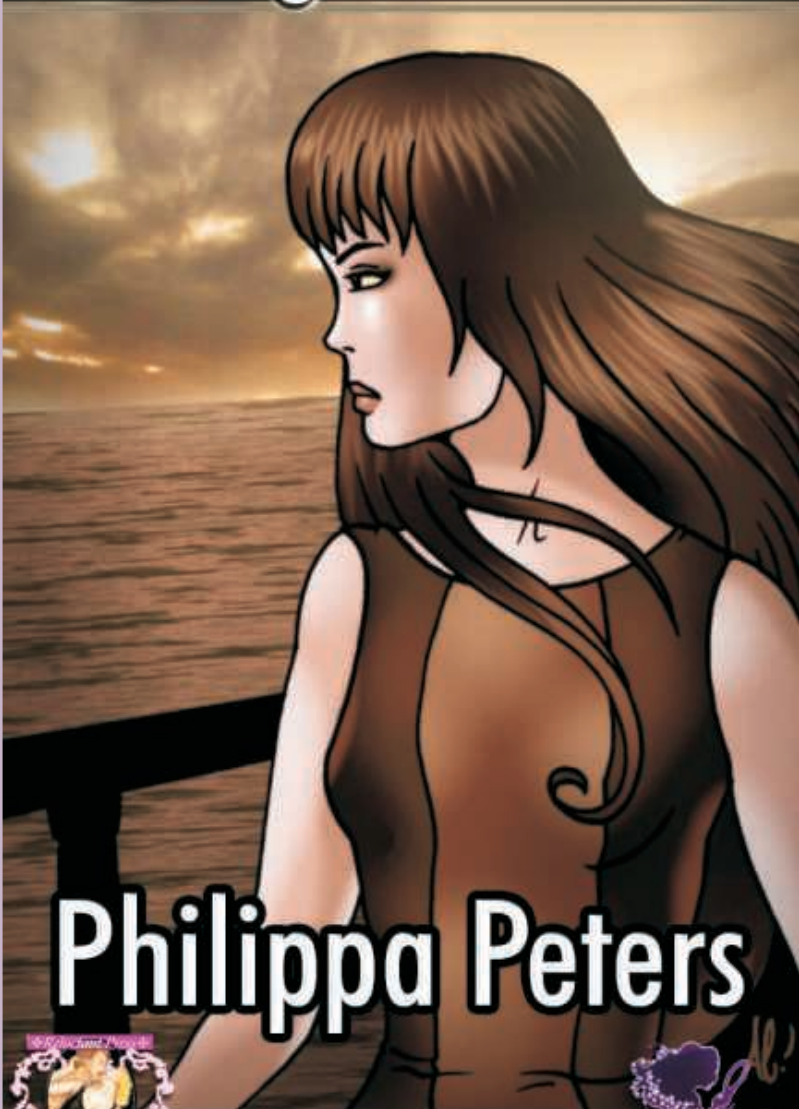


A Plague Of Men



Philippa Peters



An "Adult Tv" Novel



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A PLAGUE OF MEN

By Philippa Peters

A continuation of *'Another Fine Witch'...*

I'd no idea why I was thrown into the brig. The bluebands said nothing. They'd hauled a sailor, smelling of drink, out of the bed in a cell, I suppose it was, and thrown him in with another man, in the brig next to mine. The second had yelled and objected to having Rasson put in with him.

"Give me the other one, the cutie," the older man bellowed at the bluebands but they ignored him.

The drunk, Rasson, plunged his head into a bucket of water as I tried to shrink back into the walls and not have them look across the bars at me, in my girlish skirt and finery. I couldn't guess why I was there. What had I done wrong? Then, thoughts of the theft I'd made in Mogen's workroom came to my mind.

I shouldn't have taken so much of the sleeping powder, merenthe. Mogen must have realized what I'd done. He wouldn't have discovered the theft as I would by sniffing the powder. He was no kind of apothecary at all, I thought with a shiver. And I doubted Mogen could tell the difference between salt and merenthe, not as the Seafarers used salt. It was barely crystalline and not as effective as a preserver as proper distillation would have produced.

"Hey, cutie," whispered the man who'd been alone in his cell before the drunk

was put in with him. He'd edged right up to the bars that separated us. "Come up to the bars. I've something to give you."

"My, my name's not Cutie," I muttered to myself. His hearing must have been really good.

"Of course, it isn't," said the man, leaning back to the passageway and checking if anyone was coming. "What's your name, cutie? That's what the Fish-eaters do to a Baract captive, isn't it? Make you act as a cabin boy."

"I act anyway I please," I said, almost screaming in my attempt at a touch of bravado. Gods, being in the brig meant lashes for sure. Lashes before you were even questioned. That had been the practice on *King Tatheren's Sword*.

"Scared of a lashing!" taunted Rasson, the drunk, shaking his hair free of water. "Wait till you've been here three times as I have."

"Or until they open your back as they did mine four times over," said the man with a rotten-toothed smile. "Only twice more. Come on over, cutie. We kingsmen should look out for one another; come

over closer and let me give you what you need to survive a lashing.”

There was a vial waving at me. It was capped with metal. I couldn't smell anything at all but the smell of sweat and unwashed clothing. Like a fool, I edged over to the bars and he grabbed me. I squealed as he kissed my lips while the drunk behind him stood up and staggered towards us.

“I want some o' that!” the drunk yelled, grabbing at the man's arm. The first man had to fight him off and that enabled me to pry his fingers off my pants and fall back into the cell I'd been allotted.

“Lippy stuff,” groaned the man who'd kissed me. “Lovely. Come back, Baract, and let's do it again. Look at my pecker!” The front of his pants was tenting as if a pole was being thrust outward in them. “I'm in love with you, cutie! I'm your friend in here. The only one you got!”

Both of them lined the cell divider then, begging me to come over to them and to make love, that's the way I understood it, to them.

A blueband came by, after a while, a whole shift later it seemed to me, and smiled at the way they were begging me to back up to the dividing bars and let them do the rest.

“I haven't had a woman in half a year,” the first man to talk moaned.

“And you won't have another if we find you bonking another prisoner, Sollo,” the blueband said. “That's another twenty lashes, administered on top of other punishments, and you got eighty coming on your next visit with the bosun's mate. You get twenty as well,” he added to me. “Maybe thirty, if you entice him into having you.”

“I don’t want them at all,” I gasped.

The blueband smirked at me. “Good,” said the blueband. “As you got a show to put on, Arrathee ...”

“Arrathee,” moaned the guy in the next cell. “Such a lovely name for such a cutie ... Ow!” He screamed as the cosh in the blueband’s hand extended and smashed into the side of his face.

“... for the captain,” said the blueband, handing me my purse, and miming me putting on my makeup. That chilled me through and through. “But first, Arrathee, you make yourself as pretty as you were last night. Yes, we saw the riggers trying to tryst with you at Celebration. Heard you gave in to three of ’em. The mothers are going to have a really hard time,” he laughed at his pun and made a suggestive gesture towards me, “keeping Sollo and scum like him off you between shifts.”

“I’ll tell you where I hid it!” yelled Sollo as the blueband opened the cell and gestured to me with his thick baton to go ahead of him. “Just put her in here with me for a half shift and I’ll make you rich!”

“You’d make me dead if I did anything like that, Foreshore crud,” laughed the blueband, taking me by the arm and marching me out of the brig. By the noise behind us, the men in the other cell were fighting, each screaming ‘She’s mine!’ as I, deathly afraid, the cringing object of their affection, emerged from blackness to a high sun.

The blueband held a mirror for me as I shivered and redid my lips and powdered my face as a girl does. He held my arm all the way to the topmost deck. Undercaptain Peveret was outside a private cabin, watching a cutter, a longboat with a strange,

purple-hemmed flag, taking lines from the great ship. It was being pulled alongside *Silvery Seas*, our speed becoming theirs.

“You recognize that?” asked Undercaptain Peveret, his clothing loose as if he’d just thrown it on. “That flag?”

I gulped. “A plague flag?” I whispered, suddenly recalling lessons from Robady to us cadets on flag recognition. I recalled him saying that this was one we’d never want to see, ever. I thought I must have got it wrong by the look Peveret gave me. Well, Seafarer flags wouldn’t be the same as Baract message flags, would they?

“You look pretty this morning, Arrathee,” said Peveret suddenly, abruptly changing subjects. A smile I didn’t understand played about his lips. “The Celebration went well for you. Three trysts have put some color in your cheeks.”

I wanted to die when the undercaptain said that to me. Did everyone on this ship know all about me, all the time? Did they think I liked men touching me as if I was a woman? Did they think I was dressed as I was because I wanted to be? Goddesses, when would I ever get a chance to be like Garrin and become an ex-cabin boy?

“I like the touches of makeup on your face,” the undercaptain went on. “Let’s go in and see if Panella is awake.”

The one called my ‘mother’ by everyone else on the ship had changed from the dress she’d worn at the celebratory dance the night before, into short, female, outer clothing like me. Panella wore a dress with puffed sleeves, however, and a tiny waist. How could she fit into such a dress, I asked myself. She

looked so slim, so womanly. She was female-shaped, her gestures feminine, as she sat with her bare legs crossed, her petticoats at mid-calf. She accepted a kiss from Peveret on her lips, glossed a much darker, deeper red than mine.

“It’s true,” said Peveret to her, leaving me standing in the hatchway, the blueband closing the hatch behind me. I stood very still in the dark and tried to learn why I’d been summoned to the rooms of one of the most powerful men on the great ship. “It’s from *Zephyr*, and it’s a plague flag. Didn’t look like more than three actives on deck to take the lines.”

Panella made a dramatic shudder. “Just get rid of them, Pev!” she exclaimed. “You can’t let plague spread to our ship!”

“No, my darling,” growled Undercaptain Peveret, kissing Panella again, kneeling beside her, his hand bringing her lovely hair within his reach as he savaged her mouth, she encouraging him to go on and hold her more tightly. They acted like my father and stepmother when he’d brought her first into our home, as if they were a man and woman in love, I thought with a shudder. The undercaptain and Panella kissed just as tenderly, making me think of them as husband and wife.

I flushed in revulsion as I stood there, not knowing what to say or do as the two moaned a little as they kept on caressing one another, she as bad as he in stroking his private parts as he stroked hers.

“I have to deal with this,” said the undercaptain, finally breaking off his affectionate, sensuous caressing. Panella seemed to be encouraging him to continue even further with her.

“Doesn’t Arrathee look pretty this morning?” the undercaptain asked. Panella turned in her chair, looking around, finding me in the shadows where the undercaptain had delivered me.

“What’s she doing here?” asked Panella in astonishment. Her lip curved in a flirty sort of smile. “A threesome, Pev, at your age? She’s pretty enough to make that heart of yours explode, you know!”

“What a way to go!” said Peveret gruffly with a sly grin. “No, it’s a captain’s council, Panella. First item, aid to other ships from the Many Isles in distress, unless we’re at war with them, of course. Plague is a big distress, Pansy! *Zephyr*’s sent us a message; the poor men on that cutter fired a line by arbalest into the captain’s deck to get the request handed over.”

“But it’s a plague ship,” protested Panella in a lovely, woman’s voice I knew I could never imitate. How does she do it, I asked myself, shuddering as something began to stir in my thoughts, something, I think, Polwer had once said. What was it?

“The second item is this lovely person in front of you, your responsibility,” said Undercaptain Peveret grimly. “*Zephyr* is easy to deal with compared to her.”

“Send Mogen to *Zephyr*!” sneered Panella without a second thought. “It would be a good way to be rid of that charlatan!”

I’d thought the same when I was with him but hadn’t thought someone as feminine as Panella, a man like me, oh, shivers ran through me at such an idea, would ever express such a notion forcefully.

“Brisard will never let anyone go who supports his every command slavishly,” muttered Peveret, frowning at me. I knew he was thinking of some-

thing ill that he was going to make befall me. Oh gods and goddesses, they're going to dump me as a nurse onto a plague ship, I thought wildly.

"That must have finally brought Mirrie's Celebration to an end, mustn't it?" asked Panella waspishly, ignoring me completely. "Did our good captain get out of bed to take the message himself?"

"With a plague flag flying?" asked Peveret, caressing her legs more, as if he was touching a woman's legs, ignoring me as he returned to her pleasuring of him. I remained as still as I could be, goggle-eyed, as I watched a man and a woman, well, a man and another man dressed gorgeously as a woman, being so loving to one another.

"A blueband, who's finding out what isolation in the brig is like, relayed the message to his superior, also isolated now, and thus, by degrees, to Elder Brisard," said Peveret between loving kisses of Panella's glossy mouth. "I'm ordered to assist t *Zephyr of Serenity* by our illustrious captain 'in any way you can that does not endanger *Silvery Seas*.' In any way!" The undercaptain appeared to be imitating someone with a really haughty way of speaking. "He's as cruel as you are, my love; he wants *Zephyr* abandoned but he wants me to be the one to do it, someone to blame when talk reaches the Clanhouses on Cunya!"

"And Arrathee?" asked Panella languidly, caressing Peveret's arm. "I'm to prepare her for you, is that it, as a reward for doing Brisard's dirty work?"

I gasped audibly at that one, chills flowing over me. Both turned to look at me, laughing at whatever they saw in my face. Like an old married couple, they seemed to know when each other was joking. I

think I saw that they were joking with one another. I hoped that it was as I felt the tug of stockings I wore beneath my tight skirt.

The undercaptain laughed more heartily than his 'wife'. "No, my darling," he laughed. "Now stop teasing, Panella. You know you're the only woman in my life. I tell you and you still tease me, my darling seawife. Ah," there was a rap on the hatch, "Robady is here, and my counterpart on mid-shift."

The thin-faced undercaptain, Layward, frowned at Panella in the other undercaptain's cabin. Layward had been the one to assign cabin boy duty to me as if he'd been rewarding me. Some reward, I thought miserably, as he disdainfully looked me over, particularly staring at my dark hair.

"I should be asleep now," Layward began huffily.

"Captain's orders," said Peveret blandly. "Sailing Officer Robady!" he shouted. "Get in here!"

Robady was grimaced as he stepped through the hatch. I gasped when I saw that his hands were tied behind his back. He didn't change his expression when he saw me, such a girlish me, my face so madeup, looking at him.

"Don't have anything to say to your girl friend, Rob?" asked Peveret in amusement. Rob glowered at him, not looking at me. "When she's done all she could for you and cured you of bites and knife slashings?"

I couldn't help the loud gasp that erupted from me. That was what was wrong with Rob. He looked like his old self, not the slashed up, rat-bitten Robady whom I'd attended to just the previous day.

“Quite a remarkable recovery from affliction, wouldn’t you say, Lady Arrathee?” taunted the undercaptain, his seawife smiling as he stroked Panella’s hand. Yes, I thought shakily. She’d known all along what was going to happen to me. She’d just been playacting before, supporting her ‘husband’, in everything he’d said.

“We’ve never seen scars and bites disappear in less than a full day,” Panella murmured. “It’s several tenders, usually, which must mean, darling Arrathee, that you used some witch’s craft on our poor officer here.”

“Oh, but boys can’t be witches,” rumbled Peveret in his serious, deep voice. “So she can’t be a witch. Now, if she’s a warlock ...”

“Please,” I managed to whisper. “I don’t know why it’s worked so well, the potion I made! I just used a recipe I’d learned. The ingredients you use on this ship must be changed by sea air or something. They must be stronger than those I used on Rob’s face in Terraire or on *Sword!*”

Peveret glanced at Panella and smiled. “I owe you a new ball dress,” he said.

“And pearl earrings and a necklace,” cooed Panella, standing and swishing against her ‘husband’, wiggling into his lap and kissing his cheek. He responded with a passionate kissing of her lips while the rest of us waited. I contemplated what they were going to do to me, the least being lashes, with cuts worse than Rob had suffered. The worst was mutilation and hanging from the spars that still held Jerit and shipmates from *Sword*.

“Panella,” Peveret finally went on with a smile at me, ignoring his counterpart’s aghast expression,

“correctly told me, sweet Lady Arrathee,” why did he keep adding the title to my name? “the exact excuse you’d use for what you did for the man you love.”

“It was nothing like that ...” began Rob angrily.

Peveret shushed him. “Please, Robady,” said the undercaptain. “You’re going to tell me Lady Arrathee is not a woman, aren’t you? She couldn’t possibly have done anything witchy upon you?”

“Arrat’s not a she,” blurted out Robady. “I keep telling you that!”

“But you, and Hirdy, no,” he glanced at the seawife in his arms.

“Deedee,” said Panella, shifting, her skirt splitting to reveal lovely, dark stockinged, womanly legs. “And then there’s Mollee, Kadee, and Ellie, she really loves her pretty name, and Mazee, so cute as well. Isn’t that name ...”

“Who’ve all told us what wonders you’re always able to conjure up, Lady Arrathee,” Peveret rumbled seriously at me. “Deny being a witch and we must suppose you a warlock. And we all know what to do with a warlock in our midst.”

“Kill him,” the other undercaptain said, pulling a dagger from his belt. “Kill him before he kills all of us.”

“Now, now, gentle Layward,” said Peveret. “Let’s hear from another witness, shall we?”

Gennee was shivering even worse than me as she was ushered into the cabin to find herself being confronted by two undercaptains and a mother. She glanced unhappily at me and at Robady, tall, Baract, stern-faced and unmoving.

I couldn't deny every word Gennee said about me drugging the men who were supposed to have loved me. I couldn't, even if the stories were only half true.

"So, our cabbie," said Peveret with a smile at me, releasing Panella who sauntered, in womanly fashion, away from him, "has deceived every man she's been with. She hasn't trysted with them, though four crewmen think they've trysted with her, made glorious love to her and none have at all. She used merenthe, did she?" Peveret opened a register Panella brought to him from where it had lain on a side table. "But that's only a sleep potion. What made them think they'd lain with a cabbie?"

"She, Arrathee," drawled a shaking Gennee, her eyes so feminine. The makeup she'd worn earlier had not disappeared from her thick lashes. "She'd tell them what they'd done, when the men awoke. They'd say it back to her as if they'd done it like that to her." Thank goodness, she hadn't known Garrin had really fucked me, I thought to myself in shame. "It even worked when I told Darris what he'd done to her and she'd done to him. He told everyone every detail just as I'd told it to him when he, he was bespelled as the sleep potion wears off."

"What is this controlling potion you used?" Peveret asked me, looking into his register again. "How d'you make men like Darris and Garrin believe they've made love to you all night long? Darris swore to Panella and me he'd had you, describing the way you wrapped your legs around him and bounced on his manhood, squealing like a sand griffin speared through her nether parts!"

"Garrin was more descriptive," Panella went on. I shuddered, waiting for her to tell them he'd really had me as a woman. But, to my shock and relief,

she didn't. Panella did describe what the blueband had seen in the back room where Garrin had been going to have me again. She mentioned how lovely my legs were in the stockings I still wore and in the panties the bluebands had admired. I wanted to die in shame as I saw the look on Robady's face as he stared at me.

"Good job the bluebands saved Lady Arrathee," growled Peveret, his laughter like a clap of thunder. "Otherwise, they'd have revealed to everyone on this boat that we have a witch on board, one who can convince everyone around her she's nothing but a lowly cabin boy."

Gennee and Robady stared at me. They could have, should have, contradicted the undercaptain. I should have. But I was frightened out of my wits, waiting for some order he was going to give to have me exposed, tortured and executed horribly in front of the captain and crew. There was nothing I could do to stop him.

For an hour, with a tongue-tied Gennee, a doubting Panella and a persuasive Peveret, I was prepared as a pretty girl. "No-one will hang a daughter," were Peveret's words, as I learned I'd be in dresses and girly clothing for however long I had yet to live, if I lived, on this infernal great ship.

"As I see it," Peveret explained to Panella, as I was 'allowed' to overhear, "we have to do something that looks like we tried to help those poor bastards on *Zephyr*, don't we? And we can't send Mogen. Seeing Robady's face made me think of Lady Arrathee, whom we can say is a witch."

"The men on that cutter will never let a woman, a witch, minister to them ..." began Panella, holding

out her lovely hand to me, rings on her fingers glinting, bangles and bracelets jangling.

“Dress her like a Baract girl, Panella,” the undercaptain said, pointing at me, sending shivers through me. “Make her look like a dark-haired Lady Sherrene, as girlie as you can.” I gasped while Panella frowned. “Only a Baract witch can save the Faroys now. They wouldn’t have sent out a boat for help unless they were dieing in droves. We’ll give them a witch. They’ll try her out and we’ll know for sure.”

“But she’s not ...” gasped Panella, looking at me in fear. I had a sudden impression I’d been talked about a lot. I shuddered as I thought how I’d healed Robady. Surely they couldn’t think that healing cuts and rat bites quickly made me a witch. I’d told them the truth. I hadn’t made anything for Rob that Polwer couldn’t have made.

“We’ll make them think she is,” said Peveret. “We’ll send Robady as well.”

I couldn’t help the hiss of surprise. Robady? On a plague ship with me? Were we that dangerous to the Seafarers? Someone wanted us Baract officers dead and saw an opportunity. Perhaps our saving the Seafarers on Terraire dock was all that was keeping us alive still.

I might deserve a punishment. I shouldn’t have filched the merenthe from Mogen. I’d made the potions to cure Rob and made them too strong. But Robady was innocent of witchery. And there was witchery already all over this ship, wasn’t there? I couldn’t have behaved as a girl as I had with Richo, could I, if I hadn’t been bespelled myself.

“Robady can vouch that this one is a witch,” said Peveret, giving me a searching look after I’d reacted. He looked like he’d confirmed something about an attachment or bond between Rob and me. I flushed at the thought of such a thing.

“Robady will be loyal, to keep the last of his precious crew alive,” the undercaptain went on. “Minor problems solved all around. Who knows, she might save some of them, anyway,” he smiled encouragingly to me. It was like the smile of a blackback about to bite a swimmer in half and eat what it wanted at its leisure, “with whatever she can mix for them from apothecary recipes she recalls!”

“I-I’m not a witch,” I gasped. “I-I’m not even a woman, sir.”

“You will not say that again, ever,” said the smiling undercaptain to me, laughing at the distress and panic I must have displayed. “You’ve been promoted, Lady Arrathee. Yes, that sounds suitably witchy, doesn’t it? Now, don’t look so upset, girl, and don’t start crying. Or you’ll be back in the brig.”

So that was why I’d had a spell in there, I realized with a shudder. The threat of returning there to Sollo and Rasson was enough to make me decide that I couldn’t go back.

“But they’re all going to die,” said Panella, “on *Zephyr*.”

I shuddered. I was going to be disguised as a real woman, dropped onto a strange cutter, infected by men with a plague where I was going to die! I was going to die as if I was a girl, a woman, a witch, a Lady!

The undercaptain’s orders were speedily obeyed. Just like that, Panella put different pads in the bra I

wore, making my silhouette on the sunlit deck decidedly, embarrassingly feminine. Panella gave me, reluctantly, she said, a supply of adherent to use to keep my maleness out of sight of prying eyes.

Men were always looking, Panella warned me. As I swung down and across to the other ship's cutter, both crews would be looking up my dress at my pretty panties and undergarments. I should remember that when I was preparing to return. I had to force woman's shoes onto my feet and show Panella I could walk like a girl, mincing, my steps so small, my tush swaying.

Panella made sure my face was painted, my eyes vivid, and my hair attachments long and flowing down my back. My silhouette was feminine, not just because of the pads attached to me, but because a corset shaped me. It was curvy and lightly padded at the hips, emphasizing I was a woman. I felt sick as Undercaptain Peveret and his 'seawife' called me 'my lady' when they spoke to me in front of puzzled crewmen. Panella even gave me a vial that Peveret insisted she do.

I couldn't believe what they were doing to me. It was if I was going to a Celebration of some sort and not to my death. And the beautifying didn't just end with the dress, undies and makeup put on me. I had to take this vial of some potion that Panella didn't want me to have.

"It's a throat cordial," said the undercaptain with a smile. "Left behind by the traitors who fled from Bridgewater with the witch the whole world knows about!"

"Lady Sherrene," I gasped, clutching the vial and wondering.

“She made it,” said Panella petulantly.

“It’s why Panella talks as beautifully as she does,” said Peveret with a grin. “But, my darling, you know you don’t really need it any more. Your voice is pitched firmly and beautifully as a woman’s voice. You’ve said so yourself many times. You don’t need it; you, Mirrie, Lerrina and Fessee can afford to let Lady Arrathee have a little of the potions salvaged from *Tempest of Far Oceans!*”

“There’s so little left!” cried Panella. “The alchemists on the Foreshore and Liss try but they never get the copies right. Even if they work, it’s not for very long. What we should have done on the Foreshore, Pev darling, is we should have captured a real witch or a real witch’s apprentice and given her a workroom to make more of Lady Sherrene’s divine potions!”

“You spent enough in Terraire on love potions, throat cordials, hair oils and cosmetics, silks and satin ladies’ under- and over-clothing, and nothing on medicines,” laughed the undercaptain.

“But you wouldn’t allow me to ashore! I had to rely on cabin boys to find what I wanted! And they always buy what they want most, first!” said Panella angrily. “And there’s so much the herbalists and alchemists won’t sell us! Unless it’s in secret, out the back door, and then they make us pay five times, twenty times, what a potion is really worth!”

“Ah, it’s terrible what those Baracts do to us, isn’t it?” asked Peveret, studying the woman I was becoming under Panella’s feminine tutelage. I shuddered at the wink he gave me as if he was having a joke at Panella’s expense with a Baract like me, which Panella hadn’t seem to realize.

I had to take some of the cordial, diluting it severely, a beautiful smell of honey and sharp mint rising into my head, before I ingested it as Panella decreed I should, a look of resignation on her face. The small vial was then concealed in the larger pack of 'supplies' being given to me, not in my purse of cosmetics. Luckily, I didn't have to lift the pack myself.

No, I was Lady Arrathee now, a trembling, shaking woman. Men bowed to me, waited on me, carried things for me. I had to curtsy, in reply, a rage rising inside me at how feminine I was making myself and all for what? My hair flowed over my back and earrings bobbed at my neck as ribbons held and disguised how I was pinned. Why take all this time to make me so pretty, so womanly? I was almost hysterical with glimpses, in metallic or mirrored surfaces, of the woman I'd become.

That was when I was escorted to the council room from which all the officers were leaving. One, cross-looking, white-haired man, five stars on the shoulder of his white uniform, Sea Captain Brisard, remained. He was furious. He thought his undercaptains had brought him a new 'seawife' to try out.

"I've Mirrie," Brisard snarled at Peveret. "I don't have time to enjoy myself with another cutie. We've *Zephyr* to attend to and this other matter ..." His voice faded away as he'd stared at me.

I flushed in dismay as the guard with the harquebuss pointed it directly at me. Oh, how I wished I really was a witch like Lady Sherrene. She'd been able to bespell whatever was in a harquebuss so that the force of the black powder ex-

plosion had been strong enough to destroy a great ship. At least, Polwer's tales said she could do that.

I couldn't do anything like that! All I could do was stand there in front of the captain of a great ship, dressed in a yellow, flowered, girl's dress, sway on my high heels and clutch the tiny parasol over my yellow bonnet which covered my pinned, long, dark hair. I looked like a girl. Peveret wanted to convince the Sea Captain I was. Panella kept smiling at me, making me blush, while Robady stood there, not saying a word about the girlish figure, me, beside him.

"And you tell me, Layward," sneered the captain to the uncomfortable senior undercaptain beside him, "this pretty, exotic creature is not a cabin boy? You wish me to believe you couldn't tell the difference between boys and girls?"

"I'd like to speak to that," murmured Peveret. "I look at Lady Arrathee and all I see is a very pretty girl."

That was supposed to make me feel wanted and appreciated, I thought, calling up words Panella had used as she'd supervised my re-dressing more prettily as a girl.

"Then, I think of all the things her shipmates say she's done," went on the undercaptain while the captain looked ready to explode. "It can only mean, since she's a woman," Peveret emphasized, "that she's a witch. The other conclusion, if you don't see the girl I see, my captain, is too horrible."

Sea Captain Brisard's face was etched in shock, as bad if not worse than my own.

"Which would you rather have, captain," said Peveret, "a witch or a warlock on board your ship?"

“Kill her!” gasped the captain. “Kill her now! Before she reaches Greenhaven ...”

“Mogen’s answer,” snapped Peveret. “When we don’t even know for sure if she’s a witch or what she is!”

“We’ll know when she bespells us!” Brisard answered as fervently as Peveret. “She’ll kill us all! And the fleet! Remember Lady Sherrene!”

“I am,” said Peveret. I felt a fluttering inside my tightly bound chest as he actually winked at me. “I’ve read my father’s, Wesset’s, account, a dozen times, of how he and his captain treated Lady Sherrene. I want to re-assure Lady Arrathee that, if she proves incontestably she’s a witch, she’ll be rewarded and honored as Lady Sherrene should have been. I think she’ll treat us as we treat her, with rewards!”

“You think we could control a witch!” asked the sea captain, his face screwed up in horror.

“I think, if we don’t try,” said Peveret very quietly, “the Clan Elders will have all our heads.”

I had to mince back and stand in the doorway, my petticoats swishing about my legs, no, I couldn’t stand still, my nerves making me woozy. The three leading ships’ officers had a heated argument about me, one I was destined to lose, I knew, shaking with fear, whatever they decided. They kept looking back at me as I posed there femininely, pirouetting occasionally when Peveret signaled to me that I should.

When the whole council reconvened, some looked puzzled while Mogen glared at me. The captain, the Clan Elder, Lord Brisard, as we Baracts would have called him, announced that I, Lady Arrathee, was believed to be a witch. The sea captain and his

undercaptains would conduct a test to prove the rightness of what they'd decided. I confirmed I was who he thought by blushing and looking down the front of my dress. A lump came to my throat when I looked at the mounds protruding from my chest. I twirled the parasol in the girlish way Panella wanted me to. Peveret said it was just the right touch.

The Undercaptains had me announce myself to Clan Elder Brisard. The throat cordial clasp my throat changed my voice, making me unable to speak as the boy, the man, I was. I not only looked girlish but I sounded like a girl. I was so scared as the captain and his council stared at me. I had to mince in my high heels and pirouette in my lovely skirts, feeling nothing but feminine sensations moving through me as I tried to make them think I was a woman. The opposite would have meant my certain death.

Once the captain ordered I be 'tested' to see if I was a witch, I was led along the deck to the seachair that transferred people between ships at sea. This was the chair where men below could look up my skirts. I must close my legs, Panella told me again, even though men would see my stockings and garters, however I sat.

I wanted to turn and run back, despite the heels I was mincing in, but that meant my certain execution, as sure as that of Losser, Jerit and others. It came to me that Peveret had given me a chance to live, to be 'tested'. Was that what this was all about? I suppressed all desire to run.

I'd protested to Panella finally at being flung onto a plague ship with nothing. I'd meant powders and herbs. At Peveret's command, there were now two packs of 'my' female clothing. Now, I didn't have

‘nothing’, Peveret said. Some cabbies must have been robbed to fill such large carrying packs. A few ingredients for potions, I’d been allowed to seize, as quickly as I could, on a side trip to Mogen’s offices. I really wished I had access to Polwer’s shop.

I was terrified as I was seated femininely in a sea chair and hauled out a little over the deck where the moving stopped. But it wasn’t to haul me back and reconsider as I hoped with a twinge of relief. No, it was to add another chair for someone else to go with me, to a ship on which there was a terrible disease. Why was I being singled out, I thought frantically, as the wind whipped around my dress and made the skirts fly so femininely about me? Why was Robady made to accompany me? I’d thought they’d liked what he’d done on the Terraire dock!

Was it a test like the one the warlock always faced in the plays I’d watched so avidly in Cormallen? Tregell had managed to find ways to survive his trials. His opponents had been so clever in trying to accuse him. He’d been thrown into lakes and fires he could only survive if he was a warlock. He’d have proved he wasn’t a warlock only by not saving himself. I’d felt sorry for him, when I wasn’t ogling the pretty actresses he bespelled to love him. Everyone he didn’t control or enchant was out to kill him from the start, sure he was a menace.

If I survived, would it prove I was a witch? No, a real spike of fear went through me. I’d be condemned as a warlock. I’d be killed out of hand ... if I survived! If I saved whatever survivors there were, they wouldn’t help me if I was a warlock! Oh, oh, oh, was that why I was being transferred as a witch to assist the afflicted crew of another great ship?

If I succeeded, I'd be 'proved' to be a witch! If the crew accepted I was a woman, I must be a witch if I could stay alive on a plague ship! I was being smoked out, as witch or warlock, I was certain of it. Someone, like Robady, Hirdy or Mattle, had told what they'd seen me do. I was being tested, I was certain of it, as I swung over the deck of the ship, the little boat so far away, and so small, or so it seemed.

If it was an airborne plague, I'd be dead as soon as I landed on the little boat. The mask and pomander wouldn't help. But almost all plagues weren't spread in the air, according to Polwer. I'd heard him yelling that at some of his cronies who'd been egging him on, feeding him false facts about a plague in Hillaire or some other great city, loving to see him get so mad.

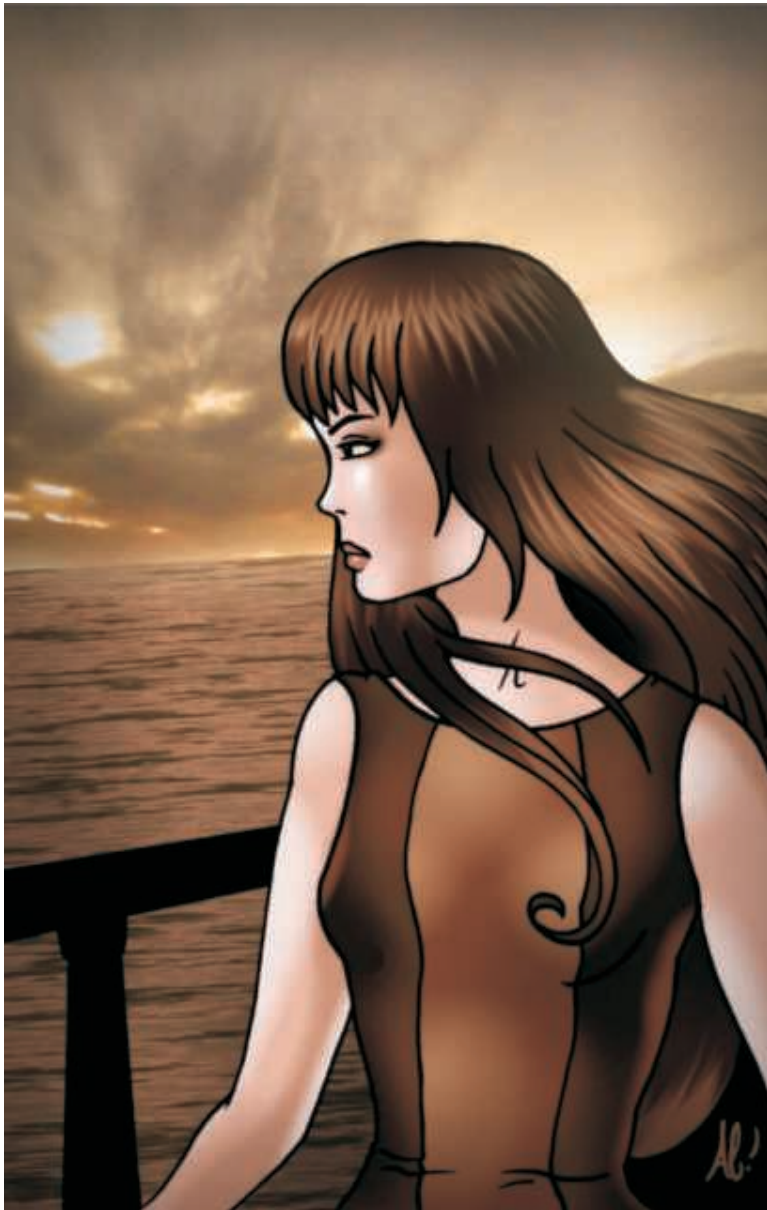
I begged the gods and goddesses to make Polwer right. I didn't want to die as soon as I was on the cutter deck. And if I could smell death in the air, as I had around some lambs once, I should cast myself in the sea right away to avoid the grisly death I couldn't avoid as a woman.

To die as a woman, in my dresses and makeup, was so absurd. As was the way Rob was now staring at me, as if I really was a woman whom he respected.

"Lady Arrathee?" he'd gulped between stares at me, bowing most respectfully, waiting for the boatmen to attach a seat for him.

I was so hot and so flushed, I'm sure. Panella laughed at me knowingly, from the deck beside the sea chair. My fingernails glistened as brightly as hers, so femininely displayed. "You must curtsy to

your companion,” Panella had called to me, “as soon as you reach the deck of the cutter, my lady! We’ll all be watching!” Me, curtsying to Robady, my fellow cadet just tendays before! It was too bizarre!



“Tell him who you are,” prompted Panella, as Robady sat above me on the chair line, staring down on my windblown hair and long, yellow dress.

“Sailing Officer Robady,” I murmured, my throat feeling as if I’d stuck the sides of it together. I tried to speak as I usually did; but only a light tone came from my mouth. “My name is Lady Arrathee, ship’s witch of *Stormclouds over Silvery Seas*.”

Rob stared at me as if I was really a witch or something in my pretty, colorfully decorated, day dress, just as Panella was wearing. “What, what happened to your voice?” he gasped.

“You must ask him whatever he means by that, the kind sir,” ordered Panella as the undercaptain had my packs loaded onto another line to *Zephyr’s* cutter.

“Whatever do you mean by that, kind sir?” I asked Robady, flushing and unable to keep my heavily madeup eyes on his. He was alarmed as he looked at me.

“You sound like a woman!” Robady blurted out.

Panella and Peveret both burst out laughing at the red-faced Sailing Officer.

“She’s supposed to,” growled the undercaptain. “She’s a woman now, Rob, and don’t you forget it!”

“It’s all right, Robady,” said Panella girlishly, flirting with Rob, who gamely tried to smile at her.

“Lady Arrathee is under the influence of one of Lady Sherrene’s potions, the last of the last she left behind when she deserted us for the pleasures of the Foreshore, and marriage to a good man.”

“Count Torthard is a good man,” said Robady fitfully, staring at me as I removed two pomanders and

masks from the purse I carried. I'd no idea what I'd smell aboard a plague ship but it would be awful, I was certain.

"Married to Lady Sherrene, he has to be, doesn't he?" asked Panella cynically.

"It's a happy marriage," Rob said stiffly. "My father knows them well and says so."

Panella grimaced as the crew working the lines indicated they were ready. Yes, there was a crowd of men below me, able to look up my skirts at what I wore under my yellow dress.

The first test of the 'cordial' seemed to have gone as Panella and Peveret expected. Robady couldn't believe that the girl he was looking at was me. I couldn't believe it was me, either, as the sailors at the chair bowed to me as if I was a woman, before setting me on my way, Rob behind, above me. There wasn't a hint in the crewmen's manners to reveal to me they thought I was a cabbie in a flowery, yellow dress.

I couldn't think about the drop. I concentrated on the taste of the throat cordial. I could almost tease out the cordial ingredients. I'd need to make more just from the way it smelled and tasted in my throat. It sort of clasped my throat. It wasn't going to be difficult to make. The procurement of the right supplies would be the problem. And staying alive, of course, I thought with a shudder

Girlish voices chattered above me as I descended, past a lower deck where Gennee called to me, wiping her eyes. She waved tentatively, Darris's arm about her in a hug.

There were several other faces I knew, Hirdy's, no she was Deedee now, wasn't she, standing out.

‘Deedee’, some rigger with his arm about her, stared in total surprise seeing Rob and me being lowered to *Zephyr’s* cutter. Rob had my pack, with the cordial, in his arms, the clothing pack having gone before me. Panella had wanted me to have a maid but Peveret had laughed and said Rob could be that for me, Rob who was astounded with the way I now talked.

Of course, I only had to talk too much, run out of cordial, and the men of *Zephyr* would know they were being cheated sooner than if I stayed alive for a while.

But I was now a woman, a witch! I must stay alive in any way I could on the plague ship.

I was caught in the harness when the chair landed on the cutter’s deck. If there was anyone alive on this visitor from another great ship, none came from the covered bow to help me. It was Robady who bounded out of his chair and came to my rescue, freeing my underskirts and my dress from the parts of the chair they’d been attached to, protecting my womanly modesty, unlike on my ride down where many viewed my female undergarments as I passed over the deck.

I flushed and thanked Robady as delicately as I could, my voice feminine as it was controlled by the witch’s potion Panella had been forced to give me. Comments about my lovely legs, stockings and frilly panties floated down from up above, from the great ship we’d left. Rob held me briefly, staring up angrily, as if, for a moment, he’d forgotten I wasn’t a

girl. And yes, I remembered to curtsy to him when I was free, trembling all over as I thought about what a fool I was, trying to act like a woman, as I was supposed to.

“Gods, this boat smells like a charnel house,” said Rob, his face contorting. He grabbed the mask I held out to him. The pomander mask I’d given him wasn’t working that well at covering smells but I hadn’t known what I was going to be facing. I think a lot of men had died on this boat, many vomiting everywhere as they died; the smells suggested that.

I didn’t know how the other men, if any were still alive, could stand being out on the open deck where Robady and I, now ‘Lady Arrathee’, stood. Thinking of myself that way made me feel faint for different reasons than the odor. I just couldn’t go on thinking how I must act all the time as if I was a Lady and a witch, a woman.

The curtain on the front of the boat parted. A tall, gaunt man, devoid of hair, shuffled forward. His shirt was open, showing off a thin, debilitated body. “Dowd, third mate on *Zephyr of Serenity*,” he stated, his hollow eyes on me, staring at me as if he hadn’t seen a woman before.

I’d probably had that same look when I’d seen a girl, tendays before, walking down the docks with hot sweetmeats for sale. *Sword* had docked in Terraire after being on the seas for three tendays. How hard we’d all felt that duty to have been, separated from women for so long. Seafarers must really suffer, we cadets had agreed, going on their year-long trips with no women aboard

Well, I knew the answer now to that ‘problem’, how the Seafarers coped with no women aboard,

didn't I, and so did my fellow cadets. They'd become, for the most part, 'cabin boys' like me, hadn't they?

That Terraire girl had smiled at all of us, men and boys, making lewd suggestions to her. "Buy something from me and we'll talk about it," she'd flirted with all of us, even us young, boyish cadets.

The man on *Zephyr's* cutter was staring at me as we'd stared at that woman. I couldn't joke with such a ravaged man, not when he was joined by another, as shaven and as starved in looks as he, who stared at me too.

"The hair?" asked Rob in a clipped, authoritative voice.

The first man looked from me to Rob in surprise. "Sea Captain's orders," said the man. "Thought lice spread the plague."

Robady stiffened beside me, an oath expelled from his lips. Like me, he must have been sure of death, the attendant of a 'witch', sent to assist these poor, afflicted men. I could almost hear Rob's thoughts. They wouldn't be about me in my pretty, yellowy dress and ruffled, female petticoats.

No, Rob must be thinking he was dead, like me. He was on a plague boat. The breeze was blowing its air around us, swirling my long skirts against my stockings, making me feel so weird, so abased, so awful to be dressed as a woman. Yet, with the breeze came the odors of the men in front of me, staring at me.

Oh goddesses, was my first thought. A witch could recognize diseases just by the smell of them. I'd been thinking I'd do something like that, at least. I'd often suggested diseases in my father's stock, until I'd learned to be circumspect, before being sent

off to sea. No, my circumspection hadn't helped me at all. I think my father must have suspected me of having witchy talents. He wouldn't apprentice me to the local apothecary. No, I had to go to sea where I'd soon lose my ability to tell one fragrance from another.

Unlike Rob, I didn't cover my painted face entirely. Oh gods and goddesses, I said to myself as I tried to analyze the odors the men gave off. Several plagues that afflicted the Foreshore, the Seafarer word for the Kingdom of the Baracts, were known and the smells of them talked about.

If this boat had men with a plague on them, all I could do was shake with fear, for different reasons than Robady. I was dead as I couldn't smell 'plague'. No, I couldn't smell plague at all. I couldn't see it, the boils and bruised discoloring of the skin, on the thin forms that came out of the tent at the front of the boat. One boy staggered and fell into the sea spray in the bottom of the boat. None of the men made any move to help him. But, worse than their treatment of a fellow seaman, was the fact that I couldn't smell any hint of plague about any of them.

Not that there wasn't clearly something wrong with all of them. Oh gods, I cursed my poor thinking for the umpteenth time since I'd been captured by *Stormclouds on Silvery Seas*, the great ship looming over us. 'Plague' probably didn't mean the same to the Seafarers as it meant on the lands of the Foreshore. We Baracts had witches who'd make potions to cure disease, among other things. They recognized the differences between many diseases and several types of plague, from black blood to the rare, airborne, rotting plague.

I couldn't ask the crew but I guessed they must call each terrible disease that afflicted them, a plague. So, with a shudder, I stepped a little closer, well, I minced like a girl as Gennee had taught me, towards Dowd, who backed off in alarm. I tried to do what I'd always done with the people who came into Polwer's apothecary store. I tried to figure out with my sense of smell what was wrong with them.

I'd helped Polwer when I wasn't needed with my father's stock animals. Polwer liked me to visit him. I wanted my father to make me the apothecary's apprentice, but Polwer didn't seem to want that.

Polwer did say, however, that I had such a good nose for sicknesses and cures he wasn't sending so many to Dolora, the witch of Cormallen, for a witch's curing, cutting her income, he bet. No wonder, thinking of it, I'd been sent to sea. My potions, working so well, must have been what led my father and brothers to think of me as a warlock.

I was strange to myself as well. To me, the world seemed made up of all kinds of mixtures my sense of smell could split apart and classify. So, I'd been sent to sea. Who could have thought that, now, standing on this swaying deck, Seafarers glowering at me, on this boat so small a calm ocean swell made it sway, my sense of smell was all that could keep me alive, and prove that I was some kind of a witch.

"You're eating well?" I asked the first man, food smells being the least rank of the odors he gave off. I looked past him, into the covered part of the deck, at a long table. Remains of a huge meal, the same as I'd served girlishly to the crew of *Silvery Seas*, were scattered therein.

Robady said something about being serious for a minute. I raised a feminine, manicured hand to him while the third mate gave me a chilling smile. It was something about food, Polwer, the apothecary, had told me. It was a smell food gave off but it wasn't because it was rotten. Oh, what was that smell?

"Can't keep it in," rasped the hollow-eyed man. "Always hungry. Seem to die from hunger. But, eating, even when you don't want to, keeps the plague at bay. Can't eat enough!"

"You've been in the sun lands," I guessed. "Marashan and further south?"

Oh, how Polwer had spoken of those places as being sinks of diseases, plagues and non-plagues alike. For some reason, he'd let me smell a small vial he'd had. I'd jerked back from it, every sense and inch of my skin in revolt at whatever it was he'd had in the vial.

"Sting you?" Polwer had asked. His eyes opened very wide as I'd had to run to his sink and throw up. It had been such a tiny waft in the air. I retched to get rid of it for several days.

"That's an antidote to the worst plague, rotting air," Polwer had told me when I was able to ask him, days later. "Made from the dead bodies of plague victims and the plague itself. That's how they do it in Marashan. Good place to avoid, I'd say! You don't want to be reacting like that when you're mixing life-saving potions, do you?"

"They said Marashan was plague-free," the hollow-eyed man, Dowd, said to me, not identifying 'they'. His glare softened when I tossed away my pomander and leaned a little forward to breathe in more of the stench from his mouth. I forgot that my

earrings would jangle and that my feminine, windblown hair would fall about them and tangle. I felt strands of hair across my soft-skinned face, making me quiver.

Robady grabbed at me, horror in his eyes, making the dress swirl about my stockings, sending waves of feminine feelings through me.

Dowd stared at me while Robady, the mask he held to his face blurring his words, came between us, telling the seamen to move back. Rob ordered two other men to pick up the fallen boy. The men turned to Dowd, still staring at me, who told them to obey.

“Well, if you’re a witch,” Dowd sneered at me, “you’ll be able to cure yourself, right? The Turlings who run *Stormclouds* would send a real Baract witch to cure us, wouldn’t they?” His voice dripped with sarcasm that I reciprocated but couldn’t agree to aloud. “That what you really are? Why sentence you to our hellhole? Is there anything in these packs that can really help when they wouldn’t let us up there or one of you down here?” He really glared at me. “How does a real witch heal something when she doesn’t know what it is?”

I shivered as the gaunt-eyed men stared at me. “A real witch could tell,” I said, fear coursing through me as I realized I’d be revealing to this scurvy lot, and to Robady, something I’d never said, that I used my sense of smell as real witches do.

“If you’re afflicted by a plague, it’s one I can’t sense in any of you,” I told Dowd, whose eyes opened wide in shock. “But you do have something inside you,” I said, pointing into his sneering mouth. “Something that’s alive and eating at you. We need

fessare and collane, Sailing Officer Robady, from the great ship, as we're standing in stale vomit from those who died here. The decks are probably crawling with eggs of parasites these men have all ingested somehow. You and I are probably being infested as well, Rob, as I speak." I just murmured the last thing to him.

"Isn't it the plague?" asked Rob uncertainly. "In the air ...?"

Several of the gaunt men were nodding their heads in agreement as I felt the breeze again around my silk-clad legs and swaying dress.

"It's not the wind, it's not the rotting air plague, that's spreading the affliction you have," I told them all confidently, amazed at the womanly voice coming from my clenched throat. "You're all standing, bare-footed, on an unclean deck, probably in a crawling mass of tiny, almost unseen creatures, which want to climb inside you where they can feed and grow. I can smell the parasites on your breaths."

I leaned over to the second man, who was hopping up and down. His breath was like Dowd's, the odor Polwer had called 'themater', I finally, thankfully, recalled. I'd told Polwer what I'd smelled in a bunch of silly, sick sheep. He'd given me a long look, not answering me right away.

"We have to kill this whole flock?" I'd asked Polwer. "It's the only way to save the rest of the sheep?"

"Kill 'em all, all the flocks, if you don't fire the ground they've been defecating on," Polwer had grunted. He'd then told me all about parasites and the odor of 'themater' that came from the victims.

“Sheep don’t make that odor,” he’d told me. “We humans don’t, either. Next time, Barade, the butcher comes in, you take a whiff of him. I can’t smell it. But he’s got a tapeworm, he says, from eggs in bad meat he ate. If he has a tapeworm, you’ll smell it, if you could smell it in the woolies. You tell me if you do.”

So I’d got close enough to Barade. I smelled what I had on the sheep, only something much more intense. Polwer had made the man a new potion then, which had made Barade so mad, when he recovered. He’d never had pain like it, he said.

“But your tapeworm’s gone, isn’t it?” Polwer had sneered at Barade, who’d been startled, slammed coins on the counter and stamped angrily out of the apothecary’s.

“I hope that that’s all that’s afflicting you,” I told the men looking at me so intensely. I couldn’t tell if that was because they saw me as a woman or if they recognized that I wasn’t. “I can’t sense what I’d call a plague at all. But if *Silvery Seas* riggers came down into this,” I indicated the poorly washed decks, “they’d take parasites back to the great ship. They’d think they’d brought the plague back which, in a kind of a way, they would. If we can kill everything alive on this deck, soak it in fessare and collane, I can set up a clean area and try to make a potion to kill what’s inside you.”

“Dasell cut open the bodies of those who died and never found anything inside the corpses,” said one of the gaunt men bitterly.

Dowd turned and clouted the man who’d spoken. “Call her ‘my lady’,” he rasped at the other human skeleton, making me shiver as he accepted me for

what I appeared to be, a woman, “if a churl like you has to open his mouth, Merren.”

“Better tell Peveret to have Silvery Seas cleansed as well,” I said to Robady, who stared at me as if he was seeing me differently, as a witch; oh goddesses, please not as a woman. “Could be some got up there on the lines or the messages.”

I woke in the middle of the night and didn't know where I was for a moment. Then, it all flooded back to me. I was in a bed, not a hammock. I was in a frilled, woman's nightgown, a light blue, silky thing that my maid, Rossel, had found for me in a clothing pack.

The woman's nightie had thin, frilly straps that went over my shoulders, with cups for my breasts, if I'd had any, to fit into. My false breasts filled the cups, making an odd trembling pass through me. The long, swirly nightgown was so light and thin that I might not have been wearing anything. I hadn't let Rossel help me with my fake, padded breasts, adhered to my chest. I didn't let him see me tape back my male genitals or put on the white panties that went with the nightie. After all, he, my maid, thought I was a woman.

Once I'd finally managed to get rid of Rossel, I'd thought I'd slip off the nightie and put on my usual sleep grays, if I could find them, but Rob had returned with Dowd, the 'captain' of the cutter that had brought us to this other, great ship. Rossel left me to shiver into the nightgown any girl would have adored.

If I'd been still on *Silvery Seas*, I'd have called Rossel 'she', as I'd learned to call all the cabin boys. The Celebration had revealed how pretty and girlish the majority were, in their dance dresses, speaking and wiggling so femininely. Of course, I'd had to learn to be just like them since I'd been captured, 'rescued' the Seafarers would have said.

Rossel didn't behave at first like the other 'cab-bies' I'd known back on *Silvery Seas*. He only underwent a change in character after being told to be my maid. He became so effeminate in front of the crewmen that even I had to stare at him. She, I suppose I should call Rossel that now, was going to be the best lady's maid there'd ever been, Rossel proclaimed to the men with a giggle, yes, an actual girlish giggle. I couldn't do that. But Gennee, my cabin boy 'girl friend', could.

"I'll see your maid returns to her duties in the morning, my lady," said Dowd, his eyes glinting in the murky light of Rob's lamp. He'd only come, 'Captain' Dowd said, to let me know that the stills and potions I'd wanted set up, were slowly fermenting the solutions I'd ordered, in the workroom assigned to me. I'd see them, and the sick men, on the morrow when I was fresh and alert.

I felt naked as the light gown flowed about me. Surely Dowd and Rob saw through the flimsy thing to the bra and panties I wore to simulate a female figure. My dark hair was braided, the ends held tightly with short red ribbons. Rossel had insisted I braid my hair as girls did at night, he'd said seriously, frowning when I'd snorted at that. My real hair was short. I normally wore a fall of long, brunette hair. Gennee had traded a dress for the wig with another cabin boy.

I scrambled into the bed, trying to keep the nightie over my legs, hiding beneath the bed clothes, to stop Dowd and Rob looking at me with such clear interest. I wished I hadn't allowed my maid to put a very fine, thin, feminine necklace on me.

I had glinting studs at my ears as well. I'd seen those in the mirror and I'd trembled at how girlish I looked despite the lack of paint on my face. I was very thin. My lips and eyes, and especially my slender, arched eyebrows, had seemed to take on almost permanent feminine attractiveness after the way Gennee, and then Panella, had made me wear makeup. And now, I thought with terrible spasms of shame passing through me, I was to present myself as a woman all of the time, and more than that, as a witch.

"You wish your bodyguard, my lady," said Dowd smoothly as Rob stiffened at that appellation for him, "stay inside your door? I think it's best as the situation below is tense. I'll let him discuss it with you, my lady. Rest assured, however, my lady," Oh, yes, I flushed and shivered to be called that all the time, "there will be enough of the potions you've concocted for all who wish to be cured, my lady, to be dosed immediately. It will be the same as the cure you forced upon us, my lady!"

So many 'my ladys'! Dowd made me blush even more at the way he eased Rossel, as if my 'maid' was really a girl, out of the 'cabin' assigned to me as Lady Arrathee. He gave me a knowing smile, his arm about the bouncy Rossel. Oh yes, I couldn't help but flush as I could guess what Dowd was going to be doing with Rossel as soon as they reached his or 'her' cabin. Rob headed to the door and slid a bolt

into place as soon as the new ‘captain’ of the great ship, Rob told me grimly, was gone.

I shuddered as I lay there in the huge bed, over to one side.

“Tell me about the ship,” I whispered to Rob. “Dowd is captain?”

“In the morning,” Rob said curtly, out of the dark. He’d extinguished the dim light completely. He’d been my superior as a cadet on *Sword*. He knew I was no woman. He was disgusted, I knew, to look at me, dressed and primped as a female. More, he had to treat me as if I was a ‘girl’ as we cabbies called ourselves, all the time.

“There are pillows down the center of this bed,” I whispered to Rob. “There’s a farmyard’s width on the starboard side where you could sleep ...”

“I can’t, my lady,” came Rob’s voice again out of the darkness. Oh, gods and goddesses, he was copying Dowd and making me feel so silly. He knew I wasn’t and could never be his ‘lady’.

“You deserve a good night’s sleep, Rob,” I told him nervously. “I’ve more than enough space. I’m still caught up in all that’s gone on, what’s happened to us. I don’t think I’ll sleep. Why don’t you tell me about conditions on the ship?”

“All right, my lady,” said Rob after a long pause.

I knew I wouldn’t get to sleep but I can’t remember one word, if any, that Rob said to me. So, I know I flaked out quickly. I must have been really exhausted with all the tensions of trying to appear as a woman for the crew, making the potions to cure them of the ‘plague’.

The next thing I knew was that I was awakening. I was in a bed. I recalled I was in a nightie as I felt it sliding silkily and femininely over my legs as I jerked in awakening. A pillow pushed against me. I recalled dividing the bed; and then I realized whose heavy breathing was at my ear and beside me in the dark.

“Rob,” I gasped as I became aware that it was still night, and where he was. “Oh!” I squealed.

“Hush, woman,” murmured Rob’s voice beside me in the darkness.

“What!” I squealed as I felt strong hands stroking my waist. I slid across the bed, the pillows meant to impede my progress having been moved away completely.

“Rob! What do you ...” think you are doing! I was going to shout at my ‘bodyguard’ but I couldn’t get any further sound out as Rob’s lips pressed against mine. His shaved cheek was on mine, so male, while I was all soft like a woman! Then, I felt a naked, male body easing over me as he pushed me down firmly in the soft bed.

I jerked against him, slapping at his arms, trying to free myself. But Rob’s lips wouldn’t let go of mine. I couldn’t believe how forceful his lips were. I gasped at his kiss which was so demanding, demanding and strong, one a woman would surely have enjoyed. But I wasn’t a woman!

“You’ve tantalized me too much, my lady,” Rob whispered huskily, kissing my cheek, his hands caressing the nightie against my hips, my legs thrashing as I felt so weird to have a man kissing and fondling me.

“Such wonderful, womanly fragrances!” Rob murmured as he squeezed me, stroked me, and made

me squeal in distress as if I was a girl. He kissed my chest as I writhed and pushed against him but I couldn't, despite my panic, get the man off me. "And I haven't had a woman in so long," Rob went on, "since Madame Merenda's, where you were with me, Lady Arrathee. You girls were saying that you, in the Celebration, as a girl ..."

"No, I didn't!" I squealed, knowing what the girls would've said, that I'd made love to three men. It wasn't true! I'd tried to use witch's potions on the men who'd tried to bed me. Only one had refused the drink I'd laid out to bespell him. And then there was Richo, who'd bespelled me and had me, the only part of the Celebration I'd enjoyed, until I realized what he'd done to me and what I'd done for him, as a girl.

"I'm not Lady ..." I countered, trying to slide out from under Rob but again his lips closed savagely on mine. I could feel his male passion as he kissed me. Several men had kissed me like that. I hadn't liked it at all. Oh, gods and goddesses, where was my sleeping draught, the one I could use against him, when I needed it so badly? Somewhere in my pack of cosmetics, I thought in panic, as Rob's hands caressed me, trying to arouse me, gentle me, as if I really was a woman.

"Still, you torment me," said my bodyguard lightly as he lifted the hem of my nightdress and ran his hand up my smooth legs as if they were a girl's legs indeed.

"Rob!" I hissed, jerking beneath him at each sensual stroking. "It's me, Arrat! I'm not ..."

"Shush, my darling lady," Rob murmured as his hands slid through the sides of my panties.

I tried to scream but his hand and then his mouth stopped me. My friend, Robady, kissed me and fondled me as if I was a girl, becoming more feverish as I struggled beneath him. The soft nightie caressed me, embarrassingly, rousing me. Rob kept murmuring that I'd tormented him with my womanly loveliness, with the feminine grace in how I moved as a woman. Here I was, a woman, so fragrant and desirable, making him want me so much.

"I'm not making ..." I gurgled as his mouth closed on mine. His tongue shocked me as it entered my mouth. It was a kiss I'd given to a woman, when I could, much more softly, to indicate I'd wanted to love them.

"You did this with the other men who had you, didn't you?" Rob went on in his soft murmur. "They touched you gently like this," his hand wrapped around my tush in just the same manner as Richo had, softly and enticingly.

"They didn't have me, Rob!" I squealed to him, even as his legs pushed mine apart. Oh, it wasn't my real, man's voice! I still had that stupid cordial influencing me!

Rob gently caressed my panties as I shrieked. He laughed softly at the way I was fighting so ineffectively to get free. I didn't know what had come over him. He knew I was a man. For goodness's sake, we'd caroused together as shipmates in bordellos in the months he'd known me. He knew I was Arrat and no lady.

But, it was as if I was with Richo again. Richo had caressed me along my bra strap and my panties as he was preparing to take me as a woman. Only afterwards, had I realized it was because of what-

ever he'd spiked my drink with. A potion several of the men on *Silvery Seas* had access to, I'd worked out, had made me feel so girlish to be in Richo's arms. The other men had used something in a punch at the party. No wonder all the girl-ishly-dressed cabin boys had been so receptive to their touches as if they were girls. They wanted to be, anyway, as Gennee constantly told me.



Rob rolled and writhed all over me, his manhood erect and touching my panties and between my thighs. I shrieked as he pushed against me; what he wanted to do, what he was going to do to me, his friend, was so blindingly obvious. I was shaking both inside and out, my mind in a frenzy as I tried not to be taken again as a woman.

“I bespelled them, Rob!” I screamed at him. That was partly true; I had, but two men had had me as a woman and, to my shame, I’d enjoyed one of those ravishings, feeling like a woman as Richo loved me affectionately.

I hadn’t even wanted Richo to leave. I lay in his arms and wrapped my legs about him, pulling him down on me to wiggle against him, loving the feel of his hands caressing me. Oh, yes, I’d felt so feminine, so much like a woman, even my skirts and stockings feeling so perfect on me.

When Richo had said it was enough, he’d gently helped me, as giddy and effeminate as Rossel, to re-tuck myself. He’d helped me to put my panties and bra back in place. He’d kissed me so softly that I’d hung onto him, wriggling against his hands on my tush, feeling his pleasure rising as I knew mine was as well, not wanting him ever to leave me. I’d wanted to be his woman forever. Of course, the feeling wore off. I was left to endure shame and humiliation all to myself, my thoughts detestable and disgusting.

Rob’s kissing eased. His hands rose to cup my face as he lay on me. I grabbed them with mine to stop him. He let me hold onto him like that. But his lips kept pressing and moving, just as his bare legs were caressing mine. I felt a shivering inside me and, incredibly, stupidly, a strange desire. Oh gods

and goddesses, it was a female, feminine desire rising in me, a desire to be pleased, as a woman, just the way I'd felt with Richo.

My lips began to tremble. Rob's tongue, gently this time, slipped into my mouth. I found I was holding him tightly, his chest bouncing on my bra, arousing such strange feelings that I fought against. All the time, his hands caressed my shoulders and slowly slipped down the thin straps that kept my nightie and bra in place. He stroked me, my lower body held down by his weight as his mouth had its fill of me. I shook beneath him as I responded with pleasure at his kiss, wanting him so much. Rob my friend, I desperately kissed back, lightning running through every one of my nerve endings again at the way he made me feel so loved.

Richo had lifted my arms about his neck and my legs about his waist, bouncing me in the bed we'd shared. I frantically wanted that loving feeling again; and so I put my arms around Rob and kissed him, telling myself how stupid it was to kiss another man like me! I kept thinking that, even as I felt such a surge of strange pleasure running through me. It was Rob who wanted me, Rob pleasuring me, and Rob who wanted me to pleasure him. Oh, I did so want to pleasure him, didn't I, I exulted, as he eased my panties down a little.

"You are so beautiful, my lady," murmured my lover, lifting my nightgown over my chest and head. I was free of it. We touched everywhere, alive and aroused, pleased, skin to skin.

"Oh, oh," I think I said as Rob pressed my thighs about his manhood. I curled my legs up around his waist, knowing what was going to happen to me in time.

“Your voice is like a goddess’s,” said Rob as fire seemed to run through me wherever he touched and caressed me. I stopped his embarrassing compliments with the simple expedient of kissing him as no woman had ever kissed him before; so he said, and never so sweetly, so he said.

I slid down my panties for him, my friend who loved me and wanted to pleasure me. I felt a hunger in him as much as in me that I needed to assuage. Rob met all the needs I had to have met, as well, as I writhed under him. I bounced him a little off me as he stripped my tuck away, me holding him so hard. Yes, Rob held me so softly, gently, whispering sweet compliments to me about my girliness, my soft and shapely legs which I loved so much to be caressed, as any girl would.

“Oh!” I had to gasp again as I felt him against my tush as my body was lifted higher and higher. Rob’s manhood penetrated me so easily. He couldn’t contain himself. He rose up over me, my legs frantically wiggling about his neck as he kissed them so wonderfully.

Rob inserted himself into me, going in and out of me so fiercely I was frightened he would tear me apart as I’d heard many a deckhand or rigger threaten to do to a cabin boy. Rob whispered that he was going to give it to me, many times, and hard. Ooo, I loved it. I really did. I loved pleasuring him as he gasped and grunted. I wriggled which pleased him so much as we were united as one.

Rob squeezed me as well, hard, but I wanted that! I wanted to be his woman! I shook fervently and bounced uncontrollably against my lover, my paddings torn away, his mouth on my chest, even on my tiny nipples.

“R-Rob!” I called as I felt him coming inside me, rutting frantically with me as I had seen so many animals do when having their uncontrollable urges. He came inside me, making me spasm. I spurted over him as well and felt such a letdown as Rob pressed on, kissing me, telling me to keep on going as frenziedly as I was, not to stop, oh, never to stop, as he loved me so. Oh, he loved me, Rob said, making warm shudders surge through me as he called me his woman again. I felt my doubts ebb away as I joined in the passionate lovemaking Rob wanted me to share.

“You, you bespelled me!” I hissed at Robady who slipped out of the bed, completely naked. He stretched, turned and grinned at me, before heading over to the hatch where someone was knocking.

“Don’t, don’t let anyone in,” I growled frantically, my voice clearly my own, Arrat’s, once more.

“You need more throat cordial, my lady,” smirked Rob, unbolting the hatch and letting in Rossel, my maid, with two large containers of hot water.

“For my lady’s bath,” said Rossel importantly, smiling at me as I shivered and tried to keep the bedsheets over me. Oh, there was my lovely night-dress and the panties I’d worn, right there where Rossel was going to walk.

Rossel poured the bath for me, put the screen in the right place, shooed out a grinning Robady, telling him to use the common bathroom and where it was.

Rob had poured me some of the cordial, he still as naked as before, not caring how Rossel was glancing at him, at his manhood, in awe. Rossel glanced at me, with envy and a smile. I blushed as we were both thinking, I'm sure, of how a woman like me could have that inside me and how it would have made me feel.

I had to make Rob put two thirds of the thick solution of the cordial back before he diluted it. I had to find a way of making more, especially now that all the men had heard me talking in a female voice. I desperately needed to find the apothecary's workroom. I had so many things to do, that a witch should do.

I let the cordial clasp my throat again and listened to Rob telling Rossel he'd use the bathroom on the officer's deck. "It's sea water in the baths," called Rossel after him.

"I should look at the bathrooms and heads," I said from beneath the sheets. Yes, so quickly did the potion work, I was speaking as Lady Arrathee again. "They're almost certainly infected. Oh, Rob was going to tell me about the men on board. We slept before he could tell ..."

"Or you had a lot better things to do than be chatting all night long," laughed Rossel, picking up my nightie and panties, while I blushed and shook under the bedsheets. She brought me a girlish robe from the pack Panella had ordered prepared for me. If I wanted any male clothing on this voyage, I'd have to steal it from *Zephyr's* sailors.

"How many men are alive and well?" I asked Rossel. The members of the cutter wouldn't answer questions like that, not even Dowd.

“You’re not a Pureblood,” Dowd had said to me with a grin. “And *Zephyr*’s from Faroy Island. They think anyone not from that tiny rock is a half-breed, a Turling, or worse. You’ll get no answers from any of them. Ask me, though, and I’ll tell you anything, My Lady Arrathee.”

Only Dowd didn’t. He went off right away. I’d only seen him once on *Zephyr*, in the doorway, his arm about Rossel as he’d taken my maid from my room the night before.

“There’s over a hundred men still alive!” said Rossel excitedly. “Isn’t that awesome, my lady? Dowd thought there wouldn’t be more than twenty or thirty, if that, with us so long away, trying to find ships in the sea lanes. ’Course there wouldn’t be any if we’d had to go all the way to Faroy! I wouldn’t have made it.” Tears came to his eyes. “Six cabin boys haven’t. ... Oh, my lady, you should bathe while your water’s hot. I’ll lay out a new dress for you, and new underwear. You don’t have to hide from me ...”

“Privacy!” I screeched at Rossel, who laughed sassily at me, and went off with a skip and a dance, girlishly, as I’d done with Gennee, though each of us was very much a boy. I scurried from my bed, into warm, femininely scented water that really eased the places where I was still hurting from Rob’s attentions.

I had to dress as a woman, a witch. I shuddered through the whole process as I put on my breasts, my bra, both tightly, the pretty panties and the long-skirted dress that hugged my waist so tightly. Rossel had left all those things out for me, shoes for my feet, stockings that I didn’t put on right away,

and a whole constellation of makeups and perfumes for me to use on myself.

A tap on the hatch and Rob came barging in without me calling to him. "I brought you breakfast," he said to me, the familiar, charming smile on his face. He set a napkin on the side table and laid out an enormous meal. I knew I'd never eat it. Then, I saw he had two sets of utensils with him.

"How, how can you be so, so ...?" I searched for the word.

"Satisfied, wonderful in bed, affectionate, charming?" Rob asked, slyly grinning as he added, "Manly?"

"Two-faced!" I added hotly, slipping my high heels onto my bare feet. "You, you know what I am, Rob. I'm not a woman!" I was blushing in embarrassment as he held a chair for me to sit down. I did, smoothing my skirts beneath me as I'd seen women do.

"Neither is Panella," said Rob, sitting on the short side of the table next to me. "You saw the way she and Peveret were going on. It was as if they were husband and wife, wasn't it?"

"That's nothing to do with us!" I said, my voice wobbling nervously. I flushed and flushed with the way Rob was looking at me, such a smirk, or satisfied smile, on his face, this man who'd had me in bed as his woman.

"It's everything to do with us," said Rob seriously. He actually reached for my hand to take it as a man does to a woman he likes, or loves. He shrugged as I gasped and pulled it away from him. "We're going to be on a great ship like this, my darling Lady Arrathee," he said, using the title Undercaptain

Peveret had hung on me, “for a long time. You’ll be in skirts, darling, and I’m not going to see a real woman in a year ...”

“I’m not a woman!” I screamed at him as he poured water into the glasses he’d brought for both of us.

“You will be,” said the young man I’d thought my friend. His words made me tingle and shake all over. I felt panic. Fear stirred in me, as did disgust with myself. I shook my head as Rob spoke on. “If not with me, you’ll be a woman for someone else. If you’re not a witch, you’ll stay a cabin boy. You’ll be expected to entertain any man on the ship. And a rigger will make love to you much more roughly than what went on between us last night.

“So, I’m still your friend, Lady Arrathee. I like you and you like me. I know that.” I shook furiously, my legs unable to keep from twitching as my long skirts rustled about me in my denial of what he was saying. “We can both help each other and keep one another sane. Because, unless you can unlock fantastically wonderful witch’s powers, my darling, we’ll both be stuck on a ship like this for years ahead, as all the other girlie cadets are going to be!”

I was shocked as I looked at him. “I’m going to get out of this,” I snapped at him. “And I’m going to remember everything anyone ever did to hurt me.”

“I won’t be one who hurts you,” said Robady, caressing my arm though I tried to pull mine away. “I like the woman who responded to me in every way as if she loved me last night!”

“You snark!” I squealed at Rob. “You bespelled me, didn’t you? You think that I’m ever going to let you do that to me again?”

Rob stared at me. Hastily, he took a drink of water and pushed a glass over to me. "You could tell?" he asked cautiously. "Panella told me cabbies could never tell when there's lovebane in the punch. But it's strongest as perfume or in bathwater, I guess. When a man strokes you, he disturbs it anew on your skin. It doesn't just affect you, either, it affects me, the man, as well."

"Don't do that to me again!" I said fiercely, trembling as Rob didn't stop stroking my arm.

"Panella says it's some kind of controlling agent," Rob went on, not stopping his touching, even as I tried to fight him off. "If I make suggestions, as I did, you'll want to obey them. So, I told you to please me, remember, and you did, darling Arrathee. You did. You were so soft and adorable, far better than any girl I ever had at Merenda's, because you really loved me. You can't deny it!"

"It will never happen again!" I told him hysterically. "I know all about it now. I'm on my guard ..."

I never expected to see a little balloon in Rob's hand, nor did I expect to watch him force out the contents out all over me.

"Oh! What are you doing?" I screamed as I stood up but Rob was on me right away.

"It's better this way, my darling," Rob said to me as he held me. My head began to whirl. There seemed to be a golden haze about my darling friend's head. "It's going to be way better for both of us!"

"What's going ...?" I garbled the questions I wanted to ask. Rob's lips closed on mine and ... Oh, it was so wonderful to kiss such a handsome man,

who kept stroking me and whispering compliments on my girliness.

I just had to please him and go to the bed with him. He so much wanted me to please him. Ooo, I so much wanted to please him as well. I felt the passion rise inside me as I clung to his neck and kissed him with such complete, feminine abandon. I was the one to lift my skirts and let him caress my panties.

Rob was the one to tell Rossel to leave and not to watch his mistress and her lover. I'd soon be out to attend to the crew who needed me. I needed Rob. He told me so. I needed his kisses all over me. I needed his manhood inside me. I needed to put my legs around him as he pushed me down and we united as one. He reminded me again and again that I was his woman; and so, I did so many womanly things for him, to keep him from flagging when he'd penetrated me more than one time.

I knew that Rob had been more than wonderful to me but, oh, I wanted him so to love me, to love me, his woman, again and again. I wanted his hands all over me, caressing me, as I was caressing him. I thought I was dieing of ecstasy and bliss. I didn't mind at all as I convulsed so marvelously beneath my lover. But he said I was only having a woman's orgasm, as I should have. I should try to have more.

So I did, and he was right. It was the most glorious sensation I'd ever felt. I knew I was a goddess as my lover called me. And, yes, I definitely was in love with Robady, who whispered he was my sea husband as I was his seawife.

Clean water, fessare and collane we'd had lowered to us from *Silvery Seas* as the cutter was still tied up to the great ship. Of course, we only got such supplies when Robady threatened to climb up the cables and breathe on everyone. "Get some men's boots as well," I said to him quickly.

"Yes, my lady," said Rob with a smile that made me blush even more than I did each time a breeze blew my silky, yellow dress about me. If I ever survived this idiocy, I'd probably die after, from all the laughter at what I'd done to survive. I'd probably be begged to get into skirts, paint my face and show my laughing audience in a tavern how I'd passed as a woman.

I tried not to think of that as I soaked boots in collane solutions to get them to work as protection for the crew. The survivors of the cutter's voyage to find help in the main sea lanes couldn't work hard; but we did manage, by nightfall, to clear the worst of the afflicted deck.

Rob strung a special hammock for me, away from the men, where I'd be able to lie in my dress and hair. Rob had his blades close by. I hadn't been able to get all of the makeup off me and still looked pretty girly. Rob insisted I was a lady; so, I'd have a lady's commode as well for what I had to do. That was lowered to us. I felt so weird to be in a covered enclosure in the rear of the boat and being so lady-like in the ablutions I carried out.

We'd worked through the evening, Robady my assistant, even though he was unable, just like the other sailors, to sense what potions I was making

from the meager supplies I'd been able to seize from Mogen's surgery. Which was lucky in one way, since I cut corners all the time, not having precisely the ingredients I wanted; and I was guessing about proportions all the time.

Rob put a blanket over me, whispering, as it grew dark, that he was on watch as I slept in the hammock. I should kick him immediately if I saw him nodding off. I shuddered as I saw his face in the moonlight. He looked like the Rob of old, his face almost unscarred once more. I slept sometime. I think Rob did as well. The cutter, us on it, cast adrift sometime in the darkness. We didn't hear any cry and didn't know why we were moving. There was no sign, as daylight reappeared, of the great ship to which we'd been lashed.

In my stocks, I did have brimseed, which I thought would make a parasite-killing potion. It was used against the tiny animals that multiplied in left-over meat and things like that. If my sense of smell really worked, as I thought it did, I could fortify my potion with fessare and have it ready by first light. The balance seemed right. It smelled the way I thought it should. I just didn't know how it would work on people.

It didn't work well. Thus, I proved I wasn't as good a witch as I'd feared I'd be. The potion was far too strong for the men's weakened bodies. I diluted their first intake, filling the men with clean water, and a diluted mixture, but still, men writhed all over the cutter's deck, demanding their remaining friends kill 'the woman' as I'd surely killed them.

I nervously weakened what I'd made, several times more. Rob helped me force my potion on the sickest men but they were all writhing and shaking,

passing mounds of strange sticky liquids from all their orifices. All through that day, we just drifted, no sign of *Silvery Seas*. If everyone had died, I'd have had no idea where we were going or why we were alone, adrift on a motionless sea.

I had so few ingredients but I tried to make fortifiers to strengthen the weakest men, like the boy, Rossel. But, by their terrible reactions, I was sure I had it all wrong. Yes, the fragrance of themater lay on all their breaths. That could only be produced by something alive inside them. We humans didn't produce that odor. Something lived inside the men but it didn't seem I could stop it at all.

I tried to tell them I was right. I'd worked enough with sheep, who were always picking up parasites, inside and out. Pollee, the town witch, I'd begun to say Polwer's name, changing it at Rob's quick shake of the head, Pollee had told me about plagues and about themater. If they just kept calm and quiet and didn't feed the parasites, we'd clean them out and they'd be well.

"Pollee?" murmured Rob to me as we helped the willing ones to ingest more potion. "She's much older and not as pretty as you, right?"

I shivered as I'd partially forgotten telling Rob a lot about me and the apothecary in Cormallen, the town I'd grown up in, who'd once wanted me to be his apprentice.

"She's a witch," I answered him with a forced smile, probably as girlish as the voice I was using. "And absolutely lovely."

"All witches are," said Rob with a sour grimace. I shivered all over as I thought about what I was doing. I couldn't tease Rob back as I had when we

were cadets. I looked too much like a woman. With my feminine voice, it sounded as if we were flirting, teasing one another. I was very uneasy but Rob didn't seem to notice at all. I was so glad when he treated me on the cutter as if I was Arrat, even if I was in a dress and ribbons.

Old and new hammocks were cleansed by Robady and me, during the day, as groaning men continued to vomit, rarely into containers. It took almost a tenday, most of our time given to just cleaning, drifting on the Ocean of Clouds, to finally have men alert and strong enough to set the sails. Dowd calculated by the stars on the tenth night. We turned onto a heading to wherever the real plague ship lay. I could only shudder in dismay as I thought about what *Zephyr of Serenity* would look like when we finally reached it.

Rob didn't say anything as I used heavily diluted throat cordial when I had to work with the crew. He didn't comment on my daily changing into different, clean, womanly clothing, or the high-heeled shoes I wore to protect my feet, but they were all I had. I was now a woman. Undercaptain Peveret had decreed it.

It was a relief to hide behind a 'lady's curtain' which the men erected between sessions of cursing me and *Silvery Seas* which had left us. I didn't tell anyone that I'd felt some on our cutter casting us loose from the great ship. I didn't know if Rob had noticed as I had.

I wouldn't have called the *Zephyr* crew 'cured', as we sailed. Some were alert and able to eat without pain, but many couldn't work sails. Dowd steered by the stars, refusing to say just where he was going, not that Rob or I would have known if he spoke

truly. In the late evening of the second day of sailing, we finally came up on a drifting great ship, none of its sails set.

We weren't hailed as we approached, despite Dowd's raised signals. The crewmen said nothing, not interpreting the lack of response to us.

We finally came up to the great mountain of a ship, an island, dragging a sea anchor behind it, keeping it, Dowd said, once we were close, in a shallow area of the ocean. There were lines hanging down all sides of the ship. It wasn't hard for the healthiest crewmen to catch a trailing line and finally draw the cutter to the great ship. Robady was the only one with the strength, however, to climb the hanging lines right away and get aboard.

"I have to leave you," Rob told me anxiously, before he climbed, giving me one of his long knives. "If any of these men insult you, my lady, defend yourself until I can return to kill him."

Dowd frowned at us. As soon as Rob was well up one of the lines, he leered at me, "He's sweet on you, my lady, that handsome young man, isn't he? As he should be, a pretty girl like you."

I shivered in my long, dark dress, my hair blowing about my makeup face. "He, he's a captive, like me," I said to him.

"You won't have to use that sticker, my lady," said Dowd, a frown still on his face. "Not on me, or this crew. But up there, if there's anyone alive, you hold it close to you, Lady Arrathee."

It took a while for the sea-ladder to descend over the side.

“Thank you, my lady,” each of the men said to me as they were hauled up by Robady and whatever helpers he’d found. “Thank you for my life.”

Rob came down as I was last to go up, my foot on the first step of a rope ladder.

“Don’t you dare, my lady,” he said with a grin.

“We’re alone, Robady,” I said, flushing as the empty cradle eased the last part of its drop to wait beside me. “You don’t have to ...”

“I do, my lady,” whispered Rob. “I have to treat you properly, Lady Arrathee, as the witch you are. Then, I won’t slip up and do something strange like treating you as if you’re a man in front of the crew of this ship.”

“What’s it like up there?” I asked him, shaking with fear as Rob lifted me off my high heels and laid me in the lifting cradle, covering my dress and me with a blanket so that I rode up like an infant being swaddled. Rob galloped up the lines beside me, showing anyone who might have watched, that he wasn’t infected with anything at all.

I was hauled up in the cradle while Rob jumped over the deck rail easily, all manly and tough. How I hated him as he and Dowd lifted me out, smoothing my dress for me, making sure I could walk in my heels on the slippery deck. Dowd had the crew from the cutter lined up to carry my packs and clothing into the forward area where the captain’s cabin should be.

“It’s so quiet,” I murmured to Rob, right beside me.

The party of gaunt sailors escorted us to an undercaptain’s cabin, twice the size of Peveret’s on *Silvery Seas*.

“I’ve only found bodies so far,” one of the cutter sailors said quietly to Dowd, who glanced at me and shook his head, indicating to the crewman to go ahead with him to the captain’s cabin.

“Who’s alive will be close to kitchens or food supplies,” said the third mate, pausing at the hatch to the captain’s cabin. “My Lady,” he smiled at the blush that came to my face, “will have the late Undercaptain Maffoy’s cabin.”

“I’ll assist my lady to her bed,” Rob said stiffly.

“I thought you would,” said Dowd, backing out the door, closing it behind him.

Robady raised his eyebrows, heading over to the ‘window’, his hand shaking a little as he took the lamp from where it was positioned. “I’ll get some more oil for this, my lady,” he said, “and a new wick.” His eyes flickered at me. He kind of gulped a little. I’d heard the expression, ‘dipping your wick’, often on *Silvery Seas*. I knew the sexual connotation of the word. It was his still using ‘my lady’ to me, his fellow cadet on *Sword*, that made me shiver the most.

“Call me Arrat,” I begged him, reaching up to release my large, round, dangling earrings.

“I, I told you, my lady, why I can’t,” Rob began, interrupted by a quiet tap on the door. He moved to it and opened it cautiously while there was a whisper from outside.

“You’re what?” Rob asked, an astounded look on his face. He turned to me and I think he shivered. “You, you, have someone here to attend you, my lady,” he said to me, “someone who says that,” he gulped, “he is your maid and must attend you and help you to undress.”

A shiver of embarrassment went through me as well. This charade we were in was definitely stretching out too far. “What?” I murmured to Rob, shuddering again at his words. He opened the door a little.

Rossel squeezed in, his face looking gray in the eerie light as he was so pale from what he’d gone through. I hoped the fortifier I’d tried to make would help him and his shipmates regain their sea legs.

“Master Dowd sent me to start my duties, my lady, as your maid,” my ‘maid’ squeaked to me in his high-pitched voice. In disbelief, I watched him stare at my long dress and my figure with envy. ‘Oh, not another Gennee’ came to my mind, unbidden.

“Come and sit, Rossel,” I said to the boy, in as womanly a voice as I could. I indicated the long table and hard chairs along one wall of the cabin. My mouth was quite dry. I was shaking inside as I swayed in the airy dress once again. “If Dowd has sent you, I must go over with you the duties of a lady’s maid.”

“Oh, yes, my lady!” said Rossel eagerly.

“I, I’ll go and check about lamp oil,” muttered Rob.

I couldn’t resist. “And wicks,” I said, blushing furiously at his look of alarm, back at me. “Fresh wicks for the lamp.”

“Yes, of course, my lady,” said Rob, almost running away from me.

Rossel, despite being in grays, crossed his legs and sat primly facing me. Yes, we had to get straight the special treatment a woman like me wanted from her maid, the spy, I was certain, that clever Third Mate Dowd insisted on foisting on me.

I tried to be a normal woman, partly undressing and putting a robe about me as I sat at my dressing table, removing my makeup and not looking any less girlish as I did so. Rossel had already lifted a silky nightdress out of a pack as I talked of the little help I required from him. He held the gown in front of him, studying himself in ‘my’ long mirror, smiling away as he said that I’d look so wonderful in such a flimsy garment. I could imagine him swaying in my nightie when I wasn’t there, seeing how he’d look in the female clothing my shipmates had sent for me to wear aboard *Zephyr*.

“Rossel,” I said to him levelly, even though my insides were churning like a liquor-still about to spill over. “Haven’t we just outlined your duties as a lady’s maid? I need privacy as a woman.”

That made my insides start to churn again. I needed a little of the cordial I’d been given from the *Silvery Seas*. Talking to Rossel, and insisting that his lady, me, Lady Arrathee, supposedly a witch, wanted more privacy than any woman he’d heard about, I was really aware that I’d have to keep up appearances as a woman in every way, especially in speaking.

Rossel might put my changes in tone down to the strangeness of my identity and position aboard his ship. He really did think I was a woman. All the men

on *Zephyr of Serenity* did. The de facto captain, Dowd, certainly did. Where was the true captain, I asked myself, a little dread coming on me. Dowd had acted like a captain in appointing Rossel to attend me.

I'd wanted to tell Dowd that a lady wouldn't want a boy to be her maid but, on a long sea voyage on a Seafarer ship, she probably would. Rossel must have heard stories of other cabin boys being ladies' maids for he was most eager to be mine.

"Yes, my lady, my duties," Rossel muttered. He carefully put the nightgown over the screen so I could reach it. It wasn't quite what I meant. I didn't want him choosing items of female clothing for me. I didn't want him trying on what I had to wear to convince the men of *Zephyr of Serenity* I was a woman. At least, at night, I intended to find some respite from that role.

But it was excruciatingly humiliating to have to be Lady Arrathee, and get ready for bed as a woman, under the watchful eyes of a young man who was the age of majority, eighteen years in the Kingdom of the Baracts, which he'd cheerfully assured me he was.

"I wouldn't have been taken on," the absurdly young looking 'boy', as I thought of him, told me. "I had to have my birth record to attest when I was born."

"I'd like to see it," I snorted, taking a nip from the bottle of throat cordial that Panella, my 'mother' on the *Silvery Seas*, had given me. I could feel it clasp- ing the sides of my throat immediately. The raspiness that was concerning my 'maid' seemed to ease as I spoke.

Rossel had stood up, turned and dropped his pants. I was about to ask him what he thought he was doing, and what I was, as he'd bent over, but then, on one of the hairless cheeks of his tush, I'd seen the tattoo and the date tattooed there.

"You all have tattoos like this?" I'd asked him as he pulled up his pants. He was indeed as old as he'd said.

"Oh no, my lady," my maid had said squeakily. I could have ended that and made his voice so feminine, which he'd have liked, I was sure, if I'd shared my cordial with him. "Only we from Faroy have tattoos. But all Seafarers are like me, my lady," he'd gone on. "We don't grow up as fast as you landers do. Girls on the Foreshore marry when they're fifteen, sixteen! We're not even cloistered until we pass twenty in full!"

"Cloistered?" I'd murmured. "Kept in boys-only or girls-only dormitories, things like that?"

"Yes, my lady," Rossel had agreed anxiously. "I know people of the Foreshore laugh at us for that. They didn't do it so much in Marashan but I think they mature even earlier than you Baracts, in the south."

"Your duties, Rossel," I began again as I saw the frilly creation, that he was holding and stroking, that any woman would have loved to wear, I supposed. Or a cabin boy, one like Rossel or Gennee, with whom I'd shared a curtained alcove, aboard *Silvery Seas*.

"I'll bring heated water and prepare a scented bath for my lady in the morning," Rossel began, counting on his fingers to recall the tasks that I'd set for him. "My lady's screen must be set before my

lady will enter the bathing area. I think I should be the one to set out your underthings, my lady, at that time for you, perhaps on your bed after I've made it ...”

“I'm not infirm, Rossel,” I said to him. Oh, thank goodness, my voice was higher-pitched and delicately female in tone. I'd 'cured' myself of whatever was ailing me, I knew Rossel would tell others, confirming to them I was indeed a witch. “You'll have enough work as it is cleaning my dresses and undies.”

That's what the cabbies on *Silvery Seas* had called the panties and bras that we wore to Celebrations when we'd had to dress as women and entertain the crew. Rossel loved the new word and used it several times to me. I knew it would soon be spreading through the remnants of *Zephyr's* crew.

Yes, I'd taken time to talk to Rossel about what was going on, if anything, in the rest of the great ship. Were there any left alive? Where were they? Were my services as a witch needed right away and through the night? Where was the true captain of this ship?

I'd been appalled at the answers I'd been given by my maid. But she, he, answered so innocently. I shook at what she told me, finding it hard to wait for Rob to come back to what would be our bedroom. As soon as I could get my chatty maid off to her bed, wherever it was going to be, Dowd would surely interrogate her about me. She'd answer as ingenuously as she'd answered me about the mutiny on the drifting great ship.

I was squealing in pleasure for the sixth or seventh time, wiggling my legs in the air, when Captain Dowd, we knew he'd usurped the title and power by then, came thundering into our cabin and asked if Rob and I were going to spend the whole day 'fornicating' while men on his ship were dieing for the want of a witch's attention.

I couldn't let Rob go, though he tried to free himself from his woman, me. No, I couldn't let go. I was in the throes of a heavenly woman's passion. He had to satisfy me. I smothered his lips with mine and wriggled even more furiously on my lover. Even a captain couldn't drive me from the arms of my lover, not when I was still so unrequited.

I heard Dowd utter some furious oath.. The hatch banged shut as we were left 'to fornicate' so heavenly for just a little while. I managed to erupt in a nerve-tingling conclusion as Rob rode me as if I was his adoring little kitten, well, his pussy cat, which he'd called me many times. I loved him being so loving to me. And I did purr as he stroked me, feeling all over as if I was the woman he wanted me to be.

"We will have to get up, my darling," whispered Rob to me as I giggled like a little girl and stretched out beneath his long, wonderful, manly body.

"Just once more," I begged him, wiggling and wriggling. Rob grinned and accommodated me, as I poured kisses on his lovely body and mouth. I was as entirely girlish for him as I knew how to be, which really wasn't a lot.

The golden glow of loving my man and being loved by him as his woman stayed with me, however, as I re-bathed and re-dressed in dark, silky undies, which matched my dark, deep blue dress. Oh, I loved the way it showed off my phoney breasts! Rob whispered that it made them look as if they were quite real. Oh, how I wished it was true that they were! I wondered if I could ever do that as a witch, make women's breasts sprout on the chests of real men like me.

I flirted with Rob, as he said I should, as we left our cabin to find Dowd. There was a small gathering of men amidships, some buckled over in pain, all of them complaining and screaming about how the witch was killing them. Clearly, someone had decanted my potions and fed them to the crew.

"She could at least make painkillers to get us through this if it's true witchery," a hoarse man was yelling, stopping only when he saw me coming toward him. The flirtatious rustle of my lovely skirts, Rob's arms about me, made me want to go back to bed with Rob and not deal with this ingrate. Oh, gods, what was I thinking? Then, a flood of ideas overwhelmed me! I started trembling horribly. I was under the influence of the potion Richo had used on me! That's what Rob had! I turned to look at him, my girlish feelings in flux. I didn't know if I loved him or not.

Dowd popped out of a hatchway. "My Lady," he said, bowing to me. I curtsied, without thinking, as a lady should. Just go with the potion controlling me until I could control myself and get even with Rob, I decided, shudders from the humiliation I'd been subjected to, running through me. I smiled prettily, swishing my dress skirts, my dark hairpiece

swaying over my back. My earrings swung and jiggled in place while my lips were a glossy red. Rossel, who'd helped me adoringly with my makeup, had insisted I wear red as he was so longing to try it out on himself some time.



“I’ll do it,” said a crewman unlike the others. He was tall and muscular, a sneer on his face. He looked as if he’d just stepped off *Silvery Seas*, like Robady and me, unaffected by the parasites. A short blade appeared in his hand as if by magic. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t ensorcel any more of our men ...” he began, snarling at me.

I was shaking in horror as I realized I was looking into the hard eyes of someone immune to whatever had infected this ship. I sensed Rob running to me. I heard his blade clearing the leather wrap he kept it in. It must have been that which distracted the grinning immune. He didn’t notice Dowd or the huge blade that swished through the air and hacked his neck wide open, almost severing his head from his body. Blood splashed everywhere, even over me, ruining my lovely dress.

The groaning, heaving men who’d been set to advance on me despite their pain stepped back in shock as if they were one man. Dowd grinned at Robady as he jerked his blade free from the man’s neck.

“You’re siding with the Baracts!” moaned a white-haired man, writhing, sinking to the deck, as if in his death throes.

“She’s a witch, Fross,” snarled Dowd. “She’s my witch! I diluted the potions she used to cure you fools.” That wasn’t true. I’d diluted the potions on the cutter myself, afraid the cutter’s crew was going to die in front of me, the agony they were in. I’d thought one might fall on his own knife and others would follow.

“I took it strong,” Dowd hissed, “and look at me now, Fross, Jarner, and you others.” He did look

like a different man from the gaunt survivor I'd first seen. Now, he seemed less lean, more sinewy, the dark shadows gone from him. "She cured me by killing whatever was eating my insides. She's to do what I want. If *Silvery Seas* finds us, I'll make her kill them all, and we'll rule two ships."

I spun on my high heels, my skirts swirling about me. I gaped at Robady, who'd put his arm about me again. "Rob," I said to him shakily, my voice lilting and feminine, appalled at the looks on the faces of the men staring at me.

"It's the only way, my darling Lady Arrathee," said my lover, swishing my dress around me as he kissed me, the strangest of feelings still swirling through me. I felt a compulsion on me to love him, to kiss him, to press my body tightly to his. There was such a lovely fragrance in the air as I kissed him, letting him taste my lips and sensing, I don't know how, that he was pleased by my lingering kisses.

"Let's show my lady what she has to work with," said Dowd to Robady. My lover danced me in a slow pirouette which made me feel delightfully feminine as I swirled after Dowd. One of the men from the cutter, leering at me, led me down one deck and into a large workroom where an apothecary must have been working. There were all sorts of open bottles and concoctions around the place.

"Here," said Dowd, opening another door. The naked body of a dead man was on a table, another, dead but clothed, fallen across him. "There's Dasell, who passed for alchemist on this ship, my lady," Dowd said, indicating the clothed man. "Wouldn't take the witch's cure, my lady. Said that they always

came with other potions wrapped around them, like love philtres with controllers as well.”

I should have thanked Dowd for what he was saying. Suddenly, I knew what my lover, my friend, Rob, was doing to me, to make me his woman. I was being subjected not just to one but to two potions at least. Oh, yes, I drew in a breath of the fragrance on my skin. There it was, the smell of honey, almost cloying in my nose.

“You’ll want to examine Dasell’s body,” murmured my lover gently into my ear.

“Oh, yes, I will,” I said fervently, smiling up into his almost healed face.

“And,” the handsome liar went on as I shivered at his caressing, “you have to make a lot more of the potions that kill the parasites. And that strengthening tonic which helped Dowd and the others recover quickly and get back to work.”

“Oh yes,” I said dreamily, smiling up at Rob, hugging him, my arms reaching around his neck as I felt so womanly. I succumbed to his orders, feeling his pleasure as he demonstrated his control over me, his lady, his woman. “I’ll do those things, my darling, right after we’ve made love again. I do love you so, my darling Rob ...”

“Don’t do that in here,” snapped Dowd from the doorway. “Kiss her, Rob. Tell her it will please you if she gets to work right away. That’s the way it works, that stuff you’re feeding her, right?”

“Shush,” said Rob, drawing me to him and kissing me while his hands tormented my shivering, delicate, feminine body. His hands ran all over me as my lips implored him to love me, to make me feel so deliciously like a woman again. I wanted to strip my

dress from myself and have him fondle the garters on my stockings. I wanted to feel his manhood on my thighs. Most of all, I wanted to feel the convulsions I'd undergone beneath him as he made me into a woman once more.

"My darling," murmured Rob as I surrendered to the female passion that was engulfing me. "Work must come first. You have many tasks here that only a wi-, a woman like you, my darling Lady Arrathee, can do."

"Oh, yes," I whispered, clinging to Rob, a tiny part of me absolutely not in his control. That part of me hated what I was doing, the way I was imitating a woman at her simpering worst. This wasn't me, I told myself in horror, but it was. And Robady loved me this way, as a woman.

Rob wanted me to love him again, I could feel it, and part of me wanted that so intensely as well. Oh, gods, I so wanted to be a woman with another man. I wanted it completely. I wanted to be Lady Arrathee. I put Rob's hand on my tush and rocked against him as he smiled, feeling my panties straining beneath the thin dress I was wearing.

"When you've done your work, my lady," Rob murmured, "I'll make love to you all night long, mi-lady. You'll be my seawife."

"I want to be your wife," I whispered to the man who kissed me while part of my mind was screaming at me, telling me how depraved and perverted I was, saying things like that to another man.

"You shall be, my darling lady," whispered Rob confidently, stroking my tush as I wiggled against him. Finally, he left me for a few moments, going

back to the other room away from the bodies, to talk to Dowd.

This was Dasell, the clothed dead man, who'd looked inside dead bodies, I thought. A golden glow infused me as I felt every one of Rob's kisses and caresses anew. Oh, I shivered in pleasure at the thought of receiving them all again.

The odor of themater rose from the body I'd approached. Dasell, the alchemist, had only just died, I could see, but not from any disease or parasite inside. He had a knife wound right through his lower abdomen.

I was staring at the wound, thinking that this was not very old, when a group of cutter men entered with stretchers and took the bodies away. I stepped to the door and saw the second emptied over the side of the boat. I shuddered, trying to control myself and not give in to whatever Rob and Dowd were using on me.

I needed to talk to Undercaptain Peveret, I thought. Do something, I told myself. All I could think of was to do what I'd been told. I began to make several solutions from the powders and herbs the workroom had in plenty. There was even what I wanted to make more throat cordial. A kiss on my neck startled me as I began combining the solution.

"Kiss me, my darling," whispered Rob again, bringing my consciousness back to him. Me, kiss another man? I gasped at him through the fog clearing from my mind and tried to do it. Ooo, I had to. I had to. His soft, gentle lips took me over as he held me firmly in his arms. He lifted my pretty dress. Ooo, it was so wonderful how Rob, my lover, pushed his manhood into me, raising my thigh about him,

fondling my stockings as he did so. But slowly, bile rose in me as I knew I was Arrat, apprentice apothecary to Polwer, Robady's friend. I trembled and pushed his manhood away from me. I felt sick simply looking its arousal.

"Well, my lovely darling," said Rob with a tight smile, "I see I'm no longer in control of the pretty woman who's made love to me with such ardor over the last few shifts. Has she quite gone away?"

Rob stroked my leg and garter while I stared up at him in panic, he leaning where Dasell's dead body had lain. "You're really even more gorgeous like this," Robady said with his charming smile. He seemed to think I'd obey as I had when I knew I was a woman. "With your lip gloss smudged so temptingly, hair strands loose from your pinnings, that look of fright - it is fright, isn't it, that's in your lovely, outlined eyes and curled eyelashes - I find you even more desirable and womanly than ever, my darling Arrathee."

Rob kissed me, fighting and suppressing my indignation at what he was doing. He kissed me, mauling my face and neck, pushing me back against the table so that he could lift my dress and stroke my stockings as I squirmed and squealed in my girlish voice. He told me I was a woman, even as he aroused my manhood.

"Don't!" I squealed. "I'm not like you, you ..."

"Say anything about me being a deviate," breathed Rob right into my face as he leant over me, his own expression taut and angry, "and I'll immerse you in lovebane and give you to the afflicted crew of this great ship. Understand?"

I shivered, struggled but finally nodded my head in fear at the expression on Rob's face, my long, heavy mass of hair shaking over my shoulders.

"You're my woman, a witch," said Rob thickly. "We'll both play our parts as we've been instructed."

You're conspiring with Dowd, a mutineer, I wanted to tell him, fearfully. But Rob seemed to think that, whatever I'd heard, I wouldn't have understood. I'd been so under the throes of loving him as a girl. Well, I had been. It'd been true, once, but I wasn't his woman any more.

Oh, goddesses, none of the solutions I was hastily mixing, to find an antidote to his lovebane and honey controller, was going to be easy while I was in the state I was.

The stench of the lower decks made the memory of *Silvery Seas* that of a palace. Crewmen lay listlessly in hammocks that I sensed were crawling with parasites. They tried to refuse the diluted potions I'd made for them and the potent cleansers that I insisted their hammocks, and the floors, be doused with.

Many men were contorted in pain. The crewmen off the cutter, whom I used as orderlies, dosed the last Faroyan survivors on the *Zephyr of Serenity* mercilessly. These last few fought back weakly, frightened, refusing to listen to a Baract witch who only wished to kill or bespell them.

In a separate hall, I found Rossel, weeping as he talked softly to a girl in silk-covered hammock. Of course, Marea wasn't the girl she'd seemed to be,

having full, pink lips, darkened eyes, thin eyebrows, golden earrings and long golden hair. She wore a long, white nightdress and was crying. She was the feminized seawife the officer Dowd had killed. She wanted to follow her lover to his sea grave.



I could sense the fear and hate in Marea as she looked at me. But whether it was because I might save her or kill her, I couldn't tell. There were more listless cabin boys in the long hall, over thirty of them, but none as feminine as her. With just a hundred and fifty left from *Zephyr's* original crew, the great ship could barely have been sailed at the best of times. It would have to be sea-anchored for shifts day and night to rest the crew.

If I could save them all, fortify them, witch that I was, the ship could reach port but in multiple tendays. That is, it could if I could persuade Dowd and his supporters, the men from the cutter, not to kill any more men than they'd already done, in some sort of internal, ship bloodletting. One of the crew, sprawled in agony in a hammock, whispered that Dowd had wreaked havoc on his shift. Thirty men were lost, 'overboard'.

"We're profaned," the man groaned. "A woman on board, a Baract witch! None of us will ever reach the Shining Isles! The goddess of death condemns us all!"

He'd collapsed then. "We don't have to treat that one, my lady," said Bruthan, a member of the cutter crew who'd wanted to slit my throat as he recovered, I recalled. "Might as well let Vess die from the plague as cure him."

I reached over and held Vess's nose, forcing the sweetened paste I'd finally made into his mouth. His eyes looked up at me in fear. Pain hit him as the parasites clenched, or so I imagined them, picturesquely shrivelling and convulsing, little fangs and claws digging in. Not that they had any appendages as far as I'd seen.

But Vess screamed in pain. I waited until all of the cabin boys, as well as the men, had been dosed. The cabbies were weeping like Marea before the cutter men helped me pour merenthe, in a safe dilution, into the afflicted men and boys. Soon, the noises grew less; Dowd's men relaxed as the noise diminished.

I heard the tread of men's feet approaching. Dowd and Rob joined me.

"Quiet ship," said Dowd with a grin.

"It wasn't a plague," I said to him in my most girlish voice. It had been easy to make the throat clasp cordial that changed my voice. I'd give some to Rossel and let 'her' practice a girlish voice the next day.

"It's what we call it," insisted Dowd. "What would you call it, Lady Arrathee?"

By the sneer in his voice, I'd no doubt he'd been talking to Rob about me. My lover, my friend, had told him all about me, the Baract 'witch'.

"I'd call it a mutiny," I said softly to the present 'captain' of the great ship.

The men facing me became extraordinarily still as I spoke those words.

"You've got that powder for her?" Dowd asked over his shoulder to Robady.

"Of course," said Rob, the man who'd said he loved me when he was caressing me. Revulsion rose inside me as I thought what he intended to do to me again. He blew the contents of another balloon over me right away. Oh, how I hated myself as I simpered worse than Gennee at her most girlish as my lover re-established his control over me.

Your fault, I thought to myself, your fault, Robady, as I resisted his controlling agent, for leaving a witch in an alchemist's workroom. I could make this lovebane he was using but who would I use it on? I didn't want anyone bespelled into adoring me, doing whatever I wanted. But that made me think of Dowd and his men. What would it be like if I could wrap all of them around my finger, my beautifully manicured, painted-nail, red-tipped finger?

I didn't want womanly potions to make me prettier as the witches wanted in the play I'd seen in Cormallen. What was it they said? The first potions any witch learned were those to change herself, make herself beautiful, sweet-voiced, perfect of figure and skin, adored and desired by every man wherever she lived.

I'd found in Dasell's workroom, however, enough anti-lovebanes, well, anti-love philtres that Polwer used to make, to use as antidotes to what Rob was using to make me love him. It was so shameful, as without some lovebane controlling me, I doubted I could pretend I was a girl, bespelled by him. He might want me to make love to him as we had before. Oh, that would be so awful. I couldn't do that.

So, first, I had to identify the other controller Rob was using. I'd now been bespelled with lovebane several times, on *Silvery Seas*, and by Rob, to know that any wortbane would act as an antidote and dissipate its effect. The honeybane controller was harder, much harder. In fact, I didn't so much try to find an antidote to that as to put myself under the control of other, very potent potions, such as fettlebane, one of the strongest fortifiers I knew.

Polwer had smiled when I'd used it on animals to help them recover from disease, and, on one notable

occasion, my father. "Animals don't have minds," he'd chortled at me when I'd suggested it for a sickly carthorse of the local baker. "Frettlebane? It's only good for strengthening their resistance to the whip!"

I didn't dare to use a still and refine terogal, which Polwer said surgeons should use but rarely did. He used to tell me many people died from the butchery inflicted on them by surgeons. Many could be saved if only the surgeons valued the apothecary's art. Fortifiers would save many a life if used properly, Polwer said. He showed me how to distill them as if I was going to be his apprentice.

Fortifiers I'd prepare later for the crew but merenthe was as good for a time. Painless, numbed sleep was what most of the afflicted needed. After dousing myself, I'd slipped the frettlebane vial into my woman's purse with my lip gloss and perfume, shuddering at the effect of the 'upland flowers' essence on so many men.

Rob gave me his charming, male smile, certain I couldn't resist it. I trembled and pretended I was controlled by him. And there it was, in the air, rising off me with the perfume he'd insisted I put on myself to make me more womanly.

"Here, my darling," Rob said, the compulsion rising in me. "Come sit in my lap."

"She can come and sit in my lap," said Dowd, leering at me.

"Mine," said another of the cutter's crew, staring avidly at me as I trembled. Rob put his arm about me. I was glad he did as I might have fallen over. I was suddenly so unsteady on my tall heels. I began to panic as I felt so girlie. Rob wanted to kiss me and I let him, shivering at how pleasant it was to

kiss him, to feel like a woman. I was going to enter into his control but it was now a weak imposition. Some things like kissing Rob I couldn't resist. I didn't want him to learn too soon, I told myself, that I'd soon be controlling him and not him, me.

Yes, I thought. I'd sleep at night, rather than be Rob's girl friend. Weirdly, a pang of disappointment went through me as I thought that. I almost welcomed the way Rob made me snuggle up to his manly, powerful chest and kiss his neck softly.

"There," Rob murmured to 'Captain' Dowd, strolling with us. "She's mine."

"You'll have to give me a turn with her in the near future," Dowd said, turning my blood cold.

"You have Rossel," said Rob. I could hear the amusement in his voice.

"He has Marea now," said Buthan sullenly, joining us and staring at Dowd. Dowd gave him a poisonous look. "He should give up Rosee. It's only fair."

"She's too eager, that one," said another dour man, Sleck, I think it was. "Always wants it. Be careful what you wish for, Buthan. She's not going to be satisfied with one man a night, that one. She's a born courtesan."

That brought general laughter to the deck. Rob cuddled me as if I was a girl. I felt more and more distressed. All these men seemed to think I was just like Rossel. They were amused by how feminine I was. It made my dress feel so wrong about me.

"Get the lantern ready, Rob," said Dowd. Rob walked me over to it, my dress skirts swaying against both of us. The sea lantern was huge, red

plates on the sea side. Rob held me with one hand, the lantern with the other.

Rob swayed the lantern from side to side as I stood beside him, the wind seeming to get under my skirts. My legs felt so cold and so feminine. Then, almost straight off the rail, another night lantern suddenly glowed, red as well. I couldn't tell if it was a small boat, close, or a bigger ship, further out. But something was out there, keeping station on us.

"We'll keep up the night signals and leave a cutter here, when we slip away," grunted Dowd. "Send Rosee to find me, Rob. You and your girl friend can have privacy for whatever she wants you to do to her," he sneered again. He didn't tell the other men I was only as much of a girl as Rossel, Rosee, was. Maybe they didn't know I wasn't a girl. I shivered anyway at the way Dowd looked at me, at my stockinged legs.

I squealed as Rob picked me up and carried me to our cabin. Several ribald comments about men and women together floated after us. I kicked my stockinged legs but it was of no use. Rob paused near to the cabin we used and kissed me, his lips all warm and gentle, making me curdle inside. I pretended I liked him doing that. But his hand stroked my panties through my dress. I broke off the pleasing kissing with a girlish shriek.

Rosee went dancing off to find 'the captain'. I think she must have visions of herself as a seawife, in dresses all the time like Marea, and me, and being kissed both publicly and privately as if she was a woman. She was definitely becoming more womanly in the way she walked as she left us and went off to tryst joyfully with another man.

“You like this, don’t you?” Rob said as he kissed me, his tongue opening my lips and making tingles, nice, happy tingles run through me. I closed my eyes and enjoyed a man kissing me. But it was all a pretence, I told myself nervously. He was saying to me that I liked him penetrating me as I was a woman. He sensed my emotions, telling me that I liked Rob kissing me. With that direction, I tremblingly obeyed.

Rob lay me down on our bed and lifted my skirts, stroking my legs and stockings. “And you love this, don’t you, my darling?” he asked me. I felt the oddity of his hand on my leg, under the dress I was clothed in, my feelings changing almost immediately at his words as if they were a command. I didn’t find his touching me strange or odd. No, it was femininely arousing and pleasurable. I loved it as he said I did.

Oh, this lovebane was really insidious stuff, I thought, trembling at Rob’s hands on my panties, spreading my legs apart. I really did want him to keep on going. I wanted him to do to me what he’d done before. I felt my legs rising automatically about him as his cold hand caressed the warm bare skin of my thigh, above my stocking, gently releasing me from my garter belt.

Rob’s manhood pressed on my panties and on my legs. I stiffened as he whispered. “And you love that part of me, my darling Arrathee, don’t you? You know what’s coming next and you want it so much, don’t you?”

Oh, I did want it so much. I wanted that part of him inside me. I wanted to bounce and writhe on it to increase the pleasure I was going to feel. Inside me, I could almost hear a boy’s voice screaming at

me that I didn't have to do this now. I could throw him out of my mind and not listen to his soft, murmured instructions to open my dress for his tongue to caress my chest. I could hear Rob telling me to take down my panties first and my tight taping, removing the thin bandages that held my manhood and genitals from interfering in the smooth, feminine frontage I showed.

You don't have to do this, I heard another voice, one controlled by the love antidote, saying, you don't have to do this but you will enjoy it, won't you? This man will make you feel like a girl. You'll know what a woman feels like when you make love to her, won't you? You'll feel all the thrills that she will feel because you are her, you are 'she'!

"My darling!" whispered Rob fervently, pulling on my bra as he kissed the top of what might be my breasts. Oh, how I cooed and sighed, wriggling beneath him as the pleasure rode through me. He kissed my bra, pressing and stretching the pads around me. Rob began to kiss down my body, to my navel while I jerked and wiggled. My panties were still covering the front of me. He moved over them to kiss my thighs, before rising up and taking what he shouldn't into his mouth.

"No! No!" I gasped as his wet mouth and chin eased my panties down as his tongue smothered me. I know I stiffened and pushed at him wildly.

"This is a little new, my darling girl," Rob said to me. "But you will love it, my darling lady. All girls love this, love being sucked by their man. Tell me you love it, my darling!"

"I, I, I ..." I stammered, knowing I was going to tell him that I didn't want that but he lifted his

head, his naked body pressing on me. He lifted my legs about him.

“Something else besides this to pleasure me with,” Rob said huskily as I tasted myself through him, as he did, I supposed, revulsed by such a thought. His hands were spreading me wide as I wiggled, trying to free myself but I couldn’t. “We both know how much you love me doing this to you, don’t we?”

Rob entered me quite roughly. He didn’t lubricate me as he would later on. Well, he really didn’t need to the first time as he was making little spurts over my tush and his fingers were spreading the liquids into my quivering excuse for a vagina. I felt my lover enter me. I knew I should be objecting. I knew I should push back at him. I should be telling him what I wanted him to do, to control him, to not be his woman any more.

“Love me, Robady,” I whispered to him and he did. He kissed and stroked me and my pleasure grew and grew as I felt a surge of passion, feminine passion, possessing me. “Oh, love me, love me, love me, Rob!” I screamed.

I don’t think that Rob had ever been so gentle and yet so loving to every part of me, twisting and caressing me so that I felt every inch of his penetration as a woman would have. I squealed in delight as I came, spurting against his abdomen as he also came inside me.

I spasmed and gyrated as if I was one of the sea goddesses being impaled on Haruva’s mountain of fire. That’s what the god’s elder daughter, Malusha, had said it was like when she was asked what it was like to be deflowered by the god of the volcano. I

knew exactly what she'd meant, I would have to tell Gennee, who'd told me the story as we lay in bed side by side, cabbies and girl friends together.

But, no, I wasn't her girl friend, I told myself savagely, as I wriggled more on Rob's pole to stop it from disappearing out of me. "Oh, darling Arrathee," said my lover as I stroked his arms. "I don't know what's coming over me. You're so soft and beautiful, my darling. I want to pleasure you in any way that I can."

I let him kiss me as I felt him begin to harden in me. I don't need to do this, I shuddered inside, as this man obeyed my directed thoughts and mauled my mouth and my chest, making me shiver and quiver inside. No, I don't need to do this, I sneered within, as I let my lover touch me gently as I thought at him and he obeyed me without a quibble. I directed him to turn and let me be on top and he did so without an objection. I still had my hair in place. The false part spread across my shoulders as he caressed it against me and over my chest, kissing the top of my straining bra as he touched me so softly while I quivered inside.

I hadn't been going to sit on his pole and ride it for the age that I did. Oh, but the delight I felt and the passion that soon rose in me again!

"Oh, Rob," the words came to my lips as I spoke, not knowing what I was going to say. "I love you so much. You are my husband and I am your wife."

"You are my wife," said Rob dreamily. "Yes, yes, Arrathee, I love you. I am your husband and you are my wife. I love you. I will love you forever."

"Rob," I gulped shakily, suddenly aware what was going on, that I was controlling him. Controlling

him, and yet not, as Robady urgently, strongly, fiercely, in manly fashion, took me as if I was a woman, his wife. He smothered me with passionate kisses and embraces while I just rode his growing manliness and absorbed the discharges he poured into me, through a night that wasn't any different to what we'd spent before, save that this time, I was aware throughout what a man was doing to me.

And, I knew, by relaxing, that I could feel like a wife, like a lady, and blissfully enjoy my husband and all the love he poured into me. This is so silly of me, I thought several times, as his control of me was non-existent. I could be Arrat any time I wanted, I knew. I should be Arrat, I should, part of me insisted. Not for a little while, another part of me giggled as my husband rolled me over, not letting me put down my legs as he worked himself into a fine state of masculinity that his wife had to accept with the aroused, girlish pleasure she felt.

There was one thing that my husband was entirely correct about. Having myself subjected to lovebane did make the whole process of his making love to me much more wonderful when I was under its control and was a woman. I hated the few moments that I'd surfaced as Arrat and could have taken complete control of another man. No, a woman like Lady Arrathee didn't want that at all, not a woman as beautiful and sexy, her man's words, as she was. This was how it was going to be for so long, as Rob had said. I must get used to this and enjoy it as it was my lot in life.

"I don't know what came over me last night," said Rob, sitting up beside me as I contemplated what I was going to do now. I trembled as I recalled what

I'd said to him, this other man, about him being my husband and I being the 'wife' of another man.

"Lovebane is like that," I said to him with what I hoped was a womanly smile. I was shaking inside, wanting him to think that he'd controlled me, wanting him to think that me being his woman again was all because he wanted it, not me. My voice was as feminine as ever, under the influence of the cordial I'd taken. "It affects both the giver and the receiver."

Rob hastily swung his legs down on the floor. He seemed perturbed as he wrapped a blanket about him. "I, I need a shower," he murmured, not looking at me as he rushed to the door, opening it just as Rosee, Rossel really, was coming in with hot water for my bath.

Go on to your cold seawater shower, I thought sardonically, as my 'husband' went on his way, clearly confused by our lovemaking of the night before. Perhaps he'd been faking his passions before with me as I'd been faking mine towards the end of the long night when he awoke me to have me again. I was still sore where he'd forced himself into me, all the attempts to slow his passion being ignored. It was as if his mind had closed, stuck on the urgency he felt, not allowing any other thought in but to pleasure me, his wife.

"My lady," said Rossel urgently, back to looking very boyish in his grays. "There's sail on the horizon. Dowd was cursing that it's too soon. He wanted me to send Robady to him right away. I guess he'll find him in the men's latrines, won't he, my lady?"

I had to agree to that. "Rosee," I said and Rossel blushed at me using a feminine name for him. "What latrines do you and the cabbies use on this

ship? Don't you all use the same latrine, since, you know, you're all men on board, aren't you?"

No, I couldn't say 'we' are all men, could I? I still had to pretend that I was a woman until Robady, or Dowd, if he did know, as I thought, exposed me to ridicule.

Rossel blushed even more fiercely. "The men don't like us to be watching them, my lady, seeing their, you know," she said, going into the closet where my dresses were stored in such perfect, pretty lines. "So, so we have our own bathroom, my lady," she murmured, not really saying who the 'we' were. She chose a light, lavender-colored dress for me that had a red ribbon at the collar and short, girlishly puffed sleeves.

"Would you like something to help you to be more of a woman?" I asked Rosee and her eyes lit up right away.

"You, you would do that for me, my lady?" she gasped.

"There's just this one thing that I've been able to make," I said slowly. "It helps your voice, makes it female in tone. That's all ..."

"Oh, my lady!" gulped Rossel in his boyish tones. "I, I'd heard that on other great ships that there's a way of giving us cabbies sweet voices. It, it would so please the men if, if I, I could sing like a girl as well. My voice used to be my talent until it broke this year. The men always tease me that I don't sound like Rosee any more ..."

"Stop," I had to tell my chatty maid. I smiled at her as Rosee looked suddenly alarmed. "Here," I gave her some of the cordial I'd made in Dasell's, the alchemist's, workshop. "This was in use by several

of the cabbies on *Silvery Seas*. One of them asked me if I could make more for her.”

“You could do that?” Rossel asked, her thin eyebrows shooting up to her fringed, straight, blonde hair.

“If there are the right ingredients in a workroom,” I said to her with a laugh. “What do you think a witch does, make potions out of thin air and seawater?”

“How, how long does this take ...?” Rossel asked nervously.

“It’s almost instantaneous,” I told him, her, with an encouraging smile. I could have said, Listen, it’s working on me, isn’t it? “It feels like someone is grasping your throat. Now, that’s strong so you can dilute it, five parts to one. It will last you a tenday, at least, before you have to ask me for more.”

“You know how it feels?” asked Rossel in surprise.

“I try out most of the things I make,” I told him, um, her. “That way, I know it’s working as it should.”

I watched as Rossel put the throat clasp cordial into his pocket as if it was a precious, delicate heirloom. “The sails on the horizon?” I asked Rossel. “Headed for us? How long?”

“Dowd said two to three hours with the sail they’ve put on,” said Rossel. “You’ll have time to bathe and make yourself pretty, my lady.”

Shivers went through me as I used the bed-clothes to cover me and make it to the screened bath without revealing myself to Rosee for what I was. “It’s *Silvery Seas*?” I asked my maid who’d im-

mediately gone to my bed, wrinkling her snub nose at the mess Rob and I had left there.

The signs that we'd made love as man and woman were all over the bedsheets. My 'maid' quickly re-made the bed even as he, she, gathered the clothing and undies I'd worn the day before, along with the soiled bedsheets, and made them into a bundle, ready for washing.

"Yes, my lady," called my maid over his shoulder. "At least, Dowd says it's *Silvery Seas*. But it's too soon, he was telling Buthan. That's why he wanted to talk to Robady."

"Dowd will be coming to see me soon," I said lightly to my maid, hurrying my bath. I didn't need to stay in the water long, anyway, as I could feel the lovebane and other cosmetic fragrances in the liquid. I wondered if Rossel knew I was being controlled too by the captain of the great ship.

"Yes, my lady," said Rossel. "The men will come to a decision on what you're to do and tell you very soon."

I looked over the screen at my maid, startled. That was, of course, what women, and cabbies, I'd learned, had to do on board a ship, obey the men. Rossel was looking most unhappy. Yes, she knew I was going to be doing something more than just making love as a witch in a short time.

Hastily, I dressed myself in my woman's undies and then the lovely dress Rossel had put out for me. I let Rossel help me with my hair and my cosmetics, leaving 'her' to put them away, knowing she was probably going to try them all on 'her' as soon as I was gone.

“You said they’d wait to find out how many are still alive,” I could hear Dowd saying to Robady as I went out to the deck. Rob’s shirt was undone, his hair still a mess as if he’d just come out of the cold shower. “They wouldn’t want to catch anything, you said. That was a certainty!”

It was clearly an impromptu conference on the captain’s deck, four of the cutter’s crew standing around Captain Dowd and glaring, like him, at Robady, who had a towel in his hands.

“That’s why we’re keeping the crew below,” said the dour Sleck, who seemed now to be Dowd’s second-in-command. “But a lot of use it’s going to be if they’re all still abed when *Stormclouds* pulls alongside.”

“They won’t board *Zephyr* right away,” said Robady confidently. “They’ll want to see me, and Lady Arrathee. They’ll want to know if she conquered the plague.”

“That’s something we can’t hide from them,” said another member of the ‘council’, whacking Buthan in his expanding gut. Buthan did look like he was in blooming health.

Buthan’s hand closed on his knife but Dowd’s foot drove into Buthan’s hand and pinned it, and his body, against the captain’s mast. “Too few of us to take offence,” said Dowd. “Now, do we haul the men out of their beds and put on a show or do we just invite the Clan Elder to take our ship and ransom us at his pleasure back to our own Line?”

“You said the witch would do something!” Buthan snarled, wringing his hand, as Dowd took his foot away. “That one they brought to Bridgewater sank the *Tempest*, didn’t she?”

“I’m not a great witch like the Lady Sherrene,” I said, my high, lilting voice cutting across their growls and curses. “And what’s in your alchemist’s workroom is limited, if not as much as Mogen’s on *Silvery Seas*.”

“Thought you were controlling her,” said Dowd, frowning at Rob, who was staring at me as well, looking quite stunned.

“I have the antidote to his love potion,” I said to the captain, smiling at Rob who gasped when I said that, “as well as one for the lovebane you men like to douse your cabbies with. It is very pleasant for lovemaking, isn’t it? You do know the giver is just as affected as the receiver, don’t you? Such a lovely potion, don’t you think, when both partners benefit from it?”

The dour Sleck laughed, prodding a grim-faced Dowd who finally relaxed and stared at me as he was apt to do. Now, I shivered as I recognized the desire in him to make love to the woman he thought I was. What was worse was that my improvement in perception must come from somewhere. I wasn’t completely free of the lovebane, I thought.

“I’ve a potion I procured in Masharan, my lady,” said Sleck, the man I had thought of as dour, his eyes twinkling as he looked at me. “I wouldn’t mind trying it out with you, Lady Arrathee. This young buck needs to learn to share until the cabbies find their pretty sea legs again!”

“I don’t know how things are on this ship,” snarled Robady, “but on my last two ships, we never shared our seawives with anyone.”

There was shock on all the men’s faces as they looked at Robady and then at me. My lovely, long

dress shifted all about me, my face a picture, I was sure, as this man, this friend of mine, called me his wife, his woman, his bed partner. I'd no idea how to say I wasn't, not without them thinking I wanted to make love to other men, like themselves.

"She won't be yours very long," Dowd grunted, pointing off to the starboard side of the boat where top and middle sails were visible from *Zephyr's* command deck. "They'll be alongside in hours, if we take in the anchor and put up sail."

"You don't have enough men, sick or not," Robady said, glancing over at me, making me tremble more at his toes-to-head appraisal of my feminine appearance. "Brisard can put three hundred arbalests, more, on us. We won't have enough men to maintain the lower riggings, never mind put up the main blows."

"So we just surrender," sneered Buthan. "Let Cunya hang us all."

Robady turned and strode across the deck to me. He smelled of sweetsoap and yes, the thinnest aroma of lovebane. It clung to his skin and almost immediately I felt that he looked so fine, his face cured. Ooo, he was so handsome! I loved the taste of his lips on mine as he kissed me in front of everyone, leaving his arm about my narrow waist as I found my breathing so hard to control. Yes, I wanted to press my false breasts against him and feel his rough legs against the silk of my stockings and the smoothness of my skin. I wanted to call him 'husband' and have him make good on his claim of me as his woman.

It was a real struggle to shiver free from the feminizing emotions casting through me. Oh, Rob

had doubled the potion in his bathwater, I realized. That was why he was so long away. He'd bathed in the potion to re-assert his control of me. And I'd let him think he did, I said to myself, as I kissed him as passionately, womanly, as I had the night before.

Rob held me against him as my emotions reeled once more. I tentatively reminded myself I was a man and not a woman in love. Oh, how my mind spun on that thought as Rob leaned my head against his shoulder. I was posed as a woman in front of the others, even the bemused Captain Dowd.

"... can make any potions she's the ingredients for," Rob was going on. "My darling Lady Arrathee," he murmured to me, "can strengthen all the men so they'll fight like Grey Men ..."

"You want us to fight them?" asked Sleck in astonishment.

"That would be a last resort," said Rob, squeezing me against him as men do to girls who'll let them be affectionate with them. My skirts swished noisily as I looked up adoringly into his eyes. "I think the best plan might be to let them see that the plague's still in control of this ship. Fly the flags. They'll keep a distance away."

"They'll put men aboard anyway," snapped Dowd. "No-hopers like you and this woman they don't know is a witch or not."

"Lady Arrathee will bespell them," said Rob calmly, astounding me. Like some of Dowd's men, I didn't know what he was doing. Selling out our new ship was the obvious answer. "Lady Sherrene controlled the minds of a shipful of men, didn't she? She made them think they were on a tenday journey

when they sailed for over four months. She made them believe they were off Bastro when they were off Liss and Terraire.”

“Can you do that?” Dowd asked me bluntly.

I shook my long, dark hair. “I, I don’t know how ...” I began.

That was when Rosee made a grand and spectacular entrance in one of my dresses, her golden hair beribboned and falling about her pretty, madeup face. But it wasn’t that that made the men all look at her in awe. Nor was it the way she femininely minced up to Dowd to kiss him. No, it was her beautiful, girlish singing voice.

“And the man I love, loves me!” Rosee trilled, pirouetting, her dress, my dress, flaring out to show off her lovely legs and female undies. “Oh, thank you, my lady,” she said to me as a bemused Dowd held a woman in his arms. “Don’t I sound like a girl now, captain, sir,” she giggled. “My Lady Arrathee made a potion for me to make my voice return, only it hasn’t, my lady. It was so girlish before, but listen to me! I’m speaking and singing like a woman! Thank you, thank you, my lady!”

“You made a potion for Rosee?” asked Dowd, looking thoughtfully at Rob.

“And she can make a potion for you, as I said,” Rob went on.

“Can we trust her?” asked Dowd with a grunt.

“Oh, yes,” said my ‘husband’ confidently, swirling me in my lovely dress as if I was dancing with him. Oh, the feeling of silk on my legs was so thrilling and chill-inducing. I had to stop wearing girl’s clothing so much, I decided, with such wonderful sensa-

tions running through me as Rob held me to him and caressed me as if I was a girl. Well, I was one, wasn't I, as well as being Arrat.

"Lady Arrathee will do anything for me," murmured Rob as his hands began to make lightning run through me everywhere, especially on the panties that he pressed so tightly into me over my tush. "Whatever I want her to do, she will, as she loves me so."

And Rob proved to the other astonished men that it was true by kissing me even more passionately. What else could I do but surrender to the lovebane and his love for me by loving him back, demanding more and more kisses as he tried to break free of me, his loving wife, and put me to work.

Stormclouds over Silvery Seas was sailed so close to *Zephyr of Serenity* that the widest spars, in mid-ships, almost touched. "We wish to speak with Lady Arrathee," said a booming voice from *Silvery Seas*, its volume increased by the use of a huge, rolled-up funnel. I'd seen smaller ones on *Sword*. Captain Sottack would use them in battle, I was told, but I hadn't seen that happen. Most often, when a message had to be relayed, one of us cadets became messenger boys and had to deliver it smartly, even if it meant climbing the riggings while experienced seamen jeered at us.

I murmured that to Robady, nervous at his hand still about my waist, as if he had the right to hold me all the time, as if I was a woman, since he'd declared me to be his wife.

“My wife will never have to climb the riggings again,” whispered Rob into my ear. He lifted a finger to my long, dangling earring and made it bounce gently against my neck. He ostentatiously breathed in my feminine fragrance and smoothed my dress against me while I shivered in shame. Seamen were spying on us and smirking.

“Imagine if you climbed the riggings in one of your fine gowns,” laughed Robady, hugging me, seeming oblivious to the dire events starting all around us. “Every man on the ship, including me, would be rushing to catch you if you fell.”

“You mean,” I said with a shiver, “that you’d be looking up my dress at my legs and panties and garters.”

“Isn’t that what I said?” asked my husband, wanting yet another kiss as the absence of lovebane, on and in me, was making me cringe inside at what I was doing. “Such beautiful legs as I can attest and your prettiest panties are ...”

“Lady Arrathee,” boomed the voice from Silvery Seas. “Lady Arrathee, please come to the portside railing and show yourself. Sailing Officer Robady, please bring Lady Arrathee to the rail so that we might reassure the prize crew about the safety of the boarding party.”

“Aren’t there compelling potions they could use that would make us do that?” Rob asked me, laughter in his voice again, between more kisses as I squirmed, my dresses swishing so femininely as I shivered at the way he was touching me, as if besotted with me, a woman. But he knew that I was me, Arrat, clear-minded as I would have to be, he’d

agreed with Dowd, if there was an attack on us, which looked likely.

“I don’t sense anything in the air,” I said to him from my hiding place behind very thick, multi-layered, wooden pallets. But there was definitely something about Rob. The lovebane he used on me all the time still leaked from him, making me reel. All I wanted to do was to fall into his arms and lie beneath him, my dress a cushion for his love as it had been so many times. I had to fight to gain even the smallest modicum of control over myself.

The crew of *Silvery Seas* couldn’t see us behind the pallets, we’d been told. Only if they circled other boats around our ship would they see Rob and me, clinching like lovers against the side of the upturned wooden pallets. There was a cutter skipping ahead of the ponderous great ships but it couldn’t see us.

Rob ignored everything but his masculine needs as we moved slowly with such little sail in place. The sea anchor had been hauled in, allowing us to move at last, but mostly to make it difficult for *Silvery Seas* to send men across to *Zephyr* unless they could attach a line between ships in some way. *Silvery Seas* hadn’t slowed at all or kept a distance from us to check if the plague flag was true or not. No, they were coming right at us as the great ship had when it ran down *Sword* off Liss Isle. But with the bucking of even a light, moderate sea, it wasn’t going to be easy to board us. At least, I thought so.

The men of *Zephyr*, of course, couldn’t venture out on the open decks, portside, at all, in fear of the harquebusses or arbalests *Silvery Seas* had trained on us.

“They’ll put lines in the rigging very soon,” murmured Rob, his hands reaching inside my dress as he pressed me so easily against a flat piece of upright wood. He was looking up along one of the great masts above us that supported the spars, sails and rigging of the great ship. His hands still wanted to caress me, tracing out the hems of my womanly undies. I had to fight against the pleasure assaulting me, the power of the lovebane threatening to overcome me and make me start tearing at his clothes, as I had done once. “When they shimmy down, you must bespell them.”

“I don’t know that this is going to work, Rob,” I had to tell the man who was still being so romantic with me, kissing first my fingertips that Rosee had re-painted for me. She’d re-done my lips a dozen times and giggled at me for being such a ‘willing woman’.

Well, that only became palling as I used fettlebane fortifiers, not just on the men below decks, many of whom were now able to crawl, even walk, from their hammocks, but on myself as well. Rob, his libido thrusting at me, dusted himself with a huge supply of lovebane he must have concealed on his person, bespelling himself to make his seawife continue our love affair in the midst of what would be a battle, I finally insisted to myself.

I had to gulp when we were engaged like that. Me, in a love affair with another man? I shivered again at the thought of it as Rob caressed my leg, lifting it gently about him and against his, as we crouched together. He kept doing it, loving how I squirmed when he found my garter belt. He began to pull on my stockings and panties, reminding me how effeminately I was dressed.

There was a hiss above us. A line caught while others missed and were pulled back. The whole deck is going to be so dangerous if many lines took hold, I recall thinking in a lucid moment. If the two ships were held by lines, they'd sway or move together. That might damage both or one ship, even a mast might fall and that would make sailing speed for the affected ship really slow.

I recognized the laughing man sliding into *Zephyr's* rigging. Kaddo had been after me as a woman, that's what he wanted me to be, since I'd first served his table. He'd pinched my tush and almost made me drop everything over the men around him. Jop, who'd helped me, taking my part, telling Kaddo not to bother me, was right behind Kaddo. And there, on another line, was Richo, who'd used some kind of lovebane on me, just as Rob did so often. Richo had used it lightly, in such diluted fashion, that I hadn't realized he was doing it. Yes, my first, real, male lover was leading another group onto 'our' ship.

Seeing Richo filled me with feminine longings. This lovebane was pernicious, I tried to tell myself. It wasn't me thinking such womanly thoughts; no, it wasn't me. Richo was across the deck from me and hadn't even seen me yet. I had to fight against thoughts of Richo doing 'it' all again to me, even as Rob was stroking me between my legs as Richo had.

Richo had mesmerized me, convincing me I liked soft, gentle kisses and wanted to be loved as a woman. I tried to sweep away my memories with revulsion. But I could only think of the way I'd moved my head in his embrace as he kissed me, wanting him to pleasure me as he did. And it was me, yes it was, who'd first let him into my panties to pleasure

me. He'd said I was loving him so wonderfully. Now, I was letting Rob feel me as Richo had, as if I was a woman, as the noise of fighting drifted over us.

The hidden crew from *Zephyr's* cutter, the strongest, most alert men on the great ship, scurried forward. *Zephyr's* crewmen covered the men from *Silvery Seas*, sliding down to the decks, with potions I'd devised in the slow hours of the sea chase. There was such a cloud of potions that the *Silvery Seas* crewmen couldn't avoid breathing in something that affected them as fighters as soon as they landed.

Arrows and pellets zinged and swished into the area from where *Zephyr's* men had appeared. I heard a scream but it wasn't from one of 'ours'. It was from one of the invaders who lay on the deck, screaming as his leg was pinned with a dark, terrible arrow, the head buried in the planking.

I eased past Rob, forcing his hands from me, and scampered on my knees, my dress snagging on the roughness of the wood. I stood by the mast and looked at smiling, disoriented men, milling around, paying no attention to their wounded companion. "Come to me!" I called to them in my lilting, feminine voice, moving to the starboard rail, hoping no shooter would see me or think to fire on me.

I'd included the perfume Gennee had made me wear on *Silvery Seas* in the potion. I don't know whether it was that or the honey-mind controller, my own version of whatever it was Rob and others used on me, but the men came ambling to me, moving more eagerly when they saw my feminine form and my lovely, frilly dress. I reached the hatch and led a line of bespelled riggers into a long room lined with beds and hammocks, ready in case my potions worked as I'd hoped.

It was almost nothing to get them to lie down, to close their eyes and to go to sleep. Some did need a heavier dose of the merenthe substitute to put them right out. I had to hope, again, that the potion I was copying, I was copying accurately. I had to hope as well that the ingredients I didn't have, like terogal which was there in a trace in merenthe, weren't as critical as the frettlebane I used in the main to replace everything I didn't have.

After all the things I'd thought I'd done wrong, or which wouldn't work as simply as I thought they should, it was a fantastic sensation to see all the men there, forty or more of them, asleep, smiles on their faces. I almost danced and hugged myself in glee, loving the swirl of my long dress and the touch of my hair extension. I was a witch, I laughed to myself. I was a witch indeed!

My 'nurses', other cabbies like me, wearing lovely, flowered, embroidered aprons, wobbled about with large, wheeled baskets, collecting the weapons the invaders had been carrying. Many 'nurses' had been carrying potions I'd distilled like the men on deck and could use them the same way if there was trouble.

Rob kept calling the cabbies 'nurses.' They didn't object, laughing at him as he said it. Rob, of course, knew I might have been that on *Silvery Seas*, if Panella had had her way. Thinking of myself as that made me weak at the knees. The last thing I wanted was to be in a girl's occupation but look at me now. I was a witch and in control of myself, well, almost. I had Rosee put the weapons into storerooms near to the late Dasell's work station which was where I'd concocted the potions I was using.

“They’re all dreaming of you, my lady,” said Rosee in her lilting, girlish voice as she organized the barely recovered ‘girls’. She began to sing a lullaby to the men. Some seemed to smile even more.

“If any stir,” I said to Rosee and two other lean, gaunt-faced cabbies who’d ‘volunteered’ to sit with her, “use the powders and the air bellows as I’ve shown you. Don’t be afraid of one of you succumbing, if she must, to someone like him.” I indicated Kaddo, whom I’d made sure got a full dose of liquid merenthe in him. “If he takes you as a hostage, you’ll awaken in bed, later, if that happens.”

“But not with him, I hope,” said Terro harshly, his manly voice making me adjust the way I was thinking about Zephyr’s cabbies. They weren’t all like Rosee and the cabbies I’d left on the unravaged *Silvery Seas*.

“No, Sleck has a claim on you,” said Rosee femininely, seriously.

That made the other cabbie, Ervo, laugh, his voice so masculine that I was jarred as well. Gods and goddesses but he shaved as well. How could he still be considered a cabbie? Maybe it was because he liked it!

I swished back up to the deck. “They’re calling for Kaddo and Jop,” hissed Rob, pointing at *Silvery Seas*. Rob actually seemed more himself. Perhaps my womanly presence was inflaming him. He began to smile and admire my figure, I could tell, as I stopped before him, my dress swaying, my chest definitely moving femininely with my exertions. “And there’s another squad, more of them coming over!”

“That’s Dowd’s plan,” I said to him, standing well back from him, feeling a huskiness in my throat. It

was time for me to use more of my cordial. "Taking them bit by bit." I wondered if Dowd had thought we'd be rammed; or that we'd have so many men on our decks from *Silvery Seas*. "Are there any coming over at the stern or bow?"

"Sleck says that they're arguing about it forward," said Rob, smiling and motioning to me to come to him, where he was lying on the deck. I wasn't going to do that, I told myself, though there was some compulsion on me again from the air drifting over the ship. I had to obey the man who gestured crudely what he wanted to do to me. "Someone over there's yelling and refusing as he didn't want to be shot by one of his own men."

Buthan appeared at the top of the steps with a smiling man, his leg covered in blood. "The powders have taken over this one," he growled at me, more than a touch of nervousness in his manner. "Drosk doesn't seem to realize he's wounded and going to bleed to death."

"Take him to my workroom," I said to Buthan as Rob objected and wanted me to come and lie in his arms.

The rigger, whom I recognized by sight, beamed at me as he followed me to the sleeping room. That's how I was thinking of the hall where the invaders were lay asleep. I had Drosk lie down and used wound stabilizers, part of any apothecary's standard potions. Dasell had a supply. I only checked them with my sense of smell to see if potency was lacking, making them too old to use, or if the 'active agents' I expected were not there. Dasell's work was fine. He seemed to have been a very competent apothecary, possibly an alchemist, I thought.

Away from Robady, I finally could consider what really seemed to be happening to me, the feelings that came over me, especially the delight in having my potions work. No, I thought, my whole body trembling, fascinating me with the feminine urges I had everywhere. I wasn't a witch. I knew that. I didn't want to be a warlock.

There, I'd thought it. I shuddered terribly at thoughts of possibly being such a creature. And yet, look how this man, Drosk, was gazing at me as I ministered to him. I had to consider that I was a witch, I thought fitfully. I was such a one in Undercaptain Peveret's estimation, I guessed.

I knew now why Peveret wanted me to be a witch and not a warlock. I could see it in Drosk's admiration of me as I bound his wounds. I gave him a fortifier to strengthen him after the blood he'd lost. If I'd been Arrat the Warlock ... No, please no, gods and goddesses, don't let me be a mad warlock and suffer Tregell's fate in the play I'd seen in Cormallen.

"You'll have to find another, another person to watch this one," I murmured to Sleck, who was checking what was going on below decks. No, I couldn't say 'nurse'. I cringed and felt so funny inside to use female terms for cabbies; but I sensed that they didn't bother men like Sleck at all.

"I'll speak to Rosee, my lady," said the dour-faced man. "She knows the other girlies and who'll be best to nurse this one."

I shivered at the way he used feminine words for cabbies who were men like me. But Sleck didn't know that about me, I hoped. So, I had to accept his compliments for me as if I really was the woman being praised.

“That was unexpected,” said Robady with a smile as he took my arm. He’d been waiting and watching for me, my female slippers with their high heels clicking loudly as I went up onto the main deck where he was.

“You saw the wounds on many of *Zephyr’s* men I cured from the plague?” I asked Rob who was playing with my hair again, hugging me and praising my feminine makeup. “All the infected knife wounds I had to cure, besides the plague?”

“I saw them,” agreed the man who seemed so much in love with me. I quivered as I fended him off from continually kissing me, despite all the noise and action that reached us from further along the deck.

“A lot of the men in the hammocks that we’re curing of the parasitic plague,” I said to him, “already have battle wounds, Rob. Haven’t you noticed? How does it make you feel being on the side of mutineers? Not even Rosee will talk about the true captain and the other four hundred people and more who’re supposed to be on *Zephyr*. Please, Rob, stop kissing me long enough to consider whether we’re really on the right side, helping Captain Dowd keep his ship! He’s taken control through mutiny!”

“I think there’s too many of them this time,” Rob went on, ignoring my words as he stroked me again. We moved along the deck to where there were pallets to protect us. The noise of harquebuss firings and the screaming of men, injured or fighting hand-to-hand, I couldn’t tell which, was so loud. It seemed as if the ship was being attacked in three places at once. There just weren’t enough healthy sailors to reject the invaders.

Dowd raced towards us, blood dripping from the huge knife in one of his hands. He carried a harquebuss in the other. He was clicking the trigger on it but the thing wasn't doing anything. "Do something!" he screamed at me, waving the useless firearm at me. What was I supposed to do? "Or we'll all be swinging from cross-spars! Fix the damned shells!"

There was a lurch. The ship shuddered in a way that great ships aren't supposed to, I thought. The ships were bumping together, I realized, as beside me, Rob was gaping through a slit where two pallets joined. A couple of men from *Silvery Seas* came bounding over the pallet. Dowd lifted the harquebuss and it fired as it should.

There was a thud as a body fell onto the deck in front of us while the other invader promptly ducked back to wherever he'd come from. Dowd tried to fire again but the harquebuss clicked uselessly. He threw it at me in a rage, screaming at me to "Fix it!"

I could see, through various slits in the woodwork, a cloud of powders drifting along the decks with men running from it. I saw Buthan throwing several balloon-packages, ones I'd made, at the invaders. The clouds that billowed forth immobilized those who were touched as the balloons shattered. The invaders couldn't help breathing in sleep powders and disorienters, just like the men we'd stashed below had.

Buthan was standing to throw another when suddenly his head seemed to burst on one side. Dowd, in front of us, began to curse as he ran forward, hiking up the pomander-mask I'd prepared for the men who might be fighting in and out of the

sleep drugs as similar as I could make them to merenthe.

There was a crash above us as the man who'd been on top of the pallets staggered to the edge above us, grabbing at his throat. He fell from the top of the stacks onto the deck beside his friend who'd been shot by Dowd.

"Can't you do something to the shells?" Rob yelled at me, his eyes all bleary. He seemed to be coming to his senses. He thrust the harquebuss at me, staring at the chaos all along the deck, men stumbling and falling. I couldn't tell who was who and why so many were falling. Was it from the sniping fire from *Silvery Seas*, or was it from potions, or from both?

"There's got to be something in there, darling!" Rob shouted at me, pushing me into the hatchway that led to Dasell's work station. "Make these black powder things, these shells, stronger!"

I'd no idea what to do. These weren't swamp gas pellets that the legendary Lady Sherrene could control. They were filled with black powder like the fireworks weapons masters used in celebrations. The harquebuss used black powder to fire a shell but they were unreliable. The snipers on *Silvery Seas* were doing things I didn't know could be done, apparently aiming and hitting people. I'd no idea how to make the shells reliable and explode as they were supposed to when they met something.

"They're coming down the stairs?" I yelled at Rob who charged into the work station and, in frustration, was grabbing at different bottles and asking, What about this or this?

Fortifiers, strengtheners, fessare and fettlebane, was all I could think of that might make the shells fire truly but I hardly had the time to do anything! All I could do was bathe the black powder, thin arquebuss shells in a hasty solution, using the strongest fortifier I knew, with a little of the volatile terogal. I didn't know what Dasell had been keeping that for but I used what was left, all of it, on a handful of shells. I put a fortified shell, feeling, in alarm, heat growing in it, back into Dowd's arquebuss.

"It's never going to work," I yelled at Rob, fearing it would blow up in his hands. He grabbed the 'buss and ran in front of me up the stairs. There was a blinding flash of light then, and a stunned silence, as all the yelling came to an end. Rob was running back to me, a huge smile on his face.

"Give me another," Rob grinned at me, pausing long enough to kiss me, swirl me around girlishly on my high heels, almost making me fall. He fondled my tush, rousing my womanliness before he bounded off up the steps again, like a young boy. But I couldn't follow him, not in a long, constricting dress or on high heels that made me teeter and sway femininely as I walked.

I wanted numbly to see what I'd done, at the power that seemed to flow from the barrel of the arquebuss. I stood at the base of the steps with several shells, ones I'd altered, in my hands. I was a witch, I thought dazedly, as another huge burst of light flashed across the ship. Something crashed on the deck above. Then, there was more shouting and screaming unlike anything I'd ever heard before.

Rob bounded down again to me. "Oh, darling, darling Arrathee," he exulted to me, his lips pressing and sliding on my glossy mouth, making my panties

jerk a little and my bra tighten on my chest. He seized two of the shells I'd prepared like the others. "They're scurrying away like the rats they are! Come and see!"

It must have been the powders on him. I felt so girlish as I swished up the steps, feeling my garter belt pulling on my stockings as I lightly tripped along the side of the ship where Rob and I had hidden before. Some of the pallets were torn down, showing that there was no fighting close to midships.

At the stern of the ship, far from us, however, I could see a fire raging. I knew, poor sailor that I was, that it had to be put out right away; but everyone around it seemed to be stumbling about in a daze. In the other direction, I saw several men stagger and fall. Only then did I realize that there was almost a continuous fire of arquebusses and arbalests from *Silvery Seas* on the bow of *Zephyr*.

I saw Rob running forward and aiming his arquebuss high, laughing, before he fired. The forward rigging of *Silvery Seas* seemed to burst into flame. It was almost as if I was in a dream as lines that had been fastened over the sides of the ship were frantically cut loose. The great ship that had been so close to us was freeing itself, retreating from us. It lurched away. I could see seamen staggering into lines on *Silvery Seas*, starting bucket chains and water lifts necessary to douse flames raging uncontested at the front of their ship.

Rob raised his arms high in the air and turned to face me, so far from him. "This was for you, my darling wife!" I could hear him yelling. "Now, I can take you to my home and this will all become ..."

I'm sure he was going to say 'real', that I was really going to go back to the Kingdom and be his wife for real. Oh, Rob, I murmured to myself, watching the smile on his face grow wider and wider, that's never, ever going to happen! Though inside me, the strangest of feelings was sweeping over me as I imagined being like one of the actresses in the Cormallen play.

Sura had been so graceful as she was introduced to the family of the warlock. She'd danced so wonderfully at the marriage rite, so in love with her husband. But she was an actress, a boy, playing a part. A boy like me could never return to the Kingdom and become any man's wife. I don't know why I felt so sad as I thought that I'd never really be any man's wife.

I would never be Robady's. "Rob! Rob! Rob!" I screamed as the arrows pierced my friend's body in several places. Arrows and bullets fell or splattered on the deck all around him. Every shooter on Silvery Seas must have had orders to shoot at him. The harquebuss fell from his hands and slithered across the deck into the ocean.

I lurched forward. I had to help Rob but a strong, manly hand grabbed me by the arm and pulled me back,

Dowd appeared out of the clouds of active agents, swirling in front of me, as I was crying and weeping, my head in a whirl. "Your man's dead!" he snarled as I recoiled from the terrible expression on his face. "Control the men on the stern as you did before and get that fire out!"

*****end of part two*****