



Reluctant Press presents:

A Witch in Spite of Himself

Philippa Peters



A 'New Woman' E-BOOK

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A WITCH IN SPITE OF HIMSELF

by **Philippa Peters**

*Continuing **Boys Can't Be Witches** and **The Captain's New Seawife***

XXI. A WITCH'S RETURN

"I think that was the first time in the last year that I haven't had at least one man in my bed at night," said Tess to Choni when my maid asked her how she had slept the night.

Choni immediately blushed and I had to smile. Hedward had had to sleep in the men's guest quarters. Men were not allowed in the nunnery of Lady Arnessa proper but there was nothing to prevent a woman visiting a man in his room. I guessed that Choni had had a little midnight scamper to the men's quarters by herself.

Little did the nuns know that the troop of women I had led into their Free Quarter nunnery were not women at all. I was the only one who hadn't once been a cabin boy and at the beck and call of any sailor on a ship who wanted to use me as a woman. No, I wasn't a cabin boy but I was a boy nevertheless. I had been encouraged by my aunt, a true witch, to dress in women's clothes and to become a witch.

At first, I thought it was because my aunt wanted to harness my power to hers. She had been in contact with my mother and she thought that I must want to become a woman. She had been wrong. It had been some other luckless boy whom my mother had been trying to help.

Poor Mithera. At my mother's death, the trials my mother had been putting him through had not ceased. My aunt had become the mistress of whoever was supplying him with potions. Orissiana the Terrible, my aunt, had applied them to me, of course, but more lightly as I was a witch and I would have sensed immediately that she was trying to feed me with poisons and could have done something about it.

Aunt Rissa had known all about the witch, Sherrene, who was me. And since I thought my mother didn't know, I was terrified, ashamed and awed that my aunt knew such an intimate detail about my life.

It was, after all, only a game we played as children, a game of bones and thrones, with Witches and Servant Knights, for possession of Castle Haybarn.

I was fair-haired, blue-eyed, and small, 'wiry' in my mother's fond estimation, and I could always think up such interesting, imaginary potions for the prisoners brought before me. They loved acting out the horrible ways I had them die. When some wouldn't play along, Cory always came to my rescue and made our play-mates, like Lenne and Tevel, obey the witch, me.

We had played it the last time for laughs, being far too old for a children's game then and when it was over, , I had flung myself down in the hay beside Cory. I had my mother's shawl and her lovely scent about me.

"What shall we do now? We'll have to run if we want to catch Lenne," I said to Cory. Everyone was gone, including Lenne who had said we could go out on his uncle's wagon to help load a neighbor's produce. We could get coin, Lenne had said, or be allowed to pull from the ale barrel the farmer always supplied male, casual workers.

Cory rolled over beside me then. I thought he was going to wrestle with me as we sometimes did but it was unfair. He was so much bigger than me and he always won.

But Cory didn't want to wrestle with me. He put his arms about me, his hands on my thin waist and suddenly he was kissing me. Apart from my mother, I had never been kissed by anyone before, boy or girl. I went rigid beneath Cory as strange feelings came over me. His strong lips moved over mine and his tongue touched my lips. I felt weak as he did that.

“A witch should reward her champion,” Cory whispered to me, reaching up and caressing my hair. That sent thrills through me. He likes me, I thought shyly, Cory likes me. I kissed him back. His hand was on my hair and he pressed me tight to him. I had intended it only as a light kiss of affection but Cory didn’t kiss me like my mother did.

Cory held me so tightly, his mouth possessing mine. He pushed my arm up about his neck and kissed me so hard, his body fiercely against mine, rolling slightly as if my moving against him gave him pleasure.

“You are so beautiful, Sherrene,” Cory murmured to me. I clung to his jacket collar. I thrilled to hear him say that while part of me wanted to tell him that I was Dedrick, not Sherrene.

“Say it again,” I whispered to him. He did, kissing all over my face as he rolled right on top of me, spreading my legs apart in the straw. I kissed him again, sinking down, thinking he must have a stick in his pocket that was pushing into me.

“My darling Sherrene,” Cory said, his hands loosening the ties of my pants, kissing my neck. He rolled me over so that I was on top of him. “Kiss me, girl,” Cory went on, drawing my head to him, opening his mouth and forcing his tongue between my lips. His hands went down my back and took hold of my derriere as he pulled me to his loving kiss.

My pants were coming loose and I realized what Cory was doing, what the stick in his pants must be as we went deeper into the straw. “You are such a beautiful girl,” he whispered to me. I gloried in what he was saying and doing to me, kissing him as passionately as he was kissing me.

“Dedrick! Dedrick!” came the call from outside the hay barn. “Dedrick, where are you?” came my mother’s voice.

Cory’s warm and passionate lips left me as he lifted his head and looked up, panic on his face. He sat up from me. “Quick!” he urged me, grabbing the ties at my waist and fumbling to fasten them again.

“Cory!” I gasped, pushing his big hands away and tying up my pants. My lips were so bruised it was if he was still kissing me. I was still writhing under him as he positioned his stick between my legs.

“We didn’t do anything,” Cory hissed at me while I was still dazed, trying to work out what had been going on between us. “Don’t tell your mother I did anything. She’ll curse me! She’ll put a spell on me!”

I started to babble. I was trying to tell Cory that my mother wasn’t like that. She was a witch but she didn’t curse people. She never had.

“Dedrick! Dedrick!” came my mother’s lilting voice again. “Do you boys have an ale barrel in here?” my mother asked, laughter in her words. “Is that why you aren’t going with Lenne and his uncle?”

“Say nothing. Please,” begged a shaking Cory as he stood up, brushing hay from him. He yanked me to my feet and brushed me off as well. All I wanted to do was to fall against him and hold him as we had been doing and kiss his warm, firm lips again.

“Sherrene!” Cory pleaded with me. Then he said the magic word. “Dedrick!” he hissed and I woke up.

I woke up with a shudder to what had been going on. I flipped off my mother’s shawl and Cory frantically covered it in hay. I guessed that it must have been covered with residue from one of the love philtres that

my mother made. I couldn't have acted like that all by myself without something to set me off. I couldn't have kissed Cory and he couldn't have kissed me without something triggering us. He was the man and I the woman because those were the roles we were playing, I reasoned later, as I lay quivering in my bed, the feel of Cory's mouth on mine so vivid still.

I had staggered out of the hay just as my mother had come into the barn. "Oh, there you are," my mother said, smiling, as Cory stood stiffly beside me. "Lenne said that you were fooling around in here."

"Just-just tidying up, m-mama," I stammered as my mother walked over to me, sniffing the air in the barn. I knew, because she had told me, that witches work by aromas and fragrances.

I felt terrified as she sniffed, sure she would go straight to the shawl and pull it out. Then I would have to embarrass myself terribly by telling her all about the little game Cory and I had been playing.

"Now, you need to tidy yourself up," said my mother, her soft hand pulling more straw from my hair. Cory edged away from us then, saying something about his mother calling him. He left us.

My mother never said anything about my roll in the hay but surely she knew. I avoided Cory but I thought about him and what we had done together every day. I was glad a week later when my mother told me we were moving to Terraire. She would become witch to Count Osgard and we would live on Herb Street so that she could be near her sources. We left Doxford and I never saw Cory before we moved. He must have been avoiding me.

My mother must have known about my escapade because my aunt knew all about Sherrene. Who else could have told her but my mother? Aunt Rissa told me that my mother had talked to her about me and, for a time, I believed her, 'till I realized my aunt had confused me with someone else. She had confused me with Mithera, a baker's son, who wanted desperately to be a girl and whom my mother was trying to help.

We lived nearly two years in Terraire, little knowing that my mother was preparing me to be a witch like her, as my aunt had made clear to me.

Now, I don't think so. I think my mother knew that I would be a warlock one day. She knew that boys cannot be witches but they could be warlocks. I think that my mother wouldn't have agreed that all warlocks were destined by their nature to go mad. I like to think that she saw more in me than madness.

Now, I look at myself in a looking glass and see what I have become, what I have allowed myself to become. Maybe the old tales are right. I may be mad. I take ganasate and throat clasper, put masheen in my hair and follow a woman's regimen in every way. I wear makeup and perfume. I wear panties and breast bands. Sometimes I wear body shapers and stockings. And always I wear dresses and high heels.

I speak as a woman and am treated as a woman. I think of myself as Lady Sherrene. I even sleep with men. I am also assisting my troop of cabin boys to become half-men, half-women like me. They all think of themselves as girls, using girls' names, makeup, and perfumes like me. And they all speak in girlish voices thanks to my throat clasping potion.

Ganasate was giving us all girlish proportions as well. I heard several of the nuns remark how pretty we

were. We were all obviously Seafarer stock, though the last crew I had been with had as many brown hairs as blondes among them. All of us girls, however, had long, blonde hair and blue eyes, our soft-skinned faces enhanced by makeup and jewellery.

“I must find us a proper place to stay,” I told the older woman who had admitted us to the nunnery the night before. She called herself Door Warden. The nuns did that, referring to themselves by tasks they did.

“You may stay here as long as you like,” said Door Warden pleasantly. “In spring, we never see many travellers. We always have a lot of empty rooms. But you said you knew that. How long did you live among us here in Terraire?”

“Two years until my mother died,” I told the old woman, who let me out of the sturdy door gate. My maid, Choni, insisted that I must be accompanied by another woman, which made me think that she didn’t really fit the words she had used. She didn’t notice anything incongruous, however, in what she had said, not in the way that I did. She had her shawl about her to be the woman to accompany me. Hedward, who we all teased her was her husband, came with us as well.

“How is Bennock?” I asked him, using the name I had told Tathally to use while we spied out the land a little. He hadn’t cried or anything when one of the nuns told us that Melleren was no longer King, having died of a fever. The Queen Regent now ruled the land for her young son, the King Kennen. It was a shame but he was said to be a very sickly boy as well.

“Bennock is being consoled by his future Princess,” said Hedward sourly. He also didn’t seem to find it incongruous to refer to the boy we all knew as Nikki in the feminine.

Tathally had given the nun who had said that Prince Tathally had deserted his position and run off to sea with a Seafarer Princess an angry retort the night before. Tathally should be King of the Far Isles by now, according to the nun, but the rumors of his desertion were circulating. Well, the nun said, second sons were always the rotten ones, weren't they? The Kingdom of the Baracts was far better off with a woman to rule it than a silly fop like the unlamented runaway Prince.

Prince Tathally, 'Bennock,' went off with Nikki then to his room. I had given Nikki a love potion to use on the Prince that night.

"You don't expect to be his Princess, do you?" I asked Nikki in one of our rare conversations as we went on a stroll about the ship we had arrived on. Nikki had been displaced by me in the affections of the sea captain of the great ship, *The Tempest of Distant Shores*.

"I might be," Nikki told me haughtily in her new little girl voice from being on the throat clasper. I had made it in imitation of that made by my aunt for me.

I tried to tell her about the ball at which I had met the Prince, to warn her of all the women, real women, who had pursued a Prince of the Kingdom. A cabin boy like Nikki could barely comprehend the idea of a Royal Court and Ladies-in-Waiting.

"I may not bear his children," Nikki said to me, "but the Royal Mistress is always the King's wealthiest servant. Tatha has promised me to marry me off to some old man who'll never touch me so I can be a true Lady of the Land."

Nikki had flounced off the night before with the potion I had given her, her attitude quite unchanged from

what it had been on the ship. If the potion worked as it had on Locco, captain of the ship, *The Snapping Shark*, it would keep the pair of them in bed until well into the afternoon of this second day on land.

Hedward needed no love potion to make him accompany my shy maid, Choni. He was infatuated with her. The others watched them with awe when they were together as I did. It was exciting to see how much in love they were, like a real girl and boy. My poor girls, I thought sadly. They looked at Choni and Hedward and undoubtedly thought that it could happen to them as well.

Choni was a wonderful seamstress. She would be easy to place in the city if I had to move the girls out to jobs in a town as large as Terraire. She made us such pretty clothes and had several of the other girls at work constantly on making underclothes, particularly new breast bands, for us all.

Seeing Choni and Hedward lightly kiss as they met sent a stab of remorse through me. Hedward looked like a taller, slimmer version of Sea Captain Anjaro, who had been the first man to love me as if I was a woman. I thought of him as the man who made me a woman. I had loved him, or thought I had, and I missed him now.

I missed all the affectionate touches Anjaro had given me. I had thrilled to them because he had known that I wasn't a girl and yet he had always treated me as if I was a female. If I hadn't accidentally figured out how witches can communicate by listening to people far away from them, I would never have known that I was being betrayed by him. Likely, I would still be his seawife, his loving woman in bed, doing his bidding in the civil war that was surely raging throughout the

Many Isles. I could have been far happier than I was right now.

Yes, I missed Anjaro. I had slept with Loccozo all the way back across the ocean to Terraire. But the captain of *The Snapping Shark* had been under my controlling spells and so it wasn't the same. He was my lover but only because he could do little else with all the potions he was imbibing daily.

But I was 'home' now, in the city I had known well for several years and I had to find my way. My first stop was going to be at the moneychanger Serrill's establishment. My aunt had told me that he was holding the money Count Osgard's Watch had recovered from the man who murdered my mother.

It wasn't a full year since my mother had died. Her killers' bodies might still be swinging in their cages on Murderers' Row. I prepared several tisanes, scented, for immersing dainty, feminine handkerchiefs in, to be used by my feminine escort and myself. Hedward would have to find his own way of dealing with the odors of the cages of the vilest criminals in Terraire on Traitors' Walk.

XXII. A WITCH'S FORTUNE

I thought it would be so easy to step out onto the familiar streets of the city I had lived in for so long. But it wasn't easy at all.

Every step in my wine red dress let me know how I was different. I had dressed as I would have for a stroll about the deck of *The Snapping Shark*. I wore the dress prepared by Choni, its tight bodice gripping my upper body and stressing my feminine assets.

The frilled square neck of my dress revealed that my chest, with help from the breast bands Choni had made, now had female proportions. As I moved, I could feel them actually bouncing, the more so as my high heels came down firmly on the paved walkways of Terraire. It made those sensations more thrilling in as I was taking short steps, placing one foot in front of the other, inducing a feminine sway into my walk.

A feminine sway meant that the long skirts of my dress swirled and swished about my legs, the airiness of the movements like a permanent caress of my pretty legs. Yes, I, a man, knew that I had pretty legs because I saw them each morning in the looking glass after my maids, Grace and Choni, bathed me in my scented bathwater. They had seen my male appendage but I didn't have to bespell them to keep that secret. They wanted me to be feminine. They loved to see my wide hips and rounded thighs. They sighed and wanted me to make them as feminine as I was, and I had.

Now they were my indispensable girl friends and conveyers of every potion and trick I used to be the woman I pretended to be, to the rest of the cabin boys. It hadn't taken much persuasion of my witch's arsenal of potions and air-blown powders to convince the crew of *The Snapping Shark* to rescue the girls who had fled to a boat as the great ship, *The Tempest of Distant Shores*, burned.

The cabin boys would all have been killed once they stepped on land. They could only wear female finery on the sea; when we had picked them up, not one had had so much as a male shirt in the packs of cosmetics and clothing they had brought with them.

A combination of the girls' natural talents and my skills as a witch had made the long sea voyage back

from the Isles to the Kingdom of the Baracts almost idyllic for the girls. The men of the *Shark* had not let on that they were sleeping with cabin boys, two of whom were in fact older 'mothers' who had had the task of organizing and preparing the cabin boys for the duties the men on the huge ship expected of them.

Now those mothers, Hope and Esha, were like girls themselves. They had strolled with me in their dresses about the deck of the *Shark* and revelled in being treated as ladies by the crew. Hope had even mentioned that she wouldn't mind being in a nunnery as a woman, safely on land, away from the burdens the girls had to endure.

The girls, the cabin boys, would have been delighted to stroll the streets of Terraire as I was. My long golden hair was plaited and pinned to accommodate the little hat I wore; a thin veil over my powdered forehead almost touched my thin, shaped eyebrows. They loved men looking at them as men looked at me. I felt the urge to look down demurely, my thick, dark, kohled eyelashes and eyelids forming a curtain in front of my eyes.

But women didn't do that so I looked back and men smiled and bowed to me. I trembled a little as I thought that some of them must be smiling in derision at me. But no one shouted after me as surely they would if they had thought that I, or Choni, was a man.

I felt my bangled earrings bounce against my neck as I smiled in return at doffed hats, tasting my pink painted lips as I did so. Never, as Dedrick, had I ever been so welcomed on the streets of the Free Quarter. It was most unnerving and strangely delightful as well.

I almost wobbled and fell when Demley, a baker, stopped and turned, staring after me. I was sure he had

recognized me. He spoke to Choni urgently, asking her the name of the beautiful Lady who had just passed. That sent a wonderful thrill through me.

I turned and smiled at Demley, who went bright red and bowed deeply to me. I couldn't resist, I smiled and curtsayed to him. Demley backed into a passing cart then, scattering some of the breads he had been carrying on his shoulder tray. Amused laughter and smiles appeared all around him then as he turned and ignored the breads that street urchins were running away with.

"Did you see that Lady Sherrene curtsayed to me?" Demley asked another amused baker's boy.

Yes, I had decided not to change my name. After all, I was Lady Sherrene. I twirled on my heels and sa-shayed away down the street and to the Moneychangers Quarter where I had to meet with Master Serrill. I hoped that the man would know who Lady Sherrene was as I didn't want to have to converse with him under my real name, the one I didn't want to say any more.

The Watchman on duty on Upper Gold Street was the same one who, the last time I had come by here, with potions of my mother's to deliver, had kicked me and told me not to bother him when I asked him if he could point out the Lady Regigard's residence.

This time he was all smiles and bows. He stroked his mustache and offered to carry my heavy purse to Master Serrill's, the second largest establishment on the street.

I smiled at his concern and drew my maid and my manservant after me to show him that I was well protected on the Watch-patrolled streets of the busy, rich

quarter of the city. I thought that I must have some lingering lovebane on my person as Watchman Surret led me right to Serrill's moneychanging and moneylending business, announcing me with great importance which brought the chief clerk of the business scurrying to attend me.

"I need a little perfume after the walk with that gentleman," I said sweetly to Baget, the chief clerk. I was quite nervous after the way Watchman Surret had treated me. I had felt very womanly as Surret let me know how he appreciated me as well, his eyes fixed on my heaving bosom. I could barely control the nerves and agitation I felt in being treated as a woman.

The chief clerk agreed readily, showing Hedward and Choni where they could wait and make eyes at each other. I straightened my dress with my manicured hand and clicked over the wooden floor. I remembered to smile as the clerk led me into the presence of my aunt's banker in Terraire.

My perfume, laced with honeybane, the controlling agent, allowed me to have Baget take me straight into the Master's den, much to the annoyance of the heavy-set man who sat at a counting table, scribbling on pieces of paper.

Serrill took his time about standing politely but I gave him a deep curtsy, leaning forward enough so that he could see right down the front of my lovely dress. He was another man who liked to stroke his mustache when he saw something that stirred his fancy.

"My Lady?" Serrill enquired, taking my soft-skinned hand and kissing it gallantly. The lovebane worked like a charm. That made me think of the Count of Torthard; I felt a little thrill go through me

at the thought of meeting him again some day. He had been one man who seemed to be alert to witchery and to me.

"You have work," I said to Baget who almost ran from the room at my suggestion.

I waited until the door closed and Serrill was seated beside me on his padded couch, fawning over me, telling me how lovely my hands were, and taking up my long, shaped, painted fingernails to kiss them in admiration.

"Let us drink to a long and affectionate association," I suggested to him, batting my eyes at him. "But not insipid wine," I murmured to him. "A glass of herisane," a fine brandy, "is needed at the start of our relationship."

"You are of a like mind to me in these matters, Lady, Lady?" said Master Serrill. He stood reluctantly and I had to direct him to his liquor cupboard. I crossed my legs and he smiled at the rasp of my silky petticoats.

Thank goodness he had brandy in there, though it wasn't herisane. Serrill wanted to please me so Baget was sent out immediately to find herisane for Her Ladyship. That gave me enough time to lace two glasses with parasane, the truth-telling potion, which has an aroma similar to that of fine brandy and bitter aloes.

"Let us drink to my name," I told the smiling man who eagerly took the filled brandy glass from my hand.

"Yes," said the beaming Serrill. His face was wrinkled as if he hadn't smiled in years. "I'm sure that your name will be as beautiful as your countenance, my Lady."

“Then let us drink to my countenance,” I suggested.

“Your countenance, my Lady,” Master Serrill toasted me, drinking a little from the glass, then a lot as I tipped it up for him.

I smiled at him as I sipped my own, seeing how my painted lips marked my glass. “My countenance was worthy of a deep draught, my Lord,” I told him, batting my eyes at him. Choni would have laughed at my inept flirting with the moneychanger if she had seen me. I must learn how to flirt more girlishly as all my future conquests couldn’t come as easily as this one.

“And my lovely figure,” I suggested.

“Your exquisite figure, my Lady,” parroted my swain.

“Is worthy of draining the glass,” I proposed, re-crossing my legs and sitting straighter so that my breasts jutted forth. My admirer did exactly what I wished him to do. He stared at my breasts, then looked dizzily down my dress to the stockings and pretty red high heels I exposed to him.

“Now, my name,” I said to Serrill as I lifted a dainty handkerchief out of the purse I carried along with a small balloon filled with the antidote to lovebane. It wouldn’t hurt the parasane. I had tried it out on Locco, the captain of *The Snapping Shark* several times on our long sea voyage.

“Ah, your lovely name,” murmured my beloved, looking curiously into his glass. I shared my brandy and parasane with him. I

I pressed the balloon and waited until the invisible air, which I could sense by its odor of heated sugar beet, had its effect upon the banker.

“Let us drink then, my Lord,” I told Master Serrill, placing his glass to his lips, “to the Lady Sherrene Perisord.”

Serrill had downed more than half of his partly filled glass before the name struck home with him. He reacted as I expected, his eyes filling with intense fear as he looked at me. I would have to find out just what that expression meant. I just wished that I was as able a questioner as my mother had been; she had plied me with parasane when I was young when I vandalized Cory’s brother’s hay ricks and lied about doing it.

“You know who I am, Orissiana the Terrible’s niece and Lady Airene’s daughter?” I asked him.

“Niece? Daughter?” Serrill gargled. He began to frown as if a weight was pressing on his head.

“Whom do you think I am?” I asked him, knowing what the answer would be.

“You, you’re the son, the nephew,” gasped Master Serrill. “The Queen had decreed it to be so. Lady Orissiana says she was fooled by her sister and her Seafarer son. He wanted to avenge his aunt, the Queen, that Seafarer princess, that Cutylene or something like that.”

“Stop,” I told him. That was one of the troubles with parasane. A subject always wanted to tell more than you asked. At least I had found out about what people thought of me. But if they thought me a man, dabbling in witchcraft, they would kill me without even a trial.

How brilliant, I thought sourly, to announce myself as Lady Sherrene. Soon, the streets would be full of people who wanted to get a look at the son of a witch who dressed in women’s clothing. I’d have urchins

running after me, laughing at me and calling me names.

“Lady Airene’s fortune,” I said to Serrill, trying to keep my mind firmly on what I had set out to do.

“How much was it?”

“Six thousand and forty-two golds,” the banker said, his face screwing up. I was staggered to hear of such a sum. It was a fortune as great as that of the kingdom itself. It could have bought my mother an army to protect her. “Twenty thousand eight hundred and seventeen silvers, four thousand nine hundred and eighty-six coppers, eight hundred and seventy-one half coppers and twenty-six counting marks from the County of Perisord.”

I stared at the banker in amazement as Serrill went on to describe the values of houses in Terraire and Doxford my mother had owned.

“Stop,” I gasped. “And all this is to come to me?”

“No, milady,” said Serrill, lowering his head in his hands. I stared at him, wondering if he realized he had just acknowledged me as a woman. “Lady Orissiana demanded the twenty-six counting marks from Perisord. Count Osgard has taken the golds and twenty thousand silvers for the treasury. The rest I am to keep.”

I was stunned once more. I had lost the fortune I had thought would be mine. I could have asked him more about houses and such but I didn’t doubt that there would be nothing left.

“What do you hold here of Count Osgard’s?” I asked, moving closer to him on the couch and swishing my skirts over his legs.

“Four thousand golds,” began Serrill, launching on a long listing of coins of other realms.

“Stop,” I told him shakily. Baget, the chief clerk, came bursting in then with a bottle of brandy. He looked aghast at his master slumped on the sofa, his face in terrible pain.

Baget didn’t want to come to me but I made him. I cast my lovebane on him, then he was only too delighted to enter the bank vault and bring forth several heavy leather packs of the golds and a smaller number of silver and coppers kept on hand for Count Osgard.

The Count had robbed me and now I would rob him, I thought, locking the vault and coating the lock with a simple hold-all potion while the two bankers were asleep, almost catatonic. They might not realize what I had done for a little while and I could be well hidden in a day or so. I dispatched Hedward to find a carriage so we could transport our coins away from Gold Street with us.

“What were you to do if Lady Sherrene showed up here to claim her mother’s fortune?” I asked the dazed, unthinking banker. I had to repeat it twice before Serrill babbled about the coin, the coin. I had to awaken Baget to find out what he was talking about.

“He has this coin in his desk,” Baget told me eagerly. I took his hand as I rose gracefully from the sofa and smiled at my new love. He put his arm about me and I had to give him the little kiss he so obviously needed to confirm my love. He found the coin for me. It was in a black satin pouch. It was buzzing as Baget, oblivious to the noise, unlocked Serrill’s desk and showed it to me.

I had thought that I discovered a new way to communicate when I stumbled on how to listen in on others' conversations aboard *The Tempest*. I now realized that my aunt was way ahead of me. If I hadn't become a witch and discovered how to set up a resonant surface on a pearl, I would never have known that the Seafarers, my rescuers from my aunt, my father's people, would betray me.

Without the other discoveries I had made, I wouldn't have been able to enter this moneychanger's and taken back my inheritance, or some of it.

Orissiana must have listening devices like this in her dark room in Birchwood. No wonder she sometimes looked so harried when she came out at supper-time. Was it two-way communication she was using? Baget was babbling on that it was, having seen the Master Moneychanger talking to it and correcting himself. I might be able to figure out how to do that myself now that I had one of my aunt's listening devices to experiment on, if what Baget said was true.

In any case, how long would it take before Count Osgard and my aunt found out that I was back in the kingdom and gathering resources? I recalled Anjaro and Wesset's conversation about armies of men spelled to fight on and on. I shivered as I thought about what I didn't know about witchery and what my aunt did. I didn't want to end up as a third maid to my aunt, a figure of fun and as mindless as Algoth and Maris, my aunt's current maids.

I wished I could have made a potion to make a person forget everything they had heard or said. I could compel thoughts to be told truly and I could cause confusion. I could control thoughts while everyone was in on it, not giving me away as the girls hadn't on *The*

Snapping Shark. The crew thought we were only eight days out of Bridgewater and had been seeing home waters for a 'day' before we completed the four-month journey to the Black Sea and the port of Terraire.

I scattered confounders, as I called them, knowing that contact with others, like the Watch at the end of the street, would soon break the influences I had left on Serrill and his sleeping underlings. I wondered how long it would be before the panicked moneychanger contacted Osgard and let him know that there was a new witch in the city of Terraire.

XXIII. A WITCH'S DRAMA

I was assisted into the carriage by the lovesick Chief Clerk to whom I waved and blew kisses as prettily as I could. I ordered the heavily laden carriage to head back along Dock Street while I tried to think over the pounding in my mind.

I knew that I must rest or I might make mistakes and set the Watch after me. We were held up at one point by Watchmen beside a crier who was shouting his news. I sat there and smiled, hoping my makeup wasn't smudged.

The crier had gone past the news to tell the crowd gathered around him all about the plays currently being performed in Terraire and where they would take place. When he mentioned the actress, Mithera, in a revival of *The Tragedy of Lady Emmenet*, I took notice. Mithera, I thought, with a little tug inside me. Surely there couldn't be two such in stage presentations in Terraire. I felt the urge to visit another who had been treated as I had been by my aunt. I wondered if

Mithera looked at all like the girls I had transformed. I hoped that she did.



I had the driver take us into the Free Quarter to the nunnery. A little sleep drug on a quiet corner and Hedward drove us into an alcove by the nunnery wall. I had a worried Choni with me to take stock of what I had done. To Hedward I gave the task of going back into town and buying a more inconspicuous carriage.

“You have to be more inconspicuous as well,” I told him. I wanted him to slouch and not be so officer-like; that was fine when I was a great lady and he could be called an officious footman.

In the end, I had to send Choni back with him, for her to play the scold and get him to buy the right carriage and a nondescript horse, to get back to the household goods they’d had to abandon on the side of the road after her father evicted her. Choni went with Hedward, certain that I was about to abandon both her and the cabin boys from *The Tempest*. I was certainly thinking about it.

I was putting Choni at risk in the town. If anyone recognized that she was a boy in a dress, she’d face the stocks for sure and likely more than that when the physical changes in her were revealed. I was putting all of the girls at risk by having them close to me. I was certainly going to be hunted by the Watch and my aunt very soon. That meant a witch, whichever one was serving Count Osgard, looking for me. I needed to get away from them all.

I should get out of this lovely dress, my stockings and my pretty shoes and re-dress like the snoring driver in the back of the carriage. I could smell him and it made my nose wrinkle. No, I couldn’t smell like water roses or upland violets. I would have to smell like a man and I felt sick at the prospect. I tried to imagine Tess, with her breasts, being a boy again.

Oh, I should never have helped the girls! I should never have let them use gansasate and throat clasper and masheen, never mind the skin softeners and hair removal salves I had showed them all how to use. I stepped down from the carriage, thinking of walking off. My high heels jarred a little and I noticed a man, a youth really, watching me from the end of the alley. He grinned and doffed his hat as he slowly strolled across the alley's entrance, straining his neck to see the man with me in the carriage.

I turned back and saw what the youth must have seen. The shiny door of the carriage showed me a young woman in fashionable hat and veil, her makeup vivid, emphasizing what a true woman she was. She was shapely and her dress was lovely. No, I couldn't go back to being Dedrick again. I wanted to be the girl I saw in the sheen on the door. And the girls, I already knew, wanted to be like me. No, I couldn't abandon them, as it had been in my mind to do right then and there.

I climbed back and sat demurely in the carriage, loving the way my stockings slid over each other and my petticoats caressed my legs. I admired the way my breasts thrust forward in Choni's clever feminine neckline. I began to feel quite heated, just waiting for Choni to come back.

So, while my driver slept on, to distract myself from all the feminine feelings rising in me, I tried to figure out my aunt's device. The buzz I quickly realized was that of several voices talking at once; most were very blurred. Only the occasional word could be understood.

"Well, Master Serrill," said my aunt's voice suddenly, quite clearly, as if she was over my shoulder,

looking down on me. "Are you just sitting there looking at the size of Tatheren's nose or are you going to say anything?"

I looked at the glistening, resonating surface of the coin. I trembled so much that I dropped it into my skirts and my aunt's voice receded from me. "Or is it you, Apprentice Baget?" I heard my aunt sneer. "Playing again at being the great moneylender, are we, Baget? I warned you, little man, not to play with my toys and now you must bear my wrath."

Almost instantly, a little line of smoke sprang from my lovely dress. The coin seemed to burn its way through my dress and my petticoats and would have burned right through me if I hadn't stood and flipped my skirts immediately. It fell onto the floor of the carriage. A small flame shot up from it, frightening me as I thought of what it would have done to me if I had had it in my hands or lap.

"I don't hear you crying, Baget," said my aunt's voice. "I do hope I haven't scarred your master's desk. Now, go and call him and get him to put the coin back into its black, satin cloth. If you do that right now and tell him what you did, I won't have you put into one of the iron cages along Traitor's Walk."

Amazing, I thought in wonder, watching the coin burn its way right through the floor of the carriage and fall to the dusty ground. The horses backed up nervously and I had to quickly use heartsease to soothe them. Why wasn't the surface of the coin burned off? I sensed the odors of fellane and molten metal rising on the heated air. I reached into my purse then and flicked some droplets of honeybane onto the heated coin. The controller did its work too well. The fragrance of honey, primrose nectar and a Seafarer poison made

from sea spiders, that Captain Loccoso had shown me proudly on *The Shark*, filled the little alley I was in.

The coin grew hotter and set fire to a twig that lay in the dust near it. The fire died as quickly as it had sprung up. I detected a final metallic odor that I recognized as molten gold and the buzzing of the coin went silent.

It was difficult to kick up a little dirt in my lovely high heels but I managed it, holding my skirts up in the process. The fire died quickly and I was left with a coin, a copper coin minted by King Tatheren. Of gold, there was nothing. The coin was quite inert so I lifted it up and looked at it.

My senses told me that the covering shell was quite gone. My aunt would know it as well, I was sure. The honeybane I used in controlling my devices had been anathema to my aunt's device. But she must have sensed that something had happened to the coin. She had known well enough that it was out of its satin holster and had been able to send it some signal to burn whoever was using it. I probably had less than a day to organize myself and get out of her way. Wherever she was, if she could reach out and do that to a simple coin, she was far too powerful a witch for me to tangle with.

Hedward and Choni came back with a suitable battered wagon, she with the driver's coat about her, looking like a blushing, eloping bride. She was so relieved to see me that she had to come and give me a hug. I saw the look of stress on Hedward's face dissipate as he smiled at the two of us.

I had them go away then with the gold I had stolen. I sent them to an inn, *The Twice Crowned King*, where the wagon could be stored and rooms rented with the silver and copper from Osgard's hoard. The inn was

one of many that struggled through the winter and spring with few customers from the sea trade. The proprietors would be glad of the custom, the Second Priestess at the nunnery had told me.

They went off again, hand in hand, so like a young married couple that my heart ached. I wished that I could hide them away somewhere as a seamstress and her husband but I had been thinking about how easy it would be for my aunt to find me with so many girls. I didn't think Loccoso would protect our secret landing at all. In fact, I wouldn't have put it past him to have sent a message to Terraire about me and the girls I was with, just to spite us.

I let Hedward and Choni hire another carriage to take some of our packs from the nunnery, along with Grace and some of the other girls, to the inn to await me. In the meantime, wearing my dress that scandalized my maid when she saw the hole I had burned through it, I took Hope with me and went to see *The Tragedy of Lady Emmenet* at the Dockside Theater on the Free Quarter side of Eastern Dock Street. I couldn't miss the chance to see and meet with Mithera, whom my mother had seemed to know so well.

As Dedrick, I had strolled about the enclosure of this very theater, laughing at the ribald comments of the workers who had come to see a play. As a Lady, however, I was immediately escorted to a booth. My high heels clicked as I went up the steps, an urchin or two scrambling to get into position to look up my dress or that of my maid, a little behind me.

A clip on the ear from the ticket seller settled that issue and I found myself in a high box on the balcony, overlooking the stage. A young girl brought us green mint tea right away. Hope tried to pry from me the rea-

sons why I would want to come to such a second-rate theater when there were things that needed to be done for the girls who had come with me by ship.

The theater was quite full as the gruff barker walked out on the platform that led into the enclosure. After a few trumpet blasts, he began to talk about *The Tragedy*. He was very long-winded which was just as well as the crowd in the enclosure began to swell with men and women coming from the alehouses along Dock Street.

Many people looked up at me in the balcony seat. "She's got a good view. She'll be able to tell us," cackled one old woman as the barker went on about how the bandit, Stover, crept into the marriage bed of the fair Lady Emmenet and stole the maidenhead with which she was supposed to gift her husband.

I flushed as many people looked up at me. My breasts seemed to thrust forward further and my panties pull tighter beneath my dress as the musicians came forward and the lords and ladies swept out in a courtly dance. I sensed Hope watching me in confusion. She was trying to sit in as ladylike a fashion as she could, I could tell. I hadn't thought that this must be the first time for her in women's clothing, attending an afternoon play in a theater in town.

The ladies' dresses swirled out as they danced with the lords. Only none of the 'ladies' was, in fact, a woman. These ladies wore garish makeup, high wigs and long dresses that swirled high to show that these ladies didn't wear petticoats at all. I don't think they shaved their legs either but they were a long way down from me. It was almost a relief to me when the music softened and the couples milled as if at a reception.

Loud, boisterish male actors set the tone for the play. Lord Emmenet was played by an actor in a grey wig as if he was an old, doddering fool. The daughter of a rich miller was just the thing to revive his flagging fortunes. The jokes were all on that level.

“Is she as pretty as my Dulcey?” asked one lord, swirling his partner in front of us. The partner, so clearly a man in a dress, planted a huge, lipsticked kiss on the lord’s head, while the crowd below me roared.

“Now who could be as pretty as Dulcey?” asked the Lord Emmenet’s bailiff.

I thought the play was a waste of my time. I began to prepare to get up and leave when suddenly the music changed and the future Lady Emmenet arrived on the arm of her father. The bantering of the enclosure ceased. Hope looked at me in puzzlement as I sat back in my chair and watched the actress who played Lady Emmenet step into the sunlight.

The girl who gracefully flowed onto the stage in her gorgeous, pink dress was every inch a woman. Her father bade her walk so that she could be measured by Lord Emmenet; she did, right out into the audience on the stage extension.

Her lovely face was not garish. Her hair, if it was real, and I could not tell, was brown with honey blonde streaks, gathered in a golden mesh net at her shoulders. Her eyebrows were as thin as mine and she wore makeup like me. She smiled from red-painted lips but kept her kohl-outlined eyes down. She swirled her skirts to reveal that she was wearing pink high heels, stockings and many petticoats. She glittered with the jewels at her ears and throat, wrists and arms.

The most striking thing about her, however, was her figure. The other 'women' had balloonish breasts and padded, voluptuous figures. The future Lady Emmenet had natural breasts, which the low-cut front of her dress showed most admirably. They bounced as she moved and looked in every way disturbingly real.

"Hey, Mithera," yelled a drunk up by the stage, holding up his arms to her. "I got a gold for you to warm my bed at *The Dove*."

While some laughed at that, others called out not to believe him. "My lords," the lovely woman's father went on. "One miserable gold will not buy my daughter's virginity."

Then proceeded a ribald contest to which the girl paid no heed as her father auctioned her off to the eager audience, with even the women cackling and joining in until Lord Emmenet quadrupled the last bid of fifteen golds and offered sixty.

"A hundred golds," said someone from one of the boxes. Whoever it was had to be hushed by his giggling companions.

"Two hundred," shouted the actor playing the Lord. The father closed off the auction immediately even as a laughing group of noble's sons were trying to out-shout each other and buy the girl's virginity.

Mithera soon changed into white and wedding dances commenced, followed by the kiss of the betrothed in which the old man kissed her with a young man's ardor as the crowd whistled, shouted and panted. Each time the wedding waltz stopped while the guests tinkled glasses, the couple had to stop and kiss passionately. Soon it was hard to tell which clinking came from the stage players and which from the

audience who appeared to want nothing more than kisses between the men on the stage.

I found myself getting more than a little hot at the spectacle in front of me. Hope, I noticed, was leaning forward in interest whenever Mithera was forward on the stage.

Then, there was the getting-ready-for-bed scene. A maid helped Mithera prepare and for the first time we heard her speak. Yes, she did have a lower, mannish sort of voice but with her feminine gestures, the ways she moved her hands and her head, it was no real give-away that this was not truly a female.

She was undressed and bathed by her maid. There wasn't a hair on her soft, smooth skin that I could see. Her panties came off only after her single thickness of nightdress was over her head.

The man who snuck into her room, black cloth draped about the stage to simulate night, was disguised as her husband but was actually one of the bragging young men who had tried to buy her from her father earlier.

She begged him to be gentle in taking her as she had not known a rough man's ways before, having been kept a virgin by her sainted father. There was not a hoot or an interruption as she drew the lover down on her and surrendered to him, their soft kisses stylized and long drawn out.

The simulation of sex was intense and fooled me as well as the crowd. I was above the action and saw the actor's hands stroking her legs before he pushed back the covers. She put her legs high in the air and he appeared to take her, the two of them wiggling and shaking as the band played romantic music. She kissed his

face in a frenzy as if she was truly being aroused and cried on cue at the right time, holding him, thrashing and begging him not to be so hard in her.

I thought Mithera had been made love to. I thought I had just seen a woman deflowered on a theater stage in Terraire. The lovers were behind veiled curtains where we could see the bed rocking as they made passionate love again. Meanwhile, the 'real' Lord was shown being delayed by his drinking partners, dancing with several of the other 'actresses,' some of the better-looking ones. Several bent over for the old Lord, flipping up their skirts. With a huge phallus attached to the front of his pants, the old Lord entertained many of the other young ladies of his court, none as beautiful or as feminine as the girl writhing with the impostor.

"You idiot!" one old woman in the audience cackled at the height of the Lord's temptation by a very ugly chambermaid. "You don't want that chamberpot! You want the real thing in your bed!"

Finally, with the urging of the audience, Lord Emmenet went to his bedroom and found his wife in the arms of another man. No mind that he had supposedly taken seven women before, the wife was to blame for the man who had tricked her and taken her maidenhead.

No amount of tears and protestations of love could save her. She was tried and judged guilty. Her nightie became more and more ragged, her exposed breast looked as genuine as mine, to gasps and pointing fingers from the audience.

Of course, she was rescued by her cheating lover in time. Her long, bare, shapely legs were about him as he carried her off. The old man died of apoplexy while having it off with his chambermaid. Her father finally

grudgingly accepted the young man as her husband, particularly when she came out in a gorgeous evening dress with a bump at the end to signify her pregnancy, much to the audience's delight.



“Show us! Show us!” chanted the crowd at the end of the performance. I had seen that before when a girl looked particularly good. They would smile and take off their wigs. Mithera tried but her hair, of course, was her own.

“Show! Show!” screamed the crowd, even the dandies and their women in the balcony. I might have been the only one not shouting. Mithera looked up at me as she lifted her dress and her ‘husband’ knelt before her and took down her panties. She wasn’t well-endowed down below but she was definitely a man.

“I told you!” screamed one woman at a blustering man in the audience. Others threw their hands in the air and cheered, jeered and screamed as Mithera lowered her dress, retreated across the stage, looking very apprehensive. The black drapes were closed to signal the end of the play.

I knew that I couldn’t leave Terraire without seeing Mithera, the one whom I thought of as the innocent victim of my aunt’s plan to capture me and make me into a woman.

A gold it cost me but I did manage to get back stage with Hope beside me, asking me why we had to go there. We were led through a long room of looking glasses where a man in woman’s makeup, his balding head exposed, was lecturing another actor on some lines that had been missed.

“Not in here, Gern,” said the older man. Gern led us to a doorway beyond the actors, knocking on it and asking whoever was within if they would see an admirer of the play who proposed a fee of a gold to meet Mithera.

“Two golds,” I said as Gern turned back, shrugging, from the door. I heard Hope gasp behind me.

Two golds got me in.

“My lady,” said the actress known as Mithera, standing and curtsying to me in a long, loose white dress. Up close, her makeup was heavy but her features were as feminine as they were on stage. She was wearing a necklace at her neck. I gulped as I saw the image of King Tatheren on the coin. I shuddered at the thought of it burning the way the coin I had taken from Master Sherrill had.

I turned and whispered to Hope, who obeyed me without question.

“My mistress loved your performance,” said Hope, appearing and speaking exactly like a young lady’s elder nurse should. “She bids you accept this token of her affection for your performance.”

I took off the pearl necklace I wore. Mithera’s eyes went wide as she looked at it. It was clearly real.

“This is too valuable,” Mithera protested in her husky voice. Hope handed it to her and Mithera tried to hand it back to me.

I whispered to Hope again. “Let me try it on you,” said Hope, going over to the hesitant, nervous actress. She sat back stiffly in front of her looking glass, as Hope put the necklace around her neck.

“Oh, it looks so beautiful with your soft skin,” Hope enthused. “But let me take this other necklace off for a moment and you can see the pearl.”

The necklace was definitely buzzing as I put the black satin over it.

“Oh,” said Mithera, gasping as she saw what I held, turning to look at the pearl at her neck.

Mithera stood up; her dress flowed about her as I put the black satin with the coin into my purse and the buzz of the coin ended. “You can’t have my necklace,” she said indignantly, her voice definitely mannish at that point.

“It’s a witch’s device,” I told her and she gaped at me. “You know that, don’t you, and that you are being ensorcelled by a witch.”

Hope looked at me, her pale, painted lips opening as she looked at me with less confusion.

“Ensorcelled by a witch?” gasped Mithera. She put her hands on her hips, tucked in her dress, showing me how feminine she really was. Her waist was thin and made her hips and thighs shapely like a woman. Her breasts were better than mine, more shapely and fuller, her nipples large and prominent through the soft, silky material.

“How would you know?” asked Mithera, her eyes glinting dangerously at me.

“Because I am a witch myself,” I said as calmly as I could.

“She is,” said Hope. Mithera did nothing for a moment but stand there, the epitome of womanhood, staring at me.

“Lady Sherrene,” Mithera finally breathed hoarsely. I nodded, my golden hair moving about my neck.

“But we know all about you, even here,” said Mithera with a sneer. “You’re not a real witch. You’re a man like me and men can’t be witches.”

XXIV. A WITCH'S DANGER

The shapely, heavily made-up woman looked at me defiantly. What had my mother seen in the young Mithera that had made her do what she had done, set this young man on the road to femininity? I looked at her and what I saw was a woman looking back furiously at me.

I opened my purse and gave her a phial of the throat-clasping potion that I made for the girls. She took it from me but set it with her cosmetics in front of the looking glass.

"That is a throat cordial," I told Mithera. "It will change your voice so that, with a little training, you can sound like me and not Count Osgard."

Mithera eyed me and Hope. "You aren't denying that you are the boy who calls himself Lady Sherrene?" she asked me.

"I am Lady Sherrene," I told her as calmly as I could. "The coin my aunt gave you is in fact a listening device. I destroyed one that Master Serrill, the money-changer, had this morning. It ruined my dress when it burned its way through my carriage to the ground. I did not want my aunt to hear me talking to you and have the device burn you as a punishment for me seeking you out."

"Why *are* you seeking me out?" Mithera asked me bluntly.

"Lady Airene was my mother," I told Mithera, swallowing a little as she studied my face. "She told my aunt all about you, the son of the baker, Athell," Mithera started at that, "and how she was helping you

become a woman. After my mother died, my aunt began to control the experiments my mother started. She has put you through a great trial. You didn't think that your breasts just appeared naturally, did you?"

Her brown eyes began to glitter, then she finally said, "She, she told me that she would make me into a woman. She told my father and my mother and they agreed that I could be their daughter. And then she died."

I knew that she meant my mother. "I found her body," I said, crossing my legs, letting my skirts swish about me, revealing my pretty high heels.

"It all stopped," said Mithera in anguish then. "I was going to be a daughter, then I was nothing. I had to go back to boy's clothes. Everyone on the street was laughing at me. They'd say my name and the insults would begin."

"So you fled here," I said calmly. Mithera nodded.

"Here you could be what you wanted to be," I said. "You could dress as a lady, a witch, a whore, and audiences loved it when you were kissed by a man. They think it's the high point of the show."

"That's only in the towns where there's the Watch to contend with," said Mithera, tears brimming over her kohled eyelashes. "In the country, they want much more authentic performances. And when all, all these changes happened to me, I got to be the leading actress in all the tragedies."

"Like today?" I asked her.

"Today was a town performance," Mithera said with a sneer. "You saw the easy way I had to reveal myself, didn't you?"

That was easy? I thought with sympathy. Having another actor pull down your panties and show off your genitals to the crowd? That was 'easy?'

"You don't know, do you, what it's like to be an actress in a country play?" asked Mithera. "They want to see it done right there on stage. When the god, Maral, seduces the daughter of Harava, the country audience wants to see the daughter taken." Her voice was trembling. "We did it thirty times in thirty nights on our first trek through Mustay and the Sellon Counties. It was my first time with a man, right out on the stage. I'd kissed a few men by then but I was still a virgin. My screams when Tegan raped me were real and he did it to me again the next night and again. He just laughed when I screamed at him to stop. He said I'd get to like it."

"You blame my mother?" I asked Mithera. I could barely look at her, empathizing with the life she had been leading.

"I wanted to be a woman!" Mithera screamed huskily at me. "If you really are a witch, make me a woman as your mother promised me she could. Then I'll tell everyone that Lady Sherrene is real, that she really is a woman, like me!"

Hope shifted uneasily on her chair. Clearly, she wondered what she had gotten herself into, as did I. I had wanted to find out if my mother had made the changes in Mithera that my aunt claimed that she had. Mithera confirmed that what my aunt had told me about my mother was true. Mithera believed my mother had told her she could change her sex. But if she could, I didn't have a clue how my mother had intended to do it.

"I need to look around your rooms," I told Mithera, who stared at me as I stood. "I need to see what other witchery is being inflicted upon you before I even try anything further."

Mithera didn't seem to hear me right away. She took a soapy washcloth from a basin and began to wipe her face. Even without makeup, Mithera looked girlish. She took off the necklace I had given her and put it in an open purse on her dressing table.

"The golds?" she asked me huskily, her voice deeper than any of the girls' voices I was used to.

I passed two golds to her and she weighed them in her hand, looking at me. "I accuse you of being a man and you don't turn a hair," Mithera said slowly. "And neither does this woman with you. I am about to pin back my hair, bandage my breasts flat until they hurt, put on rough working pants, a man's shirt and men's boots. I have to hide my jewellery in a purse and the purse in a sack.

"The Watch love to catch me and search me on the street. You should know that if you walk with me. They love to feel my breasts and my manhood and ask me if I am a man or a woman. Usually, they gather a crowd before they start asking their questions. If I answer them back, they beat me down and expose me to the crowd.

"If you walk with me and they think you are not women, they can have you killed for wearing women's clothing on the streets."

"We had heard," I said, ignoring the distress on Hope's face.

Mithera whipped off her shift then, standing before us in just tiny panties. She looked at me as she took a

soft cloth and began to wind it about her well-formed breasts, definitely larger than mine. She put another belt about her waist and stuffed into it various cosmetics, the cordial phial I had passed to her, and soft, feminine garments. With a man's shirt and workpants, she still looked like a stocky woman to me, even with her hair held back by a string, the longest part of which was put under the collar of her shirt.

A workman's hat and bulky coat didn't change my opinion that she looked like a woman in men's clothing.

"Let's go," she said, relaxing and letting her voice come from deep within her. Hope started at the masculine voice. I had expected it. I smiled and slipped my arm through Mithera's which surprised her.

"Yes, my lord," I said to her. I hoped that Mithera knew enough to keep her head tilted so the hat shaded her face. I held her arm as if she was a man escorting me, his loving woman, out of the theater.

The long, dressing room was still partly occupied by actors laughing together. "Mithera!" one male actor, scratching his stubbly beard, shouted. "The Old Drum on Cheap Street."

"Not tonight, Sarlie," Mithera answered, gripping my arm tightly. I felt the assessing glances from several of the males present; I shook my curls and earrings, my breasts bouncing lightly in my tight bodice. It covered the little push I gave to my heightened awareness with fortified honeybane inside me. If there was any witchery in the Dockside Theater, I was unable to sense it, save for the coin I had secreted away in the ladies' purse I carried.

A Watchman leered at us along Needle Street where Mithera took us down an alley and up back stairs to the rooms she lived in with Narrine, the owner of her theater company.

"I hope she paid you for your time," snapped the large, burly man, eyeing me. He reached out his hand and Mithera meekly handed him the sack she carried. Narrine found the golds, studied the images of King Tatheren and even bit at them to test the hardness of the money.

I noted that the golds went into his coin purse and that Mithera said not a word. "We are old friends, Mithera and I," I told him with a smile, curtseying to the big man, swishing my skirts so that the rustle of female underclothing was clear to him.

I saw the amused look in his eyes as I rattled on about Doxford and my father, a baker competitor of Athell, Mithera's father, and how we had played together as girls.

"Ho!" snickered Narrine. "I'd like to hear all about the games you girls played when Mithera was young. She doesn't like to talk about when she was young."

Funny how you speak of her as a woman, I thought, when you know that she is a man. "Hope," I said to my maid, "the brandy bottle." I had a parasane-laced concoction, the finest herisane brandy, thanks to Chief Clerk Baget, prepared and carried by my maid.

"Herisane," I said, arching my head and smiling into the big man's face. I reached up and gently took the pins out of my hair and shook it free, keeping a smile on my painted lips all the while. I could arch my female figure very well after watching Mithera on

stage. I saw her eyes widen in amusement as she seemed to recognize the part I was playing.

Narrine was almost slobbering over my hand as Hope brought us glasses filled with brandy and I toasted him. "Only the best of times for your theater company," I said to him. "May you have a long and profitable run at the Dockside."

Narrine downed the brandy in one. Hope eased forward, a smile on her soft-skinned face. "Not the Dockside," said Narrine with a grimace. He turned and looked at Mithera. "Got marching orders today from the Commander of the Watch, no less. Says we're a country theater and we have to clear town. Tegan says he's quitting. Going to join Madaran at the Riverroad.

"I hate that theater," he rambled on. I recognized the sway of parasane on him as he began to frown and one large hand went up to his temple to massage his brow. "Rats and bilgewater, that's what it's like in the actor's quarters."

"Stop," I told him quietly and he did. He went stiff with his arm halfway to his head. I heard a gasp from Mithera; Hope just looked at me with shining eyes. It was easier to ply him with questions than it had been Serrill. Narrine got the potions he had been given to use on Mithera from the Count's new witch. He was to make sure that the wine draught he made her drink each night was laced with it.

I had Hope bring me the bottle and sniffed it. "Ganasate," I told Hope. "Made the same way I make it for the girls at the nunnery."

Mithera's eyes went wide as I said that. She stared at the man she had been living with. She had heard herself described as a silly faggot. She heard that

Narrine had a woman and a child over on the Mill Road, and tears came to her eyes. Still dressed as a workman, I could see nothing about the way she posed and the expression on her face that didn't say she was a woman to me. I hoped she would think the same of me as I tried to flirt with her man as if I was a woman.

When he'd finished with Mithera, Narrine mumbled on, leering at me, putting his arm about me. He would take his golds over to his wife to keep for him. Gurray knew he'd break her other arm if she held out on him. He'd tell the Watch about the strange woman, me, who had come back to the house with Mithera. There was bound to be a silver in it for him.

The Watch wanted to know everything about any people Mithera met. Narrine had to report all the physical changes in her even though it disgusted him. He had to measure the size of her manhood, its condition and the other male and female parts of her. Mithera couldn't bear it as he talked about such things. She turned her back on Hope and me as Narrine rambled on about his loving, little catamite.

Narrine gave Mithera a special sleeping draught when he had to do the measuring. He'd last measured up two nights before when the Count's new witch told him to. The witch had given him the necklace Mithera wore in Midwinter; Narrine had to make sure she always wore it. He was falling asleep as he said that the silly cow always believed him when he told her she looked like a real girl in her pretty necklace.

Mithera had removed her hat and flicked out her hair, not realizing how the feminine gesture destroyed the illusion that she was a man. Her eyes were brimming over with tears as she turned and moved towards the man who was betraying her.

"This gutter snake!" she snarled, bringing out a short knife from a pocket in the jacket she wore. "I'll have his balls for this!"

"Why bother?" I asked her. I gave her a handkerchief instead and Hope one as well. I showed her how to cover her nose and mouth while I took out a merenthe puffball and broke it in front of Narrine's face. The ejection from the little balloon filled his nostrils with the tiny particles only I seemed able to sense.

"He'll sleep a day," I told Mithera. "Longer if no one disturbs him."

"No one will," she said bitterly. Her scrubbed, clean face was filled with despair as she looked at me. "He will sleep all day after he's had me for half of the night."

"You have to leave here," I told her. "Where to go, that's the question."

Mithera reached over and took a paper from Narrine's pocket. "Take the golds he took from me," Mithera said bitterly, "and we can hire dray wagons from Keltry. That will get us to Doxford at least. We have a pass to tour the counties of the Lowlands as a theater company."

"To put on country plays?" I asked. Mithera nodded, her blonde-streaked hair tumbling about her lovely face. She looked defiantly at me, daring me to tell her that she shouldn't be in such plays. "No, we'll not do that," I told her. "The nunnery will have to hide us out for a few days while I investigate this witch of Osgard's."

I didn't tell the others but I was terrified of doing that. I had met some of my aunt's friends she had called witches but whom I had sensed had little feel for

witchery. The Queen had had more but not the power that my aunt, Abriss, or I, it seemed, possessed. But there were other witches in the land and I hadn't a clue who they were or what kinds of power they possessed. I might be treading on a sea spider in meeting someone just like me.

Door Warden smiled as we entered with the reluctant, male-dressed Mithera in tow. "So nice to see someone returning today," she said as she led us by candle light into the women's quarters, taking Mithera to be a woman, even though she was dressed as a workman.

I knew about my maids and Hedward but the way that Door Warden spoke alerted me to something being up. I stopped with my little hat in my hands; Hope hovered about me to help me undress from my formerly lovely, now ruined, wine-red dress.

"Who else went out and didn't come back?" I asked the old nun as Assistant Cook, a woman old enough to be my grandmother, brought us cake, bread, cheese, hard-boiled eggs and warm tea. I sensed none of it was poisoned or worse, ensorcelled.

"Why, that Bennock and the red-haired girl who visited him in his room last night," said Door Warden chattily. "They only got out of bed around early supper time. He took her out to see the town. He was cross that we wouldn't send out for a carriage for him. Well, we don't have money for carriages. I saw him whispering to that Nikki girl and she was laughing at him. Called him clever and such. Went and changed into a gown down to here and off they went. I wouldn't tell him but I think Drudge told him that carriages can be hired on Dock Street."

I waited till Door Warden left. "Don't change," I told Hope sharply as soon as Door Warden went back to her post. "I hate to do it but I'll have to put her to sleep as well." And I would have to replenish my merenthe stocks very soon. I was beginning to run low. "Once I've done that, we must all leave." The girls would all have to come with me. I couldn't leave them all there to be interrogated by another witch.

I could feel it inside me as if it was a premonition. I shuddered, wishing that I knew so much more about how to be a witch. But all I could sense was how tightly I was bound into my bodice and how much my breasts were starting to hurt. "*The Twice Crowned King*," I said to Mithera. "You know it?"

Mithera nodded uncertainly to me.

"Bennock is Prince Tathally," I told her and her eyes widened in shock. "He's an idiot and he's gone gallivanting about town with someone," I looked at Hope, not mentioning what we knew about Nikki, "who has as little sense as he. I can feel that this other witch in town has caught the pair of them. Any of my companions can be questioned by another witch as I questioned Narrine.

"So, I want all of us hidden away for a while. Believe me, if the witch who

ensorcelled Narrine to do what he did to you has Tathally or Nikki, she will know that Lady Sherrene is here in Terraire. She'll wonder why she isn't hearing you or the other person I dealt with today." I pointed to the hole in my dress. "She'll be looking for you, for me, and for the girls who came to Terraire with me. Nikki won't have held anything back."

“Nikki will tell her all about every one of us,” Hope cut in, her voice quivering in fear.

“Wake everyone,” I told Hope. I got out a puffball of merenthe and went in to see Door Warden. She and Assistant Cook were talking and smiling in the little lodge where a great rocking chair had been set up for the Warden to sleep in. They folded easily into sleep, Door Warden in her chair and Assistant Cook atop her. I arranged the woman as decoratively as I could just as Esha arrived, shepherding Fee and a sleepy, yawning Tess.

I left Esha to organize and took Tess, Fee and Mithera out into the alleyway that led to the nunnery gate. I armed each with balloons of merenthe, keeping the last for myself. I told them how to use them and how to alert me that men at arms, watchmen or witches were coming to the nunnery.

The girls were all out of the nunnery, with packs on their shoulders, when a file of Watchmen came marching determinedly up to the front of the alley leading to the nunnery. We would all have been trapped but for Tess who sauntered out seductively and cooed enticingly to a couple of tall, grim men.

“That’s her?” one of the men asked. Tess tried to work the merenthe balloon but the men must have been told about that. They all covered their mouths and noses which didn’t help them when I tossed a bucket of water over them.

“Get back, Tess!” I shouted. “I don’t want your lovely flesh to fall off as well.”

Handkerchiefs came from mouths as the men recoiled from the invisible danger, or so they thought, and my last merenthe puffball worked perfectly. Eight

watchmen lay in a pile, sleeping soundly as I hurried the girls out into the Free Quarter. Mithera guided us down several fetid alleys, behind back entrances to buildings I would never have thought housed people.

We were accosted several times. I wished that I had Hedward with me but the girls were magnificent. "Oh, baby," cooed Bree as one man held her and another began to take down his pants.

I thought that they must have heard the swish of dresses or smelled female perfume but they didn't. We were just women on the move at night. Each was laid out by pieces of hard wood used by my girls. Later, the same wood plowed into another man's stomach and lower parts. He gave us no more trouble.

As the last girls stole into *The Twice Crowned King*, I heard the sound of horns. Suddenly all of the Free Quarter seemed to be on the move. When the Count's

Watch was out on the hunt, all wise men and women went to ground.

Among the crowded rooms Choni and Hedward had taken, I watched Mithera staring at the girls, listening to their frank talk and girlish voices.

"They're all men?" Mithera asked gruffly. I beckoned her to come to me where I waited with Hedward. He looked at her hard and I laid a hand on his arm. He seemed to have forgotten exactly what his Choni really was and took exception to any aspersion anyone made on Choni's femininity.

"Look at it from the other side," I said to Mithera. "They are all women like you."

Hedward looked at the way she was dressed. "Choni is more of a woman than this one will ever be, milady," he said bluntly.

Mithera's pouty lips opened in surprise at the way he addressed me.

"Now this Keltry," I said to her. "We need to get out of the city, all twenty-two of us, in drays?"

Mithera stared at me. I thought it was because my curls were coming loose or perhaps I had a smudge on my nose. I needed to replenish my makeup and perfume, perhaps.

"He wouldn't sell to you," said Mithera miserably. "You, you're a woman." She was baffled then by the smile Hedward gave her. Choni must have told him more than she should have about me.

"I can make him," I said softly.

Mithera thought and then began to smile. "Keltry knows me as Narrine's act-," she hesitated, thinking about it and then said the worst thing she could have said about herself, "as Narrine's bitch," she ended with a shiver. "He'll know that Narrine has been told to move on. He always knows before the actors and actresses do. I should go to the Old Drum and get Sarlie and some of the other actors or actresses who want to stay with the company. If Sarlie was driving a rig, you'd have no trouble getting three drays out of Keltry's yards, not if you had golds to pay up front as well."

"I'll come with you," I said, signalling to Grace that I needed a new dress and a wig for my hair.

I changed quickly into a black, tight-bodied dress. Mithera stared at me as I did so, an envious look on her face as she saw the lovely, feminine underclothing I wore.

We avoided the Watch who were out in force throughout the Free Quarter. "What's happening?" I

asked people outside the Old Drum, taking Mithera's arm and putting it about myself as if we were lovers out on a course to the inn.

"The nunnery," said a younger, tough-looking man. "Can you believe it? They're raiding the Lady Arnessa's."

"Looking for a witch," said another man.

"Didn't find her," cackled an older woman.

"How d'you know?" said the man beside her.

"It'd all be going boom by now," chortled the old woman. "Ain't you ever seen a witch's battle? They don't die easy, witches."

"Gotta sneak up on them, unsuspecting," retorted the man, turning and going into the inn.

Yes, I thought miserably, that's how my mother died, unsuspecting. A knife in the back.

Mithera removed my hand as we entered the Old Drum. She was a great actress. She lowered her voice and swaggered like a man. Several regulars sneered at her but not the thin, wiry man she went over to and introduced me to as 'Jensie.' Mithera smirked that I was the kind of girl who was partial to players.

Keltry looked over Narrine's warrant and shook his head. "We'll miss you," Keltry shouted over the hubbub to Mithera. "Tell Narrine that half his players are deserting him as well." He nodded to the table where Sarlie was in an argument with several other men about different plays and grinned. "I mean, if you had to do a country play, could you get it up if Sarlie was the Count's Lady?"

Keltry laughed at his own joke. I smiled as if I enjoyed it as well. Eight golds down got us four wagons

and horses. Then Mithera went over and spoke to Sarlie while I had to fend off the amorous stable owner.

Mithera smiled at my obvious discomfort when she returned. "Well, five have promised," she said to me. "But it will be more like ten when Sarlie rolls out the first wagon in the morning. It's a job after all's said and done. But Keltry's right. We'll be short eight or nine, actresses mainly, for sure."

"We won't worry about that," I said, thinking of the former cabin boys, facetiously wondering how many could act like girls. But the girls didn't exactly rush to volunteer to wear men's clothing, as actresses would have to pass us through the gates of Terraire. Hope and Esha gathered Hedward's spares for themselves and began to pass out men's pants and shirts to some of the taller girls, like Tess and Fee, who were most indignant to be singled out.

"Not you," said Esha sweetly to Choni. "Milady will have need of her maids later on. Hope and I can take these last things."

It was quite a sight to see what the girls had worn beneath their dark dresses. I hadn't realized that underwear could come in such vivid colors. I saw Mithera's eyes widen as much as Hedward's as he nervously stood guard at the door while some of the girls changed, giggling as they looked at each other with short hair wigs and their breasts bound and waists padded just as Mithera was.

"Can't they talk any lower in tone?" Mithera asked me. Ronya was giggling and lying on top of Sass, who was still in a long skirt. The pair began to kiss and cuddle as if they were man and wife. All the girls started hooting at them. It was just as I imagined a sleep party for teenaged girls would be. It struck me that I didn't

really know the ages of most of the cabin boys. I don't think any of them, save for Hope, Esha and Nikki, were actually out of their late teens.

"You won't be able to speak like a man either once you take the cordial I gave you," I told Mithera. She smiled uncertainly.

We did manage to shush the girls and get them to settle down and sleep for a little while in the clothes they had on. The male-dressed girls took turns at the door and window overlooking the street to keep watch but nothing seemed to be moving our way. Even Mithera and Choni slept as I prepared a few potions in case I had to defend myself or any of the girls the next day.

I wasn't going to go down without a fight. I loaded Hedward's 'buss with swamp gas shells and kept some phials in the pockets of the pretty, pink apron I would wear over my dress. Like the girls we packed into the back of each wagon, I had darkened my hair overnight into a reddish-auburn.

All the time, Mithera watched me, studying the way I moved as a girl. She watched me almost hungrily as I put on my frillies and breast bands and attached fresh stockings to my garter belt. I enjoyed doing that as I knew my wide hips and rounded thighs wouldn't give me away to Mithera's hungry eyes.

We met several yawning actors at Keltry's. Without being told, several of the male actors took over the driving chores. There were a few questions asked about the missing but Mithera testily said that Narrine had hired some new actresses for the country. We stopped by Narrine's house and loaded his sleeping form onto Sarlie's wagon. That satisfied Sarlie and the actors for a while. They were mystified, however,

when we stopped at *The Twice Crowned King*, that there were so many girls aboard the wagons. The girls in men's clothing they accepted right away.

"I'll bet you make a pretty girl," said one of the waggoners to Tess, who slipped her arm through his and practically purred in his ear.

"Narrine doesn't like us having real girls with us," said Sarlie, staring at me in my summery dress and pretty apron, my hair held back by pink ribbons.

"Just think of us as actresses," I told Sarlie with a sweet smile. He looked at me then uncertainly.

"You're the one with the money?" Sarlie asked and I nodded. "Well, I guess you can do what you want then. At least until Narrine wakes up."

The Eastgate Watch knew Narrine was leaving and didn't think it odd that several very feminine-looking boys were with the company heading out of town. I scattered annovare, strengthened with honeybane from the wagons. That meant that the smiling watchmen were anxious to please us and get us on our way, after I pressed on them a little.

"You did that so easily," said Choni.

I was exulting a little myself. But my relief turned sharply to fear as we came through a little copse of wood to find the road barred by several lines of armed men, holding long pikes pointed at us.

A man on horseback rode forward and smiled at me. My heart gave a little lurch as I recognized him as the Count of Torthard, who knew me very well.

XXV. A WITCH'S RETREAT

"My lady," the Count said formally, bowing to me from his saddle. He smiled at the consternation on my face. He took his hands away from the shortsword at his waist. "May I offer you and your party some refreshment in my tent over yonder?" He pointed to a shaded campsite.

Before I could answer him, Torthard turned and rode through the men who silently opened up their ranks and let him through. He stopped in the middle of the ranks and waited for us to follow him.

"What do we do?" asked a petrified Sarlie as Mithera clutched his arm.

"Follow the Count," I told him. Mithera looked at me in dismay.

There was something odd about the men in Count Torthard's troop. They didn't say anything. They didn't smile or change their fierce expression. We went through them and followed the Count into a shaded spot under the trees.

Torthard got down from his horse, unbuckled his sword and put the scabbard over the pommel. He undid his leather, armored jacket and swept that over the horse as well. Then he strode over to the wagon, vaulted halfway up onto the wagon steps below me, put his arms about my waist and lifted me up as if I was a feather. I floated through the air, protesting, until he dropped me lightly on my feet in front of him, his hands still clasped about my slender waist.

"I can't believe that it is you, Sherrene," Torthard said to me, smiling as he held me tightly to him. "You have grown more beautiful than I remembered. And

your figure." He held me apart from him, looking me up and down, smiling at the bounce of my chest. "You have become a woman, Sherrene, since I danced with you at Lady Sherrene's Ball."

I remembered how he had kissed me, on my forehead, on my nose and my chin, so gently, so lovingly. It was the only kiss I remembered from the ball where I was Announced and accepted as a woman, a Lady of the Land. I remembered how I yearned to have him kiss me on the lips as so many other men did that night. He had said that he would court me later and I felt my stomach flip over at his words. The same feeling enveloped me now as I looked up at his strong, handsome face.

"You have been waiting for me, milord?" I said nervously as the strange group I had brought with me got out of the wagons. For them too, they got a first look at the company which they had become a part of. The Count's men were acting strangely as well, bringing out a barrel of ale with cheese and bread, yet none spoke or even looked at any of the party with me.

I could sense honeybane, or my aunt's version of it in the air, along with something else, scents that I barely recognized. I should have paid more attention when I was in her house, I thought, then I might have known how to entrance people as she clearly could. She had somehow even entranced the men to obey Count Torthard.

"Very impatiently I've been waiting," said Torthard, smiling down at me, not moving his hands. "I like your hair like this, Sherrene. It's so beautiful. You have always had the loveliest hair. I wish I could spend more time with you and tell you how lovely you are. Lady Renneth, Osgard's witch at the moment, said

she would cut your hair to a soldier's length when she captured you." He laughed then as I shuddered.

"She doesn't know you, milady, as she should," Torthard said. I had only used a little makeup, on my eyebrows and lips. I wished I had used more to make myself more beautiful for this man admiring me so.

"Lady Renneth refused to let me bring the berserkers, my troop of Grey Men, into town," whispered Torthard, lowering his voice as he spoke about witchery. "She fears that I cannot control them, though Rissa told her it's the only way to take you. Your aunt is going to be very cross when she finds out you slipped by us all and are loose somewhere in her kingdom."

"Her kingdom?" I gasped.

"Might as well be," said Torthard with a grimace. "The Queen Regent does little but simper all over her. She never reads the measures Orissiana proposes to the Conclave. She just seals them into law."

"Wh-Where is Lady Renneth now?" I asked him fearfully. Torthard's eyes roved all over my face, resting finally on my pink, full lips.

"In Osgard's castle," Torthard told me, taking in my perfume of mountain flowers and water roses. I recalled how he'd told me he wouldn't mind at all if I was wearing lovebane and made him fall in love with him at my 'Sixteen' ball. He *wanted* to fall in love with me, he had said. I remembered that as he spoke softly to me and his hands held me to him.

"Prince Tathally is a most silly young man," Torthard said in disgust. "That red-haired girl with him that he claims is his wife might be even sillier. She was flirting with Osgard within minutes of being

brought in. She was given the choice of Osgard's bed or the dungeon floor with her husband and you can guess what she chose."

"Oh, she didn't!" I gasped but for a different reason than Torthard thought. I knew, even if Torthard didn't, that Nikki was a man. I wondered if she could be clever enough in bed even for one night to fool a man as experienced in love as Count Osgard.

"Your aunt is looking for you everywhere," said Count Torthard seriously, his dark grey eyes looking hungrily at me. "I've been in Terraire all winter searching for you. She sends me potions to keep my men in this berserk state so that you can't take them over. When I realized you were really here, I served it to all of my men and pages and commanded them to obey only my voice.

"You are a witch, Sherrene. You'll know what it is Orissiana's doing. You've heard the terrible stories she's had circulated about you. She's put it about that you made love to the King and his heart gave out when he found out that he had made love to a man. It's such a silly story. If Tatheren was that passionate, it would have meant that he had enjoyed you being a man if his heart gave out while loving you."

I looked up fearfully at Torthard. His arms moved from my hips to surround me. He pressed my breasts against him. I felt my nipples harden and rise as he bent his head and kissed me. I ignored all the people watching us and accepted his kiss as eagerly as he gave it to me. I stood on my tiptoes and pressed my body against his as his mouth devoured mine. I felt his hands on my breast bands beneath my dress and I felt them tighten even more as he held me.

I clung to him for minutes. I wouldn't have minded if he had carried me off to his bed, wherever that was. I wanted to be loved so much. As Torthard kissed me, I felt so much like a woman. I was a woman in his arms and it was right that he should kiss me and whisper my praises into my jewelled ear.

"I can't take you to my tent," Torthard whispered in my ear as I clung to him. "Your aunt has some kind of device she uses to listen in on people and she has one imbedded in the knife I left in there that I am supposed to never take off."

"I could destroy it," I murmured, quivering as my nipples brushed against his smooth shirt and the hard muscle beneath.

"That's what you did to Serrill's device, didn't you?" asked Torthard, crushing me to him so that he could kiss my neck and my hair and I could passionately kiss him the same way. It was some time before he let me go and I could barely make sense of what he was saying. I wanted to go on kissing Torthard and feeling like the woman he made me want to be.

"Orissiana went almost berserk herself in telling Lady Renneth to find you. Rissa says that you are the only living witch powerful enough to destroy her listening device, besides her," Torthard said as he lifted his head and smiled down at me. "When she's angry, she forgets to call you 'that cursed warlock' as she usually does."

"You, you don't believe her?" I gasped at him.

"Sherrene," said Torthard, showing all his beautiful, pearly teeth. "I know a woman's kiss when I feel it. I feel it in you and it's all the proof I need. I wish I could hold you like this forever and go wherever you

are going. I am so glad that we were able to meet at last and that I can be of service to you.

“Prince Tathally says that you rescued him from the Seafarers and that you will put him back on the throne. I wanted to meet you to tell you not to try that, milady. The witches who support Orissiana have grown strong. The only place they do not rule is Perisord, where your aunt and your mother were born. Orissiana has that county sealed with berserkers like the men out there, though with the enchantment on that place, she really doesn't have to bother.”

The troops, the Grey Men, I noticed, were concentrating fiercely on the road ahead of them, and on some imaginary enemy.

“She did tell me she wanted to take Perisord back,” I told him.

“She'll never do it,” Torthard said, taking one of my hands in his, leading me back to my mesmerized companions. “Perisord is under a curse far stronger than any she can make. It was your grandmother who cursed the land not to receive another witch as ruler. Neither a witch nor anyone enchanted can cross into that place and survive.”

We had reached Torthard's horse, its head held by a vacant-eyed page. I was reminded of the maids who served my aunt, both of whom had that same look in their eyes. I wondered then if the tales my aunt had told me were true. Maybe it was just the effect of a potion such as the one she had given to Torthard to use on his men.

My dress swirled lovingly about my legs as Torthard kissed me again. I felt weak at the knees. I

wondered how I could get a sample of whatever it was that he was feeding to his men.

"I am taking my men up the road to the gate where all will tell Lady Renneth that we saw no one on the road," said Count Torthard. "You should be well settled into the countryside by the time that Renneth realizes that you're not hiding in some Free Quarter hovel. I'll probably have to start a wider search then.

"Please don't get caught, my darling," Torthard said. "You won't be able to resist telling Orissiana everything if she catches you. Come to Torthard for Harvest. Yes, I use the same name as my castle and town. It's the last place anyone will expect me to search for you. I will go there to fulfill my duties as a true Count should. Get your friends to have one of the Great Plays ready to be performed by then. I'll invite all my true friends to come and enjoy your company of players.

"And then we can plot what we can do to break the hold that a certain witch has over the kingdom," Torthard whispered so I was the only one to hear him.

I didn't have to ask him for the potion my aunt had supplied him with. He saw a blue-tinted flagon that a page was carefully pouring from to present to us. "Don't drink from that," Torthard told me sharply. "When we're gone, you should carefully pour it all away."

I promised him I would. I stood with him as his pages and squires packed up his tents with quiet efficiency.

"I like you in peasant dresses with ribbons in your hair," said Torthard as he held me. "You are beautiful in whatever you wear. But, after summer, at Torthard, I must be formal and wear my gold- and silver-lined

best. I hope you will do me the honor, my lady, of wearing my colors, white and green, for the Harvest Feast.”



I shivered, knowing what it meant when a man asked a woman to wear his colors. I should have told him that I wasn't a woman and couldn't ever be one. "Yes," I murmured to him. I pressed my body to him as he held me and kissed me. Every nerve in my body tingled with excitement at the thought of being betrothed to such a handsome man.

Torthard kissed me several times before finally mounting and leaving with his troop. I waved to him; he turned and looked back to me, grinning as his silent troop moved after him.

I turned back at last with a sigh, feeling the touch of his hands still on my body.

"You're a witch?" asked Sarlie fearfully. Mithera stood beside him, womanly still in her male clothing.

"Worse than that," I told him gently. "I'm Lady Sherrene."

"She's the one that they were tearing the Quarter apart to find," put in Dort, another of the actors. I recognized him as the one who had been Lord Emmenet in the play I had watched at the Dockside. "She's the one they said was ..." He stopped there and stood with his mouth wide open.

"You can say it," I told him. The other actors were gathering close to Sarlie, my girls, those dressed as such and those in male clothing, behind them.

"They said you were a man, a warlock," said a tall, young, brown-haired man, a typical Russet by his looks. "You disguised yourself as a woman and seduced and killed King Tatheren in his bed."

They waited for me to say something to that. "It appears that I have ensorcelled Count Torthard as well,

doesn't it?" I began. There were suddenly smiles on several faces, notably those of my girls.

"Oh, milady," called Tess from behind the actors. "Can't we get out of these detestable clothes and get back to being what we really are?"

"Hey," said Hedward. his arm casually about Choni's shoulder. "My clothes are not detestable."

"Oh, but they are," said Fee, taking off her dark wig and shaking loose her long, blonde hair in a cascade over her back. "I don't know why you would want to wear pants, Heddo darling, when you could be wearing dresses and ribbons like My Lady."

All the male actresses set up a clamor to change back to their 'right' clothes and. I looked to Esha and Hope to organize it, which they did with their usual efficiency.

"Come on, Mithera," said Hope, taking the actress by the hand. "You don't want to be the only one not properly dressed, do you?"

Mithera looked at me with an expression of concern on her face. Yet, she went almost eagerly with Hope to be transformed into a woman.

"Is she a woman?" Sarlie growled at Hedward and Choni who remained with me.

"You saw her with the Count," said Hedward after the slightest of hesitations. "Make up your own mind."

His bluntness startled the men in front of me. I felt their eyes on me, studying me.

"No," I told them. "I am not going to disrobe in front of you and satisfy your prurient curiosity. If any of you want to get back to Terraire and claim whatever

reward you can for revealing me to Count Osgard, you should leave now."

There was a shuffling of feet. "What about Narrine?" asked the tall Russet suddenly. "He'd sell his mother for a copper. When he wakes up..."

"He can drink some of Torthard's potion," I told them, pointing to the flagon and glass that no one had touched. "Narrine doesn't control this company any more."

"Who's paying us? You?" one of the other men who hadn't said anything so far asked me.

"Yes," I told him.

"Lady Sherrene's Company?" asked Sarlie doubtfully.

"Sarlie's Company," I told him and his eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You know this business. I'm only along for the ride. I will leave you with a full purse, however, when I need to go off without you. Until then, for those who are staying, let's get as far away from Terraire as possible."

"With all these girls?" asked one of the men who played women's parts, though he didn't now look at all feminine. "We look like a travelling bordello, not a theatre company."

"That's the play," said Dort with a grin. "You know the one, Sarl. *The Bordello of Her Ladyship*."

"We couldn't do that," said Sarlie doubtfully, his eyes shifting from me to the beauties in long dresses and tight bodices emerging from the wagons. Tess wore a low-cut dress that showed off her ample, mobile breasts. She smiled over at us and pouted at the tall

Russet who had been driving the wagon she had been sitting in.

"It doesn't require much acting from the actresses," said Dort. His voice faltered as Mithera descended from her wagon in a blue and white dress that clung to every curve of her lovely body. Grace must have done her hair with masheen as each curl and wave were in place.

"Gods, Mithera," said Sarlie uneasily as she came over and joined us. Her face was already made-up, her eyes made vivid by the kohl she had used on her eyes. "You can't be out in public like that."

"Why not?" I asked him. "Who's going to question her out here? It's only in male clothes that she attracts the wrong kind of attention."

"It's not done," snapped the one I had pegged as a male actress. "We have traditions and the law to uphold if we're a respectable theater company."

Sarlie almost choked on that and several of the men started to smile. "Now that's a contradiction in terms, Gorfey," he said gruffly, "and you know it."

"I guess I'll stay," said Dort with a grin. The big Russet grunted his acquiescence as well.

"I'm going all the way with the Lady Sherrene," said Mithera in a squeaky voice that told me she had used the throat cordial I had gifted her with. That caused the others to start and look at her anew. "Lady Sherrene has a potion that changes our voices," she said, clasping at her throat. She smiled at Gorfey. "I saved some for you, Gor. I'd love to hear you doing Carena or the Lady Yetan with the voice Lady Sherrene's cordial can give you."

Gorfev stared at the woman who had joined us. When he gulped, I took it as an affirmation that he was with us.

"The only thing is," Gor said, "we are going to need a lot more men, even if we do *The Bordello*."

"Rumes had the same problem in Lachaire when I was part of his company," said a balding, older man.

"Too many actresses?" asked Sarlie dubiously. "That's not a problem. Gor has been a lord as much as he's been a lady lately. Sorry, Mithera, but the prettiest actresses don't want to join us and be competing with you for applause."

"Rumes is like Narrine, only worse," said the older man. "He still has the first copper he ever earned." There were a lot of grunts of agreement with that. "His men quit on him, daring him to put on *The Bordello* without them. So he did. He got the audience to join the play. He had his actresses, he had some nice ones then, Oslen, Fabie, Rennen, you'll remember them, Sarl, go out in the audience and haul them in from the enclosure. We almost didn't get the second half off when the actresses did a second selection. Oslen had two guys and did both of them in the wings to thank them for being part of the show."

"Are we going to be that kind of company?" asked another of the men.

"Yes and no," Sarlie said, suddenly decisive. "We're going to try first of all for more men. That means we have to head for Carris and Doxford. We won't find actors in little places. And we have to find out which of these young ladies," he looked at me, "are truly actresses and can play parts on stage."

“We could do *The Delta Queen*,” said Dort, winking at several of the other men. “I bet these actresses,” he said the word as if he didn’t believe it, “could do the bathing scene with no problem at all. It would be a sensation.”

I had to put a stop to the lasciviousness I saw growing in the little group of men. Seeing Fee and several of the other girls twirling and dancing around the camp site, their hair flowing over their shoulders, their made up faces beautiful and feminine, was raising all of their temperatures.

“We don’t want to create a sensation,” I told them. “We just want to get lost for a little while until Count Osgard’s witch stops looking for us. Mithera definitely will not be performing, or not as Mithera anyway. We don’t want anyone saying they saw Mithera in Doxford, or wherever we stop. We want to pass through lightly. Anyone else we take on can never hear about this conversation or about Mithera or Lady Sherrene. Witchery is never mentioned except in denial or wishing that we could meet one. Understood?”

I watched that message sink in. The male actors were all uneasy. They looked as if they wanted to talk about it some more. A typical group of men, I thought.

“Girls,” I called and they all came over, many hand in hand, several looking at the men with open interest. “We are all now members of Sarlie’s Company and we need to get under way immediately. Esha, Hope and Choni, talk to Sarlie and Mithera about costumes for plays. Those who would like to be on stage should find out what that entails and how performances are ended. We don’t have a lot of men yet so we’ll all have to help with jobs we usually leave to men, like looking after the horses.”

Some of the girls looked apprehensive about that. They had spent a large part of their lives recently on ships but they must have done something before that. Onboard ship, several had been cooks and many had good skills as seamstresses. I sighed. How had I ever come to be responsible for so many people? And I was planning to add even more to the company.

The only thing wrong at that moment was that I didn't have a man with me. Torthard had entered my life like a lightning stroke as he had twice before. He had tantalized me, aroused me on each of those brief encounters. I felt myself longing for him to come riding back down the road from Terraire, with that sly grin on his face, taking me again and throwing me in the air as he had when he took me from the wagon.

I remembered his lips as I stalked about our camp site that night setting traps and triggers. I expected that at least one of the men would try to slip away from us during the night. I was most pleasantly surprised the next day when none of my precautions were disturbed at all.

XXVI. A WITCH'S PREDICAMENT

At Carris, Sarlie signed on two actors who wanted to leave the company doing a country play in town. Their eyes perked up at all the girls busy at different tasks about our campsite.

Sarlie immediately gave each of them a part of *The Bordello* and rehearsals began in earnest. Mithera and I watched as the girls auditioned for parts in the play. Grace was the most natural actress of all, taking on the role of the demure innocent girl forced into the brothel to redeem the debts of her gambling obsessed father.

A couple of the girls could fiddle. With the older, bald actor as a guide, they managed credible rhythms and tunes so that the girls could practice bordello dances with the male actors

Sarlie came to me. "We should employ musicians for the shows we put on in Doxford," he told me. "If you have the money, it will repay us if we set up the show right."

"I have the money," I told him, thinking of the golds I had stolen from Count Osgard. I had given my enemies, I thought with a shudder, every reason to search the wide world for me. Maybe I shouldn't have robbed Count Osgard after all. But I would have had to find golds somewhere. When Sarlie paid the company at Carris, it had been very impressive how the actors' eyes lit up.

There had been no witch at Carris. I worried about Doxford, where my mother had been a witch for so long. I found, in the end, that I didn't need to worry. Lagaret, the city's witch, was a nice woman. I went to the baker's with her on the first morning the company was in town. I stood right next to her and smelled the odor of collane that drifted from her.

Everything else about her was very normal. She didn't appear to have sensed any of the defensive potions that I had ready. She was pleasant and well-known.

"How's the witching these days?" the cheery baker asked her and she just smiled.

"About as well as your baking," Lagaret answered kindly. I followed her to her home in the Herbalists' Quarter, near to where I had grown up with my

mother. I waited till this witch went out on her own house calls before entering.

I went into every nook and cranny and there was nothing that I could detect that hadn't been in my mother's house. I didn't detect parasites, or any poison, in the place.

I finally slipped away, feeling very guilty at invading the woman's house. But I had gotten away with it so easily. I couldn't help it then, I went and looked at the home where I had grown up. Children were running about in the enclosed yard just as I used to do with Cory, Lenne and others while I was young.

There was a new rope swing set up on the copperleaf tree and I could hear the boys laughing as they tried to swing and jump over or into a bath. A young woman came out and scolded them for using the bath for their games but it was a hot day and she decided in the end that they might all have their baths outside after all.

My body quaking, I left the children squealing in the yard. I walked slowly down the lane, stopping at the end to look at Cory's house and the barn beyond. There was no reason he should be home. There was no reason that he should know me, now that I had darkened my hair, pinned a cap into it, kohled my eyes as so many girls were doing, and wore a plain grey dress that showed off all the female curves I had developed.

I walked by his house and it was deserted. I hesitated, then went across and looked at the barn, the infamous Haybarn. It seemed smaller than I remembered. I was staring at the half-open door when I heard someone whistling inside. I froze for a moment. Only Cory had been a whistler in our group as I remembered.

Cory came out as I stood rooted to the spot. My dress swished lightly against me as I looked at the handsome man who came out of the barn. He was taller than I remembered. He had filled out. His bare arms showed impressive muscles. He saw me standing there and smiled at me.

"What can I do for you, girl?" Cory called to me, his voice conjuring up all of the memories of the romp on the hay we had had that fateful day.

"N-Nothing," I gasped in my girlish tones. Cory turned and tossed the pitchfork back into the barn. I felt a thrill go through me at his masculine power in handling the heavy object like a shortpikie.

"I, I was told that L-Lenne lived here," I mumbled, trying to think up a reason why I should be there. I couldn't tell him the true one.

"Lenne's moved, girl," said Cory with a handsome smile, coming across the yard to where I had stopped by the partly open gate. "He's married now, you know."

"Oh," I gasped, stepping back. "Then I'll just be on my way."

"Hey, don't run away," laughed Cory in the charming way I remembered so well. "I haven't met as beautiful a girl as you in so long. Surely, I'm not that repulsive. I'm Cory, by the way, Lenne's best friend. He never mentioned that he had a girl friend as pretty as you."

"I'm not Lenne's friend," I stammered and Cory smiled.

"Good," he said, opening the gate and stepping out before closing it. "I'm done for the day and I was about to walk to *The Swinging Man* for a pint of ale. After

you've walked all the way out here, I feel I owe you a drink at least."

"No," I began as my former, would-be lover looked me over. He didn't recognize me at all. It made me tremble to think that when he looked at me he saw a pretty girl.

"I'd love to show you Doxford hospitality," Cory said, smiling to charm me. "It's just up ahead and over a row."

I knew where *The Swinging Man* was but I had never been in it, being far too young when I lived in Doxford with my mother. I smiled back, delighted that Cory liked my appearance enough to try to charm me as a girl. I wondered if he would like me when he found out who I really was.

"You're not from here, are you?" asked Cory striding beside me as I swished my way down the lane towards the alehouse.

"I lived here once," I said nervously. "A long time ago."

"That explains it," said Cory with a grin. I found myself shivering as he moved closed to me, directing me to the garden area at the back of the inn where women were allowed to visit. I had forgotten that. I would have walked right in the front door and people would have objected to me, a woman, doing that. This was the country after all, not a big town like Terraire.

"You look like someone I used to know," Cory said with his charming smile. "But I can't think of her name. Now you know mine is Cory. Will you do me the honor of telling me yours?"

"Jensie," I told him, using the name by which I was known about our little company.

"That's who you look like. Jencie!" said Cory, snapping his fingers. "Let's have a drink and tell each other all about what is going on here."

In the garden at the back of the alehouse were several women, most of them with one man, talking earnestly to him. Several looked up and studied me as Cory guided me into the part of the alehouse where women were allowed. Several of the men leaned forward, clearly to talk to the women they were with about the new girl with Cory.

I swayed as femininely as I could, enjoying being in Cory's company and being treated as a woman by him.

"What would you want with an idiot like Lenne?" Cory asked me with a lazy smile as a waitress appeared and put a huge flagon of ale in front of him.

Cory insisted on buying wine for me, since I was obviously a merchant's woman, before answering the question himself. "You're a relative of Lenne's Murcar, is that it? You'll be from the mountains as well?"

"N-No," I said, still nervous. His dark eyes studied me, the familiar smile on his lips. I loved the way his eyes admired me, taking in every curve of my feminized body.

"Ah, a mystery woman," said Cory, leaning over the rough-hewn table and taking my hand. I'm sure my shaking must have been visible to him. He lowered his voice. "I love mystery women," he murmured, looking down the front of my dress at my cleavage. "It's so satisfying," he drew out the word, "to peel away all the layers and reveal what is within."

"Oh, Cory, please don't." I had often imagined myself meeting him again. I had imagined his crooked

smile as he touched me and here it was, all coming true, in the way I had dreamed it.

I dug my long nails into the soft skin of my palms and I didn't wake up. I really was with Cory and he was looking at me, with his eyes half-closed, as if I had just told him a good joke. He smelled of clean hay and aspertos grass we had always used to clean farm tools like pitchforks. They were the smells of my childhood. They were the smells of home.

"Let's go for a walk," said Cory huskily, standing and pulling me to my feet.

Someone whistled in the background. Cory waved as he put his arm about my shoulder. I smelled the sun on his skin, just as I had so long ago.

"Leaving early tonight, Cory," said the waitress, giving me a knowing smile as Cory steered me out of the garden and into the street.

I was numb. I wished I had worn a more attractive dress. I wished I had put my hair into ringlets. I wished I had returned it to my normal blonde color. Then he would have known it was me, Cory's Sherrene.

We stopped in the protection of a high yellowvine bush and he turned me to him. I wanted him to do just what he did, put his arms about my tiny waist and pull me tight to him, my breasts pressing into his muscular chest. I met his questing mouth eagerly with my own and it was just as if the kiss we had exchanged so long ago had never stopped.

Cory must know me now as passion flared through me and I pressed my body against his. I'd worn my highest heels but still I had to go up on tiptoe as Cory lifted me against him and his glorious lips took possession of mine. I felt his tongue on my lips and playfully

refused him entry as I clasped my hands tightly about his neck.

“Cory, Cory,” I whispered. He released my mouth and began to kiss my neck and my ear. I knew that he knew me and that he still wanted me as he had so long ago. He must recognize me by the kisses I poured onto his handsome, suntanned face.

“Let’s find somewhere comfortable,” Cory said then, stumbling as I edged sideways beside him. I would have gone anywhere with him.

We stopped, Cory removed my woman’s cap and my reddish-brown hair fell over my shoulders. His eyes were filled with admiration I could see even as twilight soaked up the land about us.

“Beautiful,” Cory whispered, stroking my hair and holding me against him again, so that he could kiss me. He had ignored my senseless babbling about Lenne being a friend and me carrying a message to him from his grandmother in Carris. His mouth found mine again and this time his hands didn’t stay still at my waist. They explored my back, playing with and tensing the breast bands that crossed my back and the tiny strapping over my shoulders.

I couldn’t control my desire. My nipples seemed to have grown and hardened beyond belief. Despite the breast bands, the soft, shift that I wore and my dress, the arousal of my breasts was quite evident. When Cory ran his hand down my sides, touching the outside of my breasts, I swooned in his arms, offering him my mouth in full.

His tongue took control of me as my body writhed against his. His legs pushed me back against Ellosar’s fence. I felt the desire of his manhood and gloried in it

as he pressed against my thighs. His hands slid over my rounded buttocks and hips, finding the line of my panties and the garter belt I wore.

“Cory,” I whispered lovingly as his hands explored me from the outside of my dress. I didn’t care what he did to me or how he did it. He loved me. I could feel him. I knew he knew me.

“Jensie,” Cory whispered and I looked up anxiously into his shadowed face. I caught a glimpse of his white-toothed smile. He was caressing me again, his head and mouth on my face and neck and then on the top of my dress. “Let’s find somewhere more comfortable.”

What could have been more comfortable than the hay barn? Cory picked me up at the gate to his farm and carried me in to the very place where our first kisses had so abruptly ended. He tossed me into the bed of hay that covered the very spot where we had wrestled once before.

I was delighted that Cory remembered it so well. He fell on me, his shirt thrown aside and I felt his wonderful, suntanned skin on my mouth. I kissed his shoulder. His hands went to work on the ties of my dress even as he pushed me down into the hay. Our legs entangled as he pressed into me and I felt his intense desire for me, his Sherrene.

Cory slipped down the front of my dress. I wriggled my arms free and undid my waist so that he could take it from me. There was just enough starlight coming into the barn that I could see his face. He was smiling as he slipped the thin straps of Choni’s beautifully shaped underdress down my bare arms. His touch sent thrills coursing through me one after the other as he pressed down on me.

Cory was in no haste while I was frantic. He caressed my breast bands, then released me from them. The touch of his mouth on my breasts left me breathless and in ecstasy. I rolled and writhed so that he could take each aroused nipple into his mouth. I held his head tightly to me as he suckled me as if he was my infant. I arched my body and frantically pushed my dress and petticoats down over my hips, revealing my garter belt and panties.

Cory's hand reached below my panties, caressing the soft, smooth skin of my thighs as I clenched them together.

"Gorgeous," Cory whispered as his other hand caressed my rounded hips and buttocks.

"Don't stop, Cory," I pleaded. He suddenly lifted his head slightly as if he heard something. "Please, please, don't stop this time!"

"This time?" Cory asked out of the darkness quizzically. "What?" He didn't get a chance to say more. I lifted my bare breasts against him and put my arms about him and kissed him as I had never kissed anyone, not even Torthard, before.

"Cory?" said a voice from the outside of the hay barn. A lantern was suddenly opened and light flooded in the entrance of the barn. "Is that you in there?"

I stiffened against Cory. He put his mouth on mine and lay me back into the hay, one of his hands on the top of my stockings, caressing me but gently forcing my legs apart. His hand worked its way up my thigh to my panties, stroking me gently as I lay there quivering, wondering what to do.

The lantern withdrew and I heard the woman's voice calling to an animal, which began to mewl in response to her.

"It's only my wife," said Cory as he spread my legs apart. I would have to reveal myself to him in just a moment, so intense was my desire for him.

Cory pushed his manhood against my panties and began to kiss and fondle me again as the words he had said sank home with me.

"You are married?" I asked him dumbly as his hands began to slide my panties over my buttocks.

"Second kid on the way," Cory murmured. "But you knew that, didn't you, Jensie? I saw it in your blue eyes right away. You came here looking for me, didn't you? You heard about me in town, did you? Wanted to find out if it's true? Well, it is, isn't it? Have you ever had such a stud before, my darling? And it's all going to be inside you in just a few more seconds."

I struggled with my hand and reached his manhood. It had grown enormously and he was rocking against me as he became frantic to take my panties off. He didn't know me, I thought in panic. He didn't know that I was his Sherrene.

"I'm not Jensie," I gasped as he began to rip away my bindings.

"I know that," Cory whispered. "Now don't cry out. Be a good girl. We don't want my wife coming back and finding us."

"No, no!" I hissed, fighting with his strong hands. My bindings were disintegrating in his hands.

Cory then found what no man should find in his woman's panties. I had imagined him finding out that I

was the boy he had tried to make love to once, his Sherrene. I had imagined him smiling at me, kissing me, loving me, curling me up about him and penetrating me as a man does a girl like me.

“Catamite!” snarled Cory, his hand on my engorging manhood, freed from its bonds and now betraying me. “Want a story for your perverted little friends, hey? All about how the great Cory made love to a boy, how you tricked him? Well, I’ll show you, my slutty little man-whore, what we do to catamites in this country.”

I began to cry out and he put his hand over my mouth. He rolled me over, tore a piece off my dress and forced it in my mouth before he gagged me. He was so strong. I couldn’t reach the secret pocket in my dress. I was defenceless to his strength.

Cory rolled me over, then pushed on my legs until I was on all fours. I whimpered but it did no good. He was laughing as he squeezed my manhood, even as he soaked my rear, then penetrated me. He was huge and I could feel him driving into me, riding me as he would an animal.

“Come on, girl,” he whispered into my ear as he leaned over me and caressed my breasts. “I can keep this up all night and I will until we see you come first for Daddy Cory.”

It was awful. It hurt and was the most degrading thing I had ever gone through. Making love to Anjaro and Locco was nothing like what I went through with Cory. Thinking of them helped. I felt nothing but shame and humiliation as I finally came. Cory, the boy I had thought that I loved, just laughed at me.

“Like milking a sow,” Cory taunted me as he then came inside me. I squirmed and wriggled but he held my buttocks firmly until he emptied himself in me, extracting the last ounce of pleasure for himself as I blubbered behind the gag he had tied me into.

Spent, Cory turned me and pulled me against him. My passion had evaporated as I cried and tried to hold him off.

“Now, now,” Cory said, running his hand down me, stroking my breasts. “You make a pretty fine woman, you know. So, what are you, an actress? I hear that this new company passing through has some really fine sluts in the chorus. Zute told me they’d be a silver apiece for tumble, and look what I got. I got it for free, didn’t I? So, are you a silver piece whore, Jencie, or two coppers for a mouth-job slut?”

“Oh, you can’t answer, can you? And that gag means you can’t show me how you earn coppers with your mouth. Pity. I’d like to have tried you out that way but I’ve got to save a little for my wife tonight as the waitress at *The Man* will be telling her I went off with you. She’s got the equipment you’ll never have, girl, even if you were a witch.”

Cory laughed and sat up, finding my clothes and dumping them on me as I cowered away from him, not daring to rip the gag from my mouth. I was still nude when he hauled me across the yard and dumped me through his gate.

“You look good,” Cory sneered at me as I struggled back into my panties, wondering if I could locate a swamp gas phial in my purse quickly and hurl it at him. It would be satisfying to see him burst into flames or a thousand tiny pieces of flesh. “You’d look like a woman on stage. But don’t think of bringing the Watch

down on me for what pleased me here tonight. We hang catamites by their manhoods out here in the country. When that falls off, we let the women have their fun with a few firebrands. Don't pay around here to ape a woman, slut. You can let all your whore catamites know that as well. We don't take to Russet ways round here."

Cory must have called me slut, whore, harlot, strumpet, catamite, faggot and worse several times over as I struggled back into my breast bands, my shift and my dress.

I staggered down the street, not trusting myself to reach into my secret pocket or my purse. Yes, I could have blown Cory apart. But working such a witch's concoction would have brought the town down on me. I would have revealed who I was.

I wept as I struggled to walk in my bare feet; my high heels were gone, lost somewhere in Cory's barn. I wept as I thought of all the silly, girlish fantasies I had built about Cory. He was just a man, I told myself scornfully. Cory had taught me a valuable lesson. I would never trust a man again. In the future, I would live my life like a nun.

XXVII. A WITCH'S REHEARSAL

There was a worried council waiting for me when I returned to the yard beside the grandiosely named Colossal Theater in Doxford.

Choni immediately departed. In the curtained-off portion of the lead wagon she had a bath prepared for me, while I faced the company in my torn dress and rumped, loose hair.

“We thought that you had abandoned us,” said Mithera, eyeing me in distress.

“What happened?” asked Grace, kneeling in front of me and pulling my skirts about my dirty feet.

“Something from my past,” I told them as Sarlie and Dort looked at me thoughtfully. “I’ve laid it to rest now. It won’t bother me again.”

“Why didn’t you just blow them apart?” asked Hedward, who had done just that for me in two different sea actions. He patted his arquebus while the actors looked at him in scorn. They knew how unreliable such instruments were. Besides, they had never seen a swamp gas explosion.

“I really wanted to,” I told Hedward. “But what would have happened if I had let go?”

“We would have seen the flash from here,” said Hedward as the others looked at him in surprise. “And we would have come running to help you.”

“Along with the Watch and the somnolent town witch,” I told him. Understanding flared in his face.

“So how much is this witchery of yours worth,” asked Sarlie thoughtfully, “if you’re too scared to use it when you’re in danger?”

Hope, Hedward and Grace almost immediately sprang to my defence. I let them argue for a while. “The play went well today,” I said to Sarlie.

“For a first performance,” he agreed reluctantly.

“Tell the truth, you old twister,” Dort said, smiling as he punched the older man in the arm. “It went very well. That trick of selecting members of the audience into the crowd scenes at the bordello worked well. We’ll have a bigger crowd tomorrow and the day after

is a market day. I reckon we'll be out of here with several golds clear profit."

"There's the musicians to pay and your maid," said Sarlie grumpily, "is going to spend all of the profit we make on dress material."

"The girls deserve new dresses," said the irrepressible Dort. "They're the ones everybody will be coming to see."

I noted what Dort said. He had said 'the girls' and not 'the actresses'. The fiction that some of the girls from the ships were real girls and others were 'actresses' had broken down. For caution and safety's sake, however, we'd all agreed that the girls should stay in the theater or in the yard beside it where our wagons and horses were stabled.

There was a rustle of silk then and an older woman, fully made-up, her hair about her shoulders in waves and curls, came to join us. She sat gracefully in the chair that Hedward immediately vacated for her.

"We were all so worried for you when you weren't back at dusk, milady," she said in her cultured, controlled, lilting woman's voice. "Hedward wanted to have a search party sent out for you."

"Gorfey?" I gasped and several of the others laughed at the joke they had tried to pull on me.

"Lady Rell," said Dort, "as I live and breathe. Oh, we do have to put on *The Delta Queen* soon. I just have to see Gor as the Empress in that one. Give Choni all the golds she needs for that one, Sarlie. I just have to see Gor decorated as the Empress of the Sea Empire. She'll be fantastic!"

"She?" muttered Sarlie and Gor re-crossed his stockinged legs nervously.

"I'd love to play that part," said Gor demurely, his voice as female as any of the girls I had been treating with throat cordial.

I left them teasing Gor, who took it in good part. I retired for a warm bath in perfumed water. I changed into a dark nightdress and let Grace braid my hair and put dark blue ribbons in it.

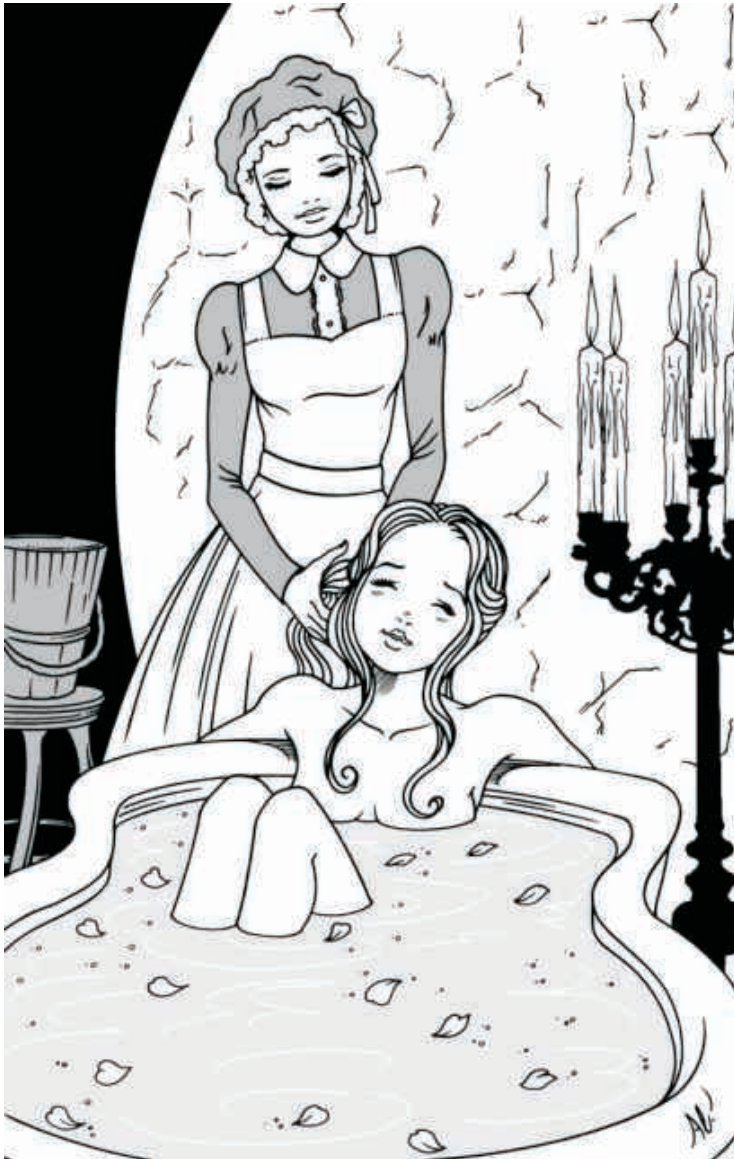
"You were lovely as Sorretta today," I told my maid and she blushed.

"I really enjoyed it, milady," Grace told me. I had her turn and I did her hair for bed as well. "All, that is, save for that one part at the end."

We were advertising our shows as town performances. But the actresses who played the female parts still had to expose themselves as males at the end. We followed the town custom of having the actresses remove their wigs at the end. The wig nets and tight rolls kept in place by masheen presented some odd looks to the audience. As the girls put their wigs back on quickly and curtseyed to the audience as women, we got a few startled enquiries about that.

"Oh yes, milady," I heard Sarlie said to an older woman who had come to the side of the stage to congratulate the company 'owner' on his production. "That is becoming a tradition in the major cities now. It does help to maintain the illusion of the performances, doesn't it? I wouldn't mind at all if the actresses didn't have to remove their wigs. After all, the audience knows that there are no women on stage, don't they?"

Grace didn't like revealing herself as a man to anyone, I knew. I felt her fidgeting as I put in the last pins to her lovely hair.



“I think I don’t have to put so many pins in your hair,” I told her, taking a little of my mountain flower perfume and using it on her, quite liberally about her breasts.

“Oh, milady,” Grace said, looking down at her lovely, manicured hands.

“Who is it tonight?” I asked her lightly.

“Dort,” she said with a smile.

“Just like on stage,” I said with a smile.

“Of course,” said Grace, smiling back at me. “Lord Welloray rescues me and deserves to have his reward, don’t you agree, for one night at least?”

Grace went off happily to her tryst with Dort as I thought about mine earlier that evening with Cory. Cory, my boyhood friend, I thought miserably, thinking back to all the times we had played together. He had always been the leader, the one we all looked up to, the one we worshipped. I had wanted to be so much like him. Now, look at me, I thought, as I stared at the woman with the puffy lips in the looking glass.

I got those puffy lips kissing the man whom I had thought loved me. And how was it going to be different with Torthard who had declared his love for me in asking me to wear his colors? It would be just like it had been with Cory, I thought miserably. I put my hands over my ears to try to block out all the crude things Cody had called after me as I struggled to get away from his farm gate. I thought of Torthard and the kisses at Lady Sherrene’s Ball.

I went to sleep remembering that. In the morning, Grace came back to help me dress and was sparkling with femininity.

“Good night?” I asked her.

“The best, milady,” chirruped Grace. “These actors know all about actresses, milady. They really know

how to treat women like us in bed. You should get yourself one."

I was mulling Grace's advice over in the workshop I had made in the back of one of the drays we had brought from Terraire. Choni came lightly running up the steps in her high heels, clutching her dress in both hands.

"You have to come quickly, milady," Choni gasped, her eyes filled with apprehension. "It's Mithera, milady. She's done something terrible to herself."

There was a crowd gathered in the theater, girls and men. Many of the girls looked close to tears and were being consoled by the strong arms of men. I hugged the robe I had put on more tightly about me.

Sarlie was leaning over the bed frantically pressing blood-soaked nighties onto the partially-clad body of the girl on his bed.

"Oh, milady!" Sarlie called to me in his first real acknowledgement of me as a woman. "Can you save her, milady? Can you?"

I moved him to one side and looked down on the pale form of Mithera. I removed Sarlie's hands and saw what she had done to herself with some awful knife. It lay, serrated and bloody, on the table beside the bed.

Mithera had hacked away at the male parts of her body and they were quite gone. Or, they lay in the pooling mass of blood and tissue oozing down the bed.

"Grace," I said and my maid was at my side instantly. "I need what I used on Baro's wounds on *The Tempest*. Listen to me carefully and bring me these potions, powders and concoctions from my workshop."

I explained carefully what I needed. "Wait," I said and gave her the antidote to the aversion solution I'd liberally painted the outside of my workshop with. "That will enable you to enter without me."

I heard one of the men gasp at that as Grace stood and rustled off. I had Choni go and get her finest needles. She swallowed hard, knowing what I was going to ask her to do but went anyway.

Mithera was white. Her eyes were rolling in her head, droplets of sweat on her forehead. She was saying something incomprehensible to me, nonsense syllables. Her legs began to flail and blood flew out across the bed.

"Hedward," I said to the seaman who had followed his love for Choni, a man just like Mithera, to this inland exile. His face was a picture of horror as he looked down at the bleeding Mithera. He must be thinking that it could have been Choni lying there, bleeding like Mithera, her manhood shredded from her body as was Mithera's. "Hedward!" He focussed on me at last. "The merenthe you carry."

Hedward stumbled out of the room. I could hear his running feet as he obeyed me without question and without me having to ensorcel him.

"That will save her?" asked Sarlie hoarsely, clutching at my arm.

"No," I told him. "It will put her to sleep while I try to figure out how to do that."

Grace returned with the terogal fortifier, collane and fessene, to clean the wound and stop the outer bleeding, as well as heronswing and trimweed, to stop the inner. I needed the honeybane as well to gain control of Mithera's actions. I couldn't have her start on

herself again as soon as I got her steady. I looked over and had Hope take charge of the crowd, clearing the little room in which Mithera was crying and putting bloody hands to her head, making her look like a battlefield casualty.

The merenthe put her to sleep and gave me time to make the concoctions I needed to fortify her with terogal and honeybane. The controller would help me make her do what she had to do to save her life.

The pink foam from the fessere and collane paste worked as it had on Baro. I was able to staunch the blood flow. Then I started to clean Mithera so that I could look more carefully at what she had done to herself.

"I need several things," I said to Hope then, as she still hung on to Retter's hand. At last, I had recalled the man's name from the handbill Sarlie had had printed. "I need to have this bed cleaned by someone who won't throw up. I need to have someone help me with Mithera, someone who won't throw up and who won't take after me when they see me trying to do finer surgery on her than she did to herself."

"Seafarers have long had to attend great injuries," said Hope, white-faced but trying to control herself. She probably didn't know how alluring she appeared in the nightie and robe that hugged her trim, womanly figure. Her hair was partly braided over her shoulder, the loose hair tussled and attractive. "Panya carried a rigger who was bitten in half by a snapper to his bunk when we all held back. She stayed with him and held his hand until he died."

"Send her to me," I said.

"I'll be the cleaner," said Hope shortly. "I couldn't ask another girl to do that."

Retter tried to get Sarlie to leave us for a moment. "It was all my fault," Sarlie moaned. "I should never have said that to her."

I thought of Cory and what I had endured earlier that night. Sarlie must have caught something more than I intended from my look. He reeled away as if I had struck him. Retter then led him away to "a strong drink, Sarl, that's what you need right now."

"What are you going to do?" asked Choni cautiously, grimacing as she looked at the torn mass of flesh between Mithera's legs. Panya, a thin-faced girl who barely said a word when I was around, looked at the mess, carefully wiped away a new trail of blood running down Mithera's smooth thigh and looked up at me with no change in expression.

"She's effectively gelded herself," I said to the two. Choni went a little green while Panya nodded thoughtfully. "The paste I used will settle, hold the blood loss at bay and become a new skin for her. But how, after all she has done to herself, will she be able to continue with normal body functions? She has to be able to pee if she lives. So, we, you and me, are going to do what she set out to do. Only we are going to succeed. We are going to make her into the woman she wanted to be."

Choni looked at me, thunderstruck, while Panya just studied the mess in front of her with interest. The hardest problem I had immediately was that I didn't want her wounds to close up and yet I couldn't let her bleed right out.

It was Panya who came up with a solution. "We used glass over Terro's hand when he was burned on

his fingers to prevent them attaching together," she told me. Mithera slept and her pallor turned a feverish color.

There was a little stump left where Mithera had slashed herself. The paste was staunching further blood loss. Choni had to turn her head as I took the thin knife blade I cauterized in a flame, opened it up and spread it out, pushing the tissue wide before inserting the glass phial, soaked by collane into the mess.

"If you cover that with this," said Panya, "that will give her a mound there and cover all but the tip. Then if you block that stuff underneath, we can put a larger glass in there, and there will be a cavity if it doesn't close."

Choni was a much better sewer than I was and so was Panya. It took us a while. Mithera began to bleed from places we didn't know existed or exactly what they did. We actually had to cut away more skin than she had hacked from herself until finally we had constructed a passageway into her body with quivering flesh controlled by the pink foam I had made. The limits of the passageway were controlled by the long, narrow glass tubing that we used.

It was a reed-like glass tubing we passed over the tip she had left which we tried to leave open so that she could pee. We didn't want that to close up. Not at all.

"I don't think it can," said Panya, pushing a dark curl from her face and studying Mithera's private parts from just an inch or so away. She touched one side and the whole set-up we had been working on seemed to spasm. Then liquid poured out of the end of the reed-like glass tube.

“See,” said Panya, looking up at me with a smile. “We can make her pee whenever we want. If this works like the stuff you used on Baro, it will heal like this.”

She sat up on one of the stools Hope had brought for us as we worked on the sleeping, jerking Mithera. “Goddesses, but that must really be hurting her. She’ll be screaming in pain when she comes to her senses.”

“I’ll make more merenthe,” I told Panya. “I’ll need more paste as well.”

“We’ll need more glass tubes like this,” said Choni, looking relieved as Panya did the last stitching over the outer skin we were tucking about the passageway we created for Mithera.

“We want to keep her vagina open and clean,” Choni said.

“It’s not really...” I began as Choni began to attach a balloon, a large one that was made from some fish stomach to the bottom of the glass tubing. We had started to use them in the workshop on *The Tempest* when I hadn’t been able to get glass containers to hold my concoctions.

“I never thought one of the dirt miners would be first to have a vagina,” said Panya thoughtfully, easing the large glass container in and out slightly. “I always thought it would have been you, milady, or Grace or Choni.”

“It isn’t,” I began again. Then I eased back and looked down at Mithera and what we had done. Choni had swabbed away the blood. The flesh and skin we had cut away were in another container along with bloody cloths. Mithera lay almost naked before us, with angry gashes about her genitals, gut stitches

criss-crossing the skin and the mounds we had made. Pink foam was leaking from her.

But, looking down on her, she did look like a her. I felt a strange emotion passing through me. I looked down on a man; from her lovely hair to her painted toes, she looked like a true woman. I found myself swallowing hard as Panya completed her last stitches. Choni gently moved Mithera and placed salt poultices over the work that we had made.

“She’ll swell up by the morning,” said Panya. “They always do. That will make her scream as the stitches tighten. She could burst and bleed again, as badly as she did before. How much bleeding can a woman do before she dies?”

Choni looked at me with fear in her eyes. “A lot,” I said. “Panya, you are now in charge of Mithera. You’ll need at least two other girls to help you. I leave it to you to recruit them. Let me know if anyone interferes with you.”

We moved Mithera onto the pads that Hope had placed in the new bed she made in Sarlie’s room. For a considerable time now, it would be Mithera’s room.

“You’ll need potions for the pain,” I told her, thinking how I could fortify the usual painkillers. Then it came to me how my aunt must be creating the kind of soldiers we had seen with Count Torthard, the kind of soldiers that had made the battles along the Foreshore between the Seafarers and the Baracts so terrible. “I’ll make you some.”

I left Mithera sleeping. Outside her room, almost every girl who had come with me from the sea awaited me. Only Panya and Choni were missing.

Hope stood tensely. "Did, did it go well, milady?" she asked.

"Mithera lives," I told her. "All the rest will need the test of time. She'll be in agony if she awakes so, like Narrine, she is going to have to remain under merenthe for some time. Panya will attend her and will find others to help with the tasks needed to get Mithera back on her feet."

"She, she," began Hope, looking at the woman seated beside her, Gor. "Were, were you able, milady, to, to restore her manhood and her, her..."

"No," I said firmly. There was a gasp from the girls. Many a hand flew up to soft, glossy lips. "She did too good a job of cutting. We had to remove a little more to make her look, well, to make her look as normal a woman as we could."

"She looks like a woman?" asked Hope, her face shocked. "Down, down here, where we have..., she looks like a woman?"

"Mithera might, in time," I told them, thinking of Baro and how successful that intervention had been. "But it is far too early to tell."

"But she could be a woman?" persisted Hope. "A true woman?"

I looked at her in surprise. I looked around at the other girls, at Tess and Fee, at Esha and Gor, who was staring as raptly at me as any of the Seafarer girls.

"Now, don't any of you start hacking at yourselves," I told them all, feeling like an old auntie. "I've only so much fessare and collane and it's all going to go to Mithera at this point. Even if Mithera could look down there, as Hope says, like a woman, she still can't be a true woman. None of us can. I can't put into her

what was never there in the first place. I can't make her pregnant. She'll never have a baby like a true woman."

"Neither will my sister, Caron," said a girl called Sass. "She's barren and she's still a woman. When my cousin died, she took over her family and is now mother of five."

There was almost a sigh throughout all of the group. Even Gor licked glossy lips and moved in such a way that I could see that all 'her' body hair was gone.

"I understand what some of you want," I said. "I sympathize. But this was a terrible way to try to get what Mithera wanted. She thought that my mother, who was a witch, had promised to make her a woman and she wanted me to complete my mother's promise. Well, in a way, I have. Or I think I have. But Mithera's agony is only just beginning. When you see her and sit with her over the weeks ahead, you should ask yourselves if anything is worth the pain she is going to be going through."

I was thinking about that myself. I was thinking of all the pain I could put myself through. Then what? I could have gone to Cory as a true woman and have been loved by him. And then what? If his wife died in childbirth, I could take her place and be mother to Cory's children. Then he could have taken some other girl to the Haybarn, maybe a girl like Tess. He could call her all the names he had called me. I wonder what he would call me when I didn't conceive for him.

I shuddered and put the thought away. I went in search of Sarlie. He was halfway into his cups with Retter, who looked at me gratefully as I took his place across the table from the heavy-lidded front man for the theater company I was funding. Retter left the kitchen area and I saw Hope come to the door and put

her arms about Retter's neck. Their kiss was most passionate, Hope's long shawl parting as Retter slipped his arm about her waist. I could see even from across the kitchen that her small, round breasts were very aroused. They scurried off to whatever room it was that they were trysting in.

"Tell me what went on," I said to Sarlie. "Why was Mithera so upset as to do this to herself?"

"She's been getting upset since you haven't been letting her practice in the plays we've been rehearsing," said Sarlie, sitting up. He looked like death warmed over, but sounded like a man who knew his mind and had been thinking hard about what had gone on.

"This is all my fault?" I asked him. I pulled my robe more tightly about me as Sarlie looked at my chest. Looking down myself, I saw how much of my natural cleavage I was revealing to him.

"No, it's mine," said Sarlie, his eyes watering. "She asked me about my wife. And she asked me what was the best thing about having a wife. I said it was the children a wife gives to you. I wasn't thinking. Then she said that she was never going to be a woman at all, so why was I bothering to sleep with her. I said that she shouldn't worry about it. I didn't.

"It's the same in all the companies. All the actresses get taken by the actors. We don't see a true woman except in the audience or as a waitress and they won't give an actor the time of day. They know we're all taking the actresses. Heck, in the country versions of our plays, they get to see us do it.

"Not me," she said. "I'm so useless, I can't even do that." Useless? I didn't find her useless. I liked her being so woman-like. I like having my wick trimmed.

And she did it better than any actress I've had in years. I put my hands up her nightie and helped her take off her breast bands.

"I took her. There, I told her, you are good for something after all, aren't you? 'Trimming your wick?' she asked me. And I said, yes. 'So who's going to trim mine?' she asked me. Well, that's not the way it is, I told her. I'm a man and I get to give it and she gets to take it. That's what actresses do.

"I'm not an actress, she cried, not any more. And I'm not a wife. I'm not a woman and I'm not a man.' Then she rolled out of the bed and got that knife off the supper platter. I thought she was going to kill me. I asked her why she was going to kill me.

"Not you,' Mithera says, and she started crying. 'Me,' she said, crying. 'I'm such a freak. I don't deserve to be alive. No one can help me. No one can give me what I truly want.'

"That's when I saw what I'd done. I saw that I'd been hurting her, giving her all the wrong answers. So I told her the truth. I told her that I'd been thinking about going off after this tour was over, together. She could have a new name and we could go far west, into Malesia proper, and we could marry, proper, and be man and wife.

"She just sat on the end of the bed and wouldn't let me touch her or take the knife from her. 'You just want me to be your bedwarmer on the road,' she said. 'You just want me to put down this knife and cuddle you and let you tap me.'

"Well, of course I wanted her to do that. Every man who sees her on stage wants to tap her. Narrine said he was going to have to put on country versions of our

plays soon as the audiences wanted to see her get tapped. He could sense it, Narrine said to me. He asked me if I would be *The Debt Collector* and she could be the widow. I wasn't sure. In the county version, I'd have to tap her at least three times and have her in my lap, her skirt up and panties down.

"Narrine said Dort really wanted to do it, but if I didn't do it, he'd get Tegen for the part. Tegen can get it up for anything in skirts so long as he can play the part rough. He really likes to tap the girls hard, does Tegen.

"I should never have said Tegen. He raped Mithera her first night on stage, you know. I don't think she'd ever had a man before. And at the end of it all, he gets drunk and says to everyone that she was the worst lay he ever had in his life.

"I should never have told her about Tegen. She started to cry and said something about he'll never prove I'm a man on stage again, something like that. And then she plunged the knife down on herself."

Sarlie ran out then. His mouth opened but no words came out. His eyes were horrified at whatever he was remembering but he couldn't say anything else.

"I didn't know that you hated Mithera that much," I said to him.

"Hate her?" Sarlie gasped at me. "I don't hate her. I love her. I always have. Since she first came to Narrine's Company, I've loved her. She didn't have breasts then at all. She was like a little tomboy dropped into the middle of all these hardened pros. I begged Narrine not to do country with her.

"I asked him if I could do Tegen's part but Narrine said the audience liked to hear her squeal and beg

Tegen not to do it to her. Tegen used to take her in a different way every night as well. She's forgotten that I was the one there for her every night when she came off the stage. I tried to help her.

"I suggested she go back to her parents but she wouldn't. She comes from Doxford, you know, but they've never come to see her act, not even here. It must have been that as well, being here in Doxford and not acting and whatever else was bothering her."

The promise of my mother, I thought.

I stood and my dratted robe opened again. Sarlie looked at my bouncing breasts in my thin nightie. Then, sighing, he looked away.

"If you're trying to entice me," said Sarlie, "I'm afraid you've got the wrong man, milady."

"You don't want me in your bed?" I asked him, trying not to let my amusement show.

Sarlie shook his head. "I just want Mithi back," he said dully.

"Well," I sighed. "I think you can count on that. But it's going to take a very long time. This is not a wound that quickheal can take care of. Then, Mithera isn't going to be the same person anyway. It could be several months before she's ready to be your woman again. It might be that she never will be able to be your woman again."

"That doesn't matter," said Sarlie, his voice tense. "She, she is going to live? Can, can I see her?"

"You can see her lying sleeping in her bed," I told Sarlie. "Don't interfere with Panya. She's in charge of Mithera for a while. But you can go and look in on her."

I'm going to bed, by myself, since you have spurned me."

Sarlie almost ran out of the kitchen after giving me an uncertain smile. Panya told me later that he brought a chair and sat beside Mithera through the night, just watching her breathing.

XXVIII. A WITCH'S MISCALCULATION

I didn't go to the performances Sarlie had scheduled for the company in Doxford. I told Grace and Choni that I had work to do and I did. I had supplies to replenish. I had to find a way of keeping the paste I used over opened flesh and blood vessels from spoiling. Salt wasn't the answer.

I had to make more merenthe and annovare. I could ensure that the girls would have an appreciative audience by having a few bellows for 'air circulation' about the theater. I had tried to get Choni to make some of the simple concoctions I needed, household cleaners like tellene and collane but she couldn't instinctively smell as I could when wortbane had turned and wasn't effective in a potion.

I had to throw out a number of her concoctions and I realized that I had to do the distilling and compounding myself. So I was busy. But that wasn't the reason I didn't go out front and seat myself in the balcony to see the show. The real reason was Cory might be there. He might see me. He might accuse me of being a man in a woman's dress.

Worse, Cory might try to blackmail me to into accompanying him back to the hay barn where he would want again what he had already had from me. This time, he might want me to be more compliant with

him. I shivered and forced that thought away from me. There was no way that I was going to be Cory's girl, in my dreams or in reality, ever again.

Besides, I had more ganasate and 'girl's products' to make now that Gor, Lace as she was calling herself, had joined 'our' side, becoming a girl all of the time she was in the compound and stableyard. The strange thing was how she and Esha got along. They kissed and frolicked like two of the younger girls with Esha teaching the more masculine Lace how to be a woman like her. With her stage experience behind her, Lace was apparently a devastating owner of the brothel in *The Bordello*.

I saw her being changed into a yellow creation by two of Choni's seamstresses, Argit and Monnee. The two draped her dress and hair just perfectly, re-touching her lip covering. Lace eased over to the stage area to be ready for her next entrance and the male actors coming off all hugged her, careful not to spoil her makeup.

"You are making this play work!" said Retter in his booming voice and the others agreed.

Smiling and swishing her way out on stage, her walk as feminine and sexy as Esha's, Lace was greeted with applause. When she asked in exasperation if there was a real man in her house that night, she was greeted with shouts and roars from different parts of the theater. She gave off a funny line then, improvised to some heckler and the crowd erupted. The actors I could see were all laughing.

Retter saw me outside Mithera's door and gave me a thumbs-up sign that the play was going very well. I smiled and went to see Mithera with some of the new, stronger painkiller compound I had been working on.

I'd suspended it in a cordial, thinking of how my aunt must get so many men to take her potions and concoctions.

The honeybane controller worked as I had hoped. Even though she still appeared to be asleep, Mithera responded to my word and sat up, astonishing Panya and Ressie, who were monitoring her. We got the cordial into Mithera even as she began to twitch, followed by the warm curds that Panya had prepared for her.

The bladder at the end of Mithera's tubing was filled with yellowish liquid. It had been darker earlier with blood, Panya had told me. We eased back her dressings and changed the diaper Panya had installed on our sick girl.

Ressie saw Mithera's injuries for the first time. Her face went almost white as I instructed Panya and her on how to remove the glass tubing and phial we had put inside the swollen, angry flesh held together by Choni's stitching.

"We'll be doing this twice a day for a long, long time," I told Ressie. "There may come a time when Mithera can do this for herself. But for now, we have to do it. We don't want her insides to close up."

Ressie gasped. "Oh, that would be terrible for her after what she's been through!" she exclaimed.

"Down," I told Mithera. "Sleep."

Ressie's indrawn breath as Mithera did as I ordered her reminded me that there were several girls who had never seen me perform witch's tasks.

"She won't do this for you," I told Ressie. "You'll have to wait until she is well and can hear you."

"It's how you controlled the men on *The Snapping Shark*," said Ressie, smiling at me in approval. "We were all so glad, milady, that you trusted us enough not to use the same potions on us girls as well."

Us girls. There it was. I had done so much to the cabin boys of *The Tempest* that they had separated themselves completely from masculinity. Us girls. I smiled at Ressie in her white dress, noting the breast bands that supported her finely shaped breasts. I didn't doubt that they were genuine. Like all of the cabin boys, she had shaped her eyebrows, thickened her eyelashes and wore powder and lip paint. Her hair was a reddish color, like mine. Earrings glinted in her ears and bangles bounced at her wrists. Her fingers ended in long nails, painted the same color of pink as her mouth.

Ressie's waist was thin and her hips were wide; I didn't doubt that her skin was completely hairless. She had been selected as cabin boy because as a boy, she was girlish in looks and undersized in stature. If she had had pronounced masculine features, she would never have been chosen to be a cabin boy on a great ship like *The Tempest*. Mothers like Esha and Hope would have weeded them out on their inspections of the new candidates brought to the ship.

"If, if, if this thing with Mithera works out," said Ressie cautiously then, "will you, milady, try out everything you've done here on another one of us girls?"

"Why would I do that?" I asked her pointedly. Panya looked at me intently and said nothing as was her way.

"Well, we could all become women," said Ressie in a rush, "and marry husbands if we liked."

“Husbands who would own you, and, if you were in the Isles, put you in cages, pretty ones, that you’d call homes. They’d visit you once a year and wonder why you didn’t give them a dozen, bouncing babies,” I told her and Ressie paled. I really shouldn’t have been so blunt. But the girls were all romantics at heart, I had noticed.

And what was I myself, a little voice asked in my head.

“Sorry,” I said more quietly to Ressie. “I know what your dreams are, princess. Let us wait a while and see if Mithera lives, and if she does live, how she feels about herself. Wouldn’t it be terrible if the loss of her male parts left her bereft of all feelings, all excitement and thrills, the passions of being in love and being made love to. Let’s see if Mithera can survive the pain she is feeling. I feel her fighting against the binding I’ve put on her.”

I did feel something coming from Mithera, a deep pain I had had to use a very heavy dose of honeybane to overcome. I could sense that her fragrance had changed as well. I sensed the terogal I had given her.

“I’m sure it will all work out, my lady,” said Ressie then. “I heard Prince Tathally saying to Nikki that she should be nice to you as you were a Perisord and the most powerful witch he had seen at court, save for your aunt. You’ll save Mithera, milady, we all know that. You’ll make her into a woman and she’ll love it. I know that I would. I would do this,” she indicated the sleeping woman in Sarlie’s bed, “even before Mithera awakes if you would want another to hone your skills on, milady.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise to Panya, who nodded. “I think I’ve had nine volunteers so far,” she

said with one of her shy smiles. "Now, we can make that ten."

"Do you count yourself in on that list?" I asked her.

"Make it eleven," said Panya quietly, her bright blue eyes sparkling as she looked at me.

I returned to the workshop in the dray and began to work at the potions I needed. I would have to go to the herbalists my mother had used to visit. I would have loved to visit Legaret, the witch of Doxford, and talk to her about some of the problems I had. I hadn't noticed any sign of spoliation in her place but then she wasn't making the kinds of potions I was.

There was an alchemist in Doxford. I heard my mother's voice calling Osser, 'a very silly young man', but she was smiling fondly when she said it. "He has to write everything down," she had laughed to me. "His nose doesn't tell him anything, I'm afraid."

I should have gone to Osser's workshop then. I could read. I could have stolen his books, his notes, and read them all. I would almost certainly have found a lot of recipes I had not heard about before. Thinking of that made me remember some of the songs I had learned from my mother.

"A snip of redwater, redberry and dun, ensures peace, happiness and a son," went one old lullaby tune. Dun I knew as a compound of three other agents that, when dried, left a paste that had to be covered quickly in greybirch leaf or it lost its potency. That was my mother's potion for making sure that a birth was a son.

"That's one that never fails," my mother had told me. "But we don't want the world filled up with just little boys, do we? We tell all who want to use it that it

is so strong that it will rip their wombs apart if they ever use it again. It's a one-time only potion."

"But that isn't true, what you said?" I'd asked her, appalled my mother who had told me that I must never lie and had used parasane, the truth-teller, on me when I had lied to her.

"Think about it," my mother had told me. "Think, Dedrick." Oh, how I hated thinking of myself by that name, my name as a boy. "Think of the witch's power, my boy, and how it would be abused if the rich and powerful knew what we could all do if we wanted to." She had smiled at me then, trusting me to think about what she had said and talk to her another day about the problem of lies. "My sister and my mother went too far down the road of revealing all their powers. Luckily for you, I don't have Kings or Counts hanging at my door. Sometimes, it is good to be the weaker sister."

My mother had laughed then. I don't think she believed that about herself. I knew now that she had been rich beyond my wildest dreams. Count Osgard and my aunt still owed me a considerable portion of the fortune they had stolen from me. I had taken some back from Master Serrill, the moneychanger. If only King Tatheren had still been alive, I could have gone to him with Master Serrill and demanded the King's Justice. I wondered if I would have gotten it if Tatheren had lived through his attempt to make love to me.

I was beleaguered with thoughts of my mother as I worked in my workshop, making me wonder what she would think of her son if she saw the woman I had become. Yes, I was living a totally female life, I thought, even to being raped by a man who had then called me a slut, a whore and a harlot.

I was half-tempted to go and settle with Cory then, thinking of all the delicious punishments I could inflict upon him once I had him under my control. I imagined myself with my high-heeled shoe pressed down on his chest while he caressed my stockinged leg, begging my forgiveness.

Luckily, Sarlie wanted to see me. He had the receipts to discuss with me. They were outstanding and he thought we should stay and do the second play Dort had suggested, *The Delta Queen*.

The company would be skimpy on rehearsals but the audience wouldn't care. They just wanted to see the actresses on stage in skimpier and skimpier female costumes. Then, we could alternate performances at Alvastone, the next stop on our tour of Malesia.

Sarlie didn't tell me that one of his real reasons for extra plays and rehearsals in Doxford was that he didn't want Mithera moved while I was anxious to move on. We had more to discuss, about taking on more actors, what to do with Narrine, adding another wagon, maybe two, and whether I wanted to add on permanent musicians. Some of the group of musicians we had hired in Doxford had indicated they wouldn't mind joining Sarlie's company permanently.

"A quiet tour," I said to Sarlie. "We need to keep Mithera quiet and out of the light." And me too, I thought, but didn't say it.

Sarlie gave me a tired, crooked smile. "When she awakes," he said. "She is going to have enough money to leave us and buy her own business in any town in Malesia."

“She’d need a husband,” I told him frankly. “Someone who would love her and treat her as his wife everywhere in public.”

Sarlie nodded. “Dort could take over the company,” he said. “He thought you’d pick him, you know, when you set up this arrangement with me. He’s been our leading man for the last five years or so. He would jump at the chance to take my place. We should ask him.”

“Wait until we see how Mithera progresses,” I told Sarlie. It just goes to show that I still don’t know people very well. If I had called Dort in and talked to him with Sarlie, things might have changed and gone very differently from that point on.

XXIX. A WITCH’S ADVICE

As it was, buoyed by the bonus we paid to the actors and all the company in Alvastone, Dort wasn’t with us when we stopped for our first watering on the road to Werhaven.

“He was with us when we pulled out of the theater yard at Alvastone,” said Hedward as he reported the defection to me. Alvastone had no true witch but it did have what the people called hags, very old women, who knew a lot of basic lore and so were able to keep the people and animals of Alvastone healthy.

“If I took a dray horse and went back to Alvastone,” I said to the circle of worried faces in front of me, “Dort would still have a half-day’s lead on me. I could track him to wherever he’s gone.”

“And we could destroy him and whoever he’s with,” said Hedward savagely while Retter and Sarlie

looked at him in distress. I think they thought that the young Seafarer was using bombast instead of common sense. But Hedward knew what he had done under my direction in the battle we had to fight to enter the seaport of Bridgewater.

“Let’s go on to the Haven,” I said. “If Dort went back to Doxford, he should be there tonight. I will know if he has and if he has contacted any of my enemies. We should know their plans and what we will have to do to protect our company and Mithera.”

“How would you know that?” asked Sarlie suspiciously.

Retter laughed scornfully, clapping Sarlie on the back. “Because she’s a witch, my old friend,” Retter said. “Haven’t you figured it out yet? All the girls will tell you. She does a lot of things we don’t know anything about and she can smell it when we’re lying to her. She can probably smell Dort clear across Malesia.”

“No, I can’t,” I told him. I wondered if that would be possible. I wondered if I could tag someone and keep tabs on him, where he was and what he was doing. It would have to be something like the listening devices I had made.

“When I see you off wool-gathering like that,” said Hope, “I know you’re coming up with another witch’s concoction. I think if anyone else leaves us, you’ll know where he is right away.”

“It could be one of the girls who runs off,” protested Sarlie.

“No,” said Hope firmly and Grace and Choni nodded with her. “We will never leave Lady Sherrene, never.”

For obvious reasons, I thought cynically, I excused myself and went in to look at Mithera.

She was in great distress, her face contorted in pain as Panya and Ressie patiently fed her. But Mithera looked up at me and her eyes weren't fevered.

"It hurts," I said, as I sat to talk to her, "and you want me to give you more for the pain. You want me to give you the sleeping draught and not let you think any more about the consequences of your actions."

"Something like that," whispered Mithera hoarsely.

"You can add the throat cordial to her medicines," I said to Panya. "Since she is a woman now, she has more right to sound like one than any of the rest of us."

The three of them went very still as I spoke.

"Well," I said to Mithera in a mocking tone; we heard the calls from the actors, actresses and musicians hooking up the horses to the wagons, readying them for movement. We had set Mithera up in a corner of my workshop; the darkness that I kept the area in was alleviated by one white candle only. None of us looked like particularly healthy women, I thought.

"Well," I asked her again. She stared at me, holding herself rigid as it was the moving that hurt her more than anything else. "Did you see yourself in the looking glass when you bathed?"

"Milady," murmured Panya. "Mithera was in such pain, we didn't think it would serve any purpose." Her voice trailed off as I gave her a look. Despite all her shyness and demure looks, Panya was turning out to have a very independent frame of mind, I was finding out.

“Good for you,” I said and Ressie smiled at her in relief. “If you had seen yourself, Mithera,” I told her, “you would have seen what a bloody mess you have made of yourself.” That shook her up. The wagon swayed as the horse took hold of the yoke. The girls always laughed when I tried to say something about horses. For Seafarers, they had become very knowledgeable about horses in a very short space of time.

“Oh, girls are like that,” Retter had said indulgently to me. “Girls and horses, it’s an old story. When I was a young man, the surest way to reach a pretty girl’s heart was to take her for a ride on a docile mare.”

The cart lurched, the bed rocked a little and Mithera gasped.

“We had to cut off a lot more where you had hacked yourself,” I told her brutally. The two attendants I had assigned to her looked at me askance as if they wished they were brave enough to tell me to take it easy on Mithera. “So, where we cut is swollen and the flesh is angry. I had to get Choni to stitch the flesh in as well so that it doesn’t all fall out the first time you touch it.”

“Oh, milady,” murmured Panya.

“It’s the stitches that hurt so much,” I went on. “We’ll take them out very soon. But the glassware has to stay. Your vagina,” I told her deliberately, “is forming about the glass that Ressie and Panya change for you each day and night.”

Mithera clutched at the bedsheets and would have stripped them off to look at herself then. My using the word ‘vagina’ had brought the first flush to her face I had seen in days.

“Yes, it will be a vagina for all intents and purposes,” I told her. “And it will work as one. You are a woman now, Mithera. I have redeemed my mother’s promise with a great deal of help from you and that hack knife. Why couldn’t you have chosen a thinner, sharper blade?” I asked in mock seriousness. “But no matter. The swelling will go like the stitches. The red scars will fade and your pubic hair will grow back. You could walk nude in front of the Queen Regent’s court in time and not a man will dare to say that you are not a woman.”

Tears shone brightly in Mithera’s eyes. “I, I,” she began, nearly choking herself as tears came.

“You owe me a proper explanation of why you did this to yourself,” I told her, straightening the pretty ribbons of the nightie Ressie and Panya had dressed Mithera in. “We don’t know and you won’t know for several months if your vagina will give you womanly pleasure,” I told her straightforwardly. “We won’t know and I don’t want you rushing out to Sarlie and getting him to try you out right away. Everything must be firm. We can’t have you bleeding again if something tears inside. And think, are you still going to call yourself Mithera? I think Mithera is gone and a new woman has taken over her body. You’re the first and only real woman in our company, you know.”

I wondered how Ressie and Panya would interpret what I had said. Did they think of me as a man or a woman, I wondered. Or both? They called me ‘milady’ or ‘Lady Sherrene’ all the time and I loved them doing that. I did so hope that they thought of me as a woman.

“Now, the next time she asks,” I told Panya, “she can have the merenthe. No point torturing her as we’ll be two days going into the Haven Theater. We’ll undo

the stitching there and she can have a looking glass as well."

We were actually into our fourth day of performances in Werhaven, raking in large amounts of cash, when, over the listening device I had taken from Mithera, I heard the buzz of talking voices suddenly stop as some wild horn began to echo from the vibrating coin.

"Lady Renneth in Doxford," said a voice I barely recognized as that of the Lady-in-Waiting to the Queen. "Legaret is right. Parasane confirms that the person we know as Sherrene Perisord is travelling with a theater company touring towards the eastern delta. It's in Werhaven or has just left about now."

If they had been talking about me before, I hadn't heard. They could have been talking when I was asleep at night, of course, or when I had been busy with something else.

"If it's here in Werhaven," asked a thin, reedy, woman's voice, "what should I be doing?"

There was a buzz of voices. I could barely make out who was talking and what advice they were offering.

A distant blast of a trumpet and the network went silent again.

"Arrest them, Carvy," said my aunt's voice, thin as if she was some distance away from the louder voices of Lady Renneth, of Carvy of Werhaven, whoever that was, and me. "Use all the potions and powders I have given you all to make the Grey Men. Berry, Sareth, Lady Renneth, get on the roads and move to Alvastone and Werhaven. If any Count denies you, make him one of your Grey Men. The Queen Regent will approve.

“We must catch Sherrene this time. Tathally says that she is at the center of the plot to put him on the throne instead of beloved Kennen. It’s the sort of plot you can expect from a warlock. A warlock will always try to change things for his own amusement. He doesn’t serve the people as a true witch should.”

There was a murmur and buzz over the communication device then. My aunt’s horn sounded. It must be their way of signalling to each other that an important message was being relayed.

“Now, my last words are to Sherrene, my pretty, little nephew,” hissed my aunt’s voice over the network, making the hair on my head stand on end. “Yes, my ladies, I am sure he has found a means of listening in to us. So, come to me, my darling, beautiful-looking, girlish boy. Surrender to Carvy at Werhaven and come to me at Birchwood, Lady Sherrene. Such a pretty name for a boy, don’t you think?”

“Do that, my lovely little seawife. Surrender and I won’t have all the Seafarers you are travelling with slaughtered.” She laughed. There was a faint buzz as if witches were whispering to each other over this network Aunt Rissa maintained.

“I didn’t think you were that sort of girl, Sherrene,” my aunt taunted me, not knowing how close to the mark she was. “We all know to what uses a Seafarer puts his seawife. It’s most amusing, isn’t it, that you should learn everything you should about being a woman by being used as one by a Seafarer? If you had the chance to learn, you’d have found our Malesian men much stronger and more manly than little Seafarers. I never saw what your mother did in Seafarer men. Perhaps you’re just like her.”

"I hope you enjoyed making love to a man, my darling nephew," Orissiana the Terrible went on, gloating over me. "If you don't surrender, your friends will endure a torture of the kind you would hate to have done to yourself, little boy thing. Tathally and his darling Nikki tell me how you've mastered collasolane." That was what Master Bretten, the alchemist, had called the swamp gas powder. "Doubtless it's what you stole from me in Hillaire. If you've any left, you may be thinking of using it.

"You could wipe out Carvy and the men at arms at her disposal, I know that, but we have it at our disposal as well. If Lady Renneth finds your company on the road, she can make a hole in the ground of all of you just as you can do to her. Sooner or later, I will get in the only shot needed and you will be no more.

"You're my only living relative, Sherrene, but, for the good of the Kingdom, if you don't surrender, I'll have you and all your friends wiped out, one way or another."

I thought of answering my aunt back right then but I resisted the urge. I shivered and shuddered and closed the black satin over the buzzing coin. The last thing I heard was someone close to me saying, "Is it true? Sherrene has swamp gas?"

My friends should know what I was going to do first. I was the one who had advised them all to press on with me to Werhaven. They had listened to my advice and gone along with it. Look at the mess I had made of it all. I should have gone on out of the country, across the Great River and the Delta to Quarrence, say, or Nettritch. I could have made a new life there for all of us.

Mithera was awake for part of the day, crying on occasion with the pain of what was going on inside her. We, Ressie, Panya, Sarlie and me, made sure she ate and drank before we had to let her back to sleep with merenthe.

I had to set up who was to be in charge of the womanly care of Mithera. They had to know what they were to do if I was taken by Carvy, the witch of Werhaven, and not the other way round, as I planned.

"It's me they are after," I told them after our meeting on the stage in Werhaven, all the girls seemingly in the arms of some man, actor or musician. Even Esha and Lace, I noted in surprise, were not in each other's arms but had older men about them.

"But they won't keep their promises, milady," bristled Hedward. Choni nestled in against him, sitting on his knees as they shared one of the few chairs. She looked up adoringly into his face with her loving, dark-fringed blue eyes.

"My aunt had no reason not to lie to me," I told him shortly.

"In the battle of the Mouth," said Hedward obstinately. "With six great ships burning, the fleet commander offered to withdraw and give hostages to the witches controlling the Baract ships and shore batteries.

"The hostages were given and promises were made on both sides but the Baract ships fired on Varry's fleet the moment it stepped back its arbalests. Only two great ships out of twenty-one got back to the Isles. *Mist over Deep Green Waters* had to be foundered as it was so badly damaged.

"The hostages were never heard of again. My line lost two Clan Elders in that battle, one hostage and one

at sea. You can't take the word of a witch, milady. She will crush her enemies completely if she has a chance. We are dead men and women if you surrender."

I looked about the room. Mithera was asleep in her bed with Ressie attending her. Mithera could be called a woman now but as I looked about the circle of chairs, I knew that we were, in fact, all men and all in this together. The word of a witch, Hedward had said. I heard Hedward say that as if he didn't think that I was a true witch.

"The people hate the Queen," said one of the young men, Jarl, whom we'd picked up in Doxford. "It's not just the taxes. It's all the soldiers the Counts can call upon. The witches are entrancing them all. They're all becoming berserkers, Grey Men. They won't stop for wounds. My friends don't know me any more. They'd kill me and not even know what they did."

"We're supposed to be getting ready for some great war," put in another. "But nobody knows who we're going to be fighting."

"When the Grey Men move," said Retter, a frown on his face, "they just march in a straight line across fields and farms. Anything in their way, man, woman or child, is killed. If they come after us here in town and you don't stop them, milady, they'll kill everyone in front of them, in every house around this theater."

"We can't fight professional soldiers!" protested one of the musicians.

"Let me fire on them, milady," begged Hedward.

"And how many innocent bystanders will you kill?" I asked him. Choni put her arms about her lover and held him, forestalling any reply to that.

“There’s one thing,” I told them. “What Count Torthard did outside Terraire. I think I can do something like it. It’s going to need some of you to help me.” Almost everyone responded as a volunteer.

I didn’t tell them that I suspected that Count Torthard had some talent for witchery, which would have made him a warlock. The more I thought about how he had controlled his berserkers and his staff made me think of Torthard’s talents with witchery. His Grey Men hadn’t seen our wagons, or us, passing through their lines. It had been a strong performance by the Count.

I hoped I could duplicate it. I wanted to have the witch of Werhaven and her Grey Men under my control.

The only way I could think to do it was by smothering the Grey Men in an antidote to the potions I hoped I had duplicated properly. I hoped I had gauged accurately how it would make men at arms behave. After the antidote, I wanted to bathe the witch and the Grey Men of Werhaven with my version of the same controllers. I wanted then to have the Grey Men so focussed on me that the company could slip by them as they had at Terraire

I would send the theater company on then to Torthard. I knew that there would have to be a witch at such an important town. But if Torthard was the warlock I thought he was, he probably had a witch there he could control. I guessed that he would be able to save my friends at least for a short time while I went up to my aunt’s house in Birchwood to kill her.

XXX. A WITCH'S ARREST

The witch of Werhaven was silly enough to ensorcel the captain or whoever it was in charge of her men at arms. No commander would have come for me as she did, marching her men furiously to the front of the Haven Theater. The balloons of antidote the men and girls tossed from the roof of the center did the job I had planned as effectively as I could have wished. So did the blowers that several brave girls, with Fee and Tess in the lead, went out on the square to use. They swept away the remnants of the attack.

Carvy was screaming and throwing my aunt's version of honeybane over several soldiers, trying to get them to grab Fee and Tess. But the beautiful girls were nimble in their skirts, having had so much practice, I suppose. They laughed and teased the men who began to smile and come after them as if it was a game.

The new control agents, delivered in the same fashion by the same men and girls who had flung down the antidote from the roof, were similar to my aunt's. The powders swept over the men at arms and Carvy. It wasn't as effective as having men drink a potion but when I stepped past Fee and Tess and commanded them all to come to me, then to stop, they moved as one man and one witch, even if they looked puzzled to be moving together.

Several chosen girls then moved out as if they were waitresses serving at some noble's garden party. "Take the drink," I ordered the men-at-arms. They all did, even Carvy, as thin and reedy a woman as she had sounded over the listening network. She stared at me with wild, frightened eyes. She could sense she was be-

ing controlled and probably thought that the worst was about to happen to her.

I set my new troop of soldiers to rest silently in the shade while I put the theater company in motion. I worked quickly and had ten stills set up to make a large supply of aversion potions. I showed them how to apply them to the wagons, the horses and to themselves, to their clothing. Fee wouldn't look at Tess until we hauled Tess over and almost tied her to the uncomfortable Fee who was averse to look at the soaked clothing Tess was wearing.

"The queen shoots out annovare from her coach," I explained to a doubtful Panya. She and Choni were going to have to serve as alchemists when I was gone. I wrote down for them the recipes they would have to use for the every-day feminizing potions we all now took for granted. "Everyone feels well when they see the Queen, not knowing that their pleasure is made from annovare, a concoction of my aunt's.

"This concoction of mine will work the same way. It will make people look away from your wagons and from you if you need to shop in towns. Storeowners won't see you. It will hurt their senses to breathe in the aroma you'll give off. Any notice paid to any of you if you're wearing the cloaks soaked in aversare, as I call it, will be fleeting and indistinct.

"You should be able to reach Torthard safely by the back roads Retter has laid out for you," It was finally sinking in to many of the girls that I wasn't going with them. Several looked almost green at the idea. I had been a constant in their lives for over a year now and must have seemed like a true heroine as we conquered so many problems. "You also have my letters to the Count." I'd prepared those while I'd waited to find out

what damage Dort had done. "I'll look for you all in Torthard at Harvest."

Grace let up a wail when she found out that she wasn't going with me. I couldn't take Choni, my other maid with me either. I wanted no one with me, as I explained to them, who would immediately become a hostage for my co-operation with my aunt.

"A Lady should have her maids with her," said Grace, pouting. "We would make them all treat you as the great lady you are."

"Carvy will have to do that for me," I told Grace. Choni took her by her sleeve and explained it all to her.

"We'll prepare some of the classic Harvest plays for Torthard," Sarlie told me earnestly. "A cycle of five plays will be fine for a small company like ours. We will perform in town traditions, milady. If anyone wants country productions, they can go and hire someone else."

I wouldn't let him tell me the name of the new company nor would I let him tell me the new name Mithera was going to use. It wasn't that I didn't want to know them. It was just that, in the power of my aunt, I could say truthfully, under the push of parasane, that I didn't know the name of the theater company and I didn't know where Mithera was or even who she was. That would hopefully blur some of the efforts of Aunt Rissa to play the game of hostages with me.

It was a most tearful good bye. I have never been kissed and hugged so much in all of my life as each of the twenty-two girls held on to me and cried, kissing me and hugging me just as much as the one true woman, tottering from her bed, did so as well. It was wonderful to feel the touch of soft hair and skin, and

round, moving breasts against me and know that I was the same. I even had the same fragrance as my lovely girls.

The girls all clustered around the new woman and hugged her and told her how thin she was and how they had missed her. Mithera clung to Sarlie who looked down at her with proud, glowing eyes and held her as if she was a precious, glass vase.

The aversive concoctions worked well enough that the unpleasant aroma of slightly decayed roots kept people off Werhaven streets and the drays left the little town on three different routes, an idea Retter insisted upon. They would travel different paths to Torthard, connecting at two gathering points along the way.

I hid my pearl medallion in one of my breast band cups and gave away the buttons and earrings I had used before to communicate with the girls. I showed them how to use them and set times for them to uncover them from their satin cloths and talk to me. It was strange that I could hear them clearly but not one of the girls could hear through the devices at all.

"It's because she's a witch," said Choni after we had experimented with Tess.

"I just wish I could send you all a message as well," I said to my maids, the most upset of all the girls at my leaving them. "Maybe when you get to Torthard, the Count's witch can contact me. You must all be sure of her, very sure, before you entrust her with any of the secrets we have been holding among us all."

I checked again that each of the wagons had the supplies that the girls needed. They would run short of ganasate if they were long in Torthard without me but that couldn't be helped. Money, swamp gas and some

of the other explosives I had manufactured but not really tried I secreted in the wagons. I told Choni every hiding place and gave her to use her best judgment on how to spend the money we had stolen from Osgard.

A last round of tears and then I waved them off. Mithera's dark hair was loose about her face, making her look so much like a delicate windflower that my heart ached for her, particularly when Sarlie came and put his arm about her.

Mithera snuggled to him in an act of familiarity that told me I was waving to a husband and wife leaving to start a new life in another town. The last image I had of them was he kissing her and she clinging to him as if she was never going to let him go again.

"Narrine," I mentioned at last to Sarlie and he shook his head at me.

"You are not to worry about him, milady," Sarlie said grimly to me. "Retter and I will take care of Narrine. You must not even give one thought of your pretty head, milady, to scum like that."

"How will you take care of him?" I asked him sharply. I had made no provision in my concoction lists for keeping Narrine under the power of a controlling agent, but then none of the girls could have used the power of a controller as Carvy and I could have. The girls weren't witches as Carvy and I were.

Sarlie just smiled and left me then. It was a moment of weakness. I really should have taken care of that problem myself and not have left it to my friends.

"Trust us," were the last words Sarlie said to me as he went to help the nurses carry an anxious Mithera into the dray they had prepared for her.

It was so quiet and yet I was not alone in the square. At least fifty men sat in the shade of the trees that lined the road that led to Alvastone. Not one was saying a word. I moved forward and fifty pairs of eyes followed me. It was most unnerving. I don't know how commanders like Torthard could have stomached such eerie study for long periods of time. I was going to have to keep these men enchanted for a very long time if I hoped to pass through the Middling Hills and all the way to Birchwood where my aunt had told Carvy to take me.

"Form up in column," I told the men-at-arms who had arrived to arrest me. I had the Captain have his men march ahead of the carriage as if they had arrested me. I travelled inside with the silent Carvy, who acted courteously towards me.

I had travelled to Birchwood once before, with the potions that my mother had wanted me, if anything happened to her, to take to my aunt. Too dangerous, my mother had insisted, were even the friendliest potions. Collane, heated and sniffed, could make those who took in the fumes light-headed and hallucinate. Taking in the fumes could even lead to death, my mother assured me. There were even those in the nobility or mercantile classes who indulged themselves in using collane for entertainment.

I was never tempted, however, to get a warmed bowl of water, cover my head in a towel and inhale in collane fumes that would give me a sense of euphoria. "It's greater than sex," a musician we'd picked up in Doxford promised me, telling me I should try it.

I let my new maid, Carvy, serve me and bathe me, even as I had the men watered with dociline, as I called the controlling Grey Man compound I made. I waited

patiently for the next day before I made a check on the progress of the girls and their friends.

"You mustn't say that to me," I heard Mithera whispering to someone

"But I do love you," I heard Sarlie whispering back.

"Yes, Ronya," I heard Choni say, who could not have been in the same wagon. "You have certainly grown a lot and I can add pieces to your breast bands for you right away. Monnee will let out the seams on your dresses if you set them out for her. We deliberately left a little fabric when we fitted you, thinking this might happen."

There was a lot of muffled talking then.

"I don't care how I make love to you," Sarlie said clearly. "I don't care if you are never to be a true woman. I love you and want to hold you, my darling, like this forever. I want you to be my wife. Let me be beside you and hold you."

That conversation was cut off as someone was crying and someone was being consoled. Mithera and Sarlie were moving together on the bed in a way that suggested lovemaking. I wished they could have heard me as I could hear them but they couldn't.

"Finish that and come to bed," said Hedward testily.

"It will only take me a moment," whispered Choni. "Oh, goodness, you can't want me that quickly, not after what you did to me at suppertime."

"That was supper," growled Hedward. "Now, I want my dessert. I want my sweets."

There was an even more intense sound of wrestling than with Mithera and Sarlie. "Darling, watch out for my pins," murmured Choni. "Let me loosen my hair."

"Oh, oh," groaned Hedward. "Oh, gods, Choni. You're shapelier than ever, aren't you? I have to mount you, girl, I must."

"Well, if you must," giggled Choni and there was the sound of more dress and bed material moving. "Oh. Ah! Ah!"

I was red-faced and ashamed of myself, then I heard Retter's voice. "Are you going to have the change that Mithera is going through?" he asked roughly.

"Why ask that now?" said Hope in a shaky voice, her breathing coming in long gasps between strange noises I had taken to be some sort of background wagon noises.

"No special reason," said Retter huskily. "Just this." Then he did something that made Hope shriek. I'm sure he put his hand over her mouth to keep her from screaming but I could hear her threshing and squealing quite clearly.

You leave her alone, I wanted to scream at Retter, but I held my voice as there was no point. I was thinking of all the horrible things I could do to him for hurting Hope when I realized that they were panting together.

"Oh, that was so good," I heard Hope saying. "You can do that to me anytime you want." There was quiet then. I think they were kissing but I heard someone else moaning in womanly ecstasy.

"I won't be able to do it to you if you have the change," said Retter hoarsely, gasping for breath, revis-

ing all the opinions I had of what was going on in his and Hope's bed.

"I would only ever have the change," said Hope then, "if my man wanted me to have it. And you are my man, Retter. It's never been like this with anyone else for me. Never."

"Not even when you were the seawife on a great ship?" asked Retter. "You were showered with jewels and silk dresses. I could never give you those things."

"You give me something that's even more wonderful," whispered Hope as I heard Choni saying something about loving it, loving it, loving it, to Hedward who was talking in inarticulate grunts.

"I want you to be my Seafarer wife," said Retter. "And promise me you won't do anything like Mithera did to herself. I like the equipment you've got, my woman. I like it when I can make you come as you do. I know you can't fake that and that you must love what I'm doing to you. Say it, will you?"

"I love you," whispered Hedward.

"I love you so very much," said Mithera.

"I, I, I love you," said Hope nervously.

"And you will be my wife forever," said Sarlie.

"I love you as well," murmured Choni.

"I love you more, my darling wife," muttered Hedward.

"I love you saying that," said Mithera. "But, but I can't, I can't, not until Panya says that I can. Some day we'll find out if I can be a wife to you. But maybe you won't want to ask me then."

"I love you more," whispered Retter. "There's no woman I've ever known who compares to you. So I am going to marry you. We'll have a bridal ceremony in Torthard."

"I can't be a bride," whispered Mithera

"I can't be a bride," whispered Hope.

"Did you ask me to be your bride?" asked Choni in sudden delight.

"Of course you can. Choni will love making you the perfect dress. And I want to be the man you stand beside and promise to love you till the sea drowns the land," one of the men said.

"I have this idea for my dress," whispered Choni. "I'm going to make it so sexy that you'll have to fight off all the men in camp when they see me. They'll all want to grab me, throw me on the ground and have me right there as you did at supper tonight."

"Oh," said Hedward. "And who was it who sat in my lap and wasn't wearing any panties when she lifted her dress to sit more comfortably?"

"I'm going to be doing that even more once you're married to me," whispered Choni, the girl I thought of as the shyest and most demure of my maids and girl friends.

"Oh, my lady is to listen to us now," whispered Hope.

"Tell her the good news," said Retter. "You've promised to be my bride."

"I, I didn't!" protested a laughing Hope.

"Every woman must be a bride once in her life," said Retter. "It's the rule on land."

“You made that up!” accused a giggling Hope, the one I thought of as the most responsible of all the girls.

“Tell milady that you’ll be my bride at Torthard,” insisted Retter.

There were sounds of kissing and creaking of beds and “Ohs” and “Ahs” for a little while.

“Y-Yes,” said Hope shakily. “I’ll be a bride for you in Torthard. It will drive all the other girls crazy. No one will have thought of it.”

I waited a few minutes, as the creaking grew.

“M-Milady, if you hear me,” Hope said, “I d-don’t have anything to report. Everything is going very well. Retter is doing a fine job leading us through the back lanes. We haven’t seen a soul since noon and that was only the backs of people.”

Likewise, Choni and Sarlie had little to report but bland statements that things were going well. I could definitely believe them, I thought, as I put the pearl buttons away and went back out of the carriage to the inn stables where I had left Carvy and the men.

I thought my powers as a witch must have disappeared as the Grey Men advanced on me, ignored my commands to stop and seized me in their gauntleted hands and tied my hands behind my back.

“You see, your majesty,” said the Count of Torthard. The ranks of the men parted and I saw Queen Larussa looking at me with a smile on her face. Beside her, Torthard, towering over her, also smiled at me. “I told you she would not be able to tell one set of Grey Men from another.”

“He!” snapped the Queen Regent, stamping her foot. “He can’t tell one set of men at arms from an-

other! Can't you tell the difference, Torthard, between me and him?"

"Oh, your majesty," I gasped, seeing other women coming across the courtyard behind the girl who'd told me to call her Lara when we had romped together in our girlish underthings. She'd been the one to reassure me that my breasts would grow.

I hadn't needed a baby to make my breasts reach female proportions, I thought sourly.

"Your majesty," I finished. I was swirled roughly in my skirts as a soldier tied my legs and skirts with a leather belt. I would not be able to run away. "I am sure the Count Torthard can tell the difference between us quite well."

To my surprise, Torthard threw back his head and laughed at me as I flushed. I was lifted towards a horse. I could see that I was going to be trussed over it, head down one side, legs down the other, like a corpse.

"Just because I kissed you once to prevent you from blowing me to the Grey Fields, Dedrick," said Count Torthard, using the most hurtful form of address anyone could have chosen for me, "that kiss doesn't mean that I thought you were a woman of any kind."

Torthard walked up to me and lifted my head by my long, golden hair. He bent over me and kissed me on the lips, his tongue setting me on fire throughout my body, even in the awful position in which I was being held.

"There," taunted the man who had said my kiss made him feel that he was kissing a woman. "Definitely a he. Oh, yes," he said, licking his lips. "Kisses and tastes just like a man, I would say."

“And you would know?” said the Queen’s voice from somewhere near the horse’s head. All the women about her began to giggle.

“Well, she doesn’t kiss or taste like any woman I ever kissed before,” laughed Torthard. “So she is definitely a he, I would say.”

“I’m glad you think so,” said the Queen Regent of the Baract Kingdom. “We women will ride in the carriage while our warlock, if he is one of those, and not just one of the catamites Orissiana likes to create out of her enemies, can be just like all of the other soldier leaders, and ride a horse to Birchwood.”

Roped to the horse, I could have broken free but I sensed the witchcraft at work about me. Not only was the Queen advancing in her witchery ways, but the women about her were all witches as well.

“He’s pretty,” said one of them. “I like his hair. We must get him to show us how he got such a figure, such lovely breasts and shapely hips. He must show us how to be a woman like him before we have to kill him.”

*****end of part three*****