

Witch-V
Choosing Sides



Philippa Peters



A "New Woman" Novel



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For information address
Reluctant Press
P.O. Box 5829
Sherman Oaks, CA 91413
USA

Call toll free (800) 359-2116

www.reluctantpress.com

CHOOSING SIDES

The future is not set

by Philippa Peters

Concluding *Another Fine Witch, A Plague of Men, All at Sea, and More Woman than Witch*

The look on my face as Pev turned me gave away what I'd been thinking about. "You have! You know how to make swamp gas powder!" my husband whispered, clasping me to him. His hand pressed my head to him as he kissed me, holding me so tight to him, swaying with me as I surrendered to his wonderful lips. "Don't tell a soul," he murmured into my ear as he hugged me and kissed my neck. "We'll talk about it later when we know we have privacy."

Have privacy? On a boat like the *Cormorant*? I couldn't believe how small the deck was, the only deck, as I joined my maids finally in a parasol stroll around the deck. There wasn't much of a crew. They were all agog to look at me, my face enhanced by makeup, swaying in my high heels and stockings that my maids insisted I wear.

“The captain’s lady?” asked one stunned, handsome young rigger. “But how did you get aboard? When?”

“That’s no way to talk to Lady Arrathee Komer,” snarled a familiar, tall, grizzled officer of the deck, Dever, who’d left his post with the helmsman to come and walk with us ‘ladies’. Rosee and Gennee giggled flirtatiously at the red-faced young man who bowed to me and begged my pardon for being so rude.

“Taken by surprise, my lady, by meeting a real woman,” said Sailing Master Dever.

“He asked a good question,” I said to the seaman who had been absolutely correct and had asked nothing at all of Captain Peveret’s wife, not even if I was a seawife, just like Gennee and Rosee.

“My husband promised me that we’d never be parted once we were married,” I told Dever as Peveret had agreed I should tell him. “But once I was aboard, I was so sick. It must have been something that disagreed with me at the Ball. Luckily, since my husband is an alchemist and sailor, he soon cured me. So, I am up and about and able to enjoy sailing again with my pretty maids.”

“Yes, my lady,” said Dever, glancing at Rosee, waving at some other boy who was aloft and who looked away across the sea as he should, on lookout’s duty. “Your maids are very pretty indeed.”

“And neither one is obligated to my husband,” I told him. There was a gleam in the grizzled man’s eyes. “Not his seawives,” I added as Gennee squealed and pointed out some huge fish skimming the waves behind our rapidly moving ship.

“That will please the crew, my lady,” said the older man, watching Gennee lean over the rail, her hair blowing loosely about her face. She did a lithe pirouette for Rosee and was saying something excitedly, her voice high and girlish, about it being a fortunate

sailing as the 'grey ladies', whatever they were, came to wish us a good voyage.

It was an old, sailor's superstition, Dever explained to me, as he watched the girls, I had to think of them that way, head to the galley and beg some leftovers to feed to the fish that were accompanying us. The cook and his assistant came out to help the girls, talking to them, casually putting an arm about either one of them as they pointed out where youngsters were lurking, hanging back from the ship. They even helped the girls to throw bait out, laughing at the feeble attempts of 'girls' to throw like sailors.

"Here is your husband, my lady," said Dever in relief. "I think I need to get the cooks back to work as well."

Peveret strode eagerly up to me and put his arm possessively about me. Dever, I noticed, ordered the cooks back to the galley and then escorted my maids, one on each arm, around the deck again, the girls laughing gaily at whatever he was saying.

"You're a popular man now," I teased my husband who looked at me in surprise. "The crew no longer has to wait for you to make a choice of seawife. Gennee and Rosee are going to be very popular for the rest of the voyage."

"It's not going to be a long one," said my husband, looking up at the sails. "It's such a relief to be really moving at last, not like that last crawl we were put through by *Zephyr*. I think we'll catch Ballaro and his ships just before they anchor off Liss Isle."

"What about the invasion fleets?" I had to ask.

"*Cormorant* will meet them before the attack on Liss," said Peveret shortly, looking away from me again. He sighed and looked down at me, squeezing my tensed body in his arms, caressing me to get me to relax. "And then the fun begins."

“You expect to kill witches,” I said to him with a shiver. We turned upwind along the deck. It felt, as I saw the wash we were leaving in the sea, that we were racing as fast as the ‘grey ladies’ who’d come to beg food from us. But we were not slowing and falling back as they were. Rosee ran to the back rail to wave goodbye to them with a lacy handkerchief.

“See on the aft deck,” Peveret said grimly to me, pointing to the covered lumps beside Rosee. “Those hoods conceal how dangerous this small ship really is, my darling. Ballaro has thirty-five bigger ships, and five like this one, scouts, in his striking force. Then there are the cannon that are on the great ships following with soldiers. They’ll have horses and mules aboard to use after we make a landing.

“Just as we did to the Sun Empire fleet, the idea is to overwhelm your witches and their Grey Men and swamp gas concoctions with concentrated fire. That’s the first thing we do. You’ve seen the new harquebusses in use, too. Imagine all the other men carrying and firing those at whatever forces the Baracts muster.”

Peveret sighed as we came close to the hooded cannons. The reek of black powder pervaded the deck, making my nose wrinkle. “Yes, I can smell that as well,” said Peveret. “It will get worse in our last tendays as we re-train the crew on what they have to do.”

“But this ship isn’t going to be battling witches, is it?” I gulped. My husband didn’t say anything but I could tell by strange look on his face that we were going to be in the thick of the battle. It would be one in which I would have to do something, I knew, a sinking feeling coming over me. I couldn’t let the people of my homeland die without doing something.

Peveret stopped. “How far does your listening device work?” he asked. “If I had sent Robady with one of your pearl earrings in his pocket, would you be able to hear him from here, across the ocean?”

“I don’t know,” I had to tell him in surprise. “I, I could hear you when, when you were out with your friends.”

“In the Quarter?” asked Peveret, squeezing my hand. “I used to spend time there, I have to admit it. I think all seamen who land in Greenhaven do. The provosts, the bluebands, the equivalent of your Baract Watch, they’re harder on what goes on in the Port Quarters, where there are real women. It’s where they live, of course. They’re easier in the Deviants’ Quarter. For us seamen, even us officers, it’s natural to head there to drink, and, frankly, to dip your wick, as seamen say, without having a provost running you in or asking for a hefty tip not to run you in.”

“You dipped your wick for a long time?” I had to ask, feeling all funny inside.

“I had a lot of Port Quarters women in my youth,” said Peveret, moving in front of me so that I had to look at his strong, determined face. “After I’d been to sea, I just found women like Hecala and Panella, for a while, to be easier to talk to. Shared experiences, I think. The women in the clanhouses lead very sheltered lives and the nuns are worse.”

Women like Hecala and Panella? Pev’s words made me shiver. Didn’t he realize that he was describing men in terms of their femaleness? No wonder that he thought nothing of making love to me, another man.

“I’m glad I’m not still in Greenhaven, without you,” I had to tell my husband. I was. I couldn’t imagine a year in a nunnery, having to be a woman. That earned me a long, lingering kiss, my arms finally about my husband’s neck as he held me to him, swaying me enough that my breasts bounced a little against his chest, reminding him of the changes in me since he’d first seen me. Yes, I’d been a cadet officer when he saw me and assigned me to the ranks of cabin boy.

That's what happened to captives, Gennee had told me. Luckily, I wasn't tall or muscular, she'd said. She thought that Peveret had seen me as a girl from the first moment he saw me. I shuddered at that. No, I was a sailor then. But it was true, in a sort of way.

I think Pev was quite convinced I was going to be doing anything he wanted me to do in the coming battle, as I did for him as a woman in bed. That made me feel so awful. I should never have said to him what I had about helping him. I only wanted to keep him alive so that he could go on making love to my female body, to which I was very attached.

"So why are we rushing to catch up with your fleet?" I finally asked Peveret.

"You think it's to capture any witches we can?" suggested Peveret. I nodded, feeling distraught inside at the thought. "My father would like that. But I don't intend to go down with the ship. That's what that course of action would lead to, wouldn't it? My father doesn't seem to understand that witches spy on us as much as we try to spy on them. Our spies have told us they have some kind of instantaneous communications system. You've confirmed to me that it's possible. I really didn't think so before, my darling.

"Anyway, I know the witches will fight back. I've no idea of Sherrene's range, or that of whoever the witch will be whom she's sent to Liss. I think we'll have swamp gas pellets fired into our ships at some point. All Ballaro's ships have cannon aboard that can fire over twice the range Sherrene used at Bridgewater. But, I don't know how many witches can do what she could do. If she'll parley with us ..."

"But your invasion fleet is launched!" I gasped. "Nothing will stop it now but ..."

"A witch's spells probably can stop us or give us victory," said my husband flatly. "But we have only one witch on our side." He looked at me with troubled eyes.

Ballaro's fleet was easy to sense on the ocean. We were still days from it but I could recognize by smell alone where they were and what speed they were traveling at. It must have been from the refuse, the food and bilge garbage sluiced out into the sea by all ships. I'd never sensed such a track before. But then, I wasn't looking for one, either.

"Soon be joining up with the fleet," Dever said to me jovially. Rosee gave him a wink and a smile as she swished past the helm and headed, arm-in-arm with Gennee, on their daily flirtation about the *Cormorant*.

"Be glad to do that?" I asked the Sailing Master as his attention was diverted by Rosee's pouting at a younger seaman's invitation, I expected. Gennee had whispered to me that Rosee had been with almost every member of the crew in the 'short' voyage and was loving every second of the long trip eastwards.

"Going to teach those witches a big lesson," growled Dever, clearly wanting to leave me and discipline the young sailor whom Rosee was making eyes at. "Destroyed great ships in the Black Sea and at Bridgewater. Time to show them who rules the seas, and the Foreshore."

The girls knew that I was a witch but it was astounding to me that the crew of the *Cormorant* didn't. Neither Peveret nor my maids said anything about that. I was the only one, thanks to my sense of smell, who seemed to know how close we were to Ballaro's fleet of fast-moving, cannon-equipped ships.

Peveret got excited when I told him what I could smell. He had me assist him to lay in a new course to take our speeding boat right past the main fleet, Brisard's great ships, the invasion fleet, wallowing along compared to us. We were just a half-day behind Ballaro's ships after starting out two tendays after them. There were no scouts in the rear so that when

the lookout called, "Sails in sight!" the crew was elated with how short the voyage had been.

"Shouldn't happen," Dever repeated, annoyed. "Taking a woman like yourself, my lady, into battle. Shouldn't happen. Should have put you off and your g-, your maids, my lady," he gave me a strange look, "on one of Clan Elder Brisard's landing fleet."

Peveret had been choked about that. "Oh, Brisard's not going back to sea," he'd snarled at me. "My father and his Council didn't lie to me. No, Brisard's going to be in charge of the army when we land it on the Foreshore proper. It's going to be one massacre after another. He hates Baracts and he wasn't even in charge at Bridgewater when *Tempest* was destroyed."

"He was there?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," said Peveret gloomily, playing with my panties and tush, as we whispered together in bed. He'd come very quickly the first time, not stretching out our pleasures in any way and so I was a little miffed. "Had a wonderful time burning out the islanders who'd declared independence from the Council of Seven, the Carabet, as it was called then."

"That's why he's driving his great ships to keep up with Ballaro and the cannon ships," I murmured to my husband who at last was taking notice of my other sorely neglected, aroused, feminine parts.

"Yes," agreed Peveret, taking hold of my shaking hips and making them gyrate even more, kissing me thoroughly. I jiggled my breasts against him as he fondled me. I kissed his chest and nipples, encouraging him to do the same to me, his woman.

"Wants to see a witch die," I said to him at last as his mouth began to descend down my body, arousing all my sensitive parts.



“So you did hear him say that when we were in conference in the Quarter,” said my husband. “Did you hear what I said to him later when I trapped him alone in the jakes?”

“I’d like to see you hack off his manhood and make him into one of Hecala’s fairies,” I said to him softly, repeating a little of what my husband had said to Elder Brisard. Hecala’s dancers finished every set in clingy, fairy dresses with such short, frilled panties, legs on display, gossamer wings attached to their backs, long antenna in their hair. Their madeup eyes and lips gleamed attractively at the wildly applauding audiences that came to see the ‘ballet’, so they said, not the striking examples of shapely women’s bodies that my potions were making common, I heard, throughout the Deviants’ Quarter.

“It would take more ganasate that you could make or I could afford,” said my loving husband, nuzzling my neck, “to make Brisard into Sardee, a woman like you. It would take years!”

“I’d be willing to work on that project,” I whispered to him as Peveret convulsed in laughter as he lifted my smooth legs high so that he could reward me as he thought I should be rewarded as his wife.

The next day was awful as the cannon hoods were lifted on all the ships. We’d joined Ballaro’s fleet just in time to watch as the guns were test-fired. Our six were fired, too, by eager crewmen who wanted us ‘girls’ to be at the helm to be impressed, by them making huge gouts of water, well away from the ship, as we and several bigger ships in Ballaro’s Fleet practiced shooting at targets we were towing.

We slowed our furious rate of advance and joined the fringe of scouts out ahead of Ballaro’s fleet. “We won’t get engaged in the fighting when it starts,” Pev told me confidently on one of our strolls along the deck. There were sailors with spyglasses looking at us from other ships in the flotilla, I could see. With

two maids, I was turned out very girlishly, to encourage 'our' seamen, Pev said.

I twirled my pink or yellow parasol as I paraded. Ballaro's fleet signaled us to end cannon practice and to keep the guns 'primed', whatever that meant.

"We'll get the order soon to drop back," Pev told me. "My job here is to talk to whoever's in charge over there and arrange the terms of their surrender."

I hated the sailors' anticipation in the last few days of our 'scouting' the seas around Liss Isle. They said things similar to Sailing Master Dever. It seemed that all of them had had relatives killed in one of the sea battles by duplicitous witches.

"Just over the horizon," Dever said to me. "You should take your girls below for safety, my lady, this afternoon, before we strike Liss."

Lookouts from several ships in the cannon fleet were signaling that Brisard's great ships were in sight behind the main fleet. They were catching up most unexpectedly, which only made the crewmen happier. Meanwhile, the lookouts on the leading scout ship were signaling 'Land ahead'.

"Liss Isle," said Peveret, handing off his spyglass to others of his officers to look ahead. "What does Brisard think he's doing? He's supposed to keep his fleet hull-down, below the horizon. He can leave the first kill up to Ballaro!"

"He wants to kill a witch," Dever said, using the same words I'd used. I felt my curls shaking all over my neck and bare chest, my breasts tightening, knowing I'd said that while being boffed by Peveret, shrieking in the sexual pleasure of being a woman.

"Sir?" asked one of the younger officers, who was very shy around Gennee as she was shy as well, when she was close to him. "Have you seen what's in front of the other scouts? Does Liss have a big fishing

fleet? Looks like they've doreys out on the waters, and they seem to be flying some kind of kite."

"Going to take a long time for those bigger boats to take in the paddlers on the doreys," Peveret said, studying them. "Never seen kites like that over boats before. Maybe it's to make sure no-one is left behind, markers in some way. But it's calm seas here; shouldn't need them, I'd think. Maybe makes the fishermen feel more secure."

"They're going to find out that nowhere's secure before this day is over," said Dever smugly. Several of the officers grinned. Some of the riggers nearby cheered. I think I was the only one not approving the coming battle wholeheartedly.

"Signal from the Admiral, sir!" Dever shouted angrily. We had to drop out of the coming battle. "All scouts sea anchors; main fleet leads the way into Liss. And that's *Zephyr* in the roads, isn't it? A whalefish surrounded by minnows. Where's the Baracts? At least, those kites in the sky will be pretty for a while. We won't be killing fishermen, fellow sailors, will we? Good idea to mark them but I've never seen that done before."

I'd done whatever my husband had wanted me to do. I'd guided *Cormorant* to the fleet we were now part of. I didn't tell him about the other things I was doing in the workshop whenever I got the chance. I didn't tell him that each night, since we'd joined up with the fleet, I'd used my listening devices and broadcast messages to the witch on Liss Isle, if there was one, telling her about the fleet coming behind us to destroy her. If I was overheard at all, I didn't know, as there was no response. No-one asked, "Who is that?" It was as if I was talking to the air.

"Ballaro is going right in," said Peveret grimly, glaring at all the fishing boats that seemed in no hurry to get out of our way. Surely, I thought, they must have seen the warships strung out in a line by now. They must realize that more ships were coming. Perhaps,

they thought that no-one would start a sea-battle so late in the day. But it was odd that the pretty dories and colorful kites weren't in flight at all from the war-ships bearing down on them.

Perhaps they just thought that they were too insignificant to be boarded and swept up by a strange fleet. An uneasy feeling was creeping all over me.

“Cannon firing first?” I asked Pev, sick with thoughts of the carnage to come that I was powerless to stop. Was that why I was so queasy? But I had seen carnage before, hadn't I? I shouldn't feel sick, womanish, at the thought of blood being spilt. Nervously, I checked the potions about me. I'd prepared windblown controllers, hidden in every compartment of my purse, and every pocket of my dress. But how could whatever I did help to stop the cataclysm that was bound to fall on Liss? I was sure that was why I was so uneasy.

The *Cormorant* crew had more than made up for lack of early firing practice by firing the cannon many, many times in the last tenday. There was a burnt, black powder smell aboard our ship as we let Ballaro and his fairly huge, heavily armed, stinking ships pass us. All day long, we'd heard some ship in that fleet firing at targets. Now at Liss, I was sure the fleet, and us, were ready for battle.

“That's what Ballaro is ordering,” said Peveret, studying the sea and the ships heading in, in three columns. “Straight in, no finesse, no flags, no messages, no warnings at all!”

“If you wanted to stop him, my darling husband, you could ...” call a parley and I could use a potion on him and all his captains, I wanted to say. I spoke in the soft, girlish whisper I used to talk to Peveret in bed. My husband turned and looked at me as if he'd never seen me before. I couldn't help revealing all the nervousness I felt as I noted the fishing boats from Liss not moving at all.

“You’re still a Baract witch,” Pev said, slowly and carefully, stressing ‘Baract’.

“You’re going to kill ...” I began, about to tell him where my true allegiance lay.

“You have grains of collasolane, swamp gas,” said my husband bleakly, “in your pretty purse. You’ll expose it and blow us all to the Grey Fields?”

“N-No,” I said weakly.

“I hoped you loved me,” said my husband starkly, watching how the men were reacting with glee at the thought of a ‘battle’ they were sure to win.

Peveret signaled to one of his officers, the shy one who liked the very girlish, pretty Gennee. “My wife is fatigued,” he said as I shook my head frantically. Pev wouldn’t look at me, his face dark and grim. “Take her to the captain’s cabin. Let her maids attend Lady Arrathee but remain there on guard until I come for her later.”

And so that was why I missed most of the great battle of Liss Isle. I cried and was distraught inside but I obeyed my husband as a good wife should. I was locked in a cabin with two anxious, terrified ‘girls’ while all we heard was the sound of one explosion after another. Occasionally we heard loud curses and running feet and Dever yelling at others to do their duty as he was doing his.

I guessed that the witch, and there must surely be one on Liss Isle, was fighting back against the attacking ships but I was certain that she, and all of those small boats, in the way of the greatest fleet ever to enter the Black Sea, must be being completely destroyed. I was, of course, totally wrong.

A white-faced, ashen Peveret came for me, taking my hand, his shaking even worse than mine as he did so. He dragged me past my frightened maids and out onto the deck where he just stretched out his hand to show me the burning hulks that stretched out to the horizon. Several I could recognize by their size as great ships. Even as I stared, one pitched forward, showing that its bow was completely blown away, and slid rapidly beneath the waves, its hull full of soldiers and their equipment, disappearing in moments.

“You warned them somehow, didn’t you?” Peveret asked me in a hoarse, hollow voice. “You’ve never loved me. It’s all been a game, hasn’t it, and I’ve been the biggest fool ever in the history of the world. Again,” the bitter words stung as it was partly true. But I hadn’t done anything to bring such total disaster to the Cunian fleet, “again, it’s a Baract witch that’s inflicted a catastrophe on us.”

“Not, not me!” I gasped, my eyes unable to take in all the horrors I saw on the ocean in front of me. All the way to the horizon, there was nothing but shattered wreckage.

“What, what happened?” was all that came out of my stultified mind as I looked over a sea of burning wrecks. A huge explosion blew apart another ship. My lovely dress rippled in the rush of warm wind that blew over me, my long, blonde hair floating so femininely about my shoulders.

There was little more than spars and wooden slats floating in the water where once a ship had been maneuvering to free itself from the blockaded waters, blocked by wrecks that the warship itself had now become.

Dever came up to my husband, his face ravaged. “*Greenhawk* is gone, sir,” he mumbled in distress.

“We’re the last fleet ship afloat. All the others out there, captain,” he pointed to larger ships with furled sails and signal flags sending out messages I couldn’t read any more, “are theirs. Permission to run out the guns, sir?”

“They’re picking up survivors, Sailing Master,” said Peveret bleakly. “You wish me to give the order to fire on ships rescuing Cunian sailors from sea graves?”

Dever couldn’t answer. He stared in haunted fashion at the carnage that once had been lines of speedy warships. Yes, he wanted to fire on the ‘rescue’ ships. It looked like the few others I could see, the helmsman and his mates, would have agreed with him and not the captain, my husband.

“I don’t understand ...” I gasped, knowing how silly and girlish I sounded. “How, how could ...”

“Those kites,” said my husband, pointing. “They weren’t markers. The crews of those doreys, as we called them, were fishing for something larger than schoolfish. Those kites,” a few floated in the sky from small boats involved in rescues, “fell on the lead ships first. Something inside them popped open when they tangled the sails, or when the men in those doreys did something.

“Swamp gas powders rained down,” Peveret went on as I shuddered at his words. “Blew the upper decks of ships apart, the cannons and their black powder stocks. I don’t think one of our ships got off a cannon shot before they were destroyed.”

“The great ships, too, with all those men?” I had to ask, horror-stricken.

“Brisard couldn’t wait to take part in yet another disaster,” said my husband bleakly.

“But *Cormorant* ...” I had to say. I had to hold my short skirt down, turning to face the rising wind. I

noted the hungry looks on the faces of several men as they stared at me. I almost panicked and threw honey-mind controller into the air but Peveret's hand snaked out and took hold of my wrist.

"We had kites over us at first, but they moved by us," he said. "They've got some kind of signaling system." My husband looked at me meaningfully. "Clearly, we weren't to be touched. Why do you think, my darling wife," that was a sneer and I shuddered all over, "that all the ships about us are destroyed and we ride the waves without a splinter loosened from us at all?"

"You, you think that the witches know about me?" I whispered.

"What do you think, my beloved?" asked Peveret. "And they know about those too well." He nodded to Dever and the glowering riggers, harquebusses in hand, those not clustered around the cannon on the aft deck.

"Orders, captain?" asked Dever, eyes glittering fiercely.

"That courier," said Peveret, pointing to a ship bearing down on us, white flags flying, "will tell us what to do. For the moment, look for survivors, pick up all we can and then follow the Baract ship. Yes, stay alive. We'll be the ones to get home and tell the Many Isles that the witches have defeated us once more."

"As soon as you have filled your decks with survivors, head into port," called someone from the Baract ship. "We'll do what we can for your wounded. Take them to the great ship you call *Zephyr*. That's where all rescue efforts are converging."

"He didn't mention the cannon, sir," said Dever as the courier moved easily past us, throwing lines out to calling sailors on what must have been part of the hull of a warship.

“He didn’t have to,” said Peveret, indicating two small, stationary boats with men standing in them, holding kite lines stationary over us. “The men out there want us to make the mistake of firing our cannon. Then we’ll be part of the flotsam. Cover the cannon, Sailing Master. Let’s start being a rescue boat before we head in to port.”

Liss Isle’s quays bristled with ships. The Baract patroller ships brought a lump to my throat as I saw more than one that looked like *King Tatheren’s Sword*. I should have been on one of them, in uniform, fighting for my kingdom. I shouldn’t be like this, repairing my lip gloss and other makeup, spraying my pretty, long hair, and having my maids make my dress look prettier as it swirled about me.

I looked but couldn’t recognize the spot where *Sword* would have been when it was run down by Brisard and *Silvery Seas*. Just one lonely great ship lay among all the minnows, boatloads of half-drowned soldiers being hauled aboard. I’d once been in charge of medicine on that ship, *Zephyr*.

I volunteered to help with injuries again. Peveret said nothing but the looks he and Dever gave me were enough. No, they weren’t admiring my dress and my pretty hair any more. I wasn’t a woman to them, but a Baract witch. A woman like me, a witch, would not be welcome on *Zephyr*, not now, so soon after the massacre which the Cunians had expected, just not to themselves.

Liss Isle’s dock harbor was busier than I’d ever seen it. There were more women and children than I’d ever seen in that place. There was bunting on every stall in the marketplace. The whole place seemed festive, once we’d delivered all the men we’d saved from the sea to the courier boat there to ferry men to *Zephyr*.

“Lady Sherrene is here,” one of the beaming stallholders told us, Peveret following the polite, well-armed soldier who’d invited us to follow him to

the Count's residence. I'd never heard before that Liss had a nobleman in charge of the place. I'd thought that it was ruled by a council of traders. Pev briefly put his arm protectively around me, marking me as his woman, as several Baract seamen, or sailors, were admiring me.

"We came out," said a smiling woman at another stall, "in case the Countess walks about in the market as she did yesterday. She's the sweetest lady, as pretty as your wife there! She's a witch but so nice to meet!"

"And it is a glorious victory!" laughed a bearded man, handling some of the trinkets on sale at one stall. "Got to have a memento for the wife back in Terraire!"

"A glorious victory," muttered Dever to my husband. "I think I'd rather be aboard ship with my rum bottle, sir."

Peveret let him go, motioning to Rosee and Gennee to stay close to me.

"Isn't it so awful, my lady," Rosee moaned to me while Gennee was white-faced with shock as there was a loud explosion from out beyond the sea lanes. All the people in the market let loose with a great cheer while the Seafarers looked glum.

"Awful for one side," I had to whisper to her, "but not for those who weren't blown to pieces by the cannon that Ballaro and Brisard brought here to do just that. The people here are reacting happily in their relief at being alive."

It didn't help my maids see it that way. Then again, walking through a marketplace in which girls were really girls was a most stressful experience for them in itself. I seemed able to ignore it completely. I was a woman, a wife and a witch, I thought, as I minced after my husband. We followed the soldier who led us

to a well-guarded house, festooned in green and white colors.

An older, well-dressed, trim-looking man waited for us. “Elder Peveret,” said the man with a courtly bow.

“Count Torthard,” said the grim-faced man beside me. “So it’s true. Once more, Lady Sherrene, your Countess, is the architect of the disaster which the Many Isles have suffered today.”

“Hardly, sir,” said Torthard, turning to bow to me. I curtsayed without even thinking, only flushing a little at the approving smile that lit up his face. “Lady Arrathee, I presume, clanwife of the Komer Elder, Peveret the Spymaster. Or is it Captain Peveret, sailor, or ambassador Peveret, envoy of the High Council?”

“My wife, Lady Arrathee Komer, Clan Lady of the Yaro,” said Peveret stiffly, finally looking at me in my stylish, Baract, knee-length dress and braided, blonde hair. My carabet necklace was in place as well as long, dangling, pearl earrings in the bluish colors of Cunya. I felt a flutter go through me as he touched me possessively for the first time since he’d steadied me as I minced off *Cormorant* in my very feminine high heels to the resounding dock. “Count Torthard is the head of the King’s High Council, as you probably know, being a Baract like him.”

Torthard held onto my hand and openly laughed at my husband and his petulant words. “What an insult!” he marveled. “Lady Arrathee is a jewel of femininity, like my wife. She had nothing to do with your defeat on the ocean. That was all due to your blind High Council, as you know very well, Pev. Your Council of Seven thinks that a peaceful people are only that way because they’re weak. Well, we would be, if my wife, the Countess, hadn’t grown and gained in knowledge and skills as you Seafarers have done since the Battle of Bridgewater.

“Come Lady Arrathee, bring your wrathful husband with you and meet the loveliest woman in the world. I trust you realize that your man there is mostly irate because his advice to the Council of Seven has been ignored repeatedly, year after year. Well, you warned them that this attack was going to destroy the military power of a great nation, didn’t you, Pev, and you were right!”

I didn’t expect the next meeting would take place in a nursery. A golden-haired Seafarer woman had a baby at her breast as did a stiff, poker-faced girl sitting beside her. As we were acclaimed at the door by another woman, the babies were hastily covered in thin, silky blankets as they suckled from the young women, but not before I got a glimpse of lovely, feminine breasts and blissful babes.

“Oh, Rebern,” laughed the blonde woman who lifted her lovely face to receive her husband’s kiss on her lips. “What a way to introduce me to our guests!”

“My wife, Countess Sherrene Torthard and Perisord,” laughed Count Torthard, kneeling beside his wife and lifting the silk blanket so that he could see his daughter attached to Sherrene’s breast. “And Lady Darisse, serving us now as wet nurse and nanny to our beautiful daughters. I’ll introduce you to our sons later but you know how boys are, out and about, seeing everything going on.”

“My Lady,” said Peveret, a grim look on his face, bowing and drawing me forward, allowing me to curtsy as well, my soft skirts flowing about my stockinged legs. “Lady Arrathee, whom I believe you know.”

“Of course,” said the blonde woman I was staring at. She was so lovely, suckling her baby. But that didn’t stop her putting out a lovely, pink-tipped hand to take mine, like hers. “Robady Mustay is back with us. Thank you for sending him with your proposed gift of a ship, Peveret. He’s talked of nothing else but you, Lady Arrathee, and your exploits on two great

ships, I gather. How perceptive of you, Pev, to recognize an untrained witch in that incident you staged in the roads, to *King Tatheren's Sword*."

"Don't blame that on me, my lady," said my husband quickly. "That was done at the orders of Clan Elder Brisard. You've made him pay for that mistake, my lady."

"Such an impetuous fool," murmured the blonde woman, looking at me, making me shudder as I saw how beautiful and blonde Lady Sherrene was, her makeup perfect, her lips just slightly mussed where she had been kissed by her husband. How could anyone, at any time, have made up that terrible story that she was a man?

"Oh, I do love that dress, Arrathee," Sherrene said. "Don't you just love it as well, Darisse? We must have dresses made for us exactly like them, Arrathee, for the late summer balls in Hillaire. Choni, who dresses me and all my friends, is going to be so jealous that she didn't make one with such beautiful, feminine lines. Of course, being as womanly and pretty as you, Arrathee, makes anything look good, I would suppose."

"My lady," said the solemn girl beside her, "I think that Cupayana is asleep here on me."

"And so is Airissa," laughed the young woman who was just too young, her voice too girlish, to be Lady Sherrene. "Help us, darling," she smiled up at her husband, "while we disentangle ourselves from these sated, little leeches!"

It was a cringe-inducing performance as I watched, my eyes surely popping out of my head, as Count Torthard eased the baby from her mother, the babe beginning to suck again as the breast was removed. Sherrene had to adjust her bra, her breast and her dress while my husband and I looked on, he as stunned as I was at the performance.

Lady Darisse took one child off to an adjoining room where there was a crib and then came back for Airissa. “I don’t know what I’d do without Darisse,” said Sherrene, her husband’s arm about her narrow waist. Again, she reached out to me. “Let’s go out on the balcony and look at the awful disaster one more time, shall we, Arrathee. We have so much to talk about together, then, girls and witches like us.”

Servants appeared quickly and quietly, smiling at Lady Sherrene as she always thanked them for whatever service they performed. They brought us silken, feminine wraps, and cool drinks. They positioned chairs perfectly for us on the balcony that afforded a limited display of the port and the ships anchored there, *Zephyr* dominating.

The men talked about the ships and the cannons and how the news of such a total defeat was going to affect the politics of the Many Isles.

“I didn’t know until yesterday that you were trying to contact me, here on Liss Isle,” murmured Lady Sherrene, stroking my hand as we sat together on a shaded, swinging seat. She took off one of her pearl earrings then as she spoke. I heard it buzzing as she brought it closer to me.

“You used some of that accidental potion I made on *Tempest*, didn’t you?” Lady Sherrene asked me. “If Darisse hadn’t set out those earrings to go with the white dress I was wearing, I’d never have realized that you were sending me a message.”

“You don’t use that potion any more?” I asked her.

“No,” said Sherrene, looking no older than me as she put the earring in her purse. “My aunt, Orissiana the Terrible, could send messages, I found, to other witches and to non-witches. She could even make the coins she used heat up and burn those she was displeased with. Enned, she’s a real, female witch and great friend of mine, and I, have worked on messaging for a while, a safe and proper way of com-

municating. We've a circle of countesses and ladies, many non-witches, whom we send to, and just a few trusted men."

Sherrene laughed as she squeezed my hand and complimented me on how pretty I was, making me warm all over. "The men don't use it much," she said in her beautiful, lilting, soprano voice, "as we girls do tend to chatter on about dresses and babies and cures for infant maladies. Who was the witch in your family's home town, Arrathee?"

"Dolora," I told her, wondering how she, such a woman, could sit there in a dress that was as short as mine, her nipples showing despite the bra and dress she was wearing, a mother who had just breastfed her baby; and yet, I'd noted, Lady Sherrene had made a clear distinction between Enned, a real female witch, and herself.

"You're from Cormallen then," said Lady Sherrene. "Dolora never mentioned someone of talent existed out there and she's supposed to be looking for that." She sighed. "Some of the older witches on the circuit are like that." Dolora was old? She'd always looked to me as if she was barely out of her teens. "They only look at girls and they make lots of mistakes. After all, girls are naturally interested in perfumes and heavenly scents, aren't they? But how many could tell that your perfume is upland violets over a three to one base of water roses?"

"Water roses are ubiquitous in the Many Isles' perfumeries," I murmured with a shudder.

"You can tell me what I'm wearing," said Sherrene with a mischievous, girlish grin.

"A real attar of roses," I began, "upland meadow flowers, no violets," that was a perfume that was really made from mixtures of aromatic herbs like arenine, "and one in ten, I think, a base of musk."

“Perfect,” smiled Sherrene as the men turned to us and listened to us talking about perfume. “I wear it to arouse my husband as he loves musk. But look at him. I think that I don’t excite him at all any more. It used to be that he would want me, take me, at any time of the day, pressing me over any table and chair, having me by surprise, and look at him now, an old man, nodding off in his dotage. I think a younger man like Robady ... Eeeeeek!”

The last word was screamed in fake dismay as the ‘brute’ of a husband, as Sherrene called him as she was lifted, her long legs and undies exposed by her husband tipping her and marching, Sherrene in his arms, with her into the next room. We could hear the loving, delighted cries and grunts of sexual congress as Count Torthard did to his aroused, excited wife all the things that she claimed that he hadn’t been doing to her lately.

Peveret took my hand and drew me to the other end of the balcony where we could hear less of the rutting couple. “You will look like you do now when you are as old as Lady Sherrene?” he asked me roughly.

I so desperately wanted him to take me in his arms and kiss me as Torthard was kissing his wife. He could have lifted my skirts and taken down my panties and penetrated me as Torthard was undoubtedly doing to Sherrene. I would have loved it as I always did. As much as Sherrene obviously did. But Peveret could only look out over the bay at the dredges going out into the sea lanes and cleaning away the wreckage of the terrible sea battle.

“You tried to contact her,” Peveret said thickly. “I wasn’t wrong in saying that to you. You didn’t know she’d heard you.”

“I wanted to tell any witch who could hear me to get out of the way of the fleet coming to slaughter them but I think Lady Sherrene and her husband al-

ready knew, didn't they?" I said. "You, you didn't send Robady with a message ...?"

"Me, betray my father?" asked my husband bitterly. "I knew what Robady would tell whoever was here about our ships and our plans. But it should have made no difference. All those kites with swamp gas. We should have shot them down."

"It wouldn't have made a difference," I said with a shudder. "They'll use new tactics next time."

"Yes," said Peveret and his arm went about my shoulders. "Torthard was just telling me that ..."

There was a noise behind us and Lady Darisse came out on the balcony with Robady, a tall, handsome Robady, hair cut back in lordly fashion, a gold ring on his finger. His clothing was as stylish and expensive as Count Torthard's.

"Count Mustay," Lady Darisse announced in her high, lilting voice. She glanced around and sashayed femininely to the door that shielded the lovers, closing it firmly before turning back to us and the bemused Robady. "The Count and Countess will be with you soon, my lord," she announced, as solemn as before in expression, "as soon as they have prepared themselves for the dusk revels."

"Count Mustay?" asked Peveret, releasing me from the embrace he'd held me in, still not having kissed me at all.

"My uncle finally passed away and, being the nearest male heir, I inherit the title and estates," said Robady, almost leering as he looked at me. "So I'm done with the sea, it seems. And I must thank you, Lord Peveret." That was how all Kingdom aristocrats addressed the leading members of all Many Isles' clans, as if they were of equal rank to them. "Without your placing me on *Zephyr* again, I could be part of that wreckage out there. Gods, whatever possessed

Brisard to bring the great ships in with the warships.”

“Eager for glory,” said Peveret sourly.

“Did I see that you have certain, ah, shall we call them girls, with you, my Lady Arrathee?” asked Robady lightly.

“Gennee and Rosee are with me,” I said to him with a shudder.

“You haven’t told anyone ...?” Rob began with a definite smirk on his face.

“No, we don’t tell anyone anything,” I said as Rob looked me up and down. I couldn’t tell if he was admiring my pretty dress, my stockings and my high heels or if he was disgusted at the figure I now had, the hair and makeup that I presented so femininely.

I couldn’t help reminding him of some on the lies that Rob had told me and other girls. “So you’ll be marrying soon,” I said, letting my flirty, girlish voice and mannerisms, taught to me by my clansisters, take over, “taking your chosen girl home to meet your relatives. I believe that being away so long that you’re addicted to blonde women as lovers, and as wives, or so I’m told.”

Robady smiled as Peveret frowned at me. “Pillow talk,” Rob said. “Didn’t know, my lady,” that was sarcastic again, “that you’d be jealous of one of your maids.”

“He gave the same line to Gennee, that he’d marry her and make her a Countess, as he did to me,” I said to my husband. “He even had the nerve to suggest that he’d arrange children for her to mother.”

“I did no such thing,” said Robady hotly. “What are you, strange or something? A man can’t be a mother! Are you sick or something?”

So he didn't know about Lady Sherrene. I looked at Peveret. Maybe we were the only ones, other than the rutting couple in the bedroom who knew exactly what they were, a couple like us, Sherrene and 'her' husband.

"I'm not sick. I'm a witch," I said easily to Robady, my friend, and, once, aboard *Zephyr*, my lover. "Marry Gennee, my lord," I said to him with a feminine curtsy, "and come and see me about your children. I think you deserve five or six, a robust man like yourself."

"You can't say that to me, you ... you ..." said a red-faced Robady, searching for an appropriate insult to give to someone like me.

"Watch what you say to my wife," said Peveret, coming forward forcefully and putting his arm about me. From the doorway to the balcony, Lady Darisse gasped and stared at us.

"Should, should I call the guard?" she asked, swallowing heavily. Then it was that I noticed the Adam's apple in her neck, bobbing up and down, as 'she' saw two men about to square off.

"Not at this time, Lady Darisse," I said as sweetly as I could to 'her'. "But do you have some way of speaking to Lady Sherrene to let her know that she has other, other guests, awaiting her and her husband?"

Darisse looked at me and nodded stiffly. "I, I will contact her right away," she said, stepping back into the antechamber to the balcony.

"Well, it is nice to see you again, Robady," said Peveret, falsely jovial. "I've missed our little chats. I must relay the intent of them to Lady Sherrene. I think she'll be amused to learn more than I think she knows about her new Count."

Robady struggled to answer, glancing at Darisse through the window. She turned away, her hand raising the collar of her dress, as she talked to someone with a pretty, feminine handkerchief holding something like a coin or a cameo in front of her face.

“I think that I’d be more useful to you in the future, my lord,” said Robady, “if Lady Sherrene did not have that information, don’t you?”

“Possibly,” agreed my husband equably. “Ah, Lady Darisse?”

“My Lady wishes me to escort you to the guest quarters in this building,” she said, clutching the scarf still to her neck. “The Count of Liss is insisting on a Victory Ball. You are invited to attend, as is Count Mustay. Any of your officers who feel that they could attend, Lord Peveret, are also welcome. I have dresses that you can choose from, Lady Arrathee, if you will let me show you the collection that I believe your maids are accumulating.”

“My Lady,” said the jovial Count of the Liss Isles, “call me Frenny, please. It’s so wonderful to see you here, at this little party I insisted we have. I thought we’d all be dead this evening! But here I am, dancing with the loveliest of ladies on the Isle. I am so glad to be alive!”

I was swirled past Gennee, ‘Lady’ Gennee as all the Baract officers and lordlings, courtiers and magnates, I supposed, were calling her. ‘Lady’ Rosee was also dancing, with Robady, I noted, wondering what they could find to talk about that left each of them smiling and giggling with one another.

“I know your husband must be pretty devastated,” said Frenny, deliberately pirouetting me so that my dress swirled against him. Somehow, my breasts in my low cut, glittering dress did as well. Frenny was

an expert dancer, I decided, who knew exactly what he was doing. I didn't doubt that he would proposition me, as if I really was a woman, later, in the 'little party'.

"Tough to lose so many ships and so many friends," Frenny went on. "But that Ballaro fellow, the commander with all the cannons, has been found. Disguised himself as an ordinary rigger, I hear. Couldn't hide from Lady Sherrene, though. She had him marked from the time he passed Haruva Isle.

"I must say that I've never heard of ships coming here so quickly. And the scout you were on, how speedily it crossed the Ocean of Clouds. Probably upsetting your husband that Lady Sherrene let him survive. Thinks he should have gone down with his ship and all that rot."

I would have disagreed with Frenny but he touched my tush, which was too much. I took his hand and raised it to my waist. "I'm a married woman," I said to the randy, old Count who apologized profusely while I had a fit of the shakes at the way I so casually categorized myself to the buffoon. I saw him later doing the same thing to Lady Gennee. She endured his male attention far longer than I'd done.

"Done your obligatory grope with Count Liss," said Robady, cutting in on me as I was applauding the musicians at the end of one slow dance as they began another. I barely had time to wave goodbye to the tall cadet, who'd described the life on his patrol ship. It had seemed to mirror experiences I'd had as a cadet officer and as a young man.

"And the same thing with another cadet," I said, forcing a smile onto my lips.

"Ouch," said Robady, lifting his hand a little, the caress along the line of my panties raising a thrill inside me. I looked up at the man who had once been

my friend, someone I talked to about girls for hours, crossing the Black Sea on week-long patrols. He wasn't looking at me any more, however, as if we were fellow cadets, sort of friends, male friends.

"I've tried to tell you a couple of times," said Robady, leaning into me, my breasts pushing against him as he whispered in my ear, "that I shouldn't have done what Dowd wanted me to do on *Zephyr*. I should never have played dead and let him take you from me. I was only following my orders, though. Peveret told me to do whatever I could to have Dowd confide in me and I did. I hated having to give you up. And then Peveret wouldn't let me near you again."

"Oh, poor darling," I murmured. "Want to be pals again? Want to visit the girls in Madame Merenda's? It's your turn, I believe, to have the ugly one."

Robady's face went taut with anger. But he sighed and hugged me tighter. "I take it, Arrathee, that you do feel something for me or you wouldn't be so nasty to me," he said, taking my breath away.

Was that right? I wasn't a bitch to anyone else, was I? Oh, I wasn't turning into the sort of girl that Rob and I had laughed about when we were in port, was I? Well, of course, I was. I was a married woman, wasn't I? And we'd agreed, Rob and I, that all married women were bitches, hadn't we?

We were going to play the field, Rob had always told me, like your father's rams and bulls with a barn full of sweet ewes and heifers. We'd even used those terms for girls. The jealous ones, whom Rob had used once and discarded, got the other name, bitches, to describe them. Rob had said the same thing to me then as he did now. That he didn't mind the bitchiness. It just meant that those girls were still in love with him.

"I'm nasty to you," I told Rob as we clinched together as we circled the floor, "because you are nasty, smirking and sneering at me."

“That’s because I love you,” said Robady, squashing all of the breath out of me and making me panic as he held me harder. “I don’t want Gennee, although she’s pretty and a fire ant in bed. I don’t want any of the girls I’ve had since I’ve been here. They don’t excite me. They don’t let me touch them or caress them as I want. It’s always what they want which is so tiresome. It’s not like the two of us and you being so wriggly and me taking you every way I could think of. I want to make love with you so much, darling Arrathee. I want to hold you and never let you go ...”

I let him go, shaking like a leaf. I heard him call after me. Amazingly, it was Count Torthard who intervened and put his arms about me, pulling me into a dance as Rob, glaring, went right by us and almost took Gennee out of the arms of a Baract cadet, who looked quite angry, as the new Count swept away with the beautiful girl.

“Mustay is giving you trouble,” stated the Count quietly as I was swished correctly about the dance floor, feeling again so womanly in my pretty dress and jingly earrings. I looked towards the doorway where Peveret had been standing. My heart sank. He was gone. “Your husband’s gone down to visit the men on *Zephyr of Serenity*. It’s what any good commander should do.”

“And left me here,” I said, more crossly than I intended.

“With Robady Mustay and all your fellow Baracts,” said Torthard, his eyes focusing on mine. “Yes, I think it’s deliberate on his part. Peveret may be the enemy, sort of, but he’s an honorable man. He’s opening the gate and letting you run off if you want to.

“You can be the beautiful Countess of Mustay, if you want it. Robady has already asked us if we’d object. We’ve told him that it’s what you want, not what we want, that counts in his pursuit of the only woman he’s ever loved. His words, by the way. So, de-

cide what kind of woman you want to be, Lady Arrathee, Baract or Cunyan. And if you can't, talk to my wife. She has another offer to make to you if you don't know what you're doing. You don't have a lot of experience with men, do you, My Lady?"

"What offer are you talking about?" I asked the man dancing me so seductively. Nervously, I looked up into the man's eyes, one of the three men who knew that my tight, shapely gown was concealing not a woman, but another man.

"You'll have to talk to Sherrene about it," said Torthard. "Tomorrow. Tonight is going to be hell. That little love game I played with my wife this afternoon was to remind her that I'm here. I'll support her in whatever she wants to do. Life is fun. But not tonight."

"Tonight, when all the celebrants have gone, she and I will go to bed. Sherrene will sob the whole night long, even if we make love, as she thinks about all the men she killed today in the battle that was forced upon her. I'll tell my darling, lovely Sherrene that it's not her fault but she'll cry and say, if only she was a witch, and not a warlock, this would all be different."

I stiffened in his arms as he said that to me. It was almost as if Torthard was reading my mind as, all the time that he had been speaking of 'her' and 'she', I'd been amazed that he could think of Sherrene in that way, particularly as he went to bed with her every night.

And how did she have their children? And how could she breastfeed her children? But the last was easy. I'd smelled the mandane lightly underneath batrice, a wortbane that was a major part of lotions I'd mixed for stockmen with ewes or cows that dried up. I guessed that the mandane, to prevent a man impregnating his or another man's wife, was needed to allow the buildup of female milk sacs that I'd seen grow many times on the female farm animals back in Cormallen.

“It’s hard to be a woman,” said Count Torthard seriously to me. “As Lady Darisse is finding out, particularly as she doesn’t want to follow the same route that Lady Mithera pioneered. You should ask my wife about them if you want truly to be a woman, Arrathee. It’s not for the squeamish as it does involve cutting. You can never put back something once it’s been removed.”

“You remove male ...” I began, huge shivers of revulsion running through me. I had to cling to Count Torthard as I would have clung to my husband. With Pev, me being so girlish made people smile. Now I saw frowns on the faces of the few people looking my way as I jiggled my breasts and female figure against another woman’s husband.

“Not me,” said Torthard, pulling a face as he hugged me warmly. I felt jitters running all through me. My panties seemed far too tight, my breasts far too aroused, my dress so awfully femmy and feminizing about me. “I’ve said enough to you, sweet Arrathee. You should talk to my wife. But tomorrow, or even the day beyond.

“Sherrene has her own grieving to pass through, even if it’s only for the stupidity and folly of foolish men. They were warned, these Seafarers, what could happen to them and yet they intended, nevertheless, to destroy and enslave a Kingdom that doesn’t threaten them at all. Despite all my reasoning, however, Sherrene’s grief is going to be heartfelt.”

I was in a daze after Torthard left me. I stayed out on the floor, away from Robady, who was definitely making a play for Gennee, even though I’d warned her before I gave permission for her and Rosee to attend the Victory Ball. The dancing and affections exchanged between men and women was definitely becoming wilder as alcohol loosened the tongues of the junior officers. They toasted being alive, and the enemy fleet being conquered, and not being dead in a battle that only a few had been actually involved in.



Count Liss proclaimed the last dance ‘and victory’. I was seized by the tall cadet who wanted to come back to my quarters with me, since my husband had deserted me. I thought about it as I was jolted by the sight of Gennee leaving with Rob’s arm about her. You’re not a woman, a voice inside me told me. I tried, prettily, womanly, to tell the young man that I wasn’t available.

“I’m a married woman,” I told him, the funny feelings running all over me again as I said what I knew wasn’t really true, could never be true for Arrat, the real me. Bitch, I said to myself, as Gorden finally left me. I retreated into the guest quarters all alone, not one of my maids there to help me.

I took my time and removed my makeup slowly, looking at the person I’d become. Even as my eyes revealed themselves truly, my eyelashes thick and dark and curled, it was a woman who looked at me somberly. Removing my bra left me with high, rounded mounds on my chest, moving easily as I stretched my thin arms to re-braid my hair for sleeping.

My lips had never been like that when I’d been Arrat Metherd. They’d never been so full, so pink, like my nipples, or so soft and kissable. I kept on my carabet necklace and my long earrings, slipping the long, white nightdress over my blonde braids that reached down on either side to my breasts.

No, I’d never had hair this long, this curly, this shiny, this golden. I didn’t recall when the girls had last bleached my hair to keep it a Seafarer blonde. It seemed that it had made a permanent change like the rest of me. I wouldn’t look in the mirror full on as I selected my panties and put them on me, looking over my shoulder as I eased them into place, seeing the rounded tush, protruding breast, smooth hips and long, shapely legs as my lace-edged panties fitted about me. How I loved the touch of women’s clothing on me. I must be a woman, I told myself, I must. I have a husband I must console.

Oh, come to me, I begged Peveret silently, my heart beginning to beat feverishly. I knew just what my maids were doing with whomever they were with, men for sure. Oh, I was so jealous of Gennee, Rosee, and even Sherrene, right then. You're as much a woman as me, I thought angrily, but you never have these thoughts that I do, remembering what you once were.

Your wife needs you, I thought to Peveret, wishing I could communicate with him, turning and posing girlishly in front of the mirror. I wanted him to see me. I wanted to see the desire in his eyes and to have him tell me what a desirable woman I was.

Rosee would pose like this all the time. Gennee and I would laugh at her, not that it affected Rosee at all. She'd use the crudest of words as she taunted whoever she was seeing in her imagination as she contorted so sexily, so femininely, in the mirror. "Do me," she would urge her imaginary lover as she writhed. "Do me! Do me now if you really love me!"

"I guess he doesn't love her," Gennee would whisper to me. We would both giggle at the writhing girl actually moving as if an invisible man was possessing her, turning her this way and that, most cruelly.

I writhed as Rosee had in front of the same mirror. I whispered the same words. "Do me, Peveret!" I hissed at the image of the woman in front of me, so clearly aroused and writhing around the chair she had been seated upon most seductively. But, just like Rosee, no-one came, even when I begged Pev to love me, love me now, and even used the crudities that men use when they say they will make love to a woman.

Overheated and breathing as hard as if I'd run all the way into town, with one of Polwer's potions for the innkeeper's wife, I wiggled all over the bed, imagining that my husband was there, watching me. But he never emerged from the shadows. And somewhere else in the castle, I heard girlish shrieks and giggles

and then “Gorden!” a final shriek in a voice I knew well. Rosee, at least, was enjoying her night at last.

My husband wasn’t there with me when I woke up. And neither were my maids. It was Lady Darisse who finally arrived with warm water to prepare a bath for me. “Would, would you like me to do your hair for you, my lady?” she murmured as she curtsayed to the bed where I tried to hide myself from her.

Darisse’s voice was a little throaty and ragged. She wrapped the scarf more firmly about her neck.

“You’ve a cold?” I asked, flinging back the sheets in disgust at myself. How could I hide from such a ‘woman’, who was doing her best to be an attractive female, while I was what she would love to be, but hiding it all from her.

I watched Darisse’s eyes as she saw my long, slim body as I divested myself of the nightie. The envy on her face glowed for a moment but she tamped it down, controlling her longing as I stepped into the warm water, my panties still about me. She tried to be solemn once more.

“My lady, your panties,” she said as she reached for my braids and began to undo them.

“Have you seen Lady Sherrene naked?” I asked Darisse, who colored, even though the rest of her expression did not change. She nodded but said nothing in reply.

“You are a woman just like her,” I said to Darisse, who stood mute and silent, nodding only when I stared at her and waited for her answer.

Slowly, I stood in my bath, my back to her. I slipped out of my panties. I turned then and handed them to her and her face blanched as she looked at



me. "So am I," I said to 'Lady' Darisse who stood there, my panties in her hands, looking as if she had never seen male sex organs before.

"Oh, my lady," Darisse said with a throaty gurgle that revealed once again the bobbing male larynx in her throat.

"You are like me," I said easily to her, reaching for the throat cordial, the imbibing of which was part of my daily ritual. I poured some into a glass beside the bath and handed it to her. Darisse sniffed at it cautiously and her eyes widened in surprise.

"Maybe not exactly the same as yours," I said in my most lilting, girlish voice, "but it works in the same way. Try it."

Darisse's nose must have detected that there was nothing evil in the potion. She poured a generous swallow for herself, drank it, and then took even more.

"We have to leave a little for Gennee and Rosee," I told Darisse, who looked perturbed as I said that. "Yes, they are girls just like you and me." My words seem to stun her as she stood there stiffly, lovely, painted mouth open, staring at me as if she hadn't seen a naked 'woman' before. "But you can do something that none of us can do. You, Darisse, can suckle a child."

"That," began Darisse, her eyes widening as the voice, emerging from her mouth, was high and lilting, the equal of mine, "is because of Lady Sherrene. Until the end of the pregnancy, twins were not expected. And then she had urgent need of a wet nurse but the nun ..." Darisse stopped, wide-eyed in horror as she stared at me. Clearly, she was thinking of the 'secrets' she was betraying to me about her mistress.

"I knew," I said but still Darisse stared at me, trembling. She glanced around as if looking for a knife but for me or for her, I had no idea.

“I guessed,” I admitted, taking the towel Darisse had left on the chair, wrapping it about me, hiding my deformed parts from her view. “My husband told me it would be easy to figure out how Lady Sherrene, a woman like me, can have four children. With women like you to assist her, it must be easy.”

“It isn’t easy to satisfy two hungry girls after a long night’s sleep,” Lady Darisse murmured. “I have to bottle-feed them in part.”

“Bottle-feed?” I had to ask, thinking of the children weaned onto goats’ milk on my family’s holding in Cormallen. “Like giving goats’ milk ...”

“No,” said Lady Darisse, touching her neck as if she couldn’t believe the light, girlish voice coming from her mouth. “We, we fill the bottles when the girls are asleep,” she said, making signs to indicate that she squeezed her breasts as I had so often squeezed a goat’s udder in order to obtain milk for sale from the farm. “Lady Sherrene adds something, a fortifier, she says, not one I can concoct yet. The milk will last for a tenday. The girls will still accept it. Lady Sherrene does it so that, if one of us cannot be there, the girls are still adequately fed with, with, mu-, mother’s m-milk!”

“And you will do this again for the next of Lady Sherrene’s children?” I asked Darisse.

“Oh, no, my lady,” said Darisse, watching me towel off between my legs and put my fresh, black, lacy panties over my legs, covering what she might not have wanted to see. She seemed relieved to see me appearing totally as a woman before her, advancing timidly, black ribbons in hand as I brushed my hair. She wasn’t at all surprised to see it bounce back to the ringlet state it had been in the night before.

“Lady Sherrene says that she will not have any more children now that she has two girls and two boys,” Lady Darisse confided in me. “And Lord Torthard has said the same. Well, he proclaims the

two boys are his, as they look like him, and the girls are Lady Sherrene's as they look like her, and another boy or girl would upset the balance."

And how could they look like Lady Sherrene, I almost asked Darisse, but the answer came to me. Whatever woman had been impregnated with seed to produce a girl for the Torthard family had been impregnated with Lady Sherrene's seed! It must be so, I thought, my throat dry as I thought about how Lady Sherrene and Lord Torthard, Count and Countess, had been able to have a loving family of babies, and be wife and husband. Oh, Peveret, I almost screamed aloud in front of the white-faced, scared Darisse, so scared about what she'd revealed, not knowing what she'd done but only knowing that it was terrible from her point of view.

"It's not terrible that I know what I always suspected," I said to the shaken 'girl' standing beside me as I began to put on my figure shaper and then my stockings as she stared even more wide-eyed as I did that. "I may have a job for you just like this one in the distant future, if you still wish to be a nanny to a host of children."

I really only said that to console Darisse, to be nice to her, thinking that she'd confide in me some more about the woman that I'd have to confront very soon. I really didn't look forward to telling Lady Sherrene all that had happened to me since I'd become a cadet.

But Lady Darisse turned scarlet and fled from helping me, leaving me alone to dress myself, braid and be-ribbon my hair, perfume my breasts, paint my face and finally exit the guest chambers, in a fashionable, black dress, fashionable by Baract standards, its skirts swirling down to my knees, ready for the mourning that I was sure was happening on *Zephyr* or ought to be.

"Lady Arrathee!" Count Torthard called after me as I clattered in my high heels, down the steps to the

thin crowds in the market square. The breakfast stalls were the only ones doing any real trade.

Behind the Count were a youth and a young boy, a carbon copy of the older. The eyes that surveyed me with interest were like those of their father. “My Lady,” said Torthard, smiling and quickly raising me out of the curtsey I made to him, “I’d like you to meet Sherrene’s and my sons, Geryat, the elder, and Rebernet.”

I stiffened more than a little as it was brought home to me again that it was Sherrene who was the Seafarer ‘witch’ and not me. She’d had a father who’d been an Elder on Cunya. And yet, at the Victory Ball, I’d felt that it was I who was representing the Many Isles, not she, whose father had been the famous, tragic Geryat.

“I see by the expression on your face that you grasp the importance of the names, my lady,” said Torthard as his sons bowed to me. I gave them polite, rustling, women’s half-curtseys in response.

“They take after you, my lord,” I murmured, hoping that my words pleased the Count and his sons. By the smiles on their faces, my words did please but doubtless they’d heard them before.

“That they do, my lady,” agreed Torthard. “Lady Darisse was concerned, I gathered, that, that you might not have noticed such a resemblance after seeing how lovely my daughters are. They take after their mother, of course, thank goodness. Wouldn’t want these boys looking as pretty as their mother, now would we?”

“Does that mean that we’re going to be wizened acorns like you, father, before we’ve even been enrolled as cadets?” asked the handsome, older boy, at his majority or close to it, I thought, his eyes and the set of his face showing him to be a Torthard so clearly.

“What’s wizenered mean?” put in the younger boy. “I don’t want to be a witch like Mummy and Daddy, Yat. I’m going to be captain of a great ship and stand in the clouds as I float upriver in foreign ports!”

“Obedience and respect are very important things in my family, as you can tell, my lady,” said Torthard with a mock sigh. “Rebernet, would you have said that if Mummy was with us?”

The smaller boy smiled. “Mummy keeps saying she’s going to make me into her pet toad and feed me nothing but dung flies,” he said, smiling up at me. “She hasn’t yet even though she’s the mostest powerful witch in the whole wide world! Um, and you’re a witch as well, aren’t you?” That was directed at me. “Is she the one, papa, that Mummy said was more stronger than her?”

“Mummy said that Lady Arrathee really could turn little boys into toads if she knew what toads were,” said Torthard seriously. “Usually her potions make impertinent boys into eelfingers, those nasty, crawly, slimy, rock sliders you didn’t like when Geryat was showing them to you. Shouldn’t wonder if that wasn’t what happened to the spies I sent out to look for Lady Arrathee in the Cunian fleet. It was them, wasn’t it?” The last question was directed to me.

“I didn’t have time to mix a toady potion,” I said as Rebernet’s eyes grew bigger. “But I have an eelfinger elixir always at the ready in my purse. It tastes of cream pudding and cherrigrapes. The more you eat, the bigger ’finger you change into.”

Rebernet didn’t look his full seven years as he partly hid behind his father. “We were going to look at her boat,” he whispered. Geryat winked at me and also gave me an appraising young man’s look that made more than a few goosebumps work their way up my back. He was nearly as old as I was when ...

“Take him with you, Geryat,” said Torthard, motioning to *Cormorant* where Dever and the helmsman,

faces set in hard expressions, were standing with a grey-uniformed, Baract officer. “And make sure he doesn’t fall into the water. The last one who did that beside the witch’s boat turned into a grayfish. We don’t want that to happen as your mother will be most displeased at having to turn all the grayfish into little boys looking for you, Rebernet. She might even find one fish she likes well enough to keep before she finds you again!”

“He doesn’t believe that, does he?” I asked the Count who put his arm through mine as he waved his sons on and slowed to let me sway and mince down the steps towards the harbor, more slowly than the boys. I noted that several men with swords and in dark uniforms flanked the young men but tried to look away as if they weren’t shadowing the boys, or Torthard and me, as a couple were, across the market.

“He didn’t,” said Torthard with a sigh. “He’d grown out of it but, he couldn’t help what he heard yesterday, could he, or, of course, what he saw of the show out there in the harbor. And everyone coming in so fearfully to pay their respects to his mother, sweating and thanking the goddesses for allowing us to have the most powerful witch in the world on our, the Baract Kingdom’s, side.”

“‘You’re a witch too,’ Rebernet said,” I murmured as I caught my heel and wobbled a little against my escort.

“Geryat would have loved to have walked you down to the ship, my lady,” said Torthard, a little smile on his face, “and been delighted to have you do that wobble against him. You probably noticed.”

“I did notice your son,” I said to him carefully.

“What is the Cunian marriage ceremony like?” asked Torthard suddenly as the boys reached the gangplank of *Cormorant* with their bodyguards. Geryat turned and looked back at us as his brother

bounded up onto the deck, two of the grey guards moving swiftly after him as he headed for the cannon, pointing at them excitedly.

“I, I don’t really know,” I had to admit. “Pev gave me my carabet necklace and said that I was married to him. Everyone seemed to agree with him and called me his wife, or land wife. I was made into a Clan Lady by Wesset, who sailed once with your, your wife.”

“She’s very upset today,” said Torthard grimly. “The body squads were hauling in corpses all evening and all night long. They still are on the northern side of the island. Water there wasn’t deep enough for the usual Seafarer burial. So we’ve got to wait till the wind blows off-shore to do a mass burn on the shore-line. Which means a witch’s fire. Sherrene’s taken on too much. Got her senses involved in every vibration of our world. Knew to the broken topsail who and how many Seafarer ships were coming and why.

“Peveret contacted us, through that witch, Dolora, while he was in Terraire, you know, and tried to get us to send a parley group out to the Many Isles to make a peace. Sherrene knew it wouldn’t do any good with that fleet they’d built and used on the Sun Empire. But she told me to agree to talk. Fine way the Seafarers respond to parley, isn’t it, here at Liss with what they did to *Sword*, and then this invasion fleet?

“Still, the negotiations, such as they were, produced the knowledge of you, Lady Arrathee, giving you time, as well, to become as pretty and powerful a witch as my Sherrene, I think. We got the Cunian reply, of course, and the gift of *Zephyr*, at the same time as Sherrene spied the invasion fleet. As I said, some fine method of negotiating, wasn’t it? Last thing we need is a great ship, but it’s come in handy.

“Seafarer custom,” Torthard said then, changing the subject, as I remained silent. “All you have to do to break your marriage to Peveret,” I could think of nothing to say as I swished against him in the morning breeze, “is give him his necklace back. That’s it,

as I understand it. Then you're free to marry anyone you please. You could have anyone but me on Liss right now, you know. I hope, too, that you'll ignore my son, though he's like Gorden and all the other young bucks, in love with a new, dangerous, beautiful witch."

I could barely speak. Shudders ran through me as Torthard went on about Lady Darisse and her distress. Did I really want to keep the poor girl, Torthard stressed that, as a wet nurse for all her life? I really should talk to Sherrene about Darisse. I really must before I scared her again.

I must settle with Peveret, I decided as Torthard went on kindly, as soon as I could. A shudder ran through me at where that might lead, the carabet necklace never seeming so heavy. I had to see Sherrene about whatever proposal she was going to make to me. I shivered and thought about how it would probably mean that she wanted me to be a woman like her for the future.

No, I couldn't do that, I thought again with a quiver. That was what was disconcerting me, I realized, since Count Torthard had said that to me, that his wife had a proposal for me as we'd danced. Torthard was so nice, so manly, as well, I thought in further embarrassment. He was one of the few men not to grope me. I was getting used to being a woman, I thought miserably, as Torthard touchingly escorted me onto *Cormorant* where his elder son turned to study my womanliness even more.

Geryat wasn't alone in looking at me. Again, I knew that I was the main attention of every man's eyes as I stood beside the helmsman and let the winds blow my dress skirts where they wanted.

In contrast to the admiring looks, however, from Geryat and the men in the Baract market square, the men on *Cormorant* glared angrily at me as I headed for the captain's cabin in which I'd spent so many wonderful nights with my husband.

“Why didn’t you help us in the battle, witch?” someone called from the riggings. “You’re on their side?”

I reeled across the deck, the few men moving sullenly out of my way, my high heels inordinately loud, my dress never so swishy as I walked towards my husband, who’d come out of his cabin and stood there, eyeing me. The male officers around him looked at me uneasily. They all studied the sway in my woman’s walk as I minced towards them. I trembled a little as I felt again how wonderful it was to wear women’s clothing, to have long hair blowing in the breeze and to feel womanly bounces at my chest. I felt like asking them if they were enjoying what they were seeing.

“My lady,” said a white-haired, older man whom I’d seen hauled from the sea by our cutter. I’d thought he’d been transferred to *Zephyr* like all of the others we’d rescued. Unlike most Seafarers, he had a small, grey, beard. But it wasn’t that so much but his air of command that made me know that I was looking at the man who’d had overall command of the Seafarer fleet. I was sure this was Ballaro, though we’d never met.

“My lord,” I said to him in my most liltily, femininely affected voice. I made an elaborate curtsy, feeling the stretch of my stocking fasteners against my thighs as I did that. His eyes gleamed as he looked at my breasts and the lace edge of my bra.

“I’m sorry,” I felt I had to say as Ballaro drew me up and leaned forward to kiss my hand, drinking in my perfume, I could see. You should go ashore and get yourself a woman, I thought angrily, but I tried to go on sweetly. “I’m so sorry that I couldn’t help in the terrible battle you fought. But I hope I can help with any and all survivors who need a witch’s attention to survive. There’s been enough killing.”

“Peveret was telling us that he locked you away for the battle,” said a smiling Ballaro. “He was afraid

their witches would be shooting swamp gas pellets at us as they did at Bridgewater. He didn't want to lose you, his beautiful wife, to a lucky hit," the leader of the fleet finished loudly, intending his words for the crew around him, I'm sure, just as I had.

"I had to stop her casting potions out on the winds," said Peveret hoarsely from where he stood with other whitehairs. I knew they hadn't been on the *Cormorant* after we'd sailed into Liss harbor. "The Baracts would have dropped swamp gas powders all over us from those infernal kites if I hadn't stopped the Lady Arrathee."

"A weapon not deployed," said one of the whitehairs angrily.

"The battle was already lost," said another wearily as if they'd been arguing that idea for a long time. "If we'd broken off, as *Cormorant* did, and covered our cannons, the Baracts wouldn't have destroyed every fighting ship but this one."

"Will my wife be allowed to aid in the treatment of injured men, in which she is adept?" asked my husband. Ballaro shook his head stiffly.

"Your wife is a Baract witch, Peveret," Ballaro said. "On *Zephyr of Serenity*, we can't guarantee her safety. Some soldier could have a harquebuss smuggled aboard, and ammunition, and then, you'd lose her for sure." He glanced around at the *Cormorant* crew in the riggings or on deck about us. "You should search your own men, as well," he murmured. "Ah, Count Torthard, and your handsome sons ..."

I watched as the two older men greeted and chatted as if they were on the harbor walk and were meeting before retiring to a tavern. They didn't look like two men on opposite sides of a great battle in which one had been totally defeated and had had the ignominy of being dragged from the sea instead of drowning.

Peveret stood and, being a dutiful wife in a public place, sort of, I curtsayed to him, leaning forward enough so that he and some of his new friends could admire my overtly feminine cleavage.

“Wearing black to a funeral isn’t a Baract custom,” my husband said gruffly as he escorted me to the familiar room that I’d shared with him for so long. The bed was covered with a sheet and moved to one side so that the circle of chairs where the men had sat in conference could cluster. “And there’s no-one for you to save. An alchemist like myself is all that’s needed. The crewmen who were rescued, I have to tell you, my lady, would rather die from their wounds than be saved by a Baract witch, particularly after what one powerful Baract witch has just done to them and their fleet.”

“It was no different,” I had to say as I stood there, he not touching me, “than what they intended to happen to innocent people who were not soldiers or warriors, just peaceful farmers and townsfolk along the Foreshore.”

Pev closed his eyes as if in pain but when he spoke, he ignored what I’d said. There were a lot of wound infections, Peveret said, reminding me that he was an alchemist, that I could tell him how to cure such infections, though I couldn’t cure the one that was building inside me, a fever that only my husband, loving me, could have brought to an end.

“You shouldn’t be here,” said my husband gruffly as we talked, not about us but about how infected wounds were to be cleansed, and with what. I just wanted him to hold me, and make me feel like his woman, again. I made suggestions, even saying that I’d make potions that he could try when he returned to *Zephyr*. They’d assist, I was certain, those few at death’s door or who wouldn’t make it all the way across the Ocean of Clouds back to Greenhaven.

“You shouldn’t be here,” my husband said again.

"I should be adorning Count Mustay's bed this morning, should I?" I asked my husband bitchily, pouting at him. He winced.

"He's a Baract like you," a hollow-eyed Peveret said to me, "a nobleman. You should prefer Robady over me. I sent you off with him once, and you were his lover, weren't you? Now the new Count Mustay wants you back. He wants to make you his Countess, Lady Arrathee. Even a fool like me can see that."

"Gennee had the pleasure of warming Rob's bed last night," I told Peveret, feeling tears welling up inside me as I had to tell him that. I stood there, and still he didn't take hold of me, his darling wife, as he should. "I slept alone in just panties and a slitted nightgown, waiting for my husband to keep his promise to me."

That jolted Peveret. "You expected me to make love to you when all these men out here are dieing ..." he asked hoarsely.

"Yes," I said to him, ignoring the arguments he could make. I might have agreed with them the night before if he'd made them to me at the ball. "Make love to me, now, my darling husband, or I shall return the carabet necklace you gave me, to you."

"Right here and now?" asked Peveret, as if he couldn't believe what I was asking him to do in the middle of the cabin where he'd had me sexually so many times.

"Torthard served his woman when she asked him," I pointed out to him. "And I am just as much a woman as Lady Sherrene is."

Peveret just stared at me and so I turned on my high heels. I don't know where I was going to go but luckily he grabbed me. He pushed me over a chair, as Torthard had done Sherrene; she'd giggled at his ardor. My husband lifted my skirts and almost ripped my panties down my legs. He'd never felt so huge as

he entered me, his hands squeezing my breasts as I jerked and tried to accommodate myself to his savage attack which I'd provoked and which I craved.

Peveret kissed my scented neck and long, sea-blown, blonde hair hungrily as I arched myself against him, twisting enough to receive kisses on my lips as my husband, oh I wanted him to be that to me, buried himself in me, hurting me with every caress, but I didn't care.

"Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes," I was saying to him as I was impaled on his manhood, wiggling my tush against him. Peveret's hands were rough between my legs, seizing and squeezing me, already aroused by his first touch. He fondled my thighs, his manhood between them, as I tried to be so womanly for him.

I think others came to the door of our cabin, to speak to him, perhaps to tell him what they would be doing; but they saw what we were engaged in, my husband cursing and driving the men away bitterly, even when someone proclaimed that the Elder Ballaro was being returned to *Zephyr*.

"Can't even be without this for one night," groaned Peveret hoarsely again as he drove and drove into me. "What kind of woman are you? Is this what I have to do to you every minute of the day to keep you happy?"

"Yes! Yes!" I told him as he slid my bra strap down my arm and so his mouth was able to arouse new, frenzied, womanly excitement in me.

"They're already saying that you've bespelled me," Peveret whispered to me. "Can you defend yourself when you go back on deck? Someone is bound to attack and think that they are freeing me from having to do this to you, forever."

"Oh, my darling," I simpered to him. "I don't ever want to be free of you."

I wiggled out of my dress and let Peveret groan again as he saw my girlish figure in the lingerie I'd chosen for that day. He groaned all the time he lifted me about him and carried me to our bed. He had me, made love to me as if I was his woman, both of us finally naked as we quivered and wriggled about one another. It was glorious. I felt so womanly and loved as I convulsed into the orgasm that seemed to come so often to me now when I had Peveret rocking inside me, his mouth on my lips or at my breasts.

When I finally was able to re-dress, I kissed my husband so passionately and so much that we had to have another session on the bed. His arousal was so great that I had yet another orgasm, as Peveret called what I was doing, shuddering in delight and ecstasy beneath him, soaking him as he was soaking me.

It took us an age before I finally re-dressed a third time, my husband's hands still all over me. I would have let him do me yet again but he was winding down. More lovemaking would have left him incapable of going on and doing what he had to do, attend the pyre of the men who'd died.

There was nothing on deck directed at me although I was ready with potions if I saw anyone about to pounce or make an odd motion. That was because no Seafarer was in the riggings and only Dever and his helmsman were on deck. They were accompanied by several men in the dark-grey uniforms with the green and white badges who were standing at the hatches to below as well.

As soon as we were clear of *Cormorant*, I glanced back. The soldiers were leaving the ship. The sailors, hair golden like Pev's and mine, came back on deck, glowering after me. A carriage awaited us which didn't take us back to the castle, as I thought of the place where I'd been a lonely guest, the night before.

Immense piles of bodies were lain on the logs and coal, most of the pyres dried driftwood and the remains of battered ships of the Ballaro Fleet, I had no

doubt. A Baract Chanter said some words that I barely grasped before Seafarers spoke in a language that I didn't know, only a few words intelligible to me.

"Light the pyres," whispered Peveret to me, telling me to say the guttural syllables that he was saying as if a prayer.

No-one had told me that I was the one to be the fire goddess. I heard her name invoked, in what Peveret said. I took the defensive terogal compound from my black purse and cast one grain onto the nearer pyre. The flash and heat as it lit up were shocking. I saw the fear on the faces of several white-haired Seafarers as Peveret guided me about the enormous pyres. I did it again and again until a mountain of fire, just like that which had lit up Haruva's Island flamed to the sky.

"Well done," murmured Peveret. "And it wasn't the witch who killed all these men, who did this honorable ceremony. They'll take that tale back to Greenhaven with them at least. And that the warriors were honored in the old way."

Peveret escorted me to the carriage that had brought me. He turned and indicated Ballaro and the grim, white-haired officers who'd been on *Cormorant* earlier. "I'm needed still by my countrymen," he said. "I'll be with you in the Count of Liss's clanhouse later this night." He smiled. "To keep my promise to you," he murmured softly into my ear, making me shiver so girlishly, all over.

I returned, with a Baract escort, to the Liss castle. Lady Darisse, as lovely a 'girl' as I was, I hoped, awaited me in the entranceway, leading me straight-away to Lady Sherrene, who was with her sons.

"You've met my lads, my lady," Sherrene said to me, looking and sounding no older than the tall, young man who was again studying me and my femininity.

“Your husband made sure that I did, my lady,” I murmured. Oh yes, I sounded as sweet and feminine as she did. Her sons were clearly admiring me, a woman so much like their mother. Oh, please don’t dream of me, I begged them silently. Don’t dream of me as I used to dream of Sura or their Aunt Grace, the actresses.

“Thank you for doing that duty in North Bay for me,” said Sherrene. “I didn’t know that you spoke Farogene.”

“I don’t,” I said as the boys looked at me in puzzlement. “Peveret whispered the words to me and I repeated them.”

Geryat scowled at me at the mention of my husband’s name. He brightened though when Sherrene said that the two ships, *Zephyr* and *Cormorant*, would be leaving Liss on the evening tide.

“My son is blushing,” said Sherrene laughingly, “because he knows I am going to beg the lovely Lady Arrathee to stay here, to journey back with us to Hillaire and finally to come with us to Torthard, the city.”

“I want to go to a play,” said Rebernet immediately. “One in which Auntie Grace plays you, Mummy.”

“Oh, that play won’t be on again for a long time,” said Sherrene, a slight blush on her face as she shooed away her sons for some privacy while she talked to me. “Go and play with your sisters,” she said. “Cupyana’s awake and you can help to feed her while Darisse feeds your other sister.”

“Mummy!” said an aggrieved younger son.

“Come on, Reb,” said his serious, older brother, again with a look at me that left me a little breathless. “Let’s go and get into the good graces of the future witches. Maybe they won’t turn us into toads when they grow older, if we can make them like us.”

“Torthard said that Geryat was more than half in love with you, Lady Arrathee,” said Sherrene, giving me what I interpreted in my own mind as a motherly look.

“I’m, I’m a married woman,” I said, flicking my hair femininely as my clansisters had taught me. “Besides, he, he doesn’t know about you and me, and Darisse, does he?”

Sherrene shook her head and was quiet for a long moment. “I’d forgotten that,” she said suddenly, a coy smile curving her lips. “I never think of myself as anything but a woman, a complete woman, with my loving husband and children all about me. But actually that’s part of what I want to talk to you about, Arrathee. What do you plan for the future?”

“I’m a married woman,” I repeated, a shake in my voice as I spoke to her. “Where my husband goes, I’ll go with him. If he’s leaving on the evening tide, I’ll go with him.”

“That’s one option,” agreed Sherrene, “and don’t think for a moment that I’d ever stop you. Robady, then, is not the choice that you’d make if your husband took back his necklace and set you aside?”

“Unless he was bespelled,” I gasped, “Peveret wouldn’t do that to me.”

“Not after the late morning you spent together,” said Sherrene with a smile. “Torthard was like that when we were first married, um, is still like that. Oh, I didn’t listen in on you as I did at the pyre, my dear Arrathee! But you saw the look on Geryat’s face. Quite disappointed that it wasn’t him with you, Prout, the guard commander, was telling Torthard. Once we return to Hillaire, there is, there’s a girl, whom he was just as sweet upon as he appears to be, now, with you. She’s older, Princess Kendra, but we’re all hoping, that she will ultimately turn out to be the girl for him.”

“Princess Kendra?” I asked, shivers running through me as Sherrene gracefully led me to a small, round table with delicate cups for tea and little teacakes upon the painted, expensive plates. “So, so, it, it is true that Queen Larussa had, had a d-daughter.”

Sherrene sat gracefully in one chair and indicated me to sit opposite her. “Would you have asked me such a question a year ago?” she asked.

“N-No, my lady,” I said as I smoothed my skirts beneath me and tried to be as girlish as her.

Sherrene giggled femininely, so pretty a woman that I couldn’t believe she was as old as my father, her son more than sixteen, as he must be to carry the sword that he did. “I won’t tell lies to you,” said Sherrene, “not since I wish to recruit you as a witch and bring you back to the Kingdom. You know that Queen Larussa proclaimed that I was a man, your parents might have told you. She and my aunt were trying to discredit me. They succeeded in part but my aunt wanted me to free Perisord from its blight. And it’s true. A witch could never have done it. It did require me, a warlock, though I hate admitting that about myself.

“I am not insane as my aunt was, Arrathee, as my grandmother was, as she cursed the land where my mother was born. My aunt learned of some tendencies I had from my mother to dress like a girl and took advantage of them to try to trap me. You see, a witch could not enter or defeat my grandmother’s hexes on Perisord.

“Well, the story that Lara put out about me gives the Kendra story credibility. When it was revealed by Enned, my friend, that Prince Kennen was not a boy at all and so not able to inherit the crown, the plots against King Tathally stopped right away. Even in Cormallen, you must have heard of the Golden Ball that we gave to Princess Kendra to acknowledge her as a woman. She’s been inundated ever since with

matchmakers trying to marry her off to every ne'er-do-well in the Kingdom, in Malesia and all along the Quarrence coast."

"I did hear that she was very pretty," I said cautiously, having heard a lot of talk about the King's sister but dismissing most of the ideas about her importance to the Kingdom. She was a woman, after all, wasn't she? Now, I had a sinking feeling as I thought about another 'woman' who was just like me. If she married and was discovered, I thought in some distress, would all of us be discovered as well?

"You have the look that says that you wonder what will happen if she is discovered to be a man like you and me," said Sherrene softly, grimacing as she said words that she probably never even thought any more. "I have to tell you about Mithera now, a woman you don't know about."

I sat there as Sherrene took her time and told me how Mithera, an actress, that is, a man who played women's parts on stage, could not stand not being a woman any longer, and had cut off her male appendages. She would have bled to death but for Sherrene. She and several other 'women like you and me' had done more than save Mithera's life. They had shaped the damaged flesh between Mithera's legs into an approximation of a woman's vagina.

I gasped and flushed and writhed on the cushioned chair on which I sat as Sherrene insisted on telling the entire story to me. Mithera had married as a woman. She said that she received pleasure from her husband, Sarlie, when they made love. She had adopted children on both sides of the family as hers. Mithi and Sarlie lived as husband and wife very, very happily.

"The cabbies who came with me from *Tempest*," said Sherrene as I was squirming in distress at the disturbing story, "were mostly actresses in Sarlie's company. But several of them wanted to follow the same route as Mithera. I had to be there at every fe-

male surgery. That's what we call it. We operate as if it was a kidney stone that has to be cut out. Panya is an incredibly deft surgeon who has had the surgery herself. We've made fifty new women completely; all married now, save one, Princess Kendra. And no, I am not one of the new women, Lady Arrathee.

"It is, however, one thing that you could do for yourself, my lovely girl, if you wished to. A second option."

I was shaking my head as I thought about it, thought about Peveret entering me from the front, through my vagina, and cold sweat broke out along my forehead.

"I thought it might not be an option for you," said Sherrene seriously. "But Gennee, your maid, talked to Lady Darisse. Darisse says Gennee will beg you to release her from being a maid so that she can journey to Torthard, meet Panya and undergo surgery like Lady Mithera to make her a complete woman."

"But she still would not be able to have children of her own," I said shakily.

Sherrene smiled sweetly at me. "You've worked out how Torthard and I do it."

"The boys are made from his seed, in a nun's uterus," I said, almost choking as I said it, "and your girls are made from your, your ..." I couldn't finish the word.

"Exactly," said Sherrene with a smile. "I didn't care for what Torthard insisted that I do, but then look what has happened. I have twin girls, from me. I don't think that I love them more than my sons but Torthard was right. I do feel completed now as a woman as I suckle my babies who came from me. That's something that you might want to do, be a mother like me, a third option."

I crossed my legs again, my dress swishing and Sherrene smiled at me. "Such a lovely sound and such a lovely feeling, isn't it, to cross your legs prettily as a woman."

I shivered as I agreed with her that I loved to be completely dressed as a woman.

"But you aren't like me," said Sherrene softly then. "You didn't play games where you were the girl, the witch. You weren't trained to be a witch by a loving mother who never told me what she was doing. I became a witch so easily for my aunt. You were forced off to sea before you could become an embarrassment to your family, weren't you, Arrat Metherd?"

I uncrossed my legs and was about to stand up and storm away but Sherrene's hand shifted. I found myself sitting down and re-crossing my legs though I was trying not to do that.

"I hate to do that but you must hear me out, Arrat," said Lady Sherrene, almost sadly. "It's the ganasate and the masheen, the throat clasper and all the other things that we take to make our skin softer. We witches let our muscles soften and decay until we become the pretty, thin girls that we are. A witch's first task is always herself. She becomes glamorous and we warlocks, Arrat, are no different in our desires. If we are going to become women, then we need to be the prettiest and most feminine girlie-girls around, don't we?"

"Save that the feminizing potions don't just change our bodies, they change our feelings about what we are. And we do, in the end, take what we want, so willingly. We even think, we say it to ourselves, that if we stop taking some of them, particularly ganasate, it will allow us to return to what we once were. Not true, pretty Lady Arrathee, not true. You will only get lovelier and more loving as a woman as I have. Your husband is already enchanted with you and neither of you know that you are bespelled to what you are.

“I am bespelled but I love the snare in which I’m held. Which is the secret of a happy, womanly life, isn’t it? You have to love the bindings that make you the way that you are. But, Arrat, you are not so far gone into womanhood as you think that you are. You, we can bring back to manhood, if you so desire. Yes,” she took a heavy, green-glass bottle from the lower shelf of the table at which two pretty women, us, sat so gracefully. “This is the antidote, or so I call it. Really, it’s a new concoction entirely. It will reverse all the effects of ganasate, masheen, the throat clasper, amesis, recosonale, tresham, goldenroot, though you may call them by other names.

“Yes, Arrat, it’s another option for you. You were never attracted to men before the bodily changes began in you, were you? You never desired to be the bride of another man? No, you didn’t and this is the last option that I want to put in front of you, Arrat. Your future is not set. You can be who you wish to be.

“You can be Arrat again, apothecary, hidden warlock, part of our circle. You can marry, have children with a woman.” She paused. “Or, you can reject this,” she picked up the green bottle, and stored it back beneath the table. “And you can be a woman like me. I can teach you everything I’ve learned about being a witch. You’ll be even greater than I’ve ever been.”

Sherrene smiled at me then, moving closer to me, making me feel even more nervous and afraid than I had in all her talking to me. She took a small spray from her purse and used it to blow a light mist at me. I sat rigidly, under her complete control, as she waited until I had breathed in the metallic, cold mist.

It was as if a silver cloak was slipping off me, away from me, as Sherrene smiled. I gasped, my arms crossing so girlishly, as I trembled, my dress shivering over my stocking legs, as I realized that I was free of whatever enchantment she’d put on me. “What, what is that?” I gasped at her.

“Silverbane,” said Sherrene with a smile, “because of the way it feels on your skin, and, like so many of our potions, not made from silver or from any wortlebane at all. My grandmother used it; so I found out from the record her apothecary left in Perisord.

“It’s like the listening devices which we must equip you with. You can use them whether you’re a witch or not. If you bathed this morning as Darisse said you did, silverbane was all over you and, luckily, Peveret didn’t remove too much of it in his ravishing of you. I only had to activate the trace on my hands and could feel it resonate on your skin and you were mine.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Yes, my girl,” said Lady Sherrene. “When you bathe tomorrow, don’t let Darisse bring you water. She knows what I wanted her to do and she’ll do it again.”

“Darisse,” I said to her, feeling an urge to re-cross my legs and re-arrange my dress at which Sherrene only smiled. “What are you doing with her? Does she get the same options as me?”

“In a way,” said Sherrene. “I’m using a tumour-shrinking potion on her larynx that is working. It’s something I’ve been thinking that we could use instead of cutting away at all the girls who want to be real women. Imagine if we could shrink what is between our legs and draw it all inside us. Would that be wonderful or do you like your orgasms so much because your husband touches you where you should feel pleasure, being a man yourself, once?”

“I don’t know but some girls are adamant that they don’t want their penises touched in any way while others are intrigued at the idea of getting rid of their peckers, the nasty things.”

I couldn’t giggle femininely at such a thought as Sherrene did. Thoughts of not having the source of so much sexual enjoyment was too difficult to take in,

all at once. To be always a woman, having a man slide my panties down and caressing my vagina ... No! I was Arrat, and I didn't want such thoughts. I couldn't think about what Sherrene was saying at all. I was a man, wasn't I, and, as pretty a mother as she was, she a man like me, as well.

"Anyway, first things first," Sherrene went on. "Darisse must lose her larynx enough that she feels she is pretty and not being called a man in disguise everywhere she goes. Then, I might work on the other thing, or it might be up to you to do it, Lady Arrathee. You will need to experiment on animals, which is why I thought of you today, in thinking about Darisse and what she might eventually want. You know a lot about farms and stock, don't you?"

"I don't know a lot about manhoods!" I protested, my mind whirling in shock at all the things Sherrene was saying to me. I couldn't help revealing that I was restless and embarrassed with where our conversation was going.

"Will you speak to Peveret about your three options?" Lady Sherrene asked me. "Or will you decide what you want on your own?"

"I-I d-don't know!" I had to admit, shivering all over.

"Well, since I still have you for a little while as a woman," said Lady Sherrene, rising again so gracefully and taking my soft hand in hers, then putting her arm about my waist as I shuddered nervously. She had shocked me to the roots of my dyed, blonde hair but at least she seemed to know that she had, probably deliberately, I thought later, as she hugged me sympathetically.

"Too much all at once," Sherrene said, her voice so delicate and lilting. "Sorry, but Torthard tells me that all the time. I tell him that I learned it from him. Now you know all that I can do for you. But I won't do anything for you, Arrathee, unless you ask me to. So, as

you are still Lady Arrathee, come with me, my lady, and let me introduce you to women's work with my daughters. Let me show you what you will be missing if you decide not to be a woman any more."

"Count Torthard insists that we dine with his wife and family tonight," said Peveret after he bounded through our bedroom door, shooed out my maids, who were talking to me about going to the Kingdom of the Baracts themselves, Gennee on the point of admitting to me what she was planning to have done to herself.

I looked up nervously at my husband, everything that Sherrene had said churning through my system. I was only a girl because I was bespelling myself as she was. That's what I thought she'd said. So, the emotion I felt as my 'husband' grabbed me and kissed me was all witchery and not me. No wonder I was shaking like a leaf in his arms as I pressed my feminine body so close to him and felt his hands caressing my tush.

I was thoroughly kissed, mauled more like it, Peveret taking me into his arms, and pushing me down onto the bed even though I was in a glittery, silky white gown that must have cost a fortune to be made. Not that Lady Sherrene had minded me wearing it. But if my husband stained it, I thought with a nervous shaking of my body that my husband began to respond to, she wouldn't be pleased and neither would I.

"I have to wear this dress of Sherrene's tonight," I gasped shakily to my ardent husband. "So I either have to have you get off me, or I have to take this dress off."

There, the responsibility was with him now. I would be a woman only if he made me be one. Yes, indeed, my husband opted for me taking off the dress.

Of course, he took off my panties and my bra, my stockings and my garter belt, as well, caressing me so lovingly at every point, me glued to him and enjoying every touch that sent a feminine sensation through me. So I was bespelled, by myself, by everything I'd done. So, enjoy it, girl, I told myself, a sob close to the surface.

After Peveret had kissed me thoroughly, he made love to me in our own preferred manner, me his loving woman, my legs high over his back. He helped me to wiggle and bounce beneath him until he was deeply and marvellously into me, making me question what Lady Sherrene had told me.

The agonizing release I had and the so-satisfying orgasm that rocked right through me seemed to contradict all she'd said. No, they couldn't thrill me so much just because of the potions I took in such small doses to keep my image as a pretty woman. No, she was wrong. This was how I truly felt, sated and loving, wanting it to go on and on as bliss overcame me, womanly, feminizing bliss. This wasn't a witch's potion that made me feel like this, I gloried in the thought, knowing that this was me, Arrathee, being so fulfilled as a woman, my man loving me in every way that I wanted him to.

I was barely satisfied with the quick release each of us had soared together in, even though it was the second tryst we'd had in that day. But we had to attend Lady Sherrene. She was surely listening in to me. I hoped she liked the grunts, the squeaks and the groans and the few whispered 'I love yous' for that was all she would have heard from me.

I was too aware of her knowing what I was doing all the time to be as unrestrained as I normally was. Imagine having her monitoring me all the time, as her aunt had apparently monitored her, I thought with a shiver. No wonder they'd fallen out. No wonder that Sherrene had eventually killed the terrible Orissiana.

“I’ve never known you get ready so quickly,” Peveret said as we approached the dining room, pausing just long enough for him to taste my lipstick and swirl me on my high heels girlishly as if we were dancing. “Lady Sherrene really makes you jump through hoops, doesn’t she? Whatever did she say to you today that brought on this change in the way you normally behave?”

“How do I normally behave?” I had to ask him so carefully.

“Like a little girl,” Pev muttered in my ear. “Like a little girl pining to be loved who can’t leave her man for a second, she loves him so.”

“That’s me,” I said brightly, clinging to his arm like a little girl, bouncing and cavorting girlishly against him, as an armed soldier showed us into the private dining room of the Torthard family. Lady Sherrene wasn’t there, naturally, I thought, when I wanted desperately to show her, by the way that I was acting, that she was wrong.

Waiting for us were the three males in the leading family of the Baract Kingdom, not counting the unmarried King Tathally and his Seafarer mistress. Peveret grinned as we sashayed over to them; well, I sashayed and was twirled in a dance to show off my pretty dress as Peveret held my hand as he strolled. I pirouetted as I was the only girl in the room, I thought smugly, noting how even Rebernet, the little one, loved my feminine aroma and the frillies beneath my dress.

“Sherrene and Darisse are putting the girls to bed,” said Torthard with an appreciative smile at me, bringing us glasses of wine that were cold and refreshing. “The boys and I really appreciate the chance to entertain you, Lady Arrathee. We have too much time together, Geryat, Rebernet and me, without feminine company.”

Oh, very clever, I thought, a lump in my throat. You didn't say 'female', did you, Count? You must have talked to your wife, or listened in on what we were talking about. If this was a trial with a citizen's panel, the jury would still be out on me, wouldn't it?

"In another year or so," Torthard went on, the perfect, genial host again, as he had been before to Peveret and me, "mealtimes are going to be chaotic as they were when these boys were young; and we only had one little man at a time to contend with. Goddesses know what it will be like when we have two pretty girls begging for attention!"

Geryat frowned as he looked at my husband. He didn't seem as pleased as his brother to see Peveret and me at the table. "Excuse me, sir," he said to Pev at last when Torthard ran down in his pleasantries. "But I was told that your ship, *Cormorant*, leaves tonight on the evening tide. Isn't that happening now?"

"It is," said Peveret easily.

"And *Cormorant* is leaving ...?" Geryat asked again.

"Yes," said Peveret with a smile of reassurance to the frowning Torthard. "But leaving on the evening tide always has about four hours of leeway after the high mark is reached. But, beside that, *Cormorant* isn't a great ship or any kind of cargo hauler. She can leave at low tide, if we wish, from this harbor, as we can anchor in the roads, too."

"So ..." began Geryat, looking at me.

"Enough," said his father quickly, giving me a quick glance and a reassuring smile that didn't make me feel any better at all. I began to think that I would be glad to get back to Cunya and leave this randy son of Sherrene and Torthard high and dry on some beach. "Let's talk of other things. You were a real pillar of strength at the funeral services this afternoon, Peveret. It was a fitting send off to the Grey Fields ..."

“... the Shining Isles of Warriors ...” murmured my husband.

“... for the brave men who died in the waters the last few days,” Torthard continued on with a nod of acknowledgement to Peveret’s correction. It reminded us all that Pev wasn’t a Baract, one of ‘us’, I thought, chills running through me. “Lady Arrathee’s words were like an incantation and perfectly said. But I gather that it was you telling her what to say, Pev, that was the guiding light of the ceremony.

“Well done, the pair of you. You make a great team, like Sherrene and me, I’d love to say, but we all know how she dominates me.” The older men laughed easily at that. “Any reason, Pev, that you can tell us, about why Ballaro kept on bringing his forces forward to be slaughtered as they were?”

“He thought that Sherrene, well, he didn’t know it was Sherrene exactly,” said Peveret, “would exhaust her powers first. He thought he’d overwhelm whatever was against him by the power of brute force. He was convinced that some ships must break through and annihilate this island, this castle, probably the witch against him. So he’d planned for the fleet to just keep on coming, no matter what, in their columns.

“If Ballaro had been in the rear and not in the van, it might have gone differently. He might have seen that there was no break, he was being slaughtered for no good reason and retreated to save lives. He’d have been in position to stop Brisard’s stupid pushing forward of his supposed invasion forces, even before the cannons were fired, to put soldiers ashore. But he, Ballaro, that is, did what worked on the Golden Sea against the Sun Empire. He couldn’t believe that fighting witches like our wives, Torthard, isn’t the same as fighting all-male armies.”

“He’s like your father,” said Torthard with a shake of his head. “At least, that is what my wife tells me. Well, here are the other ladies.” He smiled and went

forward to greet his wife with a kiss as she entered in a pink dress that made her look as young as her elder son. Lady Darisse in dark blue followed slowly behind her, looking at me and blushing.

“Mummy,” each of the boys had to greet Lady Sherrene as she hugged them and smiled at what they called her. She didn’t have to look at me as ‘we ladies’ heard her called that. Nor did we show the slightest equivocation, not even the men and ‘women’ who knew all about ‘her’, not turning at hair at what the boys called her. But I was quivering greatly inside, not able to get hold of myself, as I heard Sherrene called ‘Mummy’ so many times

Rebernet had to hug Lady Darisse and tell her how pretty her dress was. ‘She’ smiled shyly as Geryat did the same, both boys obviously well trained in the compliments that they had to pay to us ladies. I was quivering inside, however, as I looked around the table and realized that, of course, we were all, in reality, male, who were sitting down to eat, the sounds of our pretty dresses so feminine as the men helped us to sit, Geryat helping a blushing Darisse.

All ‘manly’ talk had to end then as ‘Mummy’ was seated at the table. She did the invocation of the goddess that Baracts used and thanked her for gifting all of us women with the skills to please our men. She didn’t even smile at me or Darisse as she solemnly said what she did.

We talked, as maidservants I didn’t know brought in and served food to us. We chatted about things that interested the boys which was everything to do with ships and fighting on them. The only thing other than that, that the boys spoke about enthusiastically, was the stage shows that were put on in Torthard and Hillaire.

“Sarlie’s going to bring his children’s plays to Hillaire this winter,” said Sherrene, smiling at her younger son. “You should tell Lady Arrathee all about the ones you saw in Torthard last year.”

“Auntie Grace was in all of them,” Rebernet told me quickly, his mouth half full as he spoke. “She’s the most prettiest woman in the world, save for Mummy and her friend witches, of course. Auntie Grace had the scary parts to play in almost all the stories. But I wasn’t scared because I knew it was her.”

“That’s cheating,” said Geryat. “You knew what kind of woman she was. You could have told your friends!” Oh, did that make the shivers run through me. A squeeze of my hand by Peveret wasn’t enough for me to overcome the thoughts running through me.

“She scared most of the kids when she came down into the audience,” said Rebernet, ignoring his brother completely, “but then she’d sit on all the daddys’ laps and try to tempt us to come and rescue them so she could catch us and put us in her cookpot! I didn’t ever go to her then even when she was kissing Daddy and saying that he tasted good and he should go into the pot instead of me!”

“What are you teaching your children from the stage?” I had to ask Sherrene who had Rebernet in her lap as soon as the dining was done.

“Stepmothers are bad and become awful witches,” laughed Sherrene. “But who saves the handsome prince in the end ... the good witch, Alessa.”

“Oh, she was so nice!” said Rebernet enthusiastically. “We met her in the dressing rooms afterwards. She kissed me and wrote her name on my hand and that she loved me.”

“She did the same for me,” cut in Geryat in amusement as his mother, yes, his mother, Lady Sherrene, shushed him.

“But she whispered to me that she didn’t mean it to you,” said Rebernet, giggling. “She said she was going to marry me when I grow up.”

“I think I’ll have to have a word with that actress when I see her next,” said Sherrene. “Now it’s time for bed, Reb, and ...”

“Can Lady Arrathee put me to bed and read me a story,” asked the incorrigible little boy. And so I did, reading at least three short stories of good witches, “just like you and Mummy,” Reb had to comment. The good witches did such wonderful things to save the castle, the prince, and the townfolk. This is really what you’re teaching your children, Lady Sherrene, I thought. I got a wet, slobbery kiss that made me feel so strange inside as I went back to join the grownups.

“... be best if Arrathee and Sherrene, went to Torthard and she had the chance to teach her all that she did here on Liss,” I heard Torthard saying to Peveret who was looking at him thoughtfully. Lady Darisse slipped by me, saying that she must check upon the babies. She looked at me properly and smiled, happier about me from what the Torthard family and Peveret had been talking about, I gathered.

“Where are my husband and I going to be going?” I had to ask as I sat down next to the man I was calling that, swishing my dress beneath me. Geryat was frowning at me, and at Peveret, as I took his arm and put it around me in womanly fashion.

Torthard frowned and looked to his wife, who smiled at me.

“I think she’s making her choice, darling,” Sherrene said with a charming smile at me that made my stomach do cartwheels again as I knew what she must be thinking.

“You’re going to be leaving with Lord Peveret on *Cormorant*?” asked Geryat with a scowl.

“N-No,” I said taking Pev’s hand in mine.

“Yes,” said Peveret, squeezing it hard. And then he stopped and stared at me as if he couldn’t believe what he’d just heard.

“Geryat,” said his father quickly. “Go and find Prout for me, will you, my boy? Tell him I want ten kites up, even though it’s night, to cover all ships leaving the harbor. I forgot to tell him when I left him. He’d asked and it slipped my mind.”

Geryat left, a sullen look on his face. I doubt that anything ever slipped Torthard’s mind, or Lady Sherrene’s. She patted her son’s hand and hugged him before he went quickly out of the hall.

“You didn’t tell Peveret that you weren’t going back to Greenhaven,” said Sherrene with a delighted smile on her face. My husband was looking at me as if I’d suddenly grown another head.

“You’re not catching the evening tide, my lady?” asked Torthard, glancing at his wife. “I was only saying that about Arrathee learning from Sherrene for Pev to consider before bringing her back next year.”

“No,” said Peveret angrily. “My wife was asked to make a choice today about what she wishes to do with her life and she’s made it. She does not wish to go where I must go. And I have no choice, not after the defeat that we Seafarers have suffered at the hands of the witches of the Foreshore.”

“P-Pev,” I began, turning to him, my leg pressing against him but he pulled away from me, his face bleaker and more haunted than I’d ever seen it. Oh, I couldn’t bear to see him like that. “I, I should change my mind ...” I began, not able to look at what one simple word had done to my husband.

But I had to find out if what Sherrene had said about me was true. Was I really Arrathee or was I really Arrat? I shivered just thinking about it as I tried to tell my husband why I, a Baract witch, couldn’t go back to Greenhaven with him.

All the Seafarers would be looking for someone to blame for their defeat. I knew they'd blame me. I'd have been happy, sort of, to endure that for my husband, the man I loved, the man I still loved, even now, as I tried to tell him that I needed to find out who I was. If he compelled me, I would continue as his wife, now and forever, enjoying every second of being his woman. But there'd still be that nagging thought ...

"Don't," said Peveret as if he was in physical pain. "You must find out who you really are, Arrathee. Lady Sherrene says that you'll succeed her as the witch-protector of the Foreshore, some day. But, to do that, you have much to learn, mostly about yourself."

Peveret stared at me when I tried to move onto him, throw my arms about him and tell him that I loved him. He held me away with arms of iron.

"Lady Sherrene is right, my darling wife," said Peveret, each word coming out of him as if he was drawing out a huge weight. There were tears in his eyes and they began to roll down his face. "I took you from what you were, Arrathee, and made you into a woman, perfect for me. I didn't really care about you being a witch. I just wanted you as my woman."

"I am," I said hoarsely, feeling the tears in my eyes as well. "I will be."

"You have to be yourself, Arrathee, or should I call you Arrat?" asked Peveret driving a figurative knife deep into me. "If you do decide to be a witch, Arrathee, my darling wife for a few minutes more, let me say what you know. Arrathee needs training from a witch like Lady Sherrene.

"And if you decide that being a warlock is best for you, becoming the boy again that you were in Cormallen, Arrat, I will never betray you, ever. And I will thank you forever for allowing me to love the Lady Arrathee and to make her my wife for the wonderful days that we've had together."

We were both crying, but Peveret wouldn't allow me to change my mind again though I begged him. He finally kissed me passionately as I so wanted, making all the feminine feelings I had rush to the surface of my mind, before he pushed me into Sherrene's arms. She held me as my husband ran from me. Only after I'd wept for an hour did she let me go to a balcony where I saw my husband's ship clearing the harbour, my husband aboard without his darling wife.

"Now that the story has spread of the great victory," Sherrene said to me, pulling a face, "I have to make these visits to all the great lords of the Kingdom. They're terrified when I visit and even more terrified if I don't. Men and their foolish politics!"

"But Cormallen," I gasped. "I don't have to go ..."

"Yes, you do, Arrat," said my lovely friend and eager mentor. "You've only heard me talking about aversare, the potion I used to make Sarlie and his company practically invisible to the people here in Reb's city. Now, I want you to use it and see how it actually works."

"But my parents and my brothers and their wives!" I protested in panic, my mouth dry just thinking of them and the looks of their faces when they saw the new me. "They'll know me for who I am."

Sherrene tossed her blonde mane of hair and undid her pretty apron and then loosened mine for me as she smiled. "Come," she said gently, taking my hand and leading me past Darisse who was in a world of her own as she mixed a potion for a new fishing farm, of all things, to assist in the breeding process whereby the yield of fresh fish would bring new culinary delights to the highlands.

Sherrene had several workshops here in Torthard where she was the Countess. She preferred to work



here, she said, as Hillaire, the royal capital, was just a whirl of parties as her husband was the Chancellor of the High Council. Perisord was still being cleaned of the ravages her grandmother had loosed on its land. It would be beautiful again, Sherrene said to me, but, sadly, not in her lifetime. And they said warlocks were evil, she'd commented to me, only to be tut-tutted by the man with his arm about her, her husband. They really were a very loving couple.

Sherrene reached up to one of the organized shelves and brought down several bottles carefully. "I'm much more careful about spillages than I was," she said with a giggle to me. "That was how I discovered the listening potion you found in Wesset's workroom. Of course, you have to be a witch and have advanced senses of hearing and smell and taste that you and I have.

"Enned is the closest of all the witches to us but she never really creates new potions as you do. I thought I was the only one like me, making new potions and powders, until I spoke to Robady who astounded me by relating what you could do, so young a girl, and then he told me who you really were."

All the while that Sherrene was chatting, she was mixing the active ingredients from the three containers in front of her. Whatever she was doing was making my nose wrinkle. I wanted to turn my face away as the odor she was creating was awful.

"You sense it already," laughed Sherrene. "The girls," she called the cabin boys who had traveled with her back to her homeland 'girls' whenever she spoke of them, "thought I'd made them invisible but of course I hadn't. It was just that no-one wanted to look at the wagons they brought here as even approaching them made people uncomfortable."

"There's more to it than that," I said, tears starting to form and run down my face. I felt so sad. I wanted to run away and weep, not stand where I was as

Sherrene added just a few drops from the last bottle to the mixture in front of her.

“It does affect the senses and the eyes,” agreed Sherrene, passing a small vial into my hand. “It took me ten years of pretty hard work to make that antidote. Dilute it in a spraying bottle, fifteen to one or close to that, and use it on yourself, right now, Arrathee.”

The relief from the sprayed agent came slowly but my eyes did finally stop running and the irritating odor was bearable. Lady Sherrene stoppered the mixture she’d made. She’d told me several times that the active agents we used in potions could deteriorate in potency if they were kept together for long periods of time.

“We’ll make a spray for you when this is properly mixed,” Sherrene said with a smile. “You won’t be embarrassed any more when you pass Darisse as she won’t even notice you.”

I trembled a little at Sherrene’s words. She was trying to be nice but I didn’t like the way I looked any more. I was embarrassed to have Darisse look at me, a questioning expression on her face, as if she couldn’t believe that I would want to wear my hair the masculine way it was or the clothing that didn’t properly fit a person of my shape.

I wore men’s pants but they didn’t fit me as they had. I’d cut my long, golden hair into a sort of shag like Geryat’s about my face, though longer than his, and never wore earrings any more. I used a drop of masheen to keep the soft waves behind my ears. I bandaged my breasts a little against myself in the man’s shirt I wore but I really didn’t look mannish yet. My face was so soft and my skin so glowingly feminine. I looked like a girl dressing like a boy. I hated it, even though I’d agreed to do it.

I’d tried to let my hair turn back to its normal color, but it wouldn’t. I was making my potions too

strong, Sherrene had told me. She'd been teaching me how to have a light hand in what I did. Changing the color of a woman's hair shouldn't be permanent, she'd laughed at me.

I hadn't killed every bit of darkness in my hair. My hair finally grew in all streaky, light blonde and honey colors amid chestnut and light browns. Streaky I called it in disgust but Darisse thought that it was lovely and made her hair be like mine, with lighter streaks amid the dark. She came back from a delivery that Sherrene sent her on and I heard her laugh, sounding so womanly, when Sherrene asked her why she was smiling.

"I saw two girls, Count Gorbard's daughter and her flighty friend, with hair just like Lady Arrathee's and mine," Darisse giggled. "She was telling her mother it was so pretty and stylish, the latest in fashion. The countess wanted to know who'd ever start such a fashion. It was on the tip of my tongue to say, 'Lady Arrathee', but I remembered that I'm not supposed to say that any more."

No, I was Arrat now. Well, I wasn't really. It was so hard to switch back to being a man. For over six months now, I'd not put any feminizing potions into me, into my food and drink, into the air I breathed, or into my bathwater. Lady Sherrene had given me a fortified fallase cleanser that made sure that I wasn't being infected, as I thought of it, through my clothing or bathing.

I mourned the loss of Peveret from my life every night of the first five tendays. I still went all misty-eyed, my body often on fire with desire, when I thought of him. All normal, said Lady Sherrene, giving me loving, womanly hugs. I had to cleanse myself of all that I'd been influenced by, which she said was a considerable weight upon me, and upon my mind, before I could start on the purges that would remove my breasts, thicken my waist and let me grow a beard again as most men in the Kingdom did. I'd be

attracted to women again then, Sherrene promised me.

“When the waters turn blue instead of pink,” said Lady Sherrene as she tested the tears that she took from me, “we can restore you to being Arrat.”

Her eyes twinkled at her choice of colors for her solutions. She could have made the tinting black and gold or green and white, Torthard’s, the county’s colors, but she didn’t, being the woman she was.

Even if the colors hadn’t changed yet, that was no reason why I couldn’t start regaining my masculinity, according to Sherrene. That was why my hair was cut somewhat. I could always wear wigs or hair ‘extensions’, said my mentor. It was why I was dressed in male clothing like Geryat. I rode astride a horse which was such a weird sensation as the Count took over that part of my education. He taught me to use a sword, being exasperated enough on one occasion to tell me not to hold it ‘like a girl’.

Geryat came in on us with Prout, who was instructing him in swordplay. Geryat stared at me as he was warming up, nearly getting sliced by the older man, who scolded him roundly.

“I told him that we Baracts think of young Seafarer men as being effeminate as they don’t shave and wear their hair long,” Torthard told me laughingly, a day after that embarrassing encounter, and about his later conversation with his son. “A good disguise for you, I told him, if you go back to Cunya to check what they’re up to over there.”

“I’m going back ...” I’d asked the middle-aged count, his face lined a little after his riding exertions, breaking in a new steed, while I rode his trained hack. His dark hair, too, was sprinkled with gray, I noticed. When Sherrene saw both gray hairs, they’d be gone, I thought.

“Don’t need you back there,” Torthard said cheerily. “Sherrene has a network like the circle of witches around the Kingdom and it works most of the time. Too many ships in and out of the Black Sea, smugglers at worst. We get all the information we need, Lady, um, just Arrat, I should say, shouldn’t I? She’ll tell you all about it when she has time.”

I could understand that. Sherrene was besieged with requests, many over the listening circle that she’d had me become part of. I quivered as I thought of who would be the likely members of Sherrene’s network in the Many Isles. She’d been a seawife, hadn’t she? And what would entice cabbies like Gennee and Rosee to be part of a network for a witch who could make them ganasate, masheen and all kinds of feminizing products? No, Lady Sherrene wouldn’t need me in Cunya.

Sherrene also had to find time to be a mother to her children, never mind being the wife of a demanding man who made no secret that he had rights and privileges with his wife. She would demurely ease off early to bed with him on many occasions, leaving me to grieve for the husband I no longer had.

“My aunt did this solution for our listening circle,” Sherrene said with a smile, “but I like to think that I’ve improved it since. And I don’t burn people who don’t do exactly what I ask them to do as my aunt did. I didn’t realize for the longest time that the ones who actually heard me who weren’t witches were men who were minor warlocks for want of better name.”

“So, Torthard,” I murmured, thinking aloud.

“Is an obstinate minor warlock,” said Lady Sherrene with a girlish pout. “He just won’t let me teach him more. He says that I’m the witch in the family; and I can work my spells on him to my heart’s content. But I’m never to use anything on him to make him love another woman or to make him not desire me.”

Sherrene actually blushed like a young girl as she said that, her hands working with a delicate potion she was sending to Enned to assist with curing or easing some kind of wasting disease that had broken out in the rocky, westernmost part of the Kingdom. Sherrene would have to go there soon, she'd told me, if her 'cure' didn't work. She'd want me to come as I had such an acute sense of smell. She'd heard the 'plague' story about me. But first there was Cormallen and a visit to the Count of Terraire.

"Won't Dolora," I asked, naming the witch in Cormallen, my birthplace, "know who and what I am."

"She's not a strong witch," said Sherrene, wrinkling her nose but at her potion or the witch I'd named, I couldn't tell. We left her workroom with the aversare potion. She stopped me for a moment and sprayed it on me. I didn't like the way I smelled at all! Sherrene put her finger to her lips mischievously and led me back to where Darisse was working, still absorbed in her potion-making.

"Have you seen Lady Arrathee?" asked Sherrene innocently.

Darisse looked up. "No, my lady," she said in her lilting voice. "She just went with you, did she not? She hasn't come back this way." Her nose began to wrinkle and she looked around uneasily. It was amazing as I moved to Sherrene's silent signaling. Darisse's eyes never focused on me. I stood there in the workroom, I moved from one side all the way to the other and around Darisse but she was unable to see me.

"Oh," Darisse said, bright girl that she was. "You're working a spell against me, my lady! Is it something to do with Arrat, whom we aren't to call Lady Arrathee any more?"

Sherrene sprayed me with antidote, though it really wasn't that. It was more like a completely differ-

ent potion. Darisse began to choke, her eyes ran, and she gasped for air as she pointed at me.

“This will work in Cormallen,” said Lady Sherrene. “You can wear your pants there, if you must, Arrat, but for tonight, at dinner, since the Princess is visiting my elder son, I would appreciate it if you wore a dress. Darisse, could you attend Lady Arrathee as her maids are otherwise engaged?”

Otherwise engaged? What a lovely way to describe what Rosee was doing with Robady. “Oh yes, my lady,” Rosee had said with a wicked smile to me in the long conversation I’d had with her, trying to warn her about the new Count Mustay. “He does talk to me about my lady. I think he expects me to bring tales back to you, my lady, and make you so jealous that you’ll fall into bed with him.

“He’d take Gennee now as well as me but she’s got him figured out. Rob likes a girl like me in bed because she has a little extra, doesn’t he? He says it was the same with you, my lady, that he always knew you were enjoying him and not faking it like all the women he knew before.

“Gennee isn’t going to have her extra bits for long, is she?” Rosee rattled on as she tried to style my shorter hair into something feminine. She succeeded as everyone admired my shorter, ‘Seafarer’, hairstyle. “But I’m never going to do what she is going to do, my lady. I like what Rob does to me even if he’s thinking of you as he does it. I hope you don’t mind. I would stop, my lady, right away, if me, making it with him, is hurting you.

“Besides, there’re these actors we met, Gennee and me, who really want us to be actresses, and do country performances with them, which they don’t explain. Say they’d rather show us than talk about it. Is that as lewd as it sounds, my lady? I do hope so!

“Not that we’re ever going to be doing it ever on stage with Hewin and Jaster. But it’s nice to flirt and

let them lead us on, isn't it, my lady. They know about Gennee and me, as well, that we could be actresses. I don't know how they figured that out. I bet it was the new Count. Rob's not as nice as your husband, my lady."

And that led to shivers all through me. Rosee saw my tears and had to hug me. She promised that she'd never leave me but I knew that she really did want to be an actress. She and Gennee had been at all the performances that were put on for children, as well as those for adults. They'd been to rehearsals as an audience, as they called it. I knew that she was sounding me out about her being an actress. She must have worked it out that I, through Lady Sherrene, could make sure that Rosee did accomplish her goals. And I could do the same for Gennee, as well.

"I want you to be an actress," I told Rosee. "And Gennee has the talents to be a dancer, doesn't she? No, I'm going in a completely different direction to you two girls," I admitted to her. "But I want each of you to get your heart's desire."

Even if I never would, I thought miserably, as Rosee had gone skipping off like a little girl to talk to Gennee.

Princess Kendra had arrived. She and her elegant, pretty ladies joined us, along with bodyguards and important officers in Torthard's troop of soldiers. She'd been King Kennen, but I'd never have known it. Kennen had already lost his throne to his brother, Tathally, living even then with his gorgeous red-haired mistress, Lady Nikki, who loved balls and displays and was regarded by the people we knew in Cormallen as the loveliest woman in the Kingdom.

I would never have queried the petite, princess with blonde-streaked hair and such a definite, female figure. Kendra came demurely into the great hall at Torthard's castle and smiled immediately at Geryat, who was beaming back at her.

Kendra said very little, smiling prettily through all of the conversation about her. “Not the brightest of young ladies,” remarked Lady Sherrene when we had a quiet moment together. “She’s livelier when she’s with her ladies and they cater, you might say, pander, to her. Geryat will dominate her easily which is what she wants in a man. Yes, looking at the two of them together, I think he’ll be perfect for her. See how she sparkles when he touches her. I must get the matchmakers to work on that. After seeing you in your male clothing, my son’s ardor for a Seafarer witch-bride has cooled.”

“Thank goodness,” I breathed, adjusting the long skirts of my dress, Sherrene’s tinkling laughter following after me as Commander Prout came for me to join him on the impromptu dance floor the young people had improvised.

Princess Kendra clung and swayed against Geryat very, very girlishly, looking like she wasn’t a day over sixteen thanks to Sherrene’s potions, I was sure. She squeaked how much she adored dancing and could do it every night. Geryat didn’t so much as look at me, that problem settled, I thought, a strange feeling of disappointment sweeping over me.

“I don’t remember hearing about what happened to King Kennen,” I had to say to Lady Sherrene as we journeyed to my home town.

“No, we don’t really speak of it,” said Lady Sherrene. “But when my husband spoke to the Council about what Queen Larussa had done to her daughter and accused me of being, well, it made Tathally’s accession to the throne so much easier.”

“She, she didn’t have any, any choice,” I said, causing Sherrene to look at me very sharply.

“It was explained to her,” said Lady Sherrene. “She didn’t want to be killed, as some of the Counts wanted, and talked about loudly, in her presence. She was almost relieved to be dressed like a little girl

and have all kinds of compliments made about her femininity. She'd been quite vilified by her mother and her set, I do believe."

"You won't mind her marrying Geryat," I had to ask.

"If they're in love," said Lady Sherrene, still watching me carefully. "And before you ask, Geryat will never know, unless you tell him, about Princess Kendra's true identity. Her surgery, as we call it, my nurses and I, was a complete success."

"But when she's with a man," I continued.

"If she loves him," Lady Sherrene said complacently, "it will go well. And no, children will not be a problem. Geryat knows that about the princess and knows that his mother has already made arrangements with a nunnery for that outcome. Princess Kendra will be a mother, and suckle her own children, when the time comes."

"Even if it's not Geryat who's the true father," I had to say. "She can't possibly be ..." a father as you were, I wanted to add.

"Even if it isn't my son who is a father, Kendra will have babies to suckle," said Lady Sherrene firmly. "When I make a commitment to a person, and I have to Kendra, I will see that it is carried out. Besides, it probably will be Geryat's seed that produces Torthard's heirs."

I didn't have to say that Sherrene had made a commitment to me but we both knew that that was what we were talking about.

Cormallen made my blood pressure rise with every high-heeled step I took along its familiar streets. There were crowds of people out, people whom I knew and who should have known me. But they weren't interested in me at all, not when the gorgeous Countess Sherrene Torthard and Perisord alighted from

her carriage and stopped to smile and chat to them all.

Polwer's apothecary, where I'd hoped to be apprenticed, was a bakery. I'd heard from Lady Sherrene, who'd enquired of Dolora, that the old man had died when I wasn't even in the Kingdom. I just felt so awful, feeling certain I could have been able to save him for a few more years of life if I'd been there in the apothecary's store.

Dolora hadn't changed at all. She fawned all over Lady Sherrene, bemoaning the fact that Cormallen no longer had an apothecary. She often had to send to Doxford, or even all the way to Terraire, to find the concoctions she needed. I could take up residence as what I'd always wanted to be, an apothecary, I thought. Wouldn't that be ironic, for me, to have to serve and wait on Dolora in Polwer's place?

The crowd gave the witches room to stroll through the main square. That was when a lightning bolt seemed to hit me. My father was standing in front of the chandler's, staring at Darisse and me, arm in arm, strolling along the far side of the square. If it hadn't been for Lady Sherrene between us, I think he'd have run over to me and grabbed me by the arm.

"Spray me," I said in a panic to Darisse, who hadn't seen what I had.

Darisse didn't make any alarming movements. She just squeezed my arm and eased me through the large ranks of awed townsfolk, towards the open, empty doorway of one of the town's inns.

"I really do think that I should move on from here," Dolora said, her voice carrying over the communicat-
ing necklace that Sherrene wore.

"Yes, I think it's time for many of our older ladies to move and refresh themselves in new places," I heard Sherrene say as a cloud of aversare spray fell over me

from the skin balloon that Lady Darisse used liberally.

“Oh, I can’t look at you,” whispered Darisse with a giggle. “I have to get away from you, Lady Arrathee.”

She hadn’t been told why we’d stopped here in Cormallen. Visiting a local witch was all that Darisse needed to know. She left me hurriedly and went to stand demurely beside Lady Sherrene who greeted her and introduced her to Dolora. That was when my father pushed forward and stood, his best hat twisting in his hands in his agitation, just beyond Dolora.

“That tall man, hat twisting in his hands, is my father,” I whispered to a listening Lady Sherrene, who stepped right around an astonished Dolora, and greeted him.

I was whispering to her about how he’d recognized me but Sherrene didn’t seem to hear me.

“And who is this pretty young lady,” boomed my father’s voice.

Lady Darisse was introduced. My father quickly decided that she was a witch. “Ah, well, here’s your replacement,” my father said to an irritated Dolora.

He moved off with Darisse then, as Sherrene asked Dolora about him. “Cares more about his sheep than he does about his wife,” Dolora said with a sniff. “That’s why she’s always off with her brother. So long as I keep him in love philtres and anti-sheep rot potions, he’s happy.”

“Love philtres?” asked Sherrene in surprise.

“Yes, my lady,” said Dolora in a resigned tone. “Uses them mainly on the girls at the inn, I understand. Wear off, of course, but there are always one or two in love with the old goat. You should watch out for Darisse, my lady. See how she’s smiling at him. I

hope he hasn't introduced something he shouldn't to her!"

I felt so awful then as I recalled the vials in my father's bedroom, and what I'd supplied Hatara, my sister-in-law with. There'd been those fights with Ergat, my brother, he moving away with her, just before I was sent to sea. The agony in my gut spread as I realized that Darisse had left the square and so had my father. I don't know how he'd induced Lady Darisse to go with him to our estate house but he had.

I followed along as quickly as I could, my dress occasionally swishing just a little too much. I heard him say that my stepmother was off visiting her brother. It would be just my father at home.

"You, you have a son, Arrat," said Darisse nervously as my father had his arm about her shoulder. I shuddered at what he was going to say, that I was dead, or that he'd seen me with her, in a dress, in the market square.

"Had," said my father with a laugh, and the agony I felt intensified. "Strange kid, delicate, always making potions for the ladies. Had to get rid of him." He laughed again and it was as if a knife went through me. "Sent him to sea and heard he went off with Seafarers. Well, you know how weird that lot are, Lady Darisse. Good thing Lady Sherrene's taken care of their latest attempt at enslaving us. Ah, here's my little abode." It was the largest stock holding in the county. "How would you like to be mistress of all this, my little girl?"

"Please send help to Darisse," I sent to Lady Sherrene over the private communicating devices that she'd made from her old potions that I'd inherited. I couldn't enter my family home. Not to hear his denigration of Arrat, his son, me. Darisse was trying to say that she'd heard nice things about me, which was why she wanted to see the old house, but my fa-

ther was trying to get his arms about her, telling her to forget about his stupidest son.

“Your father,” gasped Darisse, when she was able to see me, later. I’d bathed and redressed in riding pants and shirt, resentment of what I’d been to my father flaring up in me, “is a lecherous, old man!”

“Who doesn’t want me back and couldn’t care less what’s happened to me,” I said bitterly. I’d loved him, my father, I really had. And I thought that he’d loved me. Darisse looked in surprise at how I was dressed, my hair knotted back as most of the young bucks wore it. No, she couldn’t see my breasts as I’d savagely tied them down. I’d thickened my waist with a towel. Geryat’s old riding boots were filled with stockings to make them stay firmly on my feet.

“Oh,” said Darisse, staring at me, noting the lack of earrings in my ears and absence of the carabet necklace I’d worn for so long about my throat. “Lady Sherrene wishes to see you, my, my, Arrat.”

“When I come back from riding, I’ll see her,” I told a gaping Darisse. “I’ve no devices with me; so, you’ll have to tell her that. I need some time,” I said savagely, “to explore my old home,” and see where I should fit in, I didn’t say.

Darisse told me I had to ride with an escort. “That’s for women,” I snapped at her, almost pleased at the aghast expression on her face.

It was a terrible ride. I stopped for water and some toughs jeered at me, asking why a pretty woman like me was dressed like a youth. “One of them Seafarers,” another tough said when I moved to the other end of town and tried a different inn. “Come on, dearie, give us a kiss.”

“She’s got to get back to her ship,” laughed a beery voice of a man in the shadows. “Unless Lady Sherrene blew it to pieces already.” That made them

all laugh as I got back on my horse and rode off, the jeering in my ears.

Just you wait, I told them mentally, as I rode away. I'll remember Starley's Inn. I'll be back when I'm a man again, a warlock. I'll show you all how to blow things up, even people. The last was the bleakest thought of all. Yes, I was becoming like all the warlocks in the great dramas, wasn't I? I was going insane. I could feel it as I couldn't shake the overwhelming feelings of loss and shame as I looked at my father's house, hearing the laughter of some drunken woman. I turned away.

"You'll be at the ball tonight," Sherrene said to me as I moped around the workplace she'd found in Osgard Castle in Terraire. I completed the mixture to assist in the birth of healthy babies that Sherrene had said I needed to learn.

"I don't want to," I told her frankly.

"This is the last time," said Sherrene, "that you will have to be an unmarried, brazen, pretty woman, Lady Arrathee." She placed a vial with blue-tinted liquid in front of me. "Blue for a boy," she said with a tight smile. "Drink it and in a dozen tendays, you'll be like Geryat, muscular and wispy-bearded."

I shivered. Geryat would have protested the description of the mustache he was so proud of as well.

"It is what you want, isn't it?" Sherrene pouted in womanly fashion at me.

"Yes," I agreed.

"Then, drink," said Sherrene, "and, for one last night, let your handmaidens enjoy dressing the mistress they followed across an ocean. They deserve that before they go off to new positions in the world."

I swallowed the potion, so cool, and felt nothing at all happening to me. Gennee had blushinglly told me that she was to go to Torthard where she'd be made into a 'real woman'. I'd hugged her as Rosee had, but my other maid had been squealing in delight for Gennee. Rosee was going to join Sarlie's company as an actress. Well, I didn't mind. I wouldn't be needing maids any more, after all, would I, I thought gloomily, thinking how much I'd miss their chatter and gossip.

I hadn't worn a pretty dress since Cormallen. For this last performance as Lady Arrathee, Sherrene had provided me with an unbelievable dress in white silk and lace. The plunging neckline showed off my girlish breasts to outstanding, female advantage. I would soon lose them, I thought with a grim shudder. I felt so weird in my silk panties and frilled body shaper as I attached the white, silky stockings to my garter belt and stepped into my white high heels before pulling on the wonderful dress.

Gennee stood on a chair to attach a long fall of golden hair extensions to my own that had been dyed, without me knowing it, Rosee had impishly told me. My necklace was in place and long dangling pearl earrings that I'd never seen before. My face was delicately made up. Oh, everyone would see me as a sweet, little girl, as I used to be when I was bespelling myself, I thought, which was probably Sherrene's point, I further thought sourly. Next year, no-one would ever connect me, Arrat, if I was like Geryat, muscular and bearded, yes, Geryat was starting to join popular fashion, to the woman I'd been on this night.

My maids were in dresses like mine, giggling with pleasure as they did their makeup and talked about the men who'd be at the ball, the actors whom they'd dance with and tantalize. "You can have Count Mustay," said Gennee generously to her 'sister'.

"And the Princess gets Geryat," pouted Rosee. "Who do you get to have?"

“Hewin and Jaster,” laughed Gennee, “together! Darisse will help me out. She’s ready to be a girl like us with the men, tonight.”

Each allowed me a drink then of Lady Sherrene’s blue potion. Oh, it really did taste good, spicy and tangy. I offered it to my maids, but they wouldn’t take it.

“We don’t drink anything blue,” said Rosee saucily. “We know what that does to girls like you, Lady Arrathee.”

“Besides,” said Gennee, smiling prettily as well. “Lady Sherrene told us specifically not to share your potion! We have men who want us to be, um, just what we are, tonight!”

“Everything arranged then?” I said, feeling so light and airy and strange as I swished out of the doors and into the hallway that led to the ballroom. The ‘girls’ would have a great night. That was assured, or so it seemed.

Footmen were smiling at us glamorous ‘women’ as we entered the ballroom but then it turned really weird as a passage opened, people stepping aside for me. We minced right down the middle of the floor, everyone smiling at us all. Oh no, Sherrene’s not going to put on a show of saying goodbye to Arrathee, and hello to Arrat, is she?

There was a raised dais at the end of the aisle we were moving along. A Chanter stood there, smiling broadly at me. “It is with the greatest of pleasure,” he announced to the hushed crowd as my maids held me by my arms in front of him, “that I perform this country marriage here without all the trappings that become so more important than the bride and groom and their love for one another.”

I stared up at the Chanter as he was looking at me as he said it. There was rustle at my side as Rosee stepped away from me. In stupefaction, I looked up at

Peveret, smiling down at me. "What are you doing here?" I blurted out to him.

"Sherrene wants you to be properly married, my darling wife," said Peveret, taking my hand and squeezing it. I felt the strangest of emotions sweeping through me as he whispered then to me. "I think you failed the test of ever being a man again, under any circumstances. So, here we go, my darling!"

I gasped as Pev took a golden tiara from my maid Gennee's hands and put it securely in my hair. "You can't think," I gasped as all about us, men and women were beginning to applaud and shout good wishes to us.

"You stand here, man and woman," intoned the Chanter, basically shouting down the audience, "to pledge your love for one another. Who is the man?"

"Peveret Komer and Wesset, Clan Elder," said the man grasping my hand. "I declare my willingness to be married to the woman beside me," I shook as I realized what he was saying about me in front of everyone there in the Castle, "and to meet the bonds and desires that I vowed to Lady Arrathee when we became betrothed almost a year ago in the Cunian city of Greenhaven."

The crowd applauded more politely as I stood there, speechless. Then the Chanter said the words that I dreaded. "And who is the woman?" he asked, looking at my horrified face, I'm sure, as he smiled at me as if to encourage me.

All over me, as if a dam had burst, I felt a surge of femininity like a silver sea coursing all through me. "Say who you are, woman," whispered Peveret to me as the feelings poured all over me, awakening my breasts, my hips, my soft skin, my stockinged legs, my softened, painted lips as I felt as girlish as I ever had. I knew then that Sherrene had lied to me about the blue potion she'd given me. And I loved her for it.

“L-Lady Arrathee Metherd,” I said, my lilting voice as feminine as I ever recalled, and yet I’d been taking nothing for it these last tendays. There, let my father, if he ever heard, or my brothers, have their curiosity sharpened about a witch named Arrathee.

“And you declare,” prompted the Chanter.

“I, I declare my willingness today to be married as a woman to the man beside me,” I said, hearing the shaking of my lovely gown, a bridal gown, how could I not have known, “and I do so to, to discharge faithfully all the bonds and desires, and my womanly duties to my husband, that I vowed that I would to him, tendays ago in Greenhaven.”

There was an outburst of female cheering and crowd applause, the cheering coming from my maids and Lady Darisse, I noted, the Princess Kendra, and yes, Lady Sherrene.

“I now declare you to be man and wife,” the Chanter said, “and I admonish you, as man and woman, to be partners in all things, from the bed to the household ...” He went on and on until music began and the girls came shrieking forward. We were covered and bound with ribbons as is the custom among we Baracts. Oh, I was a bride, as feminine as any other woman in the gathering. I was married! I felt a true feeling sweeping through me. I was married! I was a married woman!

Peveret made it all so perfect then as he drew me, shivering so girlishly in my long dress, to him and kissed me, the applause of the crowd growing as dance music struck up. We had to begin the dance. It was Lady Arrathee’s wedding ball. Soon my maids and Darisse with Princess Kendra, as giddy and excited as them, joined me with partners on the floor, Darisse with one of the actors, I saw. Soon Lady Sherrene and Torthard and a smiling Count Osgard and his wife joined as well.

I had to dance with and accept kisses from all of the men. "My lady is convinced," said Count Torthard, "that this is what will make you truly happy, Lady Arrathee, and I've never known her to be wrong about who are girls and who are boys. She says that she will not call or listen to you for a tenday so that you and your husband, we can call him that now, are suitably re-acquainted with one another."

"Thank her for me," I asked him as he led me to the entrance where Peveret kissed Sherrene on the cheek. Then, bride and groom, we were applauded out of the ball as I swished in my man's arms all the way to our bridal suite, re-decorated in white silk everywhere, just for us.

I had no difficulty in slipping into the female role that I had vowed to do for Peveret. I loved my dress and knew that I didn't want to be dressed in any other way for the rest of my life. I would be a perfect woman for my husband. Pev had no difficulty in being the perfect, aroused and rutting male on his wedding night as he slipped me out of my lovely dress and admired my feminine underwear.

"It has been so long," we both said together, and, "Oh, how I have missed you and how I have been longing to do this with you again."

And since it was my wedding night, the Baract version, there was a vial of male intensifiers, courtesy of Lady Sherrene, I was sure, left beside the bed. That gave my husband the stamina to love me throughout the night; while the salve I'd provided for women like me, behaved as so many girls had told me it did, making every penetration into an orgasm of joy.

Sometime in the midst of our lovemaking, stroking and arousing my feminized body, Peveret told me that he was now Clan Elder, his father having resigned in disgust as the High Council accepted the Baract terms for a treaty. The Council promised never to war again on the Foreshore. "It will last our lifetime," said Peveret, who was to become a special

envoy to the Baract court and so stay in Hillaire, married to me, the submissive woman beneath him, “forever”.

“I can’t get enough of these lovely breasts and lips of yours,” Pev murmured as he took me again. “Just one glance and I want your thighs around me and to be inside you, writhing with you in passion like this.”

What could I say to him as I gyrated beneath him in ecstasy? I felt exactly the same way about my husband. He could never have enough of me, his woman, his wife, his witch, the future mother of his children. And I could never have enough of him, and the compliments he paid to my womanliness and loveliness. Yes, and the way that he loved me as a woman. No, I could never get enough of that.

Ooo, and it was me saying that as my husband loved me, without any potion or witchery making me say it. It was me, Arrathee now, glorying in my feminine dresses and feminized body, totally loving my man, as he completely loved his woman, his wife, and the future mother of his children... me.

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