

Witch-V
Choosing Sides



Philippa Peters



A "New Woman" Novel



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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 makeup 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 honeymind 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.