



Reluctant Press presents:

Boys Can't Be Witches

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An 'Adult Tv' E-BOOK

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BOYS CAN'T BE WITCHES

by **Philippa Peters**

I. A WITCH'S SON

"Dedrick?" asked my aunt, studying me intently with coal black eyes. "Surely not. Dedrick would be, what, eighteen years of age, and you..."

Her voice trailed off as my mother's sister, Orissiana, stared at me; I knew what she saw. While she had black hair like my mother, I had fair hair like my Seafarer father. I took after him as well, I was told, being small and slim.

"Wiry," my mother had called me when I cried to her at the jibes from other lads in Doxford where I had

grown up. She had smiled. "You're just like your father," she said, giving me a big hug while her eyes misted over at the memory. "He was slim and fair and blue-eyed, a true Seaman."

My father had entranced my mother, lived with her for a season and fathered me. He had gone back to his people, promising to return with seven kinds of fabled pearls in a necklace for my mother but his setting out on a summer's morning was the last she ever saw of him.

"You're not a hairy brute like me and the people of the Lowlands," laughed my mother. I had to smile at that. My graceful mother was no hairy brute. She was beautiful with dark brown eyes that helped her laugh her way through life. She was a witch like my aunt, or at least people called her that. She prepared potions for ailing cattle, love philtres for the loveless and concoctions that many a grand lady sent her maid to purchase, some to aid in fertility and the production of heirs, others to prevent or control the birth of the unwanted.

I wasn't even as tall as her, my mother, when I reached my sixteenth year and maturity. We were living then in Malesia, in the seaport of Terraire, where I saw the great ships of the Seafarers putting into dock. I was taken for one of them, the Seafarers; when a ship was in port, I got many enquiries everywhere I went as to the name of my ship and the line and clan I belonged to.

Several Seamen waylaid me one night to ask me who I was. I caught a salty aroma from them as two held my arms and two more interrogated me. "You're a Cunian spy," one said, giving off an odor of saffron that he must have eaten with a meal. He wasn't as tall

as me I saw in surprise as he jabbed my thin chest with a bony finger.

"I'm no spy," I protested while the others grinned at me.

"Only Cunians leave spies abroad after they sail," said the other, soft-voiced and, I realized by the aroma of seaflowers and sweetsoap, a girl. "What is your ship?"

"I have no ship," I said and they all smiled broadly at that.

"Your mother's name and line," said the first. Yes, he was wiry as my mother had called me.

"My mother is the Lady Airene," I said.

There was silence as they all looked at me. "That's no Seafarer name," one said and the grips on my arms relaxed.

"Your mother is landed," said the woman in surprise.

"Well, she was the witch of Doxford," I told them. "And she once had a Seafarer as husband."

The arms fell from me. "A Turling," one said. The Seafarers almost ran away from me, leaving me even more shocked than when they had quietly circled me on Wharf Street and pulled me into the quiet little square to question me.

"What's a Turling?" I asked, running after them. They had fled from me. Much later, I discovered that it was a bad word in their older language which only the most island-bound used. The word was used for half-breeds like me, ones who would never be accepted on their ships, the ships of those who ran from me as if I had a pox, that is. To those Seafarers, I would never

have been accepted and allowed to land in the Islands, no matter that I had bred as a Seafarer. On the islands they came from, I couldn't have landed if it was known that I was a Turling.

To Seafarers, I was unclean, more so, I was told in the bars by Black Sea sailors, because my mother was a Malesian witch. That was a lie and I should never have believed it. Crossbreeds did not breed true, an old, grizzled bar denizen, pungent with poorly fermented grape and spilled ale, told me. But crossbreeds weren't unusual on the waterfront. There were red-headed and brown-skinned Malesians as well as the tall, black-haired 'true blood' who looked down on all the other varieties of hair, eye and skin colors along the docks of Terraire.

My sweet-smelling mother never told me my father's name. "You'll find out when he returns," she said, smiling as always. One reason, but not the only one, I think, was that after we moved to Terraire, I grew, so I reminded her more and more of him. There, in Terraire, I thought, she could search for him among the crews of the great ships that came to call at Malesia's largest port.

I was sent out about the city one fateful day to deliver potions for her. I took my time, as always, stopping in at new inns I'd never been to before in the Merchants' Quarter. I got home on the supper hour; the fact that the door was unsealed should have told me that something was terribly wrong.

In horror, I recognized the smell of the draft in the glass on the table beside my mother's dead hand. I lifted it and smelled the brandy and bitter aloe aroma that she used only to conceal the parasane cordial, as she called it. I had only tasted it once when I had lied to

her about running wild in the hayfields outside Doxford. Cory, Lenne, and I had destroyed twenty stacks in the exuberance of an early summer's day. The parasane paralysed me. A weight pressed down on me and when my mother's voice asked her questions, I answered fully with no ability to lie, even though I wanted to.

That's when I had realized how powerful a witch my mother was. "I rarely use it," she told me later when I had recovered. "My sister now, Orissiana, she concocts that cordial and other potions like it as well, some that would allow me to see where my love lies. But to walk that path of knowledge..." She had shivered then.

"Should I die before you, Dedrick," my mother said to me. "You must not let the parasane or any of the dark bottles," they were of some special kind of glass made on Glassblowers Street by only one tradesman, "fall into anyone else's hands but those of my sister."

So, after I had had my mother's ashes placed in a vase for me, I set out on our small cart with the vase and my cargo of bottles and vials for the hills and my mother's sister, Orissiana. There was a hate in my heart then for all things Seafarer. I was a short Seafarer blade that was stuck in my mother's back. The glass told its own tale. She seemingly had drugged a Seafarer, one whom she had left the Golden Casket tavern with, something I found hard to believe she would do, but several people assured me that she had, herbalists whom I hardly knew.

I wonder if my mother had found out where my father was or what had befallen him in her questioning of the Seafarer. Roddin, our neighboring herbalist, had seen a Seafarer stagger away from our tenement and

then saw three more return and leave later. By the time I informed the Watch of all this, the only Seafarer ship in port that day, *The Breeze of Far Oceans*, was rounding Beachy Head and heading out onto the Black Sea.

Unlike my mother, my aunt was known throughout the Middling Hills. If ever anyone deserved the title of the Witch of Malesia, it was she. When tavern-dwellers heard that I was headed to her, they made the warding-spell sign at me and didn't converse with me any more.

I was glad to be going to such a powerful witch, one who was feared all along the River Road into the Hills. I hoped she would be able to avenge me on the Seafarers who had killed my mother, her sister.

I went to her dark, tree-circled home with pleasure, noting how the house sat, brooding, well out of the hamlet-town of Birchwood. I almost felt at home after a week on the road as I smelled the hazel, wortbanes and collane that my mother, like my aunt, had used to keep the rooms free of infestations.

"I have eighteen years," I told my aunt, quivering a little as her eyes held me, not allowing me to look away. She didn't have the same scent as my mother. Oh, the sweet honey was there but there was something else, a musky aroma that I associated with polished hides and something more, a hint of something sharp and metallic, but unlike anything I had smelled before. "My mother, the Lady Airene, is dead and she bade me bring the items in my cart to you before I return to Terraire and hunt down the Seafarers of *The Breeze of Far Oceans* who killed her."

"No need," said my aunt, standing in her black robes, a head taller than me. "The murderers of my sister already swing in iron cages on Traitor's Gate in

Terraire. Your neighbor, Roddin, and his apprentice, have confessed to the Watch Commander and he has carried out my request with despatch."

"Roddin?" I asked stupidly, all the hate that had sustained me on my journey to the Middling Hills evaporating. All I could think of was the man's kind smile and gentle touch as he had commiserated with me on my loss.

"My silly little sister," my aunt said contemptuously, stroking my shoulder as she spoke in a sugar-sweet voice. "Still chasing romance and rainbows. You found your mother's silver vaults almost empty, didn't you? Roddin has returned the coin in hopes of an easier death. Little does he know how hard his death would be should I have had to descend to the Lowlands to settle with him. Still, my dear, my sister's wealth awaits you in Terraire at the moneychanger you know as Serrill."

Bile had grown in me as I thought of our neighbor and his gaping-mouthed, gangrene-odored apprentice and how they had treated me so obsequiously in the months I had resided in Terraire.

My aunt frowned at me. Her hand, its fingernails long and red, reached out and touched my hair, yellow in summer, between her fingers. She was staring at me most intently. "So, my nephew, what is it that you do?" she asked me, her smile fixed. "Are you a witch like your mother?"

"Only women can be witches," I said huffily. I don't know why but I thought of the children's games we had played in Doxford. There were only boys on the street on which I lived; whenever a witch had been needed in a game, I had been the witch.

“Well, you know how to play the part,” Cory had told me. “In your mother’s shawl and her hat, you look like her. Well, what she would look like if she was a Seafarer.”

So, I had been Sherrene the Witch in some of our games. I wasn’t allowed to ‘battle.’ I had to sit in splendor and cast spells and potions on the prisoners, who died most horribly. Always, as well, the best of the plunder, the choicest cakes, were reserved for me, Sherrene. Cory was always my Servant Knight. He treated me with proper deference; if anyone forgot that I was to be called ‘she,’ he made sure they got a good, hard thump.

I started to recall the last time that we had played Sherrene but I forced that memory away as my aunt looked down at me as if she was reading my thoughts.

“Seafarers use a salve on their faces and skins. It is made from a bivalve they dig up on faraway beaches,” said my aunt as she touched my face and the thin hairs that were so fair as to be nearly non-existent on my skin. “That is why Seafarers never have mustaches or beards. I’ll get you some. You are a Seafarer, after all.”

I wanted to protest. I didn’t want to be bare-faced like a Seaman. I didn’t want to have to smile at black-bearded Malesians who teased Seafarers, even on the streets of Terraire and invited them to come and be kissed as they were smoother than their wives.

“Garling,” I heard a Seafarer mutter once. Now I knew it is a word for a bushy-quilled type of tree-climbing rat. So, I guess all the smiles and sunny expressions Seafarers were famous for, didn’t show what they really thought of us.

“So what do you do when you’re not being a witch?” asked my aunt, taking my hand and leading me through what she had called her parlor and into an organized and sweet-smelling kitchen where a pair of vacant-eyed drudges prepared a meal of soup and bread for us.

What did I do? I gulped and didn’t want to talk to her at all. I did nothing. That was the truth of it. If I tidied my mother’s vials, she would smile at me and pay me two silver coins. A drudge would have cost her only coppers a day.

She would shoo me out of the house then, claiming that her customers did not want to see anyone at home but her. Always she made sure I had coin to spend on entertainment. I was used to long perambulations about the town, spending coin freely like a Malesian noble son.

Actually, my mother was Lady Airene, a title of nobility but we didn’t live like nobles and she only used her title when she had to do something for someone she disliked. But I did sometimes think that I was a noble’s son myself when I saw how hard all my friends were working. But my mother wouldn’t let me take up a trade.

“I need you,” she would say. “I need someone I can trust with my potions when I’m not here.”

I felt important at first but I knew it wasn’t a real trade that I did. Sometimes I saw dandies in taverns, loud and swaggering. I avoided them as I could, despite their flowery pomanders. I noticed, though, that several stared after me when I slipped out of taverns where they flattered barmaids, girls with hair dyed the color of mine, with their attentions.

I mentioned it to my mother and she patted my hand. "Quite right," she smiled at me. "Best to avoid rowdies in the taverns. But really you have nothing to fear here in Terraire. Osgard," the local count, "maintains a stout Watch. Run to them if ever you must, Dedrick, and you'll find fair treatment for all, Seaman, Russet or Lowlander."

No, I did nothing of consequence, only an errand here and there for my mother, for which she paid me richly, and treats for my 'friends,' anyone who didn't mind talking to the local witch's son. Oh, I helped on occasion, mixing and checking her potions for her. I knew the differences between heronwing and heronsfoot, one a fern and the other a poisonous toadstool. I knew that heronsfoot with the innocuous greybirch leaf increased in toxicity tenfold and that weaver's thatch had to be used to store it. I could hardly have lived with my mother for so long without picking up some of her basic lore.

My aunt questioned me while the vacant-eyed drudges stood silently while we ate. One stared at the wickerwork on one wall of the kitchen, seeming to trace its interminable patterns with her eyes while the other stared fixedly at the darkened glass window, her eyes flickering from cloud to cloud. Each smelled of collane and so I knew who kept the room so scrupulously clean.

"Airene taught you well," Orissiana said with a smile when I told her how I knew it was parasane in the glass by the smell of brandy and bitter aloes. "If you were a girl, I'd say that you would be more than half a witch right now."

"But men can't be witches," I told her and my aunt gave me a crooked smile. "My mother told me so."

"That's not exactly true," said my aunt, eyeing me as my mother used to when I asked a question interesting to her. I saw the family resemblance in my aunt to my mother. Then her features hardened and she didn't resemble my graceful mother any more.

"Too much of our work is involved with women and their petty complaints," Aunt Orissiana said. "We make them love potions, philtres, baby-making essences and special concoctions to ensure the birth of sons, cordials to prevent pregnancies, and then there's heronsfoot for the boring, former lover and new love potions for when the grieving widow wishes them."

I looked at her and some of the horror I was feeling must have shown in my expression. Orissiana reached across the table where we had moved to sit and took my hand in hers. I couldn't believe how strong she was.

"Not your sainted mother," she said with a smile, showing off a mouthful of very white, straight teeth. "She dealt with the health of mothers and children, and domestic animals, didn't she? And what man would be interested in that? New wives, new children, even new animals, can be made or purchased. Even new witches. Count Osgard has offered me five hundred gold to abandon my wiflings here in the Hills and to minister to him at Terraire."

I stared at her in amazement. "No, he must seek elsewhere for his new witch," said my aunt, turning to look at her inattentive servants. A flash of the ring on her finger and they were suddenly alert, studying her face. "Algoth, the supper dishes," she said. "Maris, prepare the Green Room for our new witch, little Sherrene."

I recoiled and stood up, heat flooding my face. How could she have known about that? She must have been reading my thoughts. If so, then she must have known, *must* have known, about Cory and the kiss he had given me.

“Forgive my little joke,” Aunt Orissiana said, making an effort, or so it seemed to me, to soften her harsh looks, to be more like my mother. “But while I have you here, I will use you. I have need of a witted assistant.”

I looked over at Algoth, who had completely ignored what was going on between us. She was staring at the painted wall as her hands washed dishes with a cloth, rinsed them and laid them gently on a tray to dry, never looking down at what she was doing.

Orissiana’s eyes followed mine. “A failed assistant,” she said. “But she has her uses.” Her eyes glittered as she looked back at me. “But you won’t fail me, little Sherrene, will you? I really do not need a third drudge around my house. With your mother dead, we have no other relatives, you and I. It’s right that you come to me and I should teach you all that your mother refused to.”

II. A WITCH’S ASSISTANT

I tried to run away in the night. I never saw who or what it was that tackled me in the woods and sat on me, until a silent Algoth arrived with a lantern, took my hand as whoever it was released me, and led me back to the house and the Green Room. I would know my attacker again, however. His salty male aroma was threaded with the same metallic smell that my aunt gave off.

My aunt never spoke to me of it. She set me tasks the next day, subtle but everyday recipes to follow, all of which I had heard my mother chanting to herself. I had not thought of them as recipes for her potions until I was in my teens. My aunt seemed to think that I knew them but knowing wasn't the problem, my mother had said, when I sang them back to her, surprising her, making her laugh that I knew them so well.

It was knowing just the right amounts that fitted together, my mother said, that made the witch. The great witches could do it by smell, she told me, and tried to teach me how odors showed how changes were occurring with potions. If I knew how something should smell, she told me, then I could always make that potion on my own.

I had ruined many of my mother's more expensive concoctions by trying to do just that. My mother only laughed at my trying to be a witch like her and showed me how she did it. My aunt was different. She said nothing about how to make what she wanted, just telling me to make tellene, collane and other needed household compounds as my mother had undoubtedly shown me, and left me to it. Then my aunt retired to a dark, inner room from which emanated a sweet, honeyed aroma.

I looked at the open door and windows, the room being aired in the later days of summer. I moved towards one and Maris ran to the door, standing there, looking down at the floor, absently cleaning the heavy pot in her hands. I glanced at the window behind me. I picked up a chair and moved it to a place where I could climb out.

I was about to step up when the chair moved as Algoth pulled it away from me. She stood beside it,

frowning at the ceiling, while Maris, moving back to the kitchen area, was laying out all sorts of copperware and cleaning it neatly.

I sighed, went to the shelves and took down an unmarked glass jar of babyroot. I took it to the table as Algoth resumed a steady cleaning and dusting of the long workroom that led away from the kitchen.

The mild aroma of babyroot floated up to me as I released the cord holding the greybirch leaf about it. I found the mortar and pestle, spotlessly clean, in the cupboard beside the side table with its bowl of clean water and towel.

As I turned back to the worktable, Maris brought a jug of water to the table and set it down very, very carefully as if it was the most precious thing in the world. All the time, her eyes were focussed somewhere else. I doubt she saw the table top. She looked almost pretty as she stuck out her tongue and beads of sweat broke out on her forehead as she strained to do it perfectly. I loved the little smile on her face when she had done it.

I was standing there watching Maris staring into space when Algoth came behind me and put an apron about me. It was a clean apron, pink and frilled around the edges. She pulled up the edges over my shirt and persisted until she had the frilled straps over my shoulders and down my back to connect with the frilled waist band.

I tried to push her away but Algoth persisted. When I pushed at her, a tear rolled down her vacant expression as if something a long way away had hurt her. I stopped and let her put it on me, I could always take it off later, waiting for the smile like Maris's. It came to

Algoth when I stood at the table in my pretty pink pinafore.

I found the featherbane and scraped the sticky emanations from its rotting core onto the babyroot. Algoth came behind me again. I nearly jumped as I felt the silky touch on my cheek but it was only a clean, pink ribbon with which she was tying back my longish hair.

My mother had always worn ribbons about her hair and wooden barrettes as well. "One mustn't get a human hair in this prescription," she had told me, making a flea-ridding potion for the shorn sheep and their wool. "That would make every shepherd who handled one of my sheep violently ill. Some might even die if they were flea-infected as well. Always keep your hair out of the soup, your grandmother used to say, or you'll never marry."

Then she would laugh and say that she must have scattered armfuls of cuttings into her soups since no man ever came near us any more.

Maris came after Algoth and she had a cap and barrettes for my head. I got tired of the dodge-and-weave and hide-and-peek and let the silent girl put it on me. She was very pretty when she smiled like that. I hugged her after she had finished and kissed her but I might as well have hugged a stone statue and kissed a block of wood. The smile only seemed to be there for a job well done.

I got used to my new apparel in the next few hours before a tired-looking Orissiana came out of the room she had disappeared into all day. Her metallic aroma was considerably lessened. She raised her eyebrows after examining the work I had done and complimented me on the tasks she said I had performed well.

“Your mother taught you well,” my aunt said. “And thank you for co-operating with my girls. I see they dressed you like me when I work in our workshop. I like ribbons in my hair. They make me feel pretty. Do you get the same feeling?”

I shook my head, blushing furiously as I felt the soft, silky touch on my cheeks.

“Oh, the salve,” said my aunt and she reached into her black dress and brought something out of a pocket. “You will bathe in the morning. Algoth will prepare the bath for you. Maris will bring you clean clothes and dress you. You aren’t all boyish and silly about having girls clean you and dress you, are you?”

What could I say? “No, of course not,” I said as the drudges served us again with a tasty, aromatic stew that could have disguised any kind of drug my aunt might have wanted to serve me. Orissiana saw me watching that Maris served her from the same dish that she had served me from. She smiled as I waited for her to eat first.

“You are cautious as well,” Orissiana said and her face broke out into a huge smile. I could almost have liked her then. “But, consider,” she said as I tasted the delicious stew then. “If this was King Tatheren’s table, he would already have taken the antidote as he urged his nobles to eat the poisoned stew as he did.”

I was stunned. But it was his chancellor that had tried to poison the King’s stew, that was what everyone said, and succeeded only in killing half of the courtiers as the King had been delayed by his wife going into labor. Everyone knew that story and about Chancellor Ellard’s death in the iron cage while the nation mourned the Queen’s death in childbirth along with her infant son.

Luckily, the King had married again, my mother had said, and now had two fine sons. His new Queen had given him a third.

Orissiana watched my spoon dawdle along the side of the dish. "You have not cuckolded me by fathering a son with my conniving wife, unlike Ellard," she said, and the sharp, metallic aroma about her rose considerably. "And the only time you would have to fear me and my poisons, little Sherrene, is when you insulted me by refusing my food and my assistance."

I ate more than I normally would have after that.

Orissiana and I sat in what she called her parlor after supper, my cap, ribbons and apron were spirited away by the drudges who worked silently elsewhere in the house. My aunt didn't tell me what she was working on but she did tell me all about 'Good' King Tatheren who didn't seem quite so good with the stories she told me. She told me of other high counts in Malesia and in the Hills and it seemed to me that almost all of her stories involved treachery in one form or another.

In a lull, I asked her, "Did you know my father, Aunt?"

Orissiana smiled. "That must wait another day," she said; in her tiredness, I seemed to see a grimness. But I thought that I was imagining it. "Now, to bed."

I thought she would warn me of venturing out but she didn't. She had a much subtler way of defeating my attempt to steal away. Maris and Algoth took me to my bedchamber, the Green Room. One helped me take my clothes off and disappeared with them, to clean them I thought, as the other brushed my hair.

The woman's nightdress was over my head and floating down my body before I scarcely realized it. The girlish thing had ribbons and puffy shoulders and it tickled me all over as it touched me and billowed out about my thighs and calves. Maris tightened the ribbon about my chest as Algoth opened the bed. Only then did I realize how Algoth had divided my hair and put ribbons there so that when I was gently pushed into the bed, I was dressed as a girl would be going to bed.

I felt so strange to be in a girl's nightie but it did no good to argue with them so I endured it. It was actually kind of nice how soft it was against my skin. When the maids were gone, I searched the room for my pack, for my own clothes. Naturally, my pack was gone. The only clothes that I could find in looking in my room and the only other empty room next door were racks of maidenly dresses.

I could have sneaked out of the door in my light and airy nightie but my boots were gone. Slippers, silvery and strapped, with elevated heels, mocked me from the place I had set my boots. Slip them on my feet, put a robe about me and try to get away down the street in a nightdress and ribbons? I thought about it and thought of the somebody who had caught me in the woods. What would he do to me if he thought I was a girl escaping from my aunt's house?

I shuddered at the thought and Cory's kiss came to my mind and how I had fought him at first, but how as he had pinned my arms and kept on kissing me so ardently, the strangest of feelings had overwhelmed me and I had started to kiss him back. I was feeling that way again as the faint aroma of perfume on the nightie reached my nose.

Even when Cory was dirty, he still had this subtle smell of hyssop about him and I loved the aroma of mint as a child. As I kissed him back, Cory stroked me, releasing my arms, and I had put my arms around his neck and kissed him as hard as I could. I knew he liked it because he didn't let go of me. He was quivering like me as he stroked my hair and whispered to me. I had felt for just a few moments that I was Sherrene and that it was right to be kissing my Knight Servant.

I had felt Cory's manhood then against me and been on the edge of panic when my mother suddenly called into the hay barn for us. Cory had been as frantic as me in getting out of the hay and getting my mother's old hat and shawl hidden. My mother had spoken to me pleasantly as I met her, flushed, I'm sure, thankful that she had come in and stopped us and also disappointed that she had stopped me being Sherrene, me with all the hay in my hair. I thought she'd have known nothing but within the week, we moved to Terraire. I hadn't seen Cory since.

I was hot in bed, hugging my nightie about me, as I thought about Cory, how he had kissed me and told me that 'Sherrene' was a beautiful name and did I know what beautiful hair and eyes I had and that he must kiss me, once at least. How I had kissed him back and how his hands on me made me feel so strange. I had felt that I was Sherrene, the witch of Haybarn, the imaginary castle that he and I had defended against Lenne and his Russet bandits. If Cory, so much bigger and stronger than me, had seen me in the hay as I was now, in a nightie and ribbons...I shuddered at the thought.

My mother must have known. I took her concoctions and pastes and potions to all the women's places

in Terraire. I felt the women looking at me speculatively. I had gold in my pockets and I could have had many of the women. I think now that my mother had intended me to. I'm sure now that, if she had lived, she would have taken a more direct intervention into my life, one quite different from that which her sister took with me.

So, I lay fretfully in bed, thinking I would never sleep in such strange, enervating clothes. But I did. And in the morning, Algoth and Maris were there to insist that I bathe and be covered with the hair-removing salve, my head hair still in ribbons. And when I was cleaned of all hair on my face, body and legs, and dried, Maris brought me the clothes I was to wear for the day, and, of course, they weren't mine. They were girl's clothes, with silky underthings and airy gowns and tight-fitting stockings. They smelled of mountain flowers and of a jasmine perfume, not of manly things like clean wool and starched linen.

"Sherrene, you look lovely," said my aunt, the witch, holding her arms wide as if I was supposed to rush into her arms, my skirts floating out about me, and hug her with gratitude.

"What are you trying to do to me?" I asked her anxiously, feeling absurd as I stood there completely dressed as a girl. My skirts floated about me, touching the stockings on my legs, letting me know that I was entirely dressed as a girl, even to panties and a garter belt. I was a boy and I knew that I shouldn't be dressed as I was.

The drudges ignored me in my flickering dress and went straight to familiar tasks in the kitchen. My discomfort meant nothing to them.

I had fought them and discovered what I hadn't previously known. The drudges were stronger than any of the boys or men I had fought as part of Cory's gang. They had held me down with ease on the bed, or Algoth had, while Maris put stockings on my hairless legs and a garter belt about me to hold them up. She hadn't seem to care how I felt, so weird and hot as her rough hands caressed me as she did it.

I had on women's panties and breast bands as well, with pads inside so that when they put on the gown and its many petticoats, pulling it tight at my waist, I had a girlish figure. My hair was brushed and ribboned again, there were earrings clasped to my ears and a cold, dark-glass necklace resting on my exposed chest.

I had been dressed as a girl, just like them, unable to think why I had to have my chest padded in such a way. The petticoats flowed about me and made strange noises. I would have been humiliated if Cory could have seen me dressed like a girl. I shuddered as I wondered if he would have kissed me then.

Worse were the shoes with the elevated heels in which I tottered in front of my aunt. My dress skirts swayed against me, loosing the strangest feelings of lightness and airiness against me.

"My darling Sherrene," said my aunt in an attempt at sweetness. It looked to me, however, like the smile on the maw of a dire wolf just before it seizes its prey and rips it apart. "Think of your situation and mine. You, a young man, in a house with three women. Me, a maiden aunt, with a young man whom I say is my nephew.

"No, when my guests call later today, they will have no cause to gossip about me behind my back. Today, you shall be Sherrene. I trust that you will not for-

get in just a day in skirts how to be Dedrick. Or are you so afraid that you will like being a young woman that you won't want to go back to being misfit Dedrick again?"

"I'm not a misfit," I said through clenched teeth, sensing all the gentle flutters of my dress against my silky legs. A day in a dress? A day to be Sherrene? It actually sounded rather nice but I couldn't let my aunt know that I wouldn't mind being Sherrene for a little while. But I really wanted Cory to be there. How his eyes would grow if he could see how my chest was tented in my dress. He wouldn't be able to keep his hands off me, I thought smugly.

"No, not a misfit," agreed Orissiana. "Your mother saw to that, easing and greasing your path through Malesian lower society. She bought you friends and companions and security. Have you ever thought for a moment how a lad like you passed so easily through a society that is vicious and cruel? But here you are, at eighteen, a virgin, and worse than that, a know-nothing!"

I stared at her and the hard expression now on her face. All feminine feelings evaporated as she tucked my hair back from my face and pinned it with a barrette.

"Oh, you know your witchery well enough," said my aunt. "You could serve any village in the Lowlands well, up to a point. But you don't know a thing about the real world. I think, Dedrick, that you have gone through the first eighteen years of your life with your eyes shut. Now, come and hug me like a good girl should."

I stumbled and rustled forward, obeying her command like one of the drudges. My skin tingled and I thought of the rose aroma of the bath water and how it

seemed to be disguising something else. My aunt hugged me as I felt her breasts push against the pads on my chest, letting me know how tightly I was bound. I felt the little sleeves around my upper arms and the tight belt at my waist but most of all I sensed the skirts stroking my stockinged legs and swirling femininely about me, wafting violets and roses up to my nostrils. I shivered in dismay.

“Beautiful,” said my aunt as she kissed each of my soft cheeks, breathing in deeply my rose petal fragrance, “and Maris has shaped your eyebrows so well. I wasn’t sure that she could be trusted with such fine work. They’re really well done, a feminine touch.”

I reeled under such praise, the earrings shivering at my ears, my chest lifting the necklace as I searched for breath. My aunt called Maris and gave her something from her pocket. Maris’ eyes lit up and for a moment I saw an attractive, young girl there, playfully innocent, as she took the reward from my aunt’s hand. My aunt patted her on the head and Maris looked at her with absolute adoration.

I shuddered, earrings and scented skirts shivering, reminding me of my dreams of being a real Sherrene to Cory and I quivered more. I didn’t want to end up like Maris, I thought, as I watched the other girl do everything but wag her tail at her pleased mistress.

“This is better for her,” said my aunt, her eyes still studying me, “than the alternative, months of great pain before every internal organ explodes and she dies in a sea of blood. It’s what happens when you try to do something on your own you’ve been warned you should never do. But you, I think, will not have that problem. Being inquisitive doesn’t seem ever to have been Dedrick’s problem.”

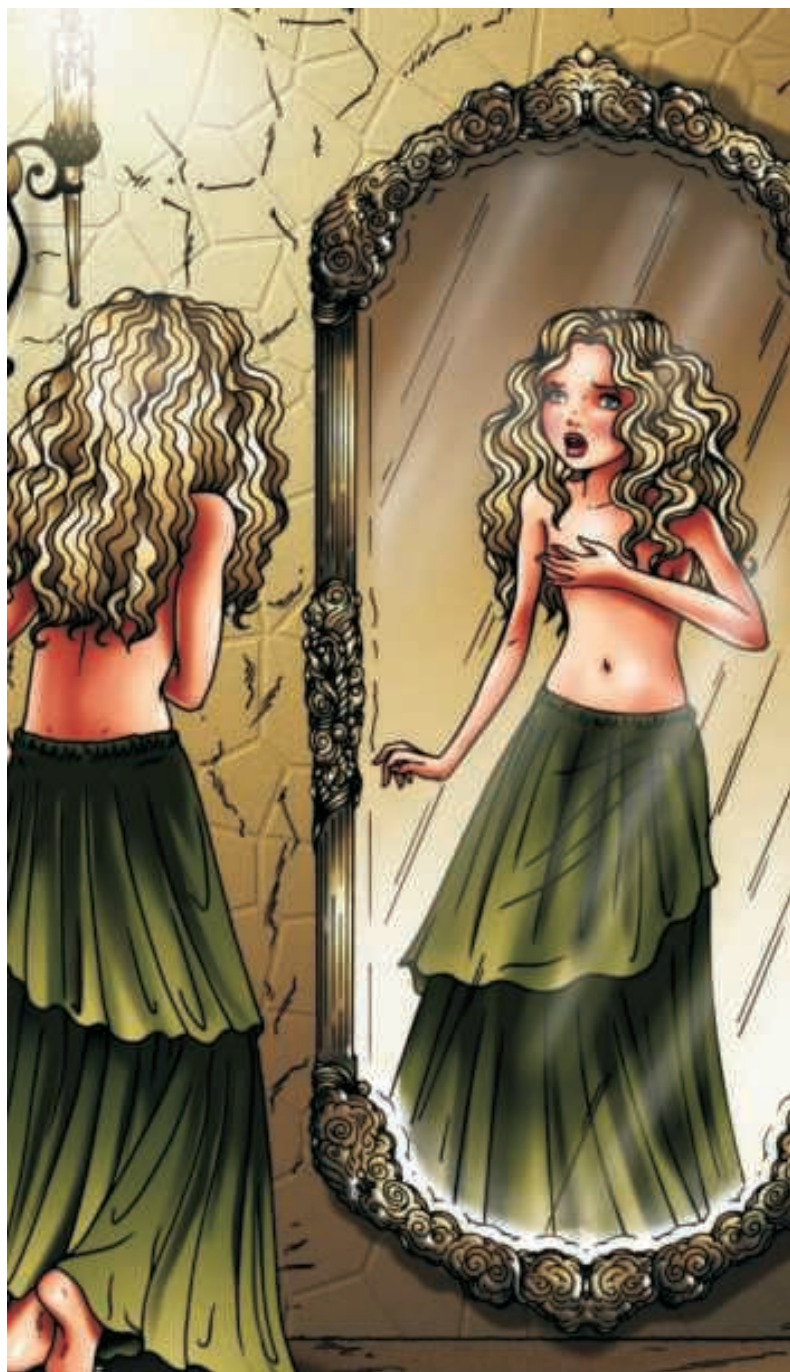
I had to wear an apron to breakfast, a very light meal. I had to sit daintily, soft, silky material against my legs and all my skin. I sat in a cloud of femininity, trying not to quiver as my aunt spoke to me and questioned me as if I was a girl. I felt the light pull on my stockings and I tried not to fidget as I sat.

Then, I had tasks that my aunt wanted done. She recited several recipes to me and retreated to her room again. She had added the names of other solutions to the list from the day before that I was to prepare, baronselle and collis, that required seven ingredients apiece. I was hard at work, ignoring the touch of my dress and earrings, heating a solution of swivel eggs, buds of the wortlebane, when I sensed her watching me.

“You will make a fine witch, Sherrene,” Orissiana said, smiling at me. Shameful feelings of being feminine before her went through me. She was calling me by my female name. “I was thirty before I had such a light hand with heat and alloying. Finish that and join me in the parlor.”

I did and my aunt had me stand before her, my hands clasped behind me, the mounds on my chest thrust forward. She smiled as I tried to look at her and ignore the feelings running through me. I felt weird and wondered how the ‘actresses’ of the Middle Theater could stand to be like this in every performance as women weren’t allowed on the stage. Yet, the girls I had seen there had seemed so real, at least until they talked.

Then you could tell it was a man swearing undying love to his soldier friend. But the ‘actresses’ always smiled as they swayed in their dresses, the young men who played the heroines. They had seemed to love be-



ing in frillies and dresses and face makeup. I shuddered as I thought of how I was dressed. Yes, I could play a part in a theater. I could be a heroine and have a man kiss me as the crowd cheered. I shivered and wondered why I had never thought of it before. Maybe the dress was making me feel all girlish, or was it the panties and breast bands that held me so tightly? But I mustn't get to like this, I thought wildly, as my aunt opened a philtre on the table in her parlor.

I smelled the lovebane as my aunt opened the small vial.

"You know this?" my aunt asked in surprise.

"My mother made many concoctions with heartyearn or blossom seasoning," I told her. My chest rose and pulled on the breast bands, making it thrust out like a girl's. Aunt Rissa didn't seem to notice as she frowned at me.

"Yes," my aunt said. "But a pretty girl like Sherrene must have her own perfume. This lovebane has the dew of the morning and stars of the evening." I shook and tried to protest but my clothing was infusing me with feminine feelings. I had to wonder, a feeling of nausea coming to me, if my aunt had bewitched the clothes I was wearing to make me feel as girlish as I did.

Orissiana laughed as she dabbed the perfume on my chest, at my ears and on my wrists as if she was preparing a maiden for a dance. Yes, it had the perfumes known as dew of the morning and stars of the evening but there was something else as well, something that prickled me as I don't think I had sampled it before. But it didn't matter as I was enveloped in the smells always associated with pretty women. I shivered and tried to get used to the idea that such a fra-

grance was now coming from me, someone who looked like a woman at least.

"Now, sit in the chair, Sherrene, and let Algoth prepare your hair while I complete your lady's toilette," my aunt ordered me. My body did exactly, femininely, as she wished, even though I tried not to obey her. I shivered as I realized how much I was already be-spelled by her.

I sat there in my rusty skirts as she painted my face and my lips. Algoth curled my hair, layering in masheen, which would hold the curls tight as she arranged them. I tried to protest at the way my hair was being brushed into a female hair style but it did no good. I could only sit there in my skirts and panties and stockings and feel how silly I was, what a figure of fun I would be for Aunt Rissa's friends who were supposed to be coming to see her.

Maris brought in a great looking-glass which showed me to myself from head to toe. I stared at the blonde, curly-haired girl in astonishment. She couldn't be me. She had pink, shiny lips, shaped, girlish eyebrows, and thick, dark eyelashes. Her skin was clear and powdered lightly. I shivered and she did too as if she sensed the delicate scent of upland violets, the stars of the evening, about her. She smiled as I did, disturbing me that she was so real a girl, no, that *I* was so real a girl.

"This is you, Sherrene," my aunt said then, as I shivered and my earrings did as well. "This is the girl you were meant to be and whom your mother tried so hard to prevent you from becoming." She had a cordial in her hand. "Drink this," she ordered. I did so without being able to stop myself. "Can't have you looking like Sherrene and sounding like Dedrick, can we? Don't

speak for a few moments and let the cordial do its work.”

I sat and stared at the girl, moving my head slightly and she moved hers. I stood, tottered, and the girl did as well, her light green skirts swaying about her, her garter belt pulling on her stockings as she, like me, tried to control the high-heeled slippers she had to wear.

It came to me then that I was a girl. I was a femininely-scented young girl. No attentive man would know that I wasn't a girl, not by my fragrance, and a girl could be a witch. Oh Cory, I thought, admiring myself more than a little. If only I had looked like this for you in the hay barn. I could just feel how tightly he would have hugged me.

“How do you feel now, like a Sherrene?” asked my aunt, cutting into my daydream, making me recall who I was and what I truly was.

“No,” I stammered. My voice was all squeaky, my throat feeling as if it had been closed up. I was lying. I felt like Sherrene, I did, and I wished that, for a little while, I could really be her.

“Explain,” said my aunt, waving her hand to urge me to speak.

“My, my voice,” I told her anxiously. “It's, it's as if I have a hand about my throat.” It wasn't me speaking but someone else saying the words I spoke, a female someone else.

“Beautiful,” said my aunt with a smile on her face. “And just in time, as you will hear.”

Maris took away the large looking glass and along with it, the image of the beautiful girl. But Algoth stepped into the room, looked at the ceiling and said

the first words I had ever heard her utter, making me want to disappear under the table.

“My ladies,” Algoth said in a strained voice as if unused to speaking, looking at me as she said ‘ladies’, making me feel as if I had a lump in my throat. “Your guests have arrived.”

III. A WITCH'S NIECE

I panicked. I stood and would have fled from the parlor, even with a lovely, scented dress swirling about me, but there was a noise in the outer room, the sound of voices, male voices. Men were coming in and they were going to see me as I was, in a dress, with my hair curled and my face painted. They would see me with earrings pinching my earlobes. They would see me teetering on my heels, a woman’s dress swishing about me. They would see me with my absurd, padded figure, a parody of a woman. They would hear my squeaky little girl’s voice. If they got close, they would laugh at the aroma I was giving off, the aroma of a woman.

What was worse was that I felt that I liked it a little. I liked being a marionette or a doll with my strings in the hands of my aunt. Then it was all her fault and not something wrong with me that I could like being dressed as a girl. Aunt Rissa turned and smiled mockingly at me. She adjusted my necklace across my chest, and teased the neckline about my budding, padded mounds. She finally adjusted my hair about my ears to make my earrings prominent and tingle at my neck. She knew she was rousing feminine feelings in me and she touched my hands to stop me from trembling so much.

“Sit down, my dear,” Orissiana ordered me and so I sat, my nerves jangling as I looked at the woman ordering me. I had to be a girl, I thought, as I knew others were coming in to look at me. My dress swirled about me and I loved how the skirts felt so light and airy about me.

My aunt motioned to me though to sit and I did, pressing my skirts beneath me. “Do as I do,” she told me, crossing her legs in her dress with infinite grace. She smiled at my clumsy efforts but I don’t think she had to contend with the unexpected tugs of the garter belt on my stockings or the feel of my stockinged legs sliding over each other. It was terrible and strangely pleasant that my skirts rustled as I did so.

I had much admired girls, the way they moved and controlled their skirts and the way they looked so delighted with the touch and feel of their soft clothes as they did. I had to do it now myself but it wasn’t really delight that I felt as noises from outside reached me. It was terror, sheer terror that threatened to overcome me as the male voices came to the door of the room where my aunt and I were seated.

“Now stand,” my aunt ordered me cruelly, “and remember how to do it. Brush your skirts beneath you, my darling, and always, always, cross your pretty legs for the handsome men.”

My senses were reeling in fright as the Count of Mustay came in. He had to duck to come into the parlor where I stood, teetering fearfully beside my aunt. He saw me and smiled appreciatively; I felt agony seeping through me as I recognized that he admired the way I appeared to him.

Oh, please don’t look at me, I thought, but I didn’t dare to look away or to look into space as Maris and

Algoth did. I felt awful as I stood there and joined in my aunt's deception. I tried to remember how I had seen girls stand and how they had smiled at men whom they met. I am a girl, I told myself fitfully. I *am* a girl and I must behave like one.

"Rissa," the Count said to my aunt. "Who is this beauty whom you've been hiding here? Not one of your concoctions from primroses and honey, is she?"

My aunt smiled at me, squeezing my hand. I shook and my legs felt so bare as light silk touched and caressed me. The dress should have delighted a female, not an impostor like me. I struggled to overcome my fright as my aunt lifted my hand with feminine grace for the Count to bend over it and kiss the back of my scented wrist.

The glaze in his eyes I recognized almost immediately. I had seen it in others who had used my mother's lovebane potions liberally and tested them on themselves in my mother's presence. I didn't want the Count to raise his head and look at me in the way that I feared he would.

I didn't want him paying me silly compliments, not to me, a boy, standing there before him, waiting to be shamed by my aunt when she exposed me to the man's laughter. The effect of lovebane had always caused my mother great mirth, especially when the affected men pressed extra payments on her for her philtres, never understanding how they had been manipulated to lust after her by their own choice of drug.

An older woman followed the Count in, a displeased expression on her face. The man who followed her looked like a bodyguard or soldier of some kind. He made an instinctive jerk as if he would rush forward when he saw the Count kiss my hand. Then he

shook his head and a small smile stole across his face as he looked at my aunt. I panicked, sure that the man had read who and what I was and was about to expose me to his companions. I felt my heart begin to race and was frightened that someone would see my it beating beneath my exposed chest.

"Lady Starane," said my aunt, introducing me to the woman first. I had seen women bow to each other and curtsy. I couldn't curtsy so I bowed. The mass of golden curls that Algoth had made of my head fell over my chest with such a caress that I quivered as if a person had touched me. "May I present my niece, Lady Sherrene, my late sister's daughter."

Oh, how I trembled at such words. I tried so to be womanly, my dress swinging about me, sending chills through me as I quivered and flushed so wildly again. Oh, I couldn't do this, I couldn't, I thought wildly. Whatever does my aunt expect me to be doing, dressing me like this and calling me 'Lady' as if I was of noble birth? She was proclaiming me to be a woman to another woman who was looking at me most peculiarly as if she had read me right away, as my aunt had.

"Yes, Lady Airene is dead. We heard," said the woman, looking at me with marked interest. "But a pretty, Seafarer daughter? We had heard a son."

"Easier for my niece to travel alone through the Hills," said my aunt smoothly; my skin broke out in goose bumps as the woman referred to me, a boy, as a 'daughter,' not contradicting my aunt. I tasted my lip paint and the lovebane perfume rose and infected me a little as well, so heated was my skin. "If you had come two days ago, you might have arrived together. I don't think, however, that you would have been fooled by her disguise."

“No, certainly not,” said Lady Starane. She turned to the third man as the Count of Mustay was fondling my hand, making me shake all over as I heard my aunt call me her ‘niece’ and my mother’s ‘daughter.’ But the perfume was having an effect on me as well as the Count of Mustay. I found his touch and the besotted look in his eyes quite beguiling. I wished I dared to respond as I had seen girls do to men who favored them. I fought back at the sensation, biting the inside of my lip. A modicum of control came to me, enough that I could look up at the sea-grey eyes of the second man to enter the room.

“The Count of Torthard,” said the soldier, introducing himself, and winking to me. “And, Lady Sherrene, I would love to kiss your hand, milady, but only if your perfume doesn’t have the same effect on me as it has done upon Mustay.”

I inclined my head to him; my curls once again fell forward. I had to do what I had seen girls do many times and flip it back without using my hands since the Count of Mustay had lifted them to his mouth and was kissing each in turn, sending chills and thrills through my closely bound body.

“Oh, Orissiana,” said the older woman in distaste. “Can’t you stop this disgusting display?”

I thought that Lady Starane meant a man kissing the hands of a boy like me.

My aunt laughed and waved the pair of latest arrivals to chairs. She brought out a small bottle with a bulb on one side. “I always carry an antidote to whatever potion I launch upon the world,” said Orissiana. She fired the spray in the Count of Mustay’s direction. Some of the antidote fell on me. The Count was splut-

tering in a moment, while I felt as if I had been dipped in a cold shower. It was quite a sensation.

“Oh,” the Count said, shaking his head.

“Sorry, Milady Sherrere,” said the other man as Mustay looked at me strangely. “I don’t think Ruval’s in love with you any more.”

Thank goodness, I thought, a shudder passing through me. I don’t know why but I felt as if I had lost something then, something that saddened me. But the Count of Mustay was staring at me as if he had suddenly realized what a fool he was, holding on to a boy in a girl’s green, silk dress.

“Don’t believe that,” said the Count of Mustay sharply to his friend but looking at me still, holding my hand. I quivered under his stiffening touch. “I’m as much in love with you, Sherrere, as I was when I walked into this room. You don’t need any love potions to bewitch me.”

I knew that I was blushing. I was shaking openly; everybody in the room was smiling at me, my aunt’s eyes glinting. I had to say something despite the sickness I felt threatening to overwhelm me. I could sense the others waiting.

“Th-Thank you, my lord,” I said nervously. How could I answer him? I thought in stunned amazement. But I recalled the beribboned girl I had seen in the long mirror and I blushed wildly at the thought. Cory would surely have loved to see me as a pretty girl. He had always been urging me on, I realized then, to bring more of my mother’s things and put them on when we played the Witch game. I shuddered and wondered what he would have done if he could see me as I was in my aunt’s house. I could feel him, in my imagination,

stroking my arms, as he had when I asked him what he was doing to me in the loft of the hay barn. Then he kissed me.

But now it was the Count stroking my arms. I was being observed by two other women and another man who all seemed to expect me to respond as any girl would in being stroked by a man.

"Enough games, Rissa," said the older woman firmly. "We all know your skill with love charms and hexes. That's not our concern. Is the truth compulsion drug ready or not?"

I glanced then at my aunt, feeling my earrings and my curled hair move with me.

These people wanted parasane? I recalled my mother's warning not to let it fall into other's hands, save for those of her sister. I thought of them trying it out on me and I began to quiver as I thought about the kinds of answers I would give to their questions.

My aunt lifted the front of her skirt and began to move out of the parlor, indicating to me to do the same.

"The truth drug is ready," said my aunt, giving me a smile. "But it isn't me you should thank for that but my niece."

Three pairs of eyes suddenly looked at me intently, my anxiety level rising even more if that was even possible.

"I told you that my sister had the secret of that concoction," my aunt went on. "Luckily, she had passed that on to Sherrene before she died. Sherrene has spent the last two days preparing samples for you. How do you propose that we test her work for you?"

I didn't understand my aunt. She knew that I had only brought to her what my mother had concocted. She knew that I wasn't a girl and yet she was making me behave like one in front of these important people. Each movement I made reminded me that I wasn't a girl and yet each movement reinforced that I was dressed like a girl. Worse, each movement made me love being dressed as a girl.

My mother had never told me the recipe for parasane and I had never thought to ask her. She had said that my aunt would know how to make it, that she knew how to do many things that my mother did not. I also knew that my mother didn't always approve of her sister and what she did. I knew, my teeth clenched as I quivered in my petticoats, that my mother would not approve of me now. She wouldn't have liked me to be a pretty girl and she would have hated me enjoying being a girl.

"We have to test it," said the Count of Torthard. "Absolutely. We have to know that when we give it to the prisoner that he is telling us the truth."

"Bring in my steward, Brost," said Mustay suddenly. He squeezed my hand. I wanted him to stop, I did, but his unfeigned interest in me was quite uplifting in a strange sort of way. "He's been robbing me blind for two years and I haven't caught him yet. I'd like to know how he does it."

"To the workroom then," said my aunt. She glanced at the Count of Mustay. "If you would be so kind, Count, as to attend my niece. She should never have worn new shoes to greet you and she's far too suspicious of my potions to allow me to ease the passage of her feet in such unyielding new high heels."