



Reluctant Press presents:

A Witch in Spite of Himself

Philippa Peters



A 'New Woman' E-BOOK

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A WITCH IN SPITE OF HIMSELF

by **Philippa Peters**

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

XXI. A WITCH'S RETURN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

XXII. A WITCH'S FORTUNE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And my lovely figure,” I suggested.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How much was it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

XXIII. A WITCH'S DRAMA

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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