



Reluctant Press presents:

Only Women Can Be Witches



A 'NEW WOMAN' E-BOOK

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ONLY WOMEN CAN BE WITCHES

by **Philippa Peters**

Concluding *Boys Can't Be Witches*, *The Captain's Seawife*, and *A Witch In Spite Of Himself*

XXXI. A WITCH'S SUBJUGATION

The townsfolk of Birchwood turned out in force to see the captured warlock. I must have looked a dreadful sight as I was paraded with my head hanging down from a dusty horse, clearly female in my dress and body shape. Another time they had applauded me as a witch. The officers riding with the Count of Torthard

used my rounded tush for target practice with their long whips, delighting in hearing me squeal as they stung me again and again.

The townspeople, whom I had once thought so polite and shy, cheered each of the whacks I received, even the occasional misses that ripped away parts of my dress, exposing my breast bands and my petticoats to public view.

“Didn’t know a man wore pretties like that,” taunted one man, running forward to lift my head by the hair and then to kiss me. What else could I do but spit back the saliva he’d left all over me. He slapped me then from side to side.

The Count of Torthard rode forward at last and intervened, using his horse to knock the man down. The tanner, I recognized his smell, was screaming at me, spitting at me in turn.

“Serves you right,” said the Count as we passed the seamstress’ shop where so many of my prettiest dresses had been made. I didn’t know if he was addressing me or the man he had knocked down with his horse.

Oh, if only I had had a little swamp gas vial about me and could reached it, I would have annihilated the town of Birchwood, the town where my aunt lived and reigned.

Torthard’s horse prevented me from seeing more. It didn’t stop the taunts of the crowd, however. My aunt and the Queen Regent had told the world that Lady Sherrene was a man, a warlock, not a witch. And yet I was paraded as a woman, my high heels still on my feet, my dress still clinging to me, my long hair still uncut.

One of the witches in the carriage ahead of us with the Queen had promised Count Torthard to cut off my golden hair. The Count had told me that when he had kissed and caressed me outside Terraire, letting me escape from her. Lady Renneth had said that she would shave my head like one of the men at arms walking so stolidly and silently beside us.

Something to look forward to, I thought grimly, forced to shriek again as one of the whips caught me right on my upper thighs, between my panties and the tatters of the stockings I was been wearing.

I was a man and men did not ride in carriages, proclaimed the Queen Regent. Nor, I gathered did they sleep inside buildings on beds. I was just cut loose each night when we stopped and flung to the ground to eat and drink from bowls like a dog.

Though the witches might snigger and jeer at me, at least I didn't have to put up with the taunts of the men. Only Count Torthard and his riders were not ensorcelled like the others, the notorious Grey Men. The Baract Kings would fling the Grey Men into battle without a care for them, knowing that the ensorcelled men would walk forward silently as instructed and fight everything in their path until their wounds bled out and stopped them or they were killed by some unlucky blow that evaded their grey-colored armor.

Going through Birchwood, I was spat at and jeered by the crowds. But they mustn't have believed what my aunt had told them about me because they called me whore and slut, strumpet and harlot, sow and bitch, all feminine insults.

"Is she a man or a woe-to-man!" screamed one wag as urchins ran beside my horse. One threw a stone and squealed even more loudly than me as a whip caught

his hand, pulling him forward almost under the hooves of the horse I was tied to.

“No hitting the horse,” the mounted soldier threatened with a snarling voice and brandished whip.

Several youngsters dropped stones and clods of earth then.

“Is she a man or a woman?” one child called after me.

You answered your own question, urchin, I thought, as my horse was pulled after the carriage. When it finally stopped, my bonds were unceremoniously cut. I was allowed to fall on my head in front of my aunt’s house.

Count Torthard jumped down from his saddle and cut the rope around my skirts and my legs. He lifted me to my feet, my hands still tied behind my back. I tried to see if there was anything left of the man who had said he wanted me as a woman the last time we had met.

My hair was so matted and dirty, however, that I couldn’t see through it at all. I felt his arm under mine as I was dragged into a house that had been so familiar to me a year ago when I had come here as a young man to deliver my dead mother’s dangerous potions to her sister-witch.

I hadn’t known that my mother was noble-born. I had thought the Lady part of her title, Lady Airene, was honorary and applied equally to all witches. I was wrong. My mother, murdered in our home in Terraire, had been noble-born like my aunt. My aunt ruled at Birchwood and the surrounding county because she was a Lady, the equal of a Count, in her own right.

My mother had never aspired to rule. She had always been some Count's witch. I hadn't known how rich she was. It had never occurred to me to visit the moneychanger's to find out what sort of money my mother had stored away.

I had been astonished to find out that my mother had always kept in touch with her sister and had told her all about me and my problem with Cory. Pretending to be a witch in our game, I had started to make love to Cory after he kissed me. I would have done it with him in any way that he wanted me, so in love was I with Cory at that time.

My aunt used that as a wedge to begin to change me right away. She began to change me into a girl. I still really don't know why with absolute certainty. Part of it had been to entice the King of the Land, Tatheren, to seduce me. He had had no chance to avoid his fate, I realized later; my aunt had access to very powerful concoctions.

Tatheren had taken me in my disguise as a girl celebrating her Sixteen into his bedroom to make love to me. My aunt and the Queen arranged it so that Tatheren died in the bedroom with me, trying to make love to me. I was accused of murdering him. I was imprisoned. I would have been burned to death but Tatheren's alchemist, Master Bredden, had set me free. He left a trail for me to follow through the castle at Hillaire that allowed me to see my aunt and the Queen in bed together.

The next step in my degradation was when I was hunted through the streets of Hillaire by men at arms who stopped and stripped women on the streets to find out if they were truly women. Luckily, I had fled across

the docks to a great Seafarer ship which gave me refuge.

I became a seawife to the captain. Since women were not allowed on great ships except as passengers, my duties were to be a woman to my husband, Anjaro.

I loved that the period of my life. I loved Anjaro as a woman loves a man. I had been a woman for Anjaro as he taught me to be. I still cried a little when I thought of how he betrayed me.

I was hurled into the reception room that I knew so well. It was in here that I had bespelled Count Mustay and where the Count of Torthard recognized that I was ensorcelled myself and so had avoided touching me at first. But later I felt Torthard's intense interest in me, his hand raising feelings in me that I had thought only Cory could. My interest in him sharpened as I felt a weird desire arising, something a lout like Mustay could not arouse in me.

A grim-faced Count Torthard lifted me to my feet in my aunt's antechamber. He wasn't afraid any more of touching me and falling in love with me, I noted. His strong hand pushed back my matted hair. There, standing in front of me, her hair as black as ever, her features as marked and dynamic as I recalled them, was my aunt.

Aunt Orissiana had made Lady Sherrene, the witch in the game I had played with Cory and other boys, into a real person. I had loved her compliments of my growing womanly talents. I had loved the effect my perfume had upon the Count of Mustay and even on the Count of Torthard. I had loved the admiration in his eyes, in particular, admiration for me as a woman. There was none now, though, as he flung me onto the floor of my aunt's living chamber.

“Why does my nephew come back to me in such a state?” my aunt asked the Count of Torthard who stood by the door with one of his men who was not under the berserker influence. The softness of her tone shook me more than if she had ranted or had me beaten.

“It’s the way he was dressed when we took him at Febry’s Inn,” said the Count shortly. “The Queen Regent would not permit Lady Sh-, that is, your nephew, milady, within the carriage as a carriage ride is for ladies. Your nephew was been brought here across a horse.”

“And has slept on the ground at night for eight days,” snapped my aunt, turning her gaze from me to the Count. Her indignation made it sound as if she actually cared for me and my comfort.

“My men slept on the ground,” said Torthard. He didn’t say that the Queen Regent had declared it the only fit place for a man like me. She had designated one of her witch companions to check on me through the night to see that I was being treated like the dog that I was.

Torthard stepped to one side as the Queen Regent of the Baracts swept into the room, several of her sycophants at her heels.

“My goodness, Orissiana,” said the Queen, lifting a delicate nosegay to her pretty mouth. “Whatever is that awful reek in your antechamber? Oh, I see that you have met Lady Sherrene again. How like a man to bring such fetid odors into a real Lady’s house!”

The Royal Ladies in Waiting tittered at me on cue.

“Lara, Lara, Lara,” sighed my aunt, giving me hope for the first time that I might yet survive this meeting

with her. But I couldn't help looking up at her in disbelief. All the threats she had made to me over the listening devices that witches used appeared to have been set aside. I shuddered. Whenever my aunt had been nice to me, it was because she was going to do something terrible to me or have me do something terrible to someone else.

"You think that I should have lodged him with me?" sneered the Queen. "The murderer of my husband? I wanted to have him burned right away. But Torthard wouldn't obey me. He fears the wrath of my witch more than he does that of the Queen Regent."

"And rightfully so," said my aunt. She waved at Count Torthard and his man to leave us. The Queen's ladies left with much alacrity and with hopeful looks at the Queen but she didn't disobey my aunt and invite any to stay, I noted.

"Now, between us," my aunt said smoothly, going to her favorite chair and waving to the Queen to sit beside her, "we do not need the pretence of your high dudgeon, Lara."

The way that the Queen sat denied the words that my aunt had spoken. "She killed my husband," Larussa pouted.

"Only because the dorospell worked so well," murmured my aunt, smiling at me, another hopeful sign. Despite the dirt clinging to me, I was able to feel the dress about me. I knew that I was shaped as a woman should be. My breasts began to tense as my aunt softly explained the effects of the Seafarer poison on her lecherous husband to the Queen. "Now you have what you wanted, Lara. You rule the land alone. Did not Sherrere bring back Prince Tathally into your clutches?"

I give you leave to tantalize that one in any manner that you see fit."

"I already am," retorted the Queen. "And I do not need your leave to do anything I please, Rissa!"

I noted the oddities in the situation. My aunt never referred to the Queen Regent as 'majesty' or 'highness' and Larussa had said 'she' when she referred to me having killed her husband. I loved to be called 'she.' I wanted to be acknowledged as a woman even by my enemies.

Algoth and Maris, my aunt's maids, appeared silently then. I still don't know how my aunt controlled them with such precision. She had been fingering one of the black stones in her long necklace at the time. It must have been a device that triggered something like the listening devices we both used.

"Release Lady Sherrene from her bonds," my aunt instructed Maris. "Bathe her and clothe her as she was when she left my house for the capital." I was sure my aunt had something large she wanted from me. If I could survive long enough, though, I might be able to fight back and destroy her instead of being destroyed by her.

XXXII. A WITCH'S REAPPRAISAL

The bath was set up as it had been so many times before. Maris and Algoth worked with the same silent efficiency as always. They stripped my grimy, soiled clothing from me, down to my panties. I had lost the bindings between my legs somewhere in the hedges I had been consigned as a latrine on the road.

I had been enraged when I was first debased like that. But the soldier who had the duty of stripping off my panties appeared to see nothing odd about it. Maris and Algot were the same. They stripped my panties away and never made any comment about my obvious male features.

They made no comment about my obvious female features, either. They poured water over my long hair and cleaned it thoroughly before drying it, braiding it and putting ribbons and barrettes in my lightened hair, the ends darker where the brown dye was disappearing from my blonde locks.

My maids soaked my breasts and salved my armpits, my legs and body so that no unsightly hair appeared. As I stood and was cleaned, I thought of Mithera, the woman I had helped to create from the ravages of the male she had been.

I looked down at my rounded hips and femininely shaped, female thighs. My legs weren't male legs any more. They were smooth and soft to the touch. I had loved it when Anjaro kissed them gently and worked his way up to my panties where I wiggled with anticipation about what he would do next.

My waist seemed tinier than ever and that made my breasts seem much larger, I thought. Maris casually cupped them as she dried me. I recognized the lovely scent of upland violets that my aunt loved on me. The essence was strong enough to conceal the honeybane compound that she also used as a controlling agent. I absorbed it through my skin in the frequent baths my aunt insisted that I have.

I smelled again like a lovely girl just I was dressed like one. It was thrilling to put on silky stockings and a frilly garter belt to hold them on my legs. Maris knew

how to apply the bindings between my legs before she put me into panties. I wished I had a looking glass as Algoth worked with masheen to style my hair.

The breast bands were tight and I wished that I had Choni with me. The former cabin boy on the great ship, *The Tempest of Distant Shores*, had proven to be a wonderful seamstress. Choni had made very comfortable breast bands for me and the other cabin boys I had transformed.

Choni would have lengthened the straps of my breast bands but Maris didn't so I was pushed up and forward in the bands I had to wear. My breasts were incredibly prominent in the light, female undergarments I wore, their gentle touch about incredibly pleasant after what I had endured.

A dark blue dress, made by one of the seamstresses in town, who had been jeering at me and calling me a whore, fitted me without me having to resort to the tight strapping of a body shaper as I had had to once before.

My breasts bulged at the low neckline even before the pretty necklace was put about my neck.

Algoth then brought me a looking glass and cosmetics. She knew that I could make myself up as a woman should because she and Maris had taught me. I had struggled so often to make my eyes vivid and my eyelashes thick. I had learned how to shape my thin eyebrows, where to rouge and where to apply eye shadow before applying a lady's face powder.

All the familiar scents brought goose bumps out on my skin as I painted my lips and looked at myself with my fair hair in braids and ringlets. It was me, Lady Sherrene, as I had been going forth to Hillaire, eagerly

looking forward to the great balls and the men who would dance with me and cover me with compliments on being so femininely attractive.

Well, it had happened but I hadn't been able to enjoy it long enough. I had caught the King's eye and he wanted me. Even though he was married to Larussa, he still dallied with young, attractive girls and I had been presented as such. I had deceived Master Bretton, the King's alchemist, with a potion that my aunt said was purely defensive.

I used it on the King as he tried to love me and the effect had been catastrophic. He came violently and prematurely all over my dress as his sexual ardor had not lessened. He recognized it before I did. I lay terrified beneath him in his bed as the King poured his essence all over me in my pretty, white silk dress. Then, King Tatharen fell, his eyes bulging, onto the floor beside me and died just as his wife came marching into the bedroom to find me with her husband. I had killed him, she accused me.

So, how could she accuse me of being a man as well? A man who had been woman enough to arouse her husband to excess? Surely the Counts would see through that if ever I was brought to trial. But that was not going to happen, not when the witches controlled the Grey Men, the berserker fighters, and could transform any men they wished into such a group.

I stood in my dark blue, high heeled slippers and swished my skirts about me with a satisfied sigh. Let Larussa call me what she liked. In a dress like this, with my breasts so prominent and shapely before me, I could bear her snide comments.

I swept out into the crowded main room of the house where one of the ladies, I think it was Lady Renneth, gasped aloud at my appearance.

“Oh, Rissa,” said the Queen petulantly, still seated beside my aunt, who sat back from trying to explain something to an unwilling Queen. “You could at least have had our prisoner dressed in his proper clothes.”

“I think that she is,” murmured my aunt, smiling at me. She patted the seat beside her on the sofa.

I minced across the room and sat as gracefully as I could, conscious of every eye in the room on me. The Queen got to her feet.

“I am not staying in here with this abomination, Rissa,” the Queen said, shrugging off my aunt’s weak hold on her arm. “If you think your nephew,” she made it into a sneer, “can assist you in getting Perisord back, you can have him. But if he comes back from there, I promise you, I will have the order spread over the land to have him burned by the first Count or Commander of the Grey Men who gets his hands on him.”

Then the Queen Regent spat at me, luckily missing me and my beautiful dress completely. “My wonderful husband would still be alive,” Larussa said theatrically, “if it hadn’t been for him, your nephew, going to my husband’s room and enticing him into bed with his warlock disguises.”

Warlocks were insane and dangerous, everyone knew that. The royal ladies got up and fluttered after the queen, casting venomous looks at me. I felt my color rise at the speculative looks I got from several of the Counts. Mustay was openly looking at my breasts, his mouth gaping open like a dog on a hot day.

“You’ll have to excuse the Queen Regent,” said my aunt, reaching over and taking my hand. She smiled at the pink, glossy polish on my newly shaped nails. I couldn’t believe that she was still treating me so warmly, not after all the threats she had made to me, gloating over the things she would do to my companions if I did not surrender. I felt very uneasy at her apparent warmth towards me. If she wanted to play at that game, though, I could do it just as well and just as insincerely as her.

“I do, milady,” I said clearly to my aunt, knowing that my voice, so light and girlish, would astound some of the men grouped about Torthard. Several looked astonished by the way that I spoke. “I just hope that in time she may come to see that I am the most unfortunate victim of circumstances and that the protection of my virtue led to the most unhappy events in King Tatheren’s chambers.”

Even the Count of Torthard looked staggered by my words and how I femininely batted my eyelids at several of the other men close to him. He glowered at me but I noticed that several others seemed disposed to talk and to question me. My aunt wasn’t going to give me a chance, however, to charm Baract nobles. She had control over me and she didn’t mind demonstrating it.

“Say no more, Lady Sherrene,” my aunt said. “We shall get into such matters at the next conclave of Counts.”

“If it ever meets again,” someone muttered.

I didn’t mind acting as if I was under my aunt’s control. I crossed my legs, loving the feel of my skirts and smiled vacuously as the Count of Mustay bluntly asked Orissiana what she intended to do with me.

“We are both Perisords,” my aunt said taking my hand. “Do you need to know more?”

“You cannot break that curse on your old county,” said Mustay with a snort. “That’s what you’ve said many times in conclave. You refused Tatheren because your power was not great enough, you said. You said that witches and warlocks cannot combine their powers and we’ve believed you. So, what is this, this Sherrene, to do that you cannot? Is she a greater witch or warlock than you?”

Orissiana smiled coldly. The Count of Mustay stepped back a little but Torthard put his hand on his shoulder and held him there, his eyes slitted as he looked at the pair of us sitting so daintily and femininely together.

“What do you say to that, Lady Sherrene?” asked my aunt gently. I could feel the slight pressure of the honeybane-like controller she had used on me. It was much stronger than what she had used on me before, but then, I was a much stronger witch or warlock now. I couldn’t help shaking, however, at the way I was being used by her. I felt like a goldfish swimming in a pool in which I could sense there were sharks on the loose.

“There is no witch more powerful than my aunt, Orissiana,” I told them all, smiling as I said it. I noted the intensity on the faces of the two Counts who had vied for my hand and my attention as a woman in this very room. Let them believe what they wanted of me. I was going to survive them all but only by clinging to my aunt, I was certain.

“There you have it,” said my aunt sweetly. “Now why don’t you men leave my, my niece, and I together for a little while? We need to have a little girl talk, as

you might expect. You can tell Lara, my dear Counts, to come and join us if she is over her fit of pique."

The Counts and the other men with them bowed then to my aunt and withdrew. Not one of them bowed to me. I didn't expect them to. But many of the men were looking me over, I noted, from my bulging breasts to my curvy hips. Some must have been reconsidering what they had flung at them by the Queen. Clearly my aunt's new attitude to me must be adding to their confusion. Several of them I had seen at the ball on my Announcing. I think that I had kissed many of them, those that I had danced with, anyway.

"Not the reception from me that you expected, I suppose," drawled my aunt when we were alone. "Hmm, I must get Algoth to procure you some new breast bands. Did you see Mustay? He's always been attracted to fine breasts and yours, my girl, have become quite magnificent. In fact, your figure is so much improved since I saw you last that I think I will have to rescind my story of you being a warlock. I don't think anyone is going to believe me if I say it again."

I kept my head up, my earrings brushing my neck as I turned to look at my aunt.

"What happened to all the threats?" I asked her in my lilting, female voice, the one she had trained me to use. "Surrender or all those travelling with me will be butchered most cruelly by your minions?"

My aunt smiled at me. "But you have surrendered, have you not, Sherrene?" purred my aunt. I felt quivers running all over my body as if I had been stroked like a little cat. It was hard to sit there beside her in my tight-fitting dress while she demonstrated how much control she had over me.

“You are so different from the Sherrene I knew before,” my aunt went on, mocking me by caressing my hand and then my dress. “Being a woman has matured you, hasn’t it? I think you must have loved the sea captain who made you his seawife. Prince Tathally thinks that you did. Niccuro, we should give Nikki his true name, shouldn’t we, thinks that you loved that Captain Anjaro. You were his goddess in some sea ceremony, Nikki told me.

“He hates you, does that poor, little catamite. Niccuro thinks you deliberately replaced him in the sea captain’s affections. But he is so proud that he enticed Anjaro, with his new feminine wiles, to betray you before the voyage you made reached the Inner Isles. He doesn’t even thank you for what you have given him, his lovely breasts, his womanly figure and his lilting voice.

“But you knew that, didn’t you?” my aunt went on. Her voice was soft and coaxing as if she was trying to mesmerize me and I was enthralled by her knowledge of me. “You must have found out that you were betrayed by a lover. What a revenge you took! You struck a blow for all womankind there, my darling girl. But what did it tell me about you? You controlled collasolane, swamp gas, the grains of which you stole from me.

“You must have discovered some means of listening in to others’ conversations. And on your voyage back to the Black Sea, you controlled a whole shipload of sailors, confusing them about what they were doing and where they were going. Yes, my dear, you have grown enormously as a witch and as a woman. As I once told you, the first thing that a witch works on is

herself. And, I must say, I sit here marvelling at the results you have achieved."

"Please," I gasped as I seemed to feel my aunt's hands about my breasts although she sat apart from me. She gripped only my long fingers in her hand, stroking the shaped fingernails that made my hands look so feminine.

"You are not incestuous at all?" mocked my aunt. "A young man should react to a woman's loving touch, you know, De-, no, I will call you Sherrene. I had no idea that you would grow into such a lovely young woman. You quite outshine the Queen, if you must know, which is the reason for the high temper that she is in."

"Lara, Lara th-thinks," I stammered, meaning to say that she still thought that I had killed her husband.

"No, she doesn't," said my aunt sarcastically, "which is the reason I am beginning to find her very tiresome. It might be time for me to try someone new on the throne of the Baracts. Do you think, however, that Tathally would serve me any better than Larussa?"

"Treachery," I managed to stammer. My aunt extended her hand and touched my garter belt where it joined my stockings on the leg I had crossed over its smooth companion.

"Of course not," said my aunt, moving closer to me, her musk perfume threatening to overwhelm my senses. My skin was aflame with the gentle caresses that seemed to flow over my body and my legs. I wished that I knew how my aunt could do that.

"Tathally is the rightful King, as Mustay, Torthard and their coterie have informed me on several occasions," Aunt Rissa said. She assaulted me mentally,

showing me how she could make my legs move, sliding easily over each other as I changed the way my legs were crossed. "He may prove, however, to be as sickly as his elder brother."

My aunt's wry smile reminded me that King Melleren was dead, just a few tendays after I escaped from Hillaire. I hadn't found that out until I returned to the Kingdom of the Baracts. I only knew as I left on the Seafarer ship that a frightened Prince Tathally had run from the capital to the same boat I was sheltered on. He had been certain that his father's Queen was out to have him killed.

"Larussa is getting to be so tiring with her need to feel secure," my aunt went on. "I wish I had never shown her how to produce the Grey Men and taught her how to control them. She's filled the country with them, frightening all the Counts half to death. If one protests, she has the Count enlisted in her army as a Grey Man himself. It's all to protect her power and keep her whelp, Kennen, on his throne. Thus, we have a huge army we have to feed and equip. Our neighbors are quite frightened about it all."

"Such an army must be used somewhere," I said nervously. My aunt renewed her actual hands-on stroking of my legs and stockings. "Any little border disagreement could lead to widespread war."

"Something everyone sees but the Queen Regent," said my aunt.

"Are you two still lovers?" I asked her bluntly, gasping at the intimate things her touching was doing about my panties.

"Lovers?" asked my aunt and the touching relaxed as she laughed at me.

"I-I saw you in b-bed t-together," I stammered again as my aunt lifted the skirts of my dress and ran her soft hand over my stockings and smooth, hairless legs.

"Yes," said my aunt softly. Ripples of emotion passed over me as I was caressed again by my aunt through the controlling agent. "I love to have a soft, womanly body against me at night. Algoth was beginning to pall when Lara offered herself. Her price was very reasonable. All she wanted was the kingdom. What would be your price, darling Sherrene?"

"The real murderer of my mother swinging in a cage on Traitor's Walk," I said as her hand passed up my skirt, between my legs and caressed the soft, warm skin between my panties and stocking tops.

My aunt's assault on me stopped very suddenly. "I told you," she began. I felt the control of my movements being restricted as she tried to make me stand up. I had visions of me lying over her lap with my skirts up over my back and my panties taken down while Maris and Algoth beat me as my aunt instructed them.

"You told me about an herbalist and his apprentice," I told her through gritted teeth. I was unable to resist her hand on my frilly panties although I was fighting against her desire to have me humiliated once more. "I would like the truth for a change."

"Oh, the truth," mocked my aunt. Our little mental engagement ended as she stopped trying to force me to stand and bend over her knee. She regarded me intently and with a fair degree of surprise. "Come willingly to my bed tonight, sweet little Sherrene, and the truth will flow out of me."

“You, you’re my aunt!” I screamed at her, forcing her hands off my panties with a monumental effort of will.

“So you do think that that matters. Good,” said my aunt, standing. With a new impulse of her will she forced me to stand also. My skirts fell about my legs, giving me a momentary relief from the intense caressing I had been receiving. She gave me a smile and lifted her arms.

“Come,” she snapped. I went to my aunt and let her wrap her arms about me in a womanly hug, a smile of triumph on her red, glossy lips.

The Queen Regent chose that moment to sweep back into my aunt’s house. “Rissa!” she exclaimed, walking straight up to us and taking my aunt’s hands in hers, ignoring me as if I wasn’t there. “This is intolerable! I cannot take this any longer. This, this, this girlie boy has to be exposed in public. I want him! I want to take him back to Hillaire and have him paraded in his frillies to the executioner! I want his male and female parts removed. I want him burned as a warning to all warlocks and to men who ape women in public that this will not be tolerated.”

“And what brings on this fit of passion?” asked my aunt calmly while I quaked at the venom in the way Larussa now spoke of me. My aunt released one of her hands from Lara’s grip and reached over to me. I was still rooted to the spot by the force of her will and the controller agent she had used on me.

“The conclave proclaimed your nephew a regicide!” protested Larussa. Her thin face regarded me with great hostility.

It was hard to think that I had once admired Lara and romped in my girl's dressing room with her. She loved me to wear outrageous female frillies and had told me not to worry about being small-breasted. I would grow, she promised me, as she had once she had a child. I would as well as soon as I was married.

Lara was the one who had urged me to be Announced at a great ball in the palace and had sponsored me on my Announcing Day, when I had become Lady Sherrene Perisord. How was I to know it was all a ruse to make her husband notice me, notice me enough to draw me into his bed where his death could then be laid at my feet?

"Conclaves have been wrong before and changed their minds on the issue of who is and isn't a witch and who is a murderer and who is not," said my aunt. "Now, this is quite enough, Larussa. You have your kingdom to play in. Go play. I have not yet acquired what I was to get out of the bargain I made with you."

"What!" shrieked an astounded Queen Regent. "Haven't I made you the Count of Perisord as you demanded, against all custom and practice?"

"But I do not yet have Perisord," snapped my aunt. "Only an empty title that is laughed at by the men of the Counts' Conclave when I am announced as the Count of Perisord. I want the land where I was born back in my hands, where it was meant to be."

"Sherrene cannot get it for you," said the Queen Regent wildly. "Give her to me, Rissa. She can share the same funeral pyre as Tathally and his catamite."

"Lara," said my aunt firmly. "You know that I have put no limits on what you do in this kingdom but, if you ever do something as foolish as that, I will have to

limit you severely. You will not burn Prince Tathally or my niece. If I hear you say it again, I will gag your mouth."

The Queen Regent staggered back. "You-You cannot speak to me like that!" she hissed at my aunt.

Despite my constricted state, I recognized the aroma that came from the balloon my aunt destroyed. I was able to fight off the effects of the controller compound that engulfed the queen. Larussa was not, however, a strong witch, no matter that she dabbled in and was sensitive to the workings of witchery.

The compound had elements of the concoction I had already used in capturing some of the Grey Men from Orissiana's witch in Werhaven. I saw the Queen's jaw slacken as the control elements took over and she lost command of herself to Orissiana.

"Go and proclaim your tiredness to your Ladies," ordered Orissiana. "You will sleep at the *Pitchfork* tonight. Sleep well, Larussa. Do not speak of Lady Sherrene ever again." Underneath her breath, she whispered to me. "We'll just see how long this spell lasts. The one I did for the last Master Alchemist was over before it really started."

"Master Bredden was the King's last Master Alchemist?" I asked my aunt.

"Now, don't be so coy if you are asking me for truth, my lovely young woman," said my aunt. "I know very well how you escaped from the Queen's dungeon, Sherrene." She sighed. "Bredden quite spoiled the wonderful surprise you would have had on your execution day as I appeared, in all my wrath, to rescue my niece from her evil accusers."

“You would have accused the Queen of that!” I gasped, looking at her hawk-like face.

“Of course not the Queen,” said my aunt with a sly smile, “though that would have been of benefit to the Land. As it was, I wouldn’t have minded having Lady Renneth burning in your place for treachery, along with Master Bredden and a few others. I intended to have Abriss named in the plot against the King as well. I would have saved you and you would have been grateful to me.

“I would have found you a safe, controllable husband. You would have undergone all the wonders of womanhood, my Sherrere. You would have been betrothed. You would have received chaste kisses from a handsome young man whom the Queen would have made a Count when he married his beautiful bride.

“But you spoiled all that by running from me. And the Queen had the story out about you being a warlock before I could counter it. Since I thought you were gone, I let it stand. See how a moment’s weakness for this woman has come back to haunt me.”

I felt the brief touch of the controller my aunt used on me to make me believe what I knew wasn’t true at all. I knew there was a hunt going on for me in the Kingdom. I also knew that my aunt had not only been in the Queen’s bed but in her carriage as I was hunted through the streets of Hillaire. I knew she had been on the docks as well and had been one of the elements in quelling the riot involving Seafarers and Castle men at arms, dockside merchants and port dwellers.

“So I am back,” I said with a tremble.

“And for your help in restoring me to Perisord,” my aunt said softly, “I will do what I originally planned.

Your accusers, those silly, twittering females from Larussa's homeland, will be immolated and you will become the Lady of Mustay. The Count is an indefatigable lover, my dear, and very easily influenced, as you have no doubt noticed."

"I would prefer the Count of Torthard," I said, thrills going through me even as I said it.

"Torthard?" asked Orissiana. "But he hates you and the thought of what you are. He seems convinced of it after interrogating Nikki and Tathally. That has made him an enemy of yours and a supporter of the Queen's."

"Which is why I want him," I told her. "I wish to teach him to respect me as I am. I want him to feel himself under the effect of lovebane and know that he can do nothing but love me as I desire before I finally cast him aside."

My aunt looked at me in amusement. "You do know that Torthard is sensitive to witchery, don't you?" she said.

"Yes," I agreed. "A minor warlock, I would have thought." My aunt's eyes went wide in astonishment. So, Torthard hated me. I had sent all my friends to his county to escape my aunt's wrath. I had to keep him away from that place and close to me if I could. Let him hate me all he wanted. I had ensorcelled a shipload of men to love not only me, but boys like me, as if we were women, on the long sea trip from the Inner Isles to the Kingdom of the Baracts.

"I so want to teach that arrogant buffoon a few lessons," I told my aunt, meaning every word.