

**THE BODICE:
A Witch at her Initiation**

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How could a knot of silken string
Be such a terrifying thing?

I, in the Witches' House, had learned
Many a strange life: I had turned,
Passive before the magical,
To a spider weaving on the wall;
And, rainbow-sided, swum the cool
Gold spangles of a mountain-pool;
As tigress, I had crouched and sprung
And gorged, red-muzzled, for my young;
I twined for winter-warmth where far
Cliff-ledges of the vipers are;
And wheeled on mighty wings to rest
Where the sea-wind prunes the eagle's nest.

Often I wondered: "What should I
Do if my changers were to die,
Or play me false, or even forget
Where they have left me? For as yet
I have not learnt the spells that can
Restore me to the race of man."
But never had my doubtings made
The metamorphosed Me afraid,
Or stirred a panic to escape
The ambit of an alien shape.

I knew no fear until there came
The night I took my witch's-name
In Conclave of the Mysteries
As sister-adept: Anaitis.

Toxone came for me that night
 To be my sponsor for the rite;
 And I, as she was robing me,
 Faced the long mirror curiously,
 Where by the tapers' steady shine
 A form that was, and was not, mine
 Confronted me: I gazed within
 At elfish smile and pointed chin;
 Green slant-eyes with an eerie spark
 That made the brows above them dark;
 And fair hair that the glass displayed
 In long twin hieratic braid;
 And opalescent semi-globes
 That bit into my tingling lobes.
 Awe-struck, I whispered, "So this is,
 My own witch-self, Anaitis!"
 —So haunting and so sinister
 I could not shield my eyes from her.

Meanwhile, behind and right and left,
 I felt Toxone, plying deft
 Tirewoman's fingers rapidly,
 Bring order, smoothness, symmetry,
 And lift the black brocaded gown
 Up to my head and past and down,
 And the snake-patterned panniers glide
 To swaying poise at either side,
 While from the glass Anaitis
 Followed the metamorphosis.

There was disquiet, but not yet
 Terror. And then Toxone set
 The black witch-bodice stiffly round
 My bosom; as her fingers found
 Back-eyelets that I could not see,
 I stood, accepting gratefully
 The firmness comfortingly pressed

Against the tremors of my breast,
Until, with every eyelet full,
There came that strong decisive pull
For the knot she cast upon the string.
Down an abyss of panicking,
Past many an imaged fear I fell:
The spring-lock on the entered cell;
The barb that drags with brutal grip
The fish's agonising lip;
The mine that caves in after you
With nothing, nothing, you can do.
Vainly, as in a hideous dream,
I longed to break away, to scream,
To plead at least that for one night
I might delay the fearful rite.
I looked into the mirror: there
I read the dull hypnotic stare
Of the gold asp about my brow:
"There can be no withdrawing now."

Toxone drew me from the glass,
And swung the door for me to pass;
And I, unable to resist
The hand that tightened round my wrist,
With insteps wavering crazily
On the tall sandals under me,
Rustled beside her down the stair
And to the lurid altar-glare,
Where, high and hooded, rose the Three
To seal a trembling votary.