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THE CHRONICLES OF ARIANTHEM III

by Samantha Sabian

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Chapter 1

Syn watched the mark carefully. He was plump which meant that he was well-fed. His clothing was a trifle gaudy, expensive but lacking in any refinement or taste. That meant he was wealthy but probably not of nobility. He wore several rings on both hands and two gold chains about his neck. One appeared to have a ruby dangling from the end of it. That would be difficult, she mused, because the weight would be noticeable. The merchant also had a bulge at his waistline inside his robe that was likely a pouch.

A small boy, a street urchin, approached the merchant, holding out his hand for alms. The merchant's features twisted into arrogant distaste and he pushed the boy to the side, causing him to stumble and nearly fall. The look on his face would have been enough for Syn to act; the push merely sealed the merchant's fate.

Noma, celebrant of Sjöfn, watched the scene unfold from the doorway of the temple. She saw Syn, saw the merchant, and saw the merchant's base action toward the urchin. She sighed and stood upright from the doorway. She turned her back on the scene and went inside the temple to pray.

Syn pulled her hood over her head and pushed herself away from the wall she had been leaning against. She began meandering toward the merchant. She stopped to examine the various wares on display, showing particular interest in the fresh vegetables of the day. She picked up a nice healthy squash, then turned to get a better look at it in the light. Unfortunately, she turned full on into the merchant, smacked him with the squash,

then comically juggled it about his shirtfront in an attempt to keep from dropping it. It was to no avail, however, and the squash went to the ground as both the merchant and the vendor began soundly cursing her.

“I beg your pardon, sirs!” Syn cried, then accidentally stepped on the squash, spraying juice onto the hem of the merchant’s gown. She kneeled down to wipe his robe, making the mess all the worse. The merchant snatched the hem from her grasp and sent a kick towards her, which she avoided.

“Get your hands from me!” the merchant said venomously. Syn stood up and backed away, hands raised upward as if in surrender. She bowed humbly in apology once more, then pivoted on her heel and disappeared into the crowd. She made a right turn into the first alley, then a left, then another right, heading down towards the docks. Her fence was there, the contact who would buy all her stolen goods. She patted her pocket; she had pilfered three of the five rings, the ruby necklace, and the pouch of gold. She would have to lay low for a while. She generally did not like to make such a scene, but that bastard had been asking for it and she could only have obtained one or two of the items by stealth. Instead, by flailing about, she was able to nearly clean him out. She would have to remember to pay the vendor for the squash.

Noma lit the candles one by one. Evening was falling and the smell of burning fireplaces was pleasant in the air. She kneeled before the altar of Sjöfn, praying for love and healing for all those in need. She rose to her feet and finished lighting the sconces, which cast gentle light onto the tiles of the temple. She turned to find Syn standing there. At one time, her silent presence would have caused Noma to start with fear, but she had grown used to the woman’s noiseless movement.

“And do you have another gift of coin for the temple?”

Noma’s tone of voice told Syn that the priestess knew whence the money had come.

“So you saw,” Syn said with resignation.

“No,” Noma said angrily, her anger more from fear than judgment, “I could not watch. I came into the temple to pray.”

Syn lifted the lid of the box that held the temple coffers and placed a large bag of gold within. She had given some to the urchin and kept enough for about a week's expenses, the rest she gave to the church.

"If you were praying for my soul, 'tis a waste of time," Syn said.

"I don't pray for your soul," Noma said, still angry, "I pray for your safety. You are reckless. If they catch you, they will behead you."

Syn took the woman into her arms, enjoying the softness of her body. Noma struggled a bit, but not very much, and Syn kissed her. "They aren't going to catch me," Syn said.

Noma stared at the woman in front of her. Truly she had a soft spot in her heart for Syn. Syn was rakishly good-looking, not beautiful, but roguishly attractive. Her green eyes twinkled with good humor and a deviltry that melted the hearts of men and women alike. She was of medium height and athletic build which allowed her to pass as a man much of the time when hooded as she was today. When the disguise came off, her fine features were far more feminine although she probably still could pass as an elven male. Her dark brown hair was shoulder length, and oddly, when she pulled it back she looked more male than when she wore it loose, as she did now and the locks softened her face. Noma had teased her about being a shape-shifter, so uncanny was the ability.

"So will you forgive me?" Syn asked, then kissed her again before she could respond. She took a step forward, her hands about Noma's waist, and Noma knew she was being maneuvered into the small side-room that held her bed.

"No," Noma said, her arms coming up around Syn as she passionately returned the kiss, "I will not forgive you."

Syn eased her backwards through the doorway, gave the door a gentle kick to close it, then pressed the priestess onto the bed. "Then allow me to do penance." She skillfully undid the buttons down the front of Noma's robes and parted the folds, still kissing the priestess. She pressed her knee gently but firmly between Noma's legs, causing the woman to moan with desire as she pulled her own overshirt from her head. She wore only a thin shift now and pressed herself to Noma's generous breasts, loving the softness against the firmness of her torso. She continued to kiss her, nibbling at her throat, then trailing a searing kiss down to the breasts where she took the fullness in her mouth with great pleasure. Syn loved women. She loved

the way they looked, the way they smelled, the way they tasted. She loved the softness of their skin, the curves of their bodies, the warm wetness between their legs that she seemed gifted to bring forth. And women sensed that love even though it was not directed exclusively at them, and they fell into her arms and into her bed with abandon.

Syn's kiss moved lower until her mouth settled between Noma's legs and the priestess arched with need. The lips and tongue moved with marvelous skill and intuition. The fingers did their part as well, stroking firmly until the nun was entirely in her control and she drove the priestess to orgasm swiftly. Noma's last intelligible thought was that she hoped the temple was empty because she began crying out about "sin" quite loudly with no inhibition.

When the room was again silent, Syn pulled herself up onto Noma's softness, then rolled her over so the priestess lay in her arms. Noma felt very sated and content but, as always, a little guilty.

"Is there a reason why you won't allow me to give you pleasure?" Noma asked.

Syn looked down at her, grinning a little. "Could you not tell I enjoyed that?"

"That's not what I mean," Noma said. "You never allow me to bring you to release."

"Hmm," Syn said, stretching, "You are a priestess and I am a thief. All I do is take, and all you do is give. I think it right that I seek to balance that."

The answer did not satisfy her, but Noma settled into Syn's arms, and soon Syn's rhythmic breathing indicated she was fast asleep. Syn at times seemed so simple: a rogue, a rake, and a crook. But there were other times she seemed unutterably complex, like moments before when that humor could barely disguise a deep sadness in her eyes.

The next morning, Syn rose early. Noma was still asleep, and Syn took a long moment to examine her lovely, soft features. She knew her actions from the day before would have consequences: more guards, more vigilance, a bounty on her head were they to learn her identity. And such

a large heist would attract the attention of the Guild who would not look kindly on such an unsanctioned theft by a non-member. She had enjoyed the time she had spent in this small village, and especially enjoyed her stint with Noma. But, like so many other times and so many other places and so many other women, Syn turned her back and walked away, knowing she would never see Noma or the town again.

Chapter 2

The caravan guards were well-armed and looked like they could handle themselves, but still, Syn was a little nervous. She was not good with a sword or bow, or really any weapon at all, so she liked to travel in the company of others. She would pay for the protection with ill-gotten gains, and sometimes even steal it back at the end of the trip depending on whether or not she had enjoyed her companions. But she did not like to travel with anyone who displayed any outward trappings of wealth; it attracted the wrong type of people, people like her, only more violent.

They were in three wagons, and most of the travelers were common folk, a farmer, a tailor and a couple of tradesmen. But there was one nobleman, or at least someone who wished to be seen as a nobleman. Syn guessed by his demeanor he had some minor pedigree that had seen better days. That didn't stop him from looking down his nose at everyone and ordering his servants about in a rude manner. What made it worse was that he most likely did not possess the wealth he intimated, so if the caravan was attacked, the robbers would be angry at the waste of time.

Even so, riding in the back of the gently rocking wagon was better than walking. It was not comfortable, but it was not crowded and she could stretch out her legs. There were no other women in the group, so she was dressed as a man, her hair pulled back beneath her hood. She kept to herself, and her traveling companions did not seem to desire conversation, so it might be a pleasant enough trip. Her destination, Trygg, was a

fair-sized town, and although it had an imperial garrison there, it seemed it might provide some work for someone with her skills. The Guild also had a presence there, which could be problematic, but she had dealt with that before. Trygg was a considerable ways, but Syn liked to put distance between herself and her past actions, well, those most recent, and as a result found herself traveling all over Arianthem.

At least there would be no Hyr'rok'kin, Syn thought. They had been seen only sporadically the last fifteen, twenty years, very few since the massive outbreak in her childhood. Syn quickly pushed this thought away; it was too painful. No, the worst thing they had to worry about would be bandits. The rocking of the wagon was soothing and she began to get drowsy. It would be better for her to sleep during the day and stay alert at night when they stopped.

It was the third day of their journey when Syn's fears were realized. They were skirting the edge of a vast wilderness when raucous cries erupted from the surrounding rocks. A dozen men leaped out and a half dozen more stood on the ledge above and began raining arrows down upon them. Syn's survival instinct was far better than her companions and she went over the side of the wagon and beneath it. The horses reared, startled, then bolted. She grabbed the railings underneath the coach and managed to pull herself up to the bottom of the carriage as it careened out of control. The ground beneath her raced by at a dizzying speed, and she knew if she lost her grip and fell it would injure if not kill her. She was not strong in an absolute sense, but very strong relative to her size and she held tight. The only good thing about the situation was that the sounds of fighting were growing fainter.

Despite the bumping and jarring, Syn began to work her way to the front of the carriage. She nearly lost her grip as she sought to pull herself up onto the side, but she jammed her hand into the crack between the seat and carriage. It hurt terribly, but she was able to pull herself up onto the seat. The driver was dead, an arrow through his throat, but he still held the reins in his lifeless hands. Syn took the leather straps from the dead man and with immense effort brought the frothing, snorting horses to a halt.

She glanced back. The sound of the other two wagons under attack could still be heard, but that battle would not last long. She glanced to the seats in the rear of the open coach. Her traveling companions had not reacted as quickly as had she; the farmer and the tailor were dead. She went through their pockets, then through those of the driver. She found some coin, a few items of jewelry, a dagger, and some curatives that might come in handy. She felt no remorse over her thievery. These men were dead through no fault of hers, and the sound of approaching hoof beats told her if she did not take the goods, the pursuing bandits would. She jumped from the side of the wagon, landed lightly, then sprinted to the nearby tree-line. With great trepidation she entered the forest, a place that would conceal her, but one only slightly less dangerous than the robbers at her heels.

It did not seem that much time had passed, but Syn knew she was already completely lost. She was gifted in a city, able to traverse the twists and turns of the streets and alleys, disappearing into shadows, scaling walls, balancing on ledges, finding ways into shops and residences that seemed impenetrable. She could analyze a layout, a building, a courtyard, really, any man-made structure and find its strengths and weaknesses. She could find food in scarcity, warmth in the frigid cold, water in a drought. There was no lock she could not pick, no safe she could not break, no window or door that would not open for her.

Here, she thought grimly, here was another story. She would probably be dead within the hour. She was good in a brawl, a dirty hand-to-hand fighter, but that wasn't going to be much use if she ran into a bear. Almost any man would go down with a good kick to his groin. She wasn't even certain if bears had a "groin." And the dagger she had plucked from the farmer wouldn't do her much good as she had found she was a greater danger to herself than others when wielding most weapons.

Syn sighed. She had some hard biscuits and some dried venison with her, enough for one, maybe two meals, but after that it would be rough going. She knew nothing of plants and would likely poison herself if she tried to eat anything. The forest creatures were in no danger from her and even the smallest hare was probably laughing at her right now. She did know

how to fish, so if she found a pond or a stream, she might be in luck. She sighed again and started walking.

It seemed as if days had passed, although Syn knew that wasn't true because the sun was just now going down for the first time since the caravan attack. The forest smelled so unnaturally fresh to her, all moist earth and pine needles, that the aroma of a campfire was assuredly a hallucination. She sniffed the air again. No, it was definitely a campfire, and the smell of cooking meat was mouth-watering. The hardtack and dried venison had been gone since noon and her stomach was growling. She followed the smell, her nose evidently her one sense that was willing to aid her in her current predicament.

She could see the light through the forest and crept quietly to the edge of a small clearing. The first thing that caught her eye was the rusty cage suspended from a large tree. That was a very bad sign, and she kept in hiding. The second thing that caught her eye was the witch stirring some brew in a cauldron, and that was an even worse sign. Witches were unpredictable. This woman might greet her presence with disinterest, might tell her to go away, or she might paralyze her with some spell and then put her in that cage to eat her. If she had any sense at all, Syn thought, she should disappear back into the forest.

But the food smelled so good. Not good enough for her to chance revealing herself, but good enough for her to hide in the bushes until the witch went to sleep and Syn could steal it. And although Syn was restless in every part of her life, there was one arena in which she was utterly patient: the job. And right now, the job was to steal some food.

Syn settled in to watch the woman. The witch was plain, her features neither attractive nor unattractive. It was hard to tell what her body looked like beneath the rough-hewn robe she wore although Syn spent a great deal of time trying to see and imagine what those curves might be. It was how she often entertained herself, although in this particular instance it would have no follow-up at all. Finally, the witch disappeared into the small, tent-like structure and the campsite settled into silence.

Syn waited awhile longer, just to make sure, then slowly crept to-

ward the campfire. She pulled the meat from the spit and stuffed it into her pockets. She would not risk eating here. She inspected the area to see if there was anything of value, then looked indecisively toward the tent. This is where she often battled herself, where that recklessness that Noma had chastised took over and made Syn attempt things that no sane person would. It wasn't that Syn was greedy; she gave away almost everything she stole. It was the excitement, the thrill, the challenge that drove her. It was the idea that she could take anything at will. It made her one of the most dangerous thieves in all of Arianthem, but it made her as dangerous to herself as others.

As usual, she lost the battle and crept toward the tent. She silently pushed her way through the flaps, crouching low until her vision adjusted to the dim light. There were two sleeping forms as there was a second witch asleep at the far side. Syn plucked several mysterious looking items from a knapsack, then a few potions from a nearby chest. A few pots and pans and some drying herbs were hanging from ropes strung across the top of the tent, but Syn had no interest in those. She examined a few scrolls, then took those as well. Junior mages and would-be wizards often had interest in such things and were willing to pay good coin for them.

Syn had made her way silently through the entire tent and thought she had taken everything of value. Neither of the witches had moved. The first one, the one who had been outside, had removed her robe but was now covered by a blanket. Syn fought the urge to lower the blanket to see if her speculation about the curves had been close. She turned her attention to the second and her eyes widened. This one was lying on her side, naked, only partially covered by a blanket. She was beautiful in a frightening sort of way and the nipples of the full breasts were almost visible above the blanket. Syn could feel her palm itch as she fought the compulsion to pull the blanket lower. She wrestled with herself, then finally won a battle as she stood to exit the tent.

Unfortunately, the breasts had so distracted her she won the battle but lost the war. She stood upright into one of the cast-iron pans, striking it with enough force that she knocked herself out cold.

Syn opened her eyes, wincing at the sunlight. Her head throbbed, which usually meant she had consumed too much wine the night before. As her eyes focused, rusty metal bars came into view, which again wasn't that unusual. What was unusual was that the cage she was in was suspended from a tree in the middle of a forest.

Events of the previous night came rushing back to her, and Syn lifted her hand to rub the bruise on her forehead. There was a small, painful lump and what felt like a bit of dried blood. She leaned over to peer out the side of the cage, which made the cage shift with her balance and swing from side-to-side. This attracted the attention of the beautiful witch who glanced up at her with disdain.

"Ah, I see our little thief has awakened."

Syn rubbed her forehead. "I wouldn't have caused you any harm."

"You mean other than taking everything that we own?" the witch said. "And I hardly think you could cause us any harm. You're lucky you knocked yourself unconscious or we probably would have killed you instantly. Of course now," she said, smelling the brew in the cauldron and adding another spice, "we will get the pleasure of killing you slowly."

Syn sat down hard in the cage, causing it to swing back-and-forth. She was disgusted with herself. If she had a gold coin for every time she had been distracted by a pair of breasts or a nice backside she would, well, she would still be broke as she gave everything away. But even so, it seemed to be her fatal flaw.

"So I must know," the beautiful witch said, "you are obviously an accomplished thief as you had almost everything we own in your pockets." She cast her eyes upward and Syn noted they were a lovely shade of light green. "So what happened?"

"I got distracted," Syn muttered, her self-disgust evident. She crossed her arms over her chest, which caused the cage to swing back-and-forth a little.

"And what distracted you?" the witch asked, returning to stirring her pot.

"If you must know," Syn said, her self-recrimination so pronounced she was bluntly honest, "I was quite enamored with your breasts."

This caught the witch's attention. She had been known to seduce the occasional handsome hunter then dispose of him when finished, but this

intriguing little creature in the cage was a different matter. There was an unbalanced intensity about her that was strangely attractive, and the witch suddenly wondered what the woman might be like in her bedroll in the tent.

And this caught Syn's attention, for the expression on the witch's face, that hint of curiosity, was one with which she was well-familiar and willing to exploit. "Perhaps there is something I could do for you to make amends for my ill behavior," Syn said cautiously.

"Really?" the witch said with amusement, and Syn was doubly cautious. This was not some naïve farm girl she could take for a toss in the hay.

"Yes," Syn said, "I am only good at two things. One is stealing things."

"And the other?" the witch asked, entertained.

Syn allowed her dark green eyes to settle on the witch, then leisurely travel down the length of her body, lingering so that there was no doubt as to her intentions.

"I could better show you than tell you."

The witch stopped what she was doing, thoughtful. Then with a mere gesture she dropped the cage to the ground. It went hurtling downward, causing Syn's stomach to lurch in fear, then came to an abrupt halt where it briefly hovered, then settled gently on to the earth. Another gesture from the witch, and the hasp from the door was released and the gate swung open. Syn sat there for a moment, trying to calm her harsh breathing. This was a very powerful witch. She stood and stepped from the cage, brushing the dust from her clothing.

"Just so there is no misunderstanding," the witch said, "you are going to please me?"

"Yes," Syn said, "there is no misunderstanding." Her gaze went to the breasts once more.

"Then you will please my sister first."

"What?" Syn said, startled. The comment was like a splash of cold water. She turned to the plain one, the one she had entirely forgotten about. The sister stood near the flaps of the tent.

"Of course," Syn stammered, far less enthusiastic about this plan.

The beautiful witch stepped toward her. "And if you are as talented as you think you are, then I had better hear her scream."

"Of course," Syn stammered again. The plain sister held open a flap

to the tent. Syn took a deep breath, walked to her, then ducked inside. The light was dim and Syn had a thought to get the matter over before her eyes adjusted to the faint light. The plain witch stared at her almost defiantly, then parted her robes and dropped them to the floor.

And all thoughts of hurry or fleeing left Syn. The woman was short, soft, rubenesque, even a little plump, but Syn so loved women. She moved to the witch and her hands slipped beneath the thin shift she wore, sliding upward to caress the breasts, then upward further to carry the shift over the woman's head. She went to her knees, which put her head on level with the woman's breasts and took each in her mouth hungrily while her hands slipped into the sheer undergarments. The warm skin smelled of mint and lavender. Syn's hands played and tortured while the woman put her hands on Syn's shoulders to brace herself and looked to the ceiling of the tent in disbelief. The hips began to undulate beneath the skilled hands between her legs and the flicking of the tongue on her nipples and she pressed Syn to her chest. Syn maneuvered her backward to the bedroll and lowered her to the ground, the hands and mouth barely pausing in their worship, and the woman responded because no woman needs to be beautiful, she merely needs to be thought beautiful, and that is what Syn's every move communicated.

Syn kissed her, deeply, then moved back down the body, her mouth and her hands trading places. The hands now playfully stroked the hardened nipples while the mouth trailed downward and settled between the legs. The witch cried out sharply at the probing tongue which then began a smooth rhythm that elicited near constant moaning. The sound made Syn smile, which almost caused her to lose rhythm, but she quickly regained it and brought the witch to a long and explosive climax. And in the end, the woman did in fact scream.

Syn rested for a moment, then pulled herself up onto the witch who now appeared far lovelier to her.

"And so do you forgive me?" Syn asked, her dark green eyes laughing. The witch lightly slapped her on the face, then kissed her.

"Yes," she said, "I forgive you." She pushed Syn from her and rose from the bedroll, her movements languorous. "But you will have to sate my sister." She pulled her robe on, languidly stretching. "She will not be so easy on you."

Syn grinned and watched the witch leave. That had been incredibly fun. She leaned back in the bedroll and clasped her hands behind her head. Perhaps this would work out after all.

The flap to the tent opened once more and the other woman entered. Light green eyes assessed her and Syn felt far less comfortable all of a sudden.

“Why are you still dressed?” the witch demanded.

“I don’t need to remove my clothing to pleasure you,” Syn said, even more uncomfortable.

“You are at least going to have to remove your pants to do what I wish you to do,” she said, making a deliberate gesture in Syn’s direction.

Syn felt a very odd sensation in her pants and pulled out her waistband to peer down inside of them. “What is that?” she asked in disbelief.

“What does it look like?” the witch said, removing her robe. This was enough for Syn to tear her eyes away from her new appendage and stare at the loveliness before her. This witch was long-limbed, shapely, with full breasts with dark aureoles and a triangle of downy softness between her legs the same color as the hair on her head. Syn gazed at her for a long moment, but then her eyes returned to her new attachment. She reached down and touched the phallus-shaped object and it sprang erect.

“By the gods!” she said, startled, “I can feel it!”

The witch settled onto the bedroll beside her. “I am not completely selfish,” she said, “I wish you to take some pleasure as well.”

She pulled Syn’s shirt from over her head, and Syn was so fascinated by the appendage she for once did not resist. The witch paused. The thief was quite a lovely human, not shapely but lithe and firm with breasts well-sized for her form. But what caught her eye was the series of crisscrossing scars down her back, thin and white against her tan skin. There was no redness to the markings at all, indicating they had healed long, long ago.

Syn caught her glance and looked away, her jaw clenched, but the witch didn’t say anything, or at least anything about the scars. “Now your pants,” the witch said determinedly, and Syn lifted her hips as the witch pulled her pants off. Another scar caught the witch’s eye, this one on the woman’s left thigh. This one appeared to be a burn, possibly left by a fire-place poker or a brand, and it, too, was white with age. She said nothing about the scar, but let her fingers trail over the surface which again made

Syn's jaw clench, right up until the trailing fingers grasped her new phallus and she gasped out loud. It was no wonder kicking a man here was so effective.

"Do you know how to use one of these?" the witch casually inquired.

It was a very odd position to be in, Syn thought, the witch controlling her entire body by grasping something that wasn't even a part of her, at least in theory. "One of these? No, I've never had one of these. But I have used some accessories because a lot of women seem to like that." Syn was speaking very fast and her words were coming out all in a jumble.

"Well, let's see how you do," the witch said, positioning Syn on top of her, and then pulled her inside.

Syn had to grit her teeth. It was a wonder men did not climax immediately on penetration, although she did understand that to be a problem. "Just so we are clear on this, you're not going to leave this on me, are you?"

The witch laughed, enjoying the fullness between her legs. "That depends on whether or not you please me."

Syn moved her hips, marveling at the sensation, but then stopped again. "Just so I am completely clear, if I please you, you're not going to leave it on me because I succeeded, are you?"

"If you don't get to work, you'll wear that for the rest of your life, which might be very short."

This was finally enough for Syn to release and she was perhaps even a little angry as she drove her hips into the witch. The sensation was intense, though, and Syn had to concentrate on not giving in to the pleasure. The beautiful witch, however, expressed no such reservation and Syn obtained great satisfaction that the woman's body responded wantonly as Syn drove her to orgasm twice. And it was finally driving her to a third that sent Syn over the edge and climaxing on top of her in as wanton a manner as the beautiful witch beneath her. Syn did not climax often so when she did, it was a fiery release.

The witch sighed with satisfaction as Syn collapsed on top of her. The witch ran her fingers on the whitened scars on the woman's back and side. She half-expected the thief to stiffen as she had before, but Syn's slow and steady breathing told the witch that the rakish thief was already asleep.

Syn awoke in the tent with no clear idea how long she had been asleep. It appeared to be dawn again, and now she wondered if she had slept almost an entire day. She recalled the previous day and glanced down, vastly relieved to see the appendage was gone. At least the witch had kept that part of her bargain.

She rose, dressed, then pushed her way through the flaps of the tent. The plain witch, who no longer seemed that plain to her but rather rosy and attractive, gave her an amused glance. The pale green eyes of her sister slid from the cauldron to their uninvited guest.

“So explain to me why I should not go ahead and kill you,” the witch said.

Any confidence Syn had gained from her performance in bed evaporated. “Well,” she said uneasily, “I travel a great deal and it is possible I could be through this way again.” The light green eyes looked at her skeptically, so she hurried on. “I could pay a tax, a toll if you will.”

“Do you trade sexual favors for everything?” the witch asked with a penetrating stare.

Syn scuffed a boot while examining the ground. “Yes.” She kicked at a rock. “Mostly just with women, although I find elven men handsome.” She would not meet the witch’s stare and had no idea why she was suddenly so confessional.

The witch stopped stirring. This really was a fascinating creature. Such an odd mixture of thievery and straightforwardness. It almost made her want to put the woman back in the cage. “I somehow doubt that we will see you again.”

Syn’s jaw clenched. That was a very true statement.

“But,” the witch continued, “if you do pass this way again, we will make you pay the toll.”

Syn nodded her understanding. She turned to the no-longer-plain witch and bowed. This was decidedly awkward. Normally she just snuck away after a sexual encounter, so standing here in broad daylight and bidding the two farewell was very odd.

“Go!” the green-eyed witch commanded, and Syn fairly sprinted into the forest. She could hear the women’s laughter for quite some time.