

No Pain, No Gain

Elizabeth Moon

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Meryl the shepherdess woke from nightmares in which she waded through glue on grotesquely swollen legs. She opened her eyes to the smoky rafters of her mother's little hut and stretched luxuriously. Bad dreams make good days, Gran always said. Flinging back the covers, she rolled out of bed and burst into screams. There they were, attached to her own body—the plump soft legs of her dream, and when she took a step, it felt as if she were wading through glue. She didn't stop screaming until her mother slapped her smartly across the mouth. Gran said it was the Evil Eye, and probably the fault of Jamis the cowherd's second wife, not better than she should be, jealous because her girl had a mole on her nose, for which she had blamed everyone but herself. Everyone knew that the Evil Eye didn't cause moles on the nose; those came from poking and prying.

Meryl's new flabby legs ached abominably for days, but eventually she was able to keep up with her flock without too much trouble. Gran had a quiet word with The Kind One, and the cowherd's step-daughter broke out in disgusting pustules very like cowpox next market-day. Meryl figured it was all over, but she still wished for her own legs back.

Dorcas Doublejoints, justly famed dancer at The Scarlet Veil, could do things with her abdominal musculature which fascinated the most discerning clients, and resulted in a steady growth in her bank account. She had trained since childhood, when her Aunt Semele had noticed the anatomical marks of potential greatness. So now, in the lovely space between her ribs and her pubic bone, all was perfectly harmonious, muscle and a delicately calculated amount of "smoothing," and unblemished skin with one artfully placed mole—the only plastic wizardry in which Dorcas had ever had to indulge, since by nature she had no marks there to begin with. All.

She woke near noon, after an unpleasant dream she attributed to that new shipment of wine... until she rolled on her side and felt... different. Where her slender supple belly had been, capable of all those enticing ripples hither and yon, she now had... She prodded the swollen bulging mass and essayed a ripple. Nothing happened. Dorcas thought of her burgeoning bank balance—not nearly as much as she wanted to retire on—and groaned.

Then she wrapped herself in an uncharacteristic garment—opaque and voluminous—and sought the advice of her plastic wizard.

Mirabel Stonefist had done her best to avoid it, but she'd been snagged by the Finance Committee of the Ladies Aid & Armor Society. Instead of a pleasant morning in her sister-in-law's garden, watching the younglings at play, she was spending her off-duty day at the Ladies' Hall, peering at the unpromising figures on a parchment roll.

"And just after we ordered the new steps the court ladies wanted, they all quit coming," Blanche-the-Blade said. "I haven't seen hide nor hair of them for weeks—"

"They'll be back," Krystal said, buffing her fingernails on her fringed doeskin vest. "The court ladies still want to look good, and without our help, they'll soon return to the shapes they had before."

The court ladies, in the fitness craze that followed the repeal of the tax on bronze bras, had asked the women of the King's Guard how they stayed so trim. In anticipation of a profitable side-line, the Ladies Aid & Armor Society had fitted up a couple of rooms at the Hall for exercise classes. But unlike the younger girls, who seemed to like all the bouncing around, the married women complained that sweating was unseemly.

"What annoys me," Blanche said, "is the way they moan and groan as if it's our fault that they're not in shape. I personally don't care if every court lady is shaped like a sofa pillow—about as firm—I never made fun of them—" She gave Mirabel a hard look. Mirabel, a few years before, had been caught with pillows stuffed under her gown, mimicking the Most Noble and Gracious Lady Vermania, wife of the then Chancellor, in her attempt to line-dance at the Harvest Ball. That story, when it got back to the Most Noble Gracious Lady and her husband, had done nothing for the reputation of the Ladies Aid & Armor Society as a serious organization.

"I was only nineteen at the time," Mirabel said. "And I've already done all the apologizing I'm going to do." She unrolled another parchment. "Besides, that's not the point. The point is—our fitness program is losing money. We're not going to have enough for the annual Iron retreat sacrifice unless we get some customers. And we're stuck with all those flower-pain step-stools and those beastly mirrors which have to be polished..."

"Recruits' work," Blanche said.

"Yes, but not exactly military training. As for the ladies themselves—they looked pretty good at the dance two days ago," Mirabel had been on what the Guard called "drunk duty" that night, and had attributed certain ladies' newly slender limbs to her sisters' efforts in the Ladies Aid and Armor Society Shape-up Classes.

"Who looked good?" asked Krystal. No one would trust Krystal for drunk duty at a royal ball; she was entirely too likely to disappear down dark corridors with one of the drunks she was supposed to sober up. She claimed her methods worked as well as the time-honored bucket of water from the stable-yard well, but the sergeants didn't agree. Mirabel, like most of the guards, thoroughly enjoyed sousing the high-born with a bucket of cold water.

"Well—the queen, for one, and the Capitola girls. You know how thick their ankles were and how they complained about exercising..." The Capitola girls had taken their complaints to the queen, who hated the women soldiers.

"Yes... ?"

"They were wearing those new gowns slit up to here, that float out on the fast turns, and their legs were incredible."

"I can imagine," Krystal sniffed. "People with thighs like oxen shouldn't wear that style—"

"No—I mean long, slender, graceful. Even their ankles. I wondered what the Shape-Up classes had been doing."

"But—" Blanche frowned. "The last time they were in our classes, they had taken perhaps their tailors tuck off those thighs, but their ankles were still thick."

"They must've found someone who knows more about exercise than we do," Mirabel said. "And that's why they're not coming to our classes any more."

"Nobody knows more about exercise than soldiers," Blanche said. "There's no way to change flab to muscle that our sergeants haven't put us through."

"There must be something," Mirabel said, "and we had better find it."

They were interrupted by the doorward, who ushered in a handsome woman muffled in a cloak far too warm for the day. Mirabel perked up; anything was better than staring at those figures another moment. She had the feeling that staring at them would never change red ink to black.

"Ladies," the woman said, in a voice meant to carry only from pillow to pillow, not across a drillfield. "I understand that you have a... an exercise program?"

"Why yes," Blanche said, before Mirabel could speak. "We specialize in promoting fitness for women..."

"I have a problem," the woman said, and put back the hood of her cloak. Mirabel gaped. She knew Dorcas by sight, of course, because she had often been the official escort for visiting dignitaries when they went out on the town. She had watched the more public parts of Dorcas's performance, and had thought to herself that if the dancer were instead a fighter, she would already be in condition.

"You?" got out before Mirabel could repress it.

"Someone stole my belly," the woman said. She stood up, and unwrapped the cloak. Under it she wore a sheer, loose, nightshirt... and under the nightshirt was a soft, billowy expanse of crepey skin. "My plastic wizard," Dorcas went on, "tells me that this belly belongs to someone else, but he cannot tell whose it is—only that it's very likely she—whoever she is—has mine. He can't get mine back, until he knows where it is, and whether this was a simple exchange or something more complicated. Even then he's not sure... he says he's never seen a case like this before." She glared at her belly, and then at them. "This one must be over forty years old—look at this skin!—and it has all the muscle tone of mud. How am I supposed to earn a living with this? I can't even do my usual warm-up exercises. Do you have something—anything—which will tone me up?"

Mirabel felt a twinge of sympathy. This was no spoiled court lady, but a hard-working woman. "I'm sure we can help," she said. "But I don't know about the age part..."

"I don't expect miracles," Dorcas said. "I just want something to work with, so I don't lose money while I'm hunting for the trollop who did this to me."

"You have no idea?"

"No... I thought of that red-headed slut down at the Brass Bottom Cafe... you know, the one who thinks she can dance..." Mirabel nodded; she didn't feel it was the time to mention that the lissome redhead was reputed to perform the famous Gypsy dance "In Your Hat" even better than Dorcas. "But," Dorcas went on, with an air of someone being fairer than necessary, "she's in better shape than this." She patted the offending belly. "If anything, she's too thin. No, I'll be looking for someone whose skirts are too loose." She sighed. "So—when's class? And is there any possibility of getting private lessons. I hate to advertise my problem..."

"Private lessons?—" Mirabel was about to explain that since their classes had disappeared, all lessons were private, when Blanche interrupted.

"There's a ten percent surcharge for private lessons, Dorcas..."

"That's all right," Dorcas said.

"But I was going to say, since you're a working woman, like us, we'll waive that fee. It's mostly for the rich ladies who are looking for a way out of the work. And we could schedule you—" She made a pretense of going through the scrolls. "Well, as a matter of fact, I could fit you in now, if that's convenient. Or two hours after first bell tomorrow, if not."

"Thanks, ladies," Dorcas said. "Soon begun, soon done."

At the end of the table, Krystal stirred. "Mirabel, you don't suppose—?"

"Those court ladies!" Mirabel said, slamming her fist on the table. "That would be just like them!" Lazy, hated sweating and grunting for it, but wanted svelte bodies anyway. They would think of stealing, and if they had found a black plastic wizard...

"I wonder if it's happened to anyone else," Krystal said. "There aren't enough exotic dancers to supply flat tummies and perky breasts and slender thighs and smooth haunches and..."

"All right, Krystal. I get the point." Mirabel closed her eyes, trying to think how many court ladies she'd seen at the dance with markedly better figures. Had any of the other dancers been robbed? "I'm going to check on some things," she said. "You stay here and let Blanche know what we came up with."

Out on the street, she headed for the Brass Bottom Cafe, and stopped short outside. For the past half-year, a poster advertising the red-haired Eulalia's charms had been displayed... but it wasn't here any more.

"Painting a new poster?" she asked, as she came through the door.

"She's not here," said the landlady. "But we've got Gerynis and Mythlia and..."

"When did she leave?" Mirabel asked.

"Are you on official business?" asked the landlady. "Or just snooping?"

"Official as in King's Guard, no. Official as in Ladies Aid & Armor Society, yes."

The landlady sniffed. "So what does the Ladies Aid & Armor Society have to do with exotic dancers? Going to learn to be graceful in armor? Or sleep your way to promotions?"

Mirabel remembered why she never came here. The landlady cooed over male soldiers and had a rough tongue for the women. "Ma'am," she said, trying to sound both pleasant and businesslike, "information from another exotic dancer suggests that all of them may be at risk, so, the LA & AS wants to offer protection—"

"And make a tidy profit, no doubt." The landlady glared. "Well, you're too late for Eulalia. I can tell you that. What's been done to her is nothing short of blasphemy, and now you come along with your story about protection. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if you didn't have something to do with her troubles, just trying to scare all the girls into buying into your protections—" She advanced from behind the counter, and Mirabel saw that she held an iron skillet almost as broad as her hips. Mirabel beat a hasty retreat. So much for that... but if she could find Eulalia, the redhead might have more sense.

Back at the Hall, Eulalia was slumped at the table with a bright-eyed Krystal. Eulalia's midsection had gone the way of Dorcas's, although the replacement wasn't quite as big. Krystal had already signed her up for classes.

Eulalia knew of two other dancers so afflicted. "And my cousin, who just came to the city last week, told me about a plague among shepherd girls out in the Stormy Hills. Only with them it's not bellies—it's legs. Those girls do have gorgeous legs, from all that running and climbing."

Mirabel looked at the map on the wall. "Umm." She remembered that the court ladies had made a Progress into the Stormy Hills a few weeks before. Or so they'd said. She had thought at the time it was an odd place to go for a Progress in late winter—or at any time, really. There was nothing up in the Stormy Hills but bad weather and sheep... and of course the herding families that tended them.

They had insisted on being escorted by male soldiers, too. At the time, Mirabel had thought that was just another of their ladyish attitudes, of which they had many. Most likely, they were still in a snit about the exercise classes, and thought that the women soldiers would make them walk too fast. They had refused to go on hill walks as part of their fitness program.

"Something is definitely going on here," Mirabel said. "We'd better have a word with our favorite plastic wizard." He was still on retainer for the Society. And much as she sympathized with the dancers, if even half of them suddenly needed fitness classes, it would help make up the deficit from the court ladies' defection. They might come up with enough for the Iron Jil retreat sacrifice after all.

The first break in the case came from one of the girls who was in the pre-recruit class. She arrived full of giggles, and Blanche had to speak quite sharply to her.

"Sorry, ma'am," she said, her shoulders still shaking. "It's the older ladies—my aunt Sapphire and her bunch. You know they didn't like coming down here to your fitness classes—"

"I know," Blanche said.

"Well, they've got a dancing master now, calls himself Gilfort the Great, who claims that the female body is especially suited to fitness by dancing. They wear these little silk tunics—some of them even wear just a bandeau on top—and carry long scarves and ribbons and things, and while the court string quartet plays in the corner, they hop about—but never enough to sweat."

"But surely they're... er... losing condition?" Blanche asked.

"Terribly, at first," the girl said. "Then—overnight, almost—the dance began to work, and they were gorgeous. If I didn't want to learn swordplay, I'd go there myself." She caught the look on Blanche's face and stepped back. "Not really, of course, ma'am, but—it is kind of pretty. In its own way."

"But what were you laughing at, then?"

"Well... on my way here, I passed behind the potted palms, and the dancing master was telling them all they had the bellies of belly dancers, and the legs of shepherdesses, and the arms of apple-pickers. And I just couldn't help thinking, 'and the brains of boiled cabbages.' Her voice trailed off, with the quick mood change of adolescence. "I don't know why I thought it was so funny, really, just—most of the time they'd be horrified if anyone called them dancers or shepherdesses, and they were lapping it up, giving him these soppy grins."

"Apple pickers," Blanche said. "I never thought of apple pickers."

"If they're wearing those two piece outfits, we can certainly recognize our bellies," Dorcas said. Eulalia nodded. "But we don't want them to see us."

"That's what potted palms are for," Mirabel said. "Those giggling girls are always hiding behind the potted palms; you can wrap up to look like chaperones."

She herself looked like nothing but what she was, one of the Royal Guard. She took up her stance at the door of the third-best ballroom, sent Dorcas and Eulalia behind the potted palms, and waited.

The queen glared at her when the ladies arrived. "Where's Justin? He's our regular guard."

"Justin's sick this morning, your majesty," Mirabel said. Justin knew when it was healthy to be sick; he'd said he was tired of watching them fancy ladies misbehave in front of a foreigner anyway.

"Well... I certainly hope he gets well soon."

The queen's body looked, Mirabel had to admit, about half the age it had at Prince Nigel's wedding. Trim waist, slender taut legs. Too bad nothing had improved her sour face. The ladies twittered and cooed as the dancing master appeared, leading the musicians.

He was a handsome fellow, in his way. He had broad manly shoulders, a deep chest, a long step, and white teeth in a flashing smile. In fact, if not for his thick gray hair, he would have seemed the picture of handsome, rugged, young manhood.

Gray hair? She looked again. Smooth-skinned, no wrinkles; hands of a man no more than thirty, if that. Some people grayed early, but their hair usually came in white, and his was the plain gray of stone. Wasn't there something about gray hair on a young face, some jingle? She was trying to remember it when she noticed that the fronds of one potted palm were shaking, as if in a windstorm, and strolled casually over.

"Be still," she said as softly as possible. With the wailing of the dance music, she didn't think they'd hear.

"That—!" Whatever Dorcas had been about to say, Eulalia smothered successfully with her scarf.

"Get her out of here," Mirabel said. "We'll sort this out later."

What Dorcas had seen, it transpired, was her belly—unmistakeable not only for its singular beauty and talents, but for its mole.

"But she's letting it go," Dorcas wailed. "It's been two weeks, and I can tell she hasn't done a full set of ab crunches yet."

"I saw mine, too," Eulalia said. "And that woman must eat eight meals a day. The hipbones are already covered."

"You could use a little more contouring, dear," Dorcas said to her, too sweetly.

"You could use a little less," Eulalia said, not sweetly at all. They looked like two cats hissing; Mirabel slapped the table between them.

"Ladies. This is more important. Can you identify your bellies well enough for a court?"

"I'm sure," Dorcas said, eyes narrowed.

"And I," Eulalia agreed.

The judge, however, insisted that they had no proof. "A belly," he said firmly, "is just a belly. There is no evidence that it can be moved from one person to another."

"But that's my belly!" Dorcas said.

"Prove it," the judge said.

"That mole—"

"According to expert testimony, that mole was so placed by plastic wizardry, and Lady Cholérine has a receipt from a plastic wizard to show that she paid to have it put there. You madam, do not have a mole... or a receipt."

"Of course this belly doesn't have a mole," Dorcas said. "It's not mine. You should know."

"Keep her quiet," the judge said icily, "Or I'll have her in contempt!"

Dorcas glared at the judge, but said no more.

Afterwards she exploded to Mirabel. "He knows perfectly well that's my belly—he's had his tongue on that mole, when it was where it should be, on me. He just doesn't want everyone to know it."

Feristax, the LA&AS wizard, smiled when Mirabel told him about that fiasco. "If we can get them into court again, I think I may have something."

"What?" asked Mirabel crossly. She was not about to humiliate herself again in court.

"It's a new concept." She had heard that before. "After that problem with the random access storage device—"

"When you got our tits mixed up," Mirabel said. "I remember perfectly. Go on."

"Well... there's always been exchange, you know. Someone with red hair wants yellow hair; they get the red hair spelled off, and yellow hair spelled on. That puts red hair into the universe, and removes yellow hair. So if someone else wants red hair, there it is—it's an exchange, not a creation. But it's not a theft or anything."

"Like money," Mirabel said.

"Exactly." The wizard beamed at her. He had found the right level to communicate. "But with money, there are thieves. If there's no red hair—just for an example—"

"YES!" said Mirabel, stroking the haft of her knife; the wizard blenched and went on hurriedly.

"If there's no red hair, then they'll do a universal search for an individual with red hair. . . . contact a local practitioner—sometimes not even a licensed wizard!—to spell-steal it away where it becomes available to the person who wanted red hair."

"What color hair does the victim get?" Mirabel asked. "Or do they just snatch them bald-headed?"

"Gray, usually," the wizard said. "Very few people ask for gray, except of course wizards. He patted his own storm-colored hair, so incongruous with his youthful unlined face.

"Aha!" That was the thing about gray hair. Gray hair on young visage, might be a wizard. "He had gray hair, that dancing master. And he was young."

"Did he have a badge of license?" asked Feristax, touching his.

"Not that I saw," Mirabel said.

"Then, if he is a wizard, I'll bet he's a renegade. Do you know his name?"

"Gilfort the Great," Mirabel said.

"Sounds like somebody's apprentice pretending," Feristax said.

"Dorcas's belly isn't pretending," Mirabel pointed out. "So—what is this new technique might get everyone's legs and bellies back where they belong?"

"Ah. That. Well, the incidence of what we call 'prosthetic theft' has been rising in Technolalia, and they've developed a way to trace the origin of exchanges through something known as a virtual watermark."

"Watermark? Like on silk?"

The wizard laughed deprecatingly, but with a nervous look at the dagger in Mirabel's hand. "In the... er... flesh. Another possibility is a transunion connectivity spell, which allows the individual who originally inhabited the body part to control it while under the spell."

"Huh?"

"You mean," Dorcas said slowly, "that if we used this spell, and I wanted to, I could make my belly dance on someone else's body?"

"Precisely," the wizard said.

"I like it," Dorcas said, with a dangerous smile.

Half a dozen shepherd girls and apple-pickers, plus Dorcas and Eulalia, stood in a row

one side of the courtyard, and the court ladies they accused stood on the other.

"You can't make us undress in public!" the queen's first lady-in-waiting said, her cheeks mottled red.

"That isn't necessary at all," Sophora Segundiflora said. "All you have to do is stand there and watch." She had been invaluable in getting the court ladies there; they were no more inclined to disobey the new chancellor than the women soldiers had been when she was the senior member of the LA&AS.

"Watch what?"

Sophora said nothing, but waved to the musicians.

At the wailing of the pipes minor and the nose-flutes, Dorcas and Eulalie began to dance "Your Hat," their limbs describing fluid arcs and volutes, though their still-reluctant substitute bellies came nowhere near the movements required.

"This is disgusting," the queen said. "In our court—!"

"Well, it's not up to standard," the king said, without taking his eyes off the dancers, "but worth watching nonetheless..." The queen glared.

The observers gasped suddenly. Two of the court ladies were jerking spasmodically, clutching at themselves with both arms.

"What's wrong with them?" the king asked. "Are they sick?"

"They're trying to dance," Dorcas said, without missing a beat of the dance. "That's my belly—"

"No, that one's mine," Eulalia said. "It's got that little extra spiralling wiggle..."

Some of the guards had begun to make enthusiastic noises, and now they burst into cheer. "Eulalia! Eulalia!" and "Dorcas! Dorcas!" as they pointed at their candidates for those respective abs among the court ladies twitching and writhing.

Sophora held up one massive hand, and the courtyard fell silent.

"It's clear," she said, "that terrible things have been done to your people, your majesty, but don't believe that these ladies had evil intent."

"Ha!" muttered Mirabel.

"I believe they were deluded by the enchantments of a black plastic wizard—" A gasp of horror swept the yard. "—who posed as a dancing master." She pointed.

The dancing master attempted a fast reverse shuffle, but found himself up against the breastplates of a half-dozen Royal Guard, several of them women.

"See his gray hair!" Sophora thundered. Several small bits of masonry fell from the castle walls and shattered on the pavement. "That is no natural hair—that is a wizard's choice." She waved, and Feristax came forward. "You all know this wizard, long a respected practitioner in our fair city. Let him now examine this imposter."

"He's not even a licensed wizard," Feristax said confidently. A night's work on the informational plane of the multiverse had located the man's own identity codes. "He's a supplier of magical components for real wizards... In fact, he is the fellow who shipped me that very imperfect random access storage device which caused so much trouble last year. I've been told that he lost his franchise with several reputable manufacturers recently, that he has been suspected of tampering with network traces and virtual watermarks."

"It's all a stupid conspiracy!" the man—dancing master or black plastic wizard—yelled. "It's just a way to keep down the talented and let lazy fools like you—" He stopped, a dagger in his throat.

"Gilfort, he calls himself," Feristax said. "If it please your majesty, I can reverse his iniquitous and illegal spells."

"Perhaps in a more private place," Sophora murmured in the king's other ear. "These ladies have been foolish and gullible, but you would not want to humiliate them..."

"Oh... no..." the king looked bewildered, his habitual expression. The queen glared at Sophora, who smiled back.

"For your own benefit, your majesty," Sophora said.

At the end of the speedy trial—the judge, with Sophora leaning over his shoulder, did not delay proceedings in any way—all body parts were restored to their original owners, except for one: a shepherd girl in the Stormy Hills, slowed by Lady Alicia's flabby legs, had not outrun a wolf. Alicia got to keep the girl's legs, but had to send 20 gold crowns in compensation... or choose to spend the summer herding sheep for the girl's family. She sent money.

Because the Ladies Aid & Armor Society had incurred unreasonable expense in acquiring exercise equipment for the court ladies to use, the ladies had to agree to three classes a week.

for the next year, by which time the step stools, mirrors, and showers would be paid off.

And, as a special reward for their discovery and solution of the problem, the Ladies Aid and Armor Society received a unique contribution to their annual Iron Jill retreat.

Thirty sulky ladies in silk tunics stepped smartly up and down the flower-painted stools to the rhythm of mallet on shield, and the brusque commands of the LA&AS top instructors.

"Aaaall right, ladies... and FIVE and FOUR and THREE and TWO and ONE... now the other foot and EIGHT and SEVEN and SIX and FIVE..."

"Let's see those smiles, ladies! A proper court lady always smiles!"

"More GLOW, ladies! Let's see some GLOW!"

Gilfort the Great, Dancing Master to the Royal Court and (privy) black plastic wizard, sat on the rock in the middle of the clearing, hands bound to the ring thereon, and wished he had never left Technolalia. Twenty-seven of the women of the Ladies Aid & Armor Society had shown up for the annual Iron Jill retreat, at which (so he had heard) terrible rituals were performed. No male had seen them and lived to tell about it.

The corresponding male-bonding ceremonies he knew about, having been taken to the fire-circle to drum and dance by his father and uncles. He had been forced to down raw fish and even a luckless mouse; he had run naked through the meadows and woods screaming the worst words he knew.

But this? Around the rock, the women swirled, seeming to ignore him, as they stripped off armor, kicked off heavy boots, and unpacked provisions for the first night's dinner.

"Hunting tomorrow," said the tall muscley one who had prodded him in the back most of the way here. "Tonight's the last night for this bough ten stuff."

"Yeah..." breathed the others, and then they did look at him, and he wished they hadn't.

"By the time we find and kill, we'll be ravenous," a perky blonde said, growling a little. "The Mother sent us off as usual, we won't really have much of a supper tonight..."

He could see that they didn't. Bread, cheese—not much of it—some pickles. To his surprise, they brought him a pot of stew, and urged him to eat his fill.

"It's all right for you," they said. He wasn't hungry, but the menace of their swords suggested he had better obey, and he forced the stew into a reluctant belly. Later, he hardly slept—it was amazingly difficult to sleep on a hard rock, with his hands tied, and the knowledge that twenty-seven hungry women had plans for him the next day.

Just as the first gray light seeped into the clearing, the women began to wake. First one then another stopped snoring, rolled to her feet, spat, and let out a loud yell. Birds took off, wings clapping, in all directions. Twenty-seven yells, in everything from lyric soprano (with a fine vibrato) to tenor, and afterwards they all looked at him again.

"Now didn't that feel good?" asked the brown-haired brawny one. "Let's do it again, and next time let all the tension out. Iron... JILLLL!"

Twenty-seven women yelling Iron Jill at the tops of their lungs sent all remaining birds thrashing out of the trees at high speed, and in the echoing silence afterwards he could hear distant hoofbeats becoming ever more distant.

"Ahhh," said the brawny one, stretching. "Usually we can't do that right away, not if we want any breakfast, because it scares the game, but this time..." She smiled. Gilfort the Great fainted.

When he woke up, he was being slapped gently enough by several of the women.

"Oh goodie! He's awake," said the perky blonde.

"Now, what you have to do," said another, "is this: we point you away from the castle and the city, and then you run. And then we chase you."

"Such fun," said the blonde one. "You've had more food and a good night's sleep." He tried to protest, but his mouth was dry. "We give you a flagon of water and some sandwiches; we have nothing. You might well outrun us; we might have to subsist on nuts and berries. Even beetle grubs." She giggled.

They sounded so cheerful. They sounded so confident.

"It's just—" Strong fingers clamped his cheeks; bold eyes stared into his. "Don't come back this way, Gilfort. I shouldn't warn you, not really, but—the rules are, if you come back this way, we can do it all. Tear you. Slowly. Limb. From. Limb. We like it, but you probably wouldn't. So best to run that way, Gilfort. We do it quickly, when it's a running prey."

"Like a deer," one of the others said. "Prey, not sacrifice."

"Attaboy," said the brawny one, and they hauled him to his feet, attached the water flagon to his belt with care, tucked a packet of sandwiches in his pack, and unbound his hands. "That

way," the brawny one said again. "We give you ten Iron Jills head start."

Gilfort staggered away, the stagger quickening to a run as his body found a use for all the adrenaline. Behind him, the first roar of the women: "Iron... JILL!" He leapt over a fallen log, raced down a little slope, splashed through the creek. "Iron JILL!" Up the slope on the far side, slipping in drifts of leaves, fingers desperate for a grip on branches, rocks, anything... on up and up, a long gentle slope that offered his burning lungs no rest. "Iron JILL!" Down again at last, gasping, sweat burning his eyes, to another creek too wide to jump. He plunged into icy water, slipped on a rock and fell headlong. "Iron JILL!" came faintly from behind.

Hours later, sore, panting, blistered, stung, scraped, scratched, and very aware of his good fortune, he emerged on the Hacksaw Pass road back to Technolalia. He had heard the strident call over and over, in those desperate hours, sometimes nearer, sometimes farther away, as the crazed pack of starving warrior women sought their lawful prey. But now he was at the road, and once over the pass he would be safe. Forever safe, because he certainly would never come back.

The crazed pack of starving warrior women, sprawled at ease on the soft spring turf of the clearing, burped in varying tones. A couple of hours after they'd sent Gilfort off, the supply train arrived, complete with the festive foods appropriate to an Iron Jill retreat, including the molded chocolate statue of the Mother of All Women Warriors. It had taken the last coin in the treasury, but without the sacrificial chocolate, it just wasn't an Iron Jill retreat.

They were full now, overfull, and hardly able to sing along when Dorcas and Eulalie (honorary inductees to the rites this year) struck up the traditional Hymn to Iron Jill:

"Women must cook, so women can eat

Is mostly the rule,

But not on retreat...

Too much fat, and too much sweet

Should be avoided

But not on retreat...

An iron woman's no fun at all

So eat your fill and have a ball.

Food in the belly

Love in the night

Chocolate today

Will make all right."

When night fell, the flames leaped high, and when the vision for which they had come, I
Jill herself, walked among them... they rolled over and ate another piece of chocolate. Iron
smiled at her daughters, and her daughters smiled back.