

AND LADIES OF THE CLUB

Elizabeth Moon

"But you don't tax jockstraps!" Mirabel Stonefist glared.

"No," said the king. "They're a necessity."

"For you, maybe. How do you expect me to fight without my bronze bra?"

"Men can fight without them," the king said "It's far more economical to hire men, anyway. Do you have any idea what the extra armor for the women in my army costs? I commissioned a military cost-containment study, and my advisors said women's uniforms were always running over budget." The king smirked at the queen, on her throne a few feet away, and she smirked back. "I've always said the costs to society are too high if women leave their family responsibilities-"

"We'll see about this," said Mirabel. She would like to have seen about it then and there. The king's personal guards—all male this morning, she noticed—looked too alert. No sense getting her nose broken again for nothing. Probably it was the queen's fault anyway. Just because she'd been dumped on her backside at the Harvest Tourney, when she tried to go up against Seren, the Savage, expecting that uncompromising warrior to pull her strokes... the queen gave Mirabel a curled lip, and Mirabel imagined giving the queen a fat one. As the elected representative of the Ladies' Aid & Armor Society, she must maintain her dignity, but she'd have to control her imagination.

"Six silver pence per annum," said the king. "Payable by the Vernal Equinox."

Mirabel growled and stalked out, knocking over several minor barons on the way. In the courtyard, other women in the royal army clustered around her.

"Well?"

"It's true," said Mirabel grimly. "He's taxing bronze bras." A perky blonde with an intolerably cute nose (still unbroken) piped up.

"Just bronze? What about brass? Or iron? Or-"

"Shut up, Kristal! Bronze, brass, gold, silver... 'all such metal ornaments as ye female warrioresses are wont to use-'"

"Warrioress!" A vast bosomy shape heaved upward, dark brows lowered. Bertha Broad had strong opinions on the dignity due women warriors.

"Shut up, Bertha!" Kristal squeaked, slapping Bertha on the arm with all the effect of a k swatting a sabertooth.

"Warriress is what the law says," Mirabel snapped. "I don't like it either. But there it i

"What about leather?" Kristal asked. "Chain mail? Linen with seashell embroidery?"

"KRISTAL!" The perky blonde wilted under the combined bellow.

"I was only thinking-"

"No, you weren't," Mirabel said. "You were fantasizing about those things in the Dark Knights catalog again. This is serious; I'm calling a meeting of the Ladies' Aid & Armor Society."

"And so," she explained that evening to the women who had gathered in the Ladies' Aid & Armor Society meeting hall, "the king insists that the extra metal we require in our armor is luxury, to be taxed as such. He expects we'll all go tamely back to our hearths-or make him rich."

"I'll make him sing soprano," muttered Lissa Broadbelt, Bertha's sister. "The nerve of th man-"

"Now, now." A sweet soprano voice sliced through the babble as a sword through new butter. "Ladies, please! Let's have no unseemly threats..." With a creak and jingle, the spea stood... and stood. Tall as an oak (the songs went), and tougher than bullhide (the songs we clad in enough armor to outfit most small mercenary companies, Sophora Segundiflora tow over her sister warriors. She had arrived in town only that evening, from a successful contr "Especially," Sophora said, "threats that impugn sopranos."

"No, ma'am."

"He is, after all, the king."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Although it is a silly sort of tax."

"Yes, ma'am." A long pause, during which Sophora smiled lazily at the convocation, and convocation smiled nervously back. She was so big, for one thing, and she wore so much n armor than everyone else, for another, and then everyone who had been to war with her kne that she smiled all the time. Even when slicing hapless enemies in two or three or whatever

number of chunks happened to be her pleasure. Perhaps especially then.

"Uh... do you have any... er... suggestions?" asked Mirabel, in a tone very different from that she'd used to the king.

"I think we should all sit down," Sophora said, and did so with another round of metallic clinkings and leathery creakings. Everyone sat, in one obedient descent. Everyone waited, varying degrees of patience but absolute determination. One did not interrupt Sophora. One would not have the chance to apologize. Whether she was slow, or merely deliberate, she always had a chance to speak her mind. "What about other kinds of bras?" she asked at last.

Mirabel explained the new decree again. "Metal ornaments, it said, but that included armor. Said so. Called us warrioresses, too." Sophora waved that away.

"He can call us what he likes, as long as we get paid and we don't have to pay this stupid tax. First things first. So if it's not a metal bra, it's not taxed?"

"No-but what good is a bit of cloth against weapons?"

"I told you, leather-" Kristal put in quickly.

Sophora let out a cascade of soprano laughter, like a miniature waterfall. "Ladies, ladies, what about something like my corselet?"

"He was clever there, Sophora. He doesn't want to tax the armor men wear, and of course some men do wear mail shirts or corselets of bronze. But he specified that modifications to standard designs-marked in diagrams; I saw them-count as ornamentation, and make the whole thing taxable."

"Idiot!" huffed Sophora. Then she jingled some more as she tried to examine her own mail shirt. "These gussets, I suppose?"

"Yes, exactly. We could, I suppose, wear men's body armor a size larger, and pad it out. It would be miserably hot in summer, and bulky the rest of the time. There's always breast-binding-"

"I hate binding my breasts," said someone from the back of the room. "You gals with the baby tits can do it easily enough, but some of us are built!" Heads turned to look at her, and sure enough, she was.

The simple thing is to get rid of our breasts," said Sophora, as if stating the obvious. The resulting gasp filled the room. She looked around "Not like that, she said. "I have no intention of cutting mine off. I don't care what anyone says about heroic foremothers, those Amazons were barbarians. But we live in an age of modern marvels. We don't have to rely on

old-fashioned surgery. Why, there's a plastic wizard right here in the city."

"Of course!" Mirabel smacked herself on the forehead. "I've seen his advertisements my Thought of having a nose job myself, but I've just been too busy."

"That's right," Bertha said. "And he does great temporary bridges and crowns, too: our Desiree had the wedding outdoors, and he did a crystal bridge across the Sinkbat canal, and a pair of crystal crowns for Desiree and the flower girl. Lovely-so romantic-and then it vanished right on time, no sticky residue."

"Temporaries! That's even better. Take 'em or leave 'em, so to speak."

"Let's get down to business," Sophora said. "Figure out what we can pay, and how we can avoid paying it."

"What?"

"Come on in the business office and I'll show you." She led the way into the back room, began pulling down scrolls and tomes. Mirabel and a couple of others settled down to wait. After peering and muttering through a short candle and part of a tall replacement, Sophora looked up.

"We'll need to kick in two silver pence each to start with."

"Two silver pence! Why?"

"That's the ceiling in our health benefits coverage for noncombat trauma care. It's reimbursable, I'm sure, but we have to pay it first," Sophora said. She had half a dozen scrolls spread on the desk, along with a thick, well-thumbed volume of tax laws. "We might have to split it between a reimbursable medical expense, and a deductible business expense, if they're picky."

"But how?" Mirabel had never understood the medical benefits package anyway. They should've paid to have her nose redone, but the paperpushers had said that because she was a prisoner at the time, it didn't qualify as a combat injury. But since she'd been in uniform, it wasn't noncombat trauma, either.

Sophora smiled and tapped the tax volume. "It's a necessary business expense, required to comply with the new tax code. The chancellor might argue that only the cost related to removing the breasts is a business expense, but the restoration has to count as medical. It's the law: 'any procedure which restores normal function following loss thereof.' Either it's reimbursable or it's deductible, and of course we aren't paying the tax. With a volume discount we should be able to set the job done for two silver pence. Bertha says he charged only three for that entire wedding celebration."

Mirabel whistled her admiration. "Very good, dear. You should be a lawyer."

"I will be, when I retire." Sophora smiled placidly. "I've been taking correspondence courses. Part of that G.I.T. Bill the king signed three years ago: Get Into Taxpaying. Now let me get the contract drawn up-" She wrote steadily as that candle burned down; Mirabel lit another. Finally she quit, shook her hand, and said, "See that the wizard signs this contract drawn up." She handed over a thick roll. Mirabel glanced down the first part of it.

"It's heavy-surely we don't need all this for a simple reversible spell..."

"I added a little boilerplate. And yes, we do need all this. You don't want to wake up with the wrong one, do you?"

"Wrong breast? Ugh-what a thought: Although I expect some of our sisters wouldn't mind they could choose which one."

"They can pay extra for full reshaping, if they want. I'm not going to have my children drinking, out of someone else's breast, even if it is on my body."

"You want a reversible reduction mammoplasty?" the wizard asked. His eyebrows wavered, unsure whether to rise in shock or lower in disapproval. Mirabel could tell he didn't like her using the correct term for the operation. Wizards liked clients to be humble and ignorant.

"Yeah," Mirabel said. She didn't care if the wizard didn't like smart clients; she wasn't about to let the sisterhood down. "See, there's a new tax on breast-armor. What we need is to lose 'em when we're headed for battle, but of course we want to get 'em back when we're nursing. Or... whatever." Whatever being more to the point, in her case. Two points.

"I... see." The steeped fingers, the professional sigh. Mirabel hated it when wizards put on all this high and mighty expert jazz. "It could be... expensive..."

"I don't see why," Mirabel said. "It's not like we're asking for permanent changes. Isn't it true that a reversible spell disturbs the Great Balance less? Doesn't cost you that much... of course I can find someone else..."

"Where do you people get your idea of magery?" the wizard asked loftily. Mirabel held the Ladies' Aid & Armor Society's copy of *Our Wizards, Our Spells*. He flushed. "That's a popularization... it's hardly authoritative-"

"I've also read *Wishbone and Peebles' Altering Reality: Temporary vs. Permanent*

Spellcasting and Its Costs."

"You couldn't have understood that!" True, but Mirabel wasn't going to admit it. She merely looked at the wizard's neck, thinking how easily it would come apart with one blow of her sword, until he swallowed twice quickly and flushed. "All right, all right," he said then. "Perhaps you soldiers should get a sort of discount."

"I should hope so. All the women warriors in the kingdom... we could even make it exclusive..."

"Well. Well, then let's say-how much was the new tax?"

"Irrelevant," said Mirabel, well briefed by Sophora. "We can pay two silver pence apiece per year."

"Per year?" His fingers wiggled a little; he knew he was trying to add it up in his head.

"As many transforms as needed... but we wouldn't want many."

"Uh... how many warriors?"

"Fifty right away, out there might be more later."

"It's very difficult. You see, you have to create an extradimensional storage facility for the... the... tissue, so to speak. Until it's wanted. Otherwise the energy cost of uncreating and creating all that, all the time, would be prohibitive. And the storage facility must have very good-well, it's a rather difficult concept, except that you don't want to mix them up." But what he was really thinking was "a hundred silver pence-enough for that new random-access multidimensional storage device they were showing over in Technolalia last summer."

Still, he was alert enough to read the contract Mirabel handed him. As she'd expected, he threw up his hands and threatened to curse the vixenish excuse for a lawyer who had drawn such a ridiculous, unspeakable contract. Mirabel repeated her long look at his neck-such a scrawny, weak neck-and he subsided. "All right, all right. Two silver pence a year for necessary reversible mammoplasties..." He signed on the dotted line, then stamped below the sigil on the end of his wizard's staff, as Sophora had said he should. Mirabel smiled at him and handed over two silver pence.

"You can do me first," she said. "I'll be in tomorrow morning. We'll need proof that it's reversible."

The operation took hardly any time. The wizard didn't even need to touch the target area

One moment the breasts were there, then they weren't. The reversal took somewhat longer, it worked smoothly, and then they were again. A slight tingling that faded in moments—that was all the side effects. Mirabel had gone in with her usual off-duty outfit on, and came out moments later with considerably more room in the top of it. The other women in the palace guard, who had come to watch, grinned happily. They would all have theirs done at once, they agreed.

Mirabel thought it felt a bit odd when she stripped for weapons practice, but the look on the king's face was worth it. All the women in the palace now displayed an array of admirably flat-but muscular-chests above regulation bronze loin-guards. At first, no one recognized them, not even the sergeants. But gradually, the men they were training with focussed on the obvious—Mirabel's flat nose, Kristal's perky one—and the necessary, like the sword tips that were getting in their way when they forgot to pay attention.

The king, though... the king didn't catch on until someone told him. "That new draft..." he said to the sergeant. "Shaping well."

"Begging the king's pardon, that ain't no new draft," said the sergeant.

"But—"

"Them's the ladies, Sire," the sergeant said "Haven't got no thingies anymore." He knew he had already used all the usual terms, but felt that when addressing the king in person, he ought to avoid vulgarisms. "They's fightin' better than ever, your highness, and that's better'n most."

"Women!" The king stared. Mirabel, in the first row, grinned at him. "And no tits!"

"Uh... yes, Sire. No... er... tits." Not for the first time, the sergeant felt that royalty had failed to adhere to standards.

"No tax," Mirabel said cheerfully, as the king's eyes flicked from her face to her chest and back again.

"Oh... dear," said the king, and fled the courtyard. Minutes later, the queen's face appeared at a high window. Mirabel, who had been watching for it, waved gaily. The queen turned her head back.

The prince glared at himself in the mirror. The spell was definitely wearing off. The wizard had insisted he'd simply grown out of it, but the prince felt that having a handsome throat did not make up for having a... face. He left a blank, there, while staring at the mirror. Face it was that it had two eyes and a nose and mouth arranged in more or less the right places. Aside from that, he saw a homely boy with close-set eyes under a sloping brow, a great prow of a nose

buck teeth, and a receding chin, all decorated with splotches of midadolescent acne. And even if he had outgrown the spell, it was still wearing thin-last week his throat had been handsome but this week his Adam's apple looked like a top on a string. This spell should have been renewed a month ago. If only his father weren't such a cheapskate... he had his own spells renewed every three months, and what did he need them for, at his age. Everyone knew the important time of life was now, when you were a young prince desperately trying to find a princess.

She was coming next week. Her parents had visited at Harvest Home; her aunts and uncles had come for Yule. Now, at the Vernal Equinox, she was coming. The beautiful Marilisa-had seen pictures. She had seen pictures of him, they said: the miniature on ivory done by the own artist. But then the spell had been strong, and so had his chin.

He had to get the spell renewed. His father had said no hurry, but suppose her ship came early?

"I think we should return to normal for the Equinox," said Bertha. "Think of the dances, parties. The prince's betrothal... the wedding, if we're lucky."

"But that's when the tax is due," Mirabel said.

"Only if we're wearing breast-armor," Sophora pointed out. "We can manage not to fight war for a week or so, I hope. Just wear civilian clothes. Some of you are pulling castle duty then-I suppose you'll have to stay flat, at least for your duty hours but the rest of us can enjoy ourselves again-"

"Yes," said Kristal. "I like that idea..." She wriggled delicately, and Mirabel gave her a disgusted look.

"You would. But... after all... why not?"

They presented themselves at the wizard's hall. "All of you reversed at once?" he asked. "That will take some time-the reverse operation is a bit slower, especially as I now have so many in... er... storage. And I do have other appointments..."

"No," Sophora said. "You have us. Look at your contract." And sure enough, there it was the paragraph she had buried in the midst of formal boilerplate. She read it aloud, just in case he skipped a phrase. "Because that the Welfare of the Warrior is Necessary to the Welfare of the Land and Sovereign, therefore shalt thou at all times and places be Ready and Willing to proceed with this Operation at the Request of the Warrior and such Request shall supersede Others, be they common or Royal. And to this Essential shalt thou bind thyself at the peril of thy Life at the hands of the Ladies' Aid & Armor Society."

The wizard gulped. "But you see, ladies, my other clients-the ladies of the court, the chancellor's wife-

Sophora pointed to be they common or Royal. "It is your sworn word, wizard, which an court will uphold, especially this court..."

The wizard was halfway through the restorations when the royal summons came. "I can't right now," he told the messenger curtly. He had just discovered that the newly installed random access multidimensional storage device had a bug in it and for the fifth time in a row he'd gotten an error message when he tried to retrieve Bertha Broadbelt's breasts. He was swearing and starting to panic every time he glanced at her dark-browed lace.

"But it's the king's command," the messenger said.

"I don't care if it's the king's personal spell against body odor," the wizard said. "I can't now, and that's final." He pushed the messenger out the door, slammed it, and tried to calm himself. "Sorry about the interruption," he said to Bertha, who seemed to be calmer than he was. Of course, she had the sword.

"That's all right," she said. "Take your time. Nothing's wrong, is it?"

"Nothing at all," said the wizard. He tried again. No error message in the first part of the spell, at least. He felt the little click in his head that meant the transfer had been made, and glanced at Bertha just as she looked down.

And up. He knew his mouth was hanging open, but he couldn't say a word. She -could. "These aren't my boobs," she said without any expression at all. "These are Gillian's." He wondered how she could recognize someone else's breasts on her chest just as he realized was having trouble breathing because she had a vast meaty hand around his throat.

The prince hated being in the throne room with his outgrown spell leaving the most visible parts of himself at their worst. But he'd been summoned to wait for the escort that would take him to the wizard for the spell's renewal, so he'd slouched into the room in a long-sleeved hooded jerkin, the hood pulled well forward and the sleeves down over his awkward hands.

"Stand up, boy," his father said.

"Don't wear your hood in the house," his mother said.

"He won't do it," the messenger said, bowing his way up the room.

"Won't do it!" King and queen spoke together, danced at the prince in unison, and then glared at the messenger. The king waved the queen silent and went on alone. "What do you mean, he won't do it. He's our subject."

"He's busy," the messenger said. "That's what he told me. He said even if your majesty's personal body-odor spelt-

"Silence!" bellowed the king. His face had turned very red and he did not glance at the queen. "Guards!" he called. The prince's escort looked up, with interest. "Co arrest us this pesky wizard and bring him here."

The wizard's shop, when the guards arrived, was open and empty but for the usual magi impedimenta and the mysterious black box with a red light that was humming to itself in the of E-flat minor. A soldier touched it, and it emitted a shrill squeal and changed to humming the Lydian mode. "Fatal error," said a voice from the emptiness. The soldiers tumbled out of the shop without touching anything else.

"If you're looking for that there plastic wizard," said a toothless old woman on the street "one of them there lady warriors took him away."

The soldiers looked at each other. Most of them knew where the Ladies' Aid & Armor society met. A few of them had been guests at the Occasional Teas. But no man went there uninvited. Especially not when Sophora Segundiflora was leaning on the doorframe, eyeing them with that lazy smile. They had started off to the meeting hall in step, and come around corner already beginning to straggle... a straggle that became a ragged halt a few yards out Sophora's reach. They hoped.

"Hi, guys," she said. "Got business with us?"

"Umm," said the sergeant. And then, more coherently, "We heard that plastic wizard might be around here; the king wants him."

"Probably not," Sophora said. "Not now." She glanced suggestively at the door behind her. No sounds leaked through, which was somehow more ominous than shrieks and gurgles would have been.

"Ummm," said the sergeant again. No one had asked his opinion of the new tax code, but he had one. Anything that upset Sophora Segundiflora and Mirabel Stonefist was a bad idea - and he didn't want to be the one to tell the king why the wizard wasn't available.

"Anything else?" Sophora asked. She looked entirely too happy for the sergeant's comfort. He had seen her in battle. The sergeant felt his old wounds paining him, all of them, and wished he had retired the year before, when he'd had the chance. Too late now; he'd re-upped for five years. That extra hide of land and a cow wouldn't do him much good if Sophora tore him limb from

limb. He gulped, and sidled closer, making sure his hands were well away from any of his weapons without being in any of the positions that might signal an unarmed combat assault. There weren't many such positions, and his wrists started aching before he'd gone ten feet.

"Look-can we talk?"

"Sure," said Sophora. "You are, and I am. What else?"

He knew she wasn't stupid. Word had gone around about that correspondence course. She must be practicing her courtroom manner. "It's... kind of sensitive," he said.

"Got an itch?" she inquired. "Down two streets and across, Sign of the Mermaid..."

"Not that," he muttered. "It's state business. The prince-"

"That twerp Nigel?"

"It's not his fault he inherited that face," the sergeant said. It would have been disloyal to say more, but everyone had noticed how the prince took after his uncle, the chancellor. "Not a bad kid, once you know him."

"I'll take your word for it," Sophora said "So what about the prince?"

"He's... that princess is coming this week. For the betrothal, you know."

"I heard."

"He... er... needs his spells renewed Or it's all off."

"Why'd the king wait so long?" Sophora asked. She didn't sound really interested.

"The gossip is that he felt it would be good for the prince's character. And he thought with enough willpower maybe the prince could hold on until he was full-grown, when they could get the permanent ones, and a crown at the same time."

"I see. But he needs a temporary before the princess arrives. How unfortunate." Without even looking at him, she reached behind her and opened the door. The sergeant peered into the hall, where the wizard could be seen writhing feebly in Bertha's grip. "We have a prior contract, you see, which he has yet to fulfill. And a complication has arisen."

A slender woman jogged up the street, and came to a panting halt at the door. "Got here soon as I could-what's up?"

"About time, Gillian," Sophora said. "Bertha's got a problem with our wizard and your-

she stopped and gave the sergeant a loving look that made his neck itch. "Go away, sergeant, I have your message; I will pass it along."

The sergeant backed off a spear length or so, but he didn't go away. If he stayed, he might find out what happened to the wizard. Better to return to the palace with a scrap of the dismembered wizard (if that happened) than with no wizard at all. So he and the others were still hanging around when a grim-faced group of women warriors, some flat-chested in armor and others curvaceous in gowns, emerged from the Ladies' Aid & Armor Society hall.

The sergeant pushed himself off the wall he'd been holding up and tried to stop them. "The king wants the wizard," he said.

"So do we," Sophora said. Her smile made the sergeant flinch, then she scowled—a release of tension. "Oh, well, you might as well come along. We're going to see that the wizard corrects his errors, and you can report to the king."

She led the way back to the wizard's house, and the others surrounded the wizard.

Inside, it still looked like a wizard's house, full of things that made no sense to the sergeant.

"Someone touched this," the wizard said, pointing to the black box.

"How can you tell? And who could've touched it?" Sophora asked. But they all turned to look at the hapless soldiers.

"We were just looking for him," the sergeant said. "He wasn't here... we were just looking for evidence___"

"FATAL ERROR," said the voice from the air again. Everyone shivered.

"Can't you shut that up?"

"Not now. Not since some hamfisted boneheaded guardsman laid his clumsy hands on it. The wizard looked particularly wizardly, eyebrows bristling, hair standing on end... Miral noticed her own hair standing on end, as the wizard reached out his staff and a loud blue SHRIEK came from the box.

"SYSTEM OVERLOAD," said the voice from the air. "REALLY FATAL ERROR THIS TIME."

"Code!" said the wizard.

"A..." the voice said, slowly.

"B!" said the wizard. "B Code. B code run." Mirabel wondered what that was about, just as a shower of sparkling symbols fell out of the air into the wizard's outstretched palm.

"NO TRACE," said the voice; the wizard stared at his hand as if it meant something.

"I need a dump," the wizard said. Then he muttered something none of them could understand, nonsense syllables, and a piercing shriek came from the black box.

"NOOOOOOOoooo." Out of the air came a shower of noses, ears, toes, fingers, and a pair of particularly ripe red lips.

"Aha!" said the wizard, and he followed that with a blast of wizardese that made another black object, not quite so boxy, appear shimmering on the desk. Without looking at any of them, the wizard picked it up and spoke into it. "I want technical support," he said "Now."

The small demon in the black box enjoyed a profitable arrangement with others on various extradimensional planes. Quantum magery being what it was, wizards didn't really understand it, and that kept the demons happy. Nothing's ever really lost, nothing's wasted, and the transformational geometry operated a lot like any free market. It was a lot easier to snatch extra mammarys than to create them from random matter. Demons are particularly good with probabilities, and it had calculated that it need keep no more than a fifth of its deposits on hand, while lending the rest brought in a tidy interest income.

"And I didn't do nothin' wrong, really I didn't," it wailed at the large scaly paw that held it firmly. Far beneath, eyes glowered, flamelit and dangerous.

"Subcontractors!" the universe, growled, and the small demon felt nothing more as it vanished in universal disapproval.

"It's under warranty," the wizard insisted.

"Shipping replacement storage device..." the voice said.

"But my data..."

"Recovered," the voice said. "Already loaded. Please stay on the line and give your credit card number-sorry, instruction error. Please maintain connection spell and give your secret name-" The wizard leaned over and said something through cupped hands.

With a flicker, the miscellaneous body parts disappeared, and a black box sat humming

the key of A major, its light was green.

"Me first," said Bertha. "I want Gillian's boobs back on Gillian, and mine on me." "But prince-" the sergeant said. "Can wait," said Bertha.

The royal accountant lagged behind the chancellor, wishing someone else had his job. The chancellor had already given his opinion, and the accountant's boxed ears still rang. It was his fault anyway. A contract was a contract; that's how it was written, and he hadn't written it. But he knew if it came to boxing ears, the king wouldn't clout the chancellor. After all, the chancellor was the queen's brother.

"Well-what is it now?" The king sounded grumpy, too-the worst sort of grumpy.

"Sire-there's a problem with the treasury. There's been an overrun in the military medical services sector."

"An overrun? How? We haven't even had a war!" Very grumpy, the king, and the accountant noticed the Dig bony fists at the ends of his arms. Why had he ever let his uncle talk him into civil service anyway?

"A considerable increase in claims made to the Royal Provider Organization. For plastic wizardry."

The king leaned over to read the details. "Plastic wizardry? Health care?"

"Sire, in the reign of your renowned father, plastic wizardry to repair duty-related injuries was added to the list of allowable charges, and then a lesser amount was allocated for noncombat trauma-"

The king looked up, clearly puzzled. "What's a reversible reduction mammoplasty?" The chancellor explained, in the tone of someone who would always prefer to call a breast a bosom.

"Those women again!" The king swelled up and bellowed "GUARDS! FETCH ME THOSE WOMEN!" No one, not even the accountant, had to ask which women.

"But your majesty, surely you want the women of your realm able to suckle their own children?" Mirabel Stonefist, serene in the possession of her own mammae, and surprisingly graceful in her holiday attire, smiled at the king.

"Well of course, but-"

"And you do not want to pay extra for women's armor that will protect those vulnerable fountains of motherly devotion, isn't that right?" She had gotten that rather disgusting phrase from a sermon by the queen's own chaplain, who did not approve of women warriors. Rumor had it that he had chosen his pacific profession after an incident with a woman warrior who had rendered his singing voice an octave higher for a month, and threatened to make the change permanent.

"Well, no, but-"

"Then, Sire, I'm afraid you leave us no alternative but to protect both our womanhood, and your realm, by means of wizardry."

"You could always leave the army," said the queen, in a nasty voice.

Mirabel smiled at her. "Your majesty, if the king will look at his general's reports, instead of his paper-pushers' accounts, he'll find that the general considers us vital to the realm's protection." She paused just that necessary moment "As our customized armor is necessary for our protection."

"But this-but it's too expensive! We shall be bankrupt. Who wrote this contract, anyway?"

"Perhaps I can explain," Sophora Segundiflora strode forward. In her dark three-piece riding habit with its white bib, she looked almost as impressive as in armor. "As loyal subjects of this realm, we certainly had no intention of causing you any distress, Sire."

The king glared, but did not interrupt. Perhaps he had noticed the size of the rings necessary to fit over her massive knuckles.

"We only want to do our duty, Sire," she said.

"Both for the protection of the realm, and in the gentler duties of maternity. And in fact, had it not been for the tax, we might never have discovered the clear superiority of this method. Even with armor, we had all suffered painful and sometimes dangerous injuries, not to mention the inevitable embarrassment of disrobing in front of male soldiers while on campaign. Now-our precious nurturing ability stays safely hidden away, and we are free to devote our skills to your service, while, when off-duty, we can enjoy our protected attributes without concern for their safety."

"But-how many times do you intend to switch back and forth?"

"Only when necessary." Sophora Segundiflora smiled placidly. "I assure you, we all take our responsibilities seriously, Sire. All of them."

"It was the tax, you say?" the king said. He glanced at the queen. He was remembering his relationship to the chancellor.

"We'd never have thought of it, if you hadn't imposed that tax," Sophora said. "We owe you thanks for that, Sire. Of course, it wouldn't be practical without the military's medical assistance program, but-

"But it can't go on," the king said. "Didn't you hear me? You're not paying the tax. You're spending all my money on this unnecessary wizardry. You're bankrupting the system. We can't spend it all on you. We have the prince's own plastic wizardry needs, and the expenses of his visits...."

"Well." Sophora looked at Mirabel as if she were uncertain. "I suppose... it's not in the contract or anything, but of course we're very sorry about the prince-

"Get to the point, woman," said the queen. Sophora gave the queen the benefit of her smile, and Mirabel was glad to see the queen turn pale.

"As long as the tax remains in effect, there's simply nothing else we can do," Sophora said, looking past the king's left ear. She took a deep breath that strained the shoulders of her professional robe. "On the other hand, if the tax were rescinded, it's just possible the ladies would agree to return to the less efficient and fundamentally unsafe practice of wearing armor over their... er... original equipment, as a service to the realm." She smiled even more sweetly, if possible. "But of course, Sire, it's up to you."

"You mean, if I rescind the tax, you'll go back to wearing armor over your own... er..."

"Bosoms," offered the chancellor. The king glared at him, happy to find someone else to glare at.

"I am quite capable of calling a bosom a breast," he said. "And it was on advice from your accounting division that I got into this mess." He turned back to Sophora. "If I rescind the tax, you'll quit having these expensive wizardry reversals?"

"Well, we'll have to put it to a vote, but I expect that our proven loyalty to your majesty will prevail."

"Fine, then," the king said. The queen stirred on her throne, and he glared at her. "Don't say a word," he warned. "I'm not about to lose more money because of any parchment-rolling accountants or Milquetoast chaplains. No more tax on women's armor."

"I shall poll the ladies at once, Sire," said Sophora. "But you need not worry."

"About that" growled the king. "But there's still an enormous shortfall. We'll have to find money somewhere. And soon. The prince must have his spells renewed-

"Ahem." Sophora glanced over her shoulder, and the wizard stepped forward. "As earned for our loyalty, Sire, the Ladies' Aid & Armor Society would like to assist with that project. She waved the wizard to the fore.

"Well?" the king asked.

"Sire, my latest researchers have revealed new powers which might be of service. It seems that the later-ally-reposed interface of the multidimensional-

"His new black box came with some free spell-ware," Sophora interrupted before the king's patience shattered.

"Not exactly free," said the wizard. "But in essence, yes, new spells. I would be glad to donate the first use to the crown, if it please you."

"Nigel!" the king bellowed. The prince shuffled forward, head hanging. "Here he is, wizard-let's see what you can do."

The small demon in the new black box received the prince's less appetizing morsels with surprising eagerness. In a large multitasking multiplex universe, there's always someone who wants a plague of boils, and a wicked fairy godmother who wants to give some poor infant a receding chin. Available at a reasonable price on the foreign market were a jutting chin, black moustache, and excessive body hair, recently spell-cleared from a princess tormented by just such a wicked fairy. It spit out those requirements, causing a marked change for the better in Prince Nigel's personal appearance. A tidy profit, it thought, and turned its attention to retrieving the final sets of mammary tissue.

The princess in the rose garden was as beautiful as her miniature; Nigel could hardly believe his luck. Her beauty, his handsomeness... he kept wanting to finger his new black moustache and eye himself in any reflecting surface. At the moment, that was her limpid gaze.

"I can hardly believe I never met you until this day," the princess said. "There's something about you that seems so familiar..." She reached out a delicate finger to stroke his moustache and Nigel thought he would swoon.

Across the rose garden, Sophora Segundiflora smiled at the young lovers and nudged Mirabel, whose attention had wandered to her own new nose job.

Mirabel was bored, but Sophora didn't mind chaperoning the young couple. Not with the great gold chain of chancellor across her chest. The previous chancellor had made his last confession the day the wizard tried out his new spells-the other had been a Stretched Scroll which highlighted certain questionable transactions, such as the withdrawals to the chancellor's personal treasure chest. The fool should have known better. To embezzle all that money, and then choose women warriors as the group to make up the revenues... she hoped the wizard had done something to enhance Nigel's wits. Certainly his mother's side of the family hadn't contributed anything.

Meanwhile, the Ladies' Aid & Armor Society would continue to flourish; other older warriors had decided to follow Sophora's example and study law. Girls who hitherto had been around the queen pretending to embroider were now flocking to weapons demonstrations. Kristal had been seen cracking something other than a whip.