



Lonely Lady
of the tower

The Lonely Lady of the Tower

Cooper and Kadee

"I am surprised to see you," Femyn said, "but not as surprised as you must be to find yourself needing my help."

Stonefist eyed the slender woman. "Who says I need your help?"

"The only reasons you would come to see a witch would be to kill her or to seek her help, warrior. And if you had come to kill me, you would now be rather dead."

"Don't be so certain of the powers of your magic. There's a reason this world is ruled by warriors."

"Well, then, go ask one of them for their help."

"I didn't come for your help. I came to do business."

"And what business would that be?"

"I need something to make me stronger. And I am willing to pay a very steep price for it."

"Then follow me." Femyn turned and walked through a beaded curtain without waiting for a reply. Stonefist took a deep breath and followed, his skin tingling-he could practically feel the magic swirling all around him. Femyn moved quickly, and he followed her nervously around corners, through rooms, up and down stairwells and finally down into a narrow brick stairway so low-ceilinged that he had to duck in order to fit in the space. Femyn removed the keys from her hip, unlocked the door and led Stonefist into a

chamber crammed with mannequins, all wearing various items of clothes, mostly women's.

"For what do you need this extra strength?" Femyn asked, turning to face him, one hand casually on her hip while she ran the other through her long black hair.

"That business is my own."

"Then you have no business with me."

Stonefist frowned. "What man doesn't crave greater strength?"

"What woman can't tell when a man is lying?"

"Fine. This is none of your business, witch, but I want to throw down the Legion of Steel. Their leader is the strongest man on earth, and I must be able to match him if I want to have my revenge."

"Revenge for what they did to you and to your men?"

"Exactly," Stonefist whispered, raising a gauntleted fist to his forehead. "For what they took from me and from my men, for-"

Femyn laughed. "I appreciate the effort, but you are still lying to me. Tell me the real reason, so I will now how high to set the price, or leave me in peace."

Stonefist dropped his hand and stared at Femyn, his own cheeks growing hot with shame and rage. He felt-he knew-that he'd been a fool to come to this woman, this witch, and every instinct in his body told him to walk away, just as she'd suggested. His world was a world of men, a world where decisions were made and disputes settled with steel and fire, where a man's right to keep his business to himself was respected.

"If you were a man, I would kill you where you stand."

Femyn stopped laughing. "And since I am a woman?"

"It is no affront for you to behave as a child, because that is the nature of woman."

And as he said the word "woman," Femyn's hand seemed to suddenly be on his forearm. He never saw her move. It was just there, and before Stonefist could flinch she said, "tell me the real reason you need the extra strength."

"I have found the tower of Steelsinger in the Mage War ruins."

"How can you be sure?"

Stonefist pulled a piece of parchment from his pouch and handed it to her. "I made this rubbing from runes carved into the gate."

Femyn studied the parchment, surprised and excited at the words she saw. It was almost certainly true-the greatest storehouse of magical armaments in the world. Discovered. And, one of the greatest opportunities in the world to learn the forgotten arts of magic from the Grand Age of the Wizards.

"And why do you need the extra strength, precisely?"

"The entrance is guarded by a great stone warrior. No weapons seem to harm him, and I have found no way to trap, slow, or sneak past this great force. But near the entrance to the tower is a sheer cliff that drops off for thousands of feet. I wish to throw the stone warrior off of this cliff, and I do not have the strength."

"You can trust me with all of your knowledge on this, Stonefist. In fact, you should make a point to tell me everything you know, and to keep me apprised of the situation as frequently as possible."

"Of course. Do you want me to tell you right now?"

"Not yet. I do have an ancient artifact that will give you the strength you need to defeat the warrior of stone, but I am not sure if you will want it."

"I am sure I will want it," Stonefist answered, his pulse quickening. "I have spent three years seeking the tower, finding it and now hurling myself against this warrior. Three times I have attacked him, and three times he has beaten me. The only thing in this world that I want now it to beat him, and I will do anything."

"Follow me, then, and let's see."

Stonefist followed Femyn as she walked among the narrow items in the room, examining them one by one. "You cast some kind of spell on me, didn't you?"

Femyn paused from her looking. "Yes."

"I feel like I trust you, and I want to please you."

"We'll get along a lot better this way, and-a ha!" Femyn raised her hands in a flourish. "I give you the Corset of the War Maiden." Wrapped tightly around the small, wooden, female manikin was a corset, the outer cover of white satin festooned with little pink bows and edges of lace. There was a silk rose at one hip, and of course garters attached to white silk stockings.

"You aren't telling me that is the artifact?"

"It's pretty, isn't it?" Femyn said with a smile. "You'll look cute, feel gorgeous and have the strength of 1000 men."

"I will not wear that."

"You'd have the strength of 1000 men."

"I'd be dressed as a woman."

"What happened to, "I'd do anything to beat the stone warrior?"

"Anything, but not that."

"I could order you to wear that, and you would," Femyn finally said. "But I want you to make the decision on your own. So, it's your choice.?"

"I will find another way."

"Suit yourself."

"Please remove the spell you put on me before I leave."

"You don't want me to do that."

"That's true. Now."

"Make sure to close the door on your way out."

"I'm not sure I can find the way out," Stonefist answered, feeling absurd that he'd ever come here expecting help, feeling the whole thing had been a way for her to make a mockery of him, and wondering if with all that had happened, she would be the one rather than him who would reap the profits of his work.

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Months passed. Stonefist returned to the wizard's tower, sought out the stone warrior and waged war on him. Each time, the stone warrior easily beat him down. Each time, the stone warrior then nursed him back to health to the point where he could limp back to town, fully heal and scheme some more. During those times of rest, he and the stone warrior talked.

"Why don't you learn that you can't defeat me?" The stone warrior asked one night, tending the fire he built to keep his wounded human companion alive.

"I believe that I can beat you," Stonefist answered, staring at the flames.
"It's only a matter of finding the strength."

"But you have no way of getting strong enough to beat me. That would take the strength of a God."

"I know a witch who can give me the strength to beat you, but she wishes to humiliate me, and I refuse to be humiliated."

"And what is it for you when I defeat you over and over again and you return to your people beaten and bruised?"

* * *

Femyn was at the tavern, flirting with a pair of young adventurers, when Stonefist walked through the door. She smiled and waved, and was surprised to see him jerk his head, indicating that he wanted to talk to her. She smiled at the two young men, and told them she would be right back. "I have to talk to that old friend of mine."

"He's old enough to be your grandfather," one of the young men said.

Young adventurers. Femyn did enjoy them, having a little fling with them before they went off in search of glory in the ruins of the Mage War. They were all so confident and naïve, and it was, in her mind, a kind gesture to give them one night of pleasure before they died.

"Hello," Femyn said as she sat down across from Stonefist.

"I am ready to-try-your offer."

"I thought so.."

"We haven't discussed terms yet."

"I am a fair woman. You get to take your choice of the weapons and armor. Whatever you can carry out. I'll even let you come back and trade from

time to time. I get all the knowledge and keep watch over the tower."

"You're asking too much."

"I give you permission to say no."

Stonefist didn't even consider it. "I have to defeat that warrior. People are laughing at me."

"Then, let's go."

The four of them went back to Femyn's place. She left the two young adventurers upstairs with some wine and a pixie, and went downstairs with Stonefist, removing the dainty little corset from its manikin and handing it to him. Stonefist held tiny, girlish garment away from his body. "It will never fit."

"It's magic. It'll fit."

"It gets bigger?"

"You'll get smaller. Now let's get you into this, and you'll see."

"I'm going to get smaller?"

"A lot smaller, I'd say. You'll change to fit the corset. Still game?"

'Order me to wear it," Stonefist said, his dark eyes glassy. "Let it be forced on me."

"This is your choice. You have to make the decision."

Stonefist held a post as Femyn pulled the laces tight. "The warrior maidens were an elite group of female fighters who guarded the king's women. They had to please both the king-who wanted his women protected by the best female warriors in the world-and the queens and the princesses, who wanted to be surrounded by only the most beautiful of girls. So, their

saying was, "My strength is my beauty and my beauty is my strength. These corsets gave them all identical dimensions as well as surprising physical power."

Stonefist closed his eyes, but he could feel his body shifting and shrinking as the corset closed around him, reshaping his ribs, waist, hips and chest. With each inch that came off his waist, he could feel power surge through his muscles.

"There," Femyn said. "Let's take a look."

Stonefist could feel the swelling of his chest, the new flesh constricted by the corset, pushed up, and he was now about an inch shorter than Femyn, who stood maybe 5'8". She led the warrior to a full length mirror, and he was surprised and ashamed to see that from the neck to the hips, he now had the curvaceous body of a gorgeous young woman-his waist was nearly non-existent, his fleshy hips wide and firm, and the full, pale breasts on his chest alluringly abundant. His shoulders and arms had also taken on the slender aspect of a young woman's, making his still male, bearded face absurd and grotesque.

Seeing his body corseted into the hourglass form of woman, and the pink and white silk of the garment wrapped around him, made him dizzy, and he spun to face Femyn. "This is a mistake. Everyone will laugh."

Femyn gave Stonefist a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. "No, you'll be able to hide your body. No one will even know."

"They'll know. Look at this shape." He gestured down at his breasts, his hips. "I'll be the laughing stock of the city."

"How often do you see people up at the ruins?"

"Never, but-"

"But nothing. You sneak you out of the city, you defeat the stone warrior, you take the corset off and no one knows you ever spent a few

weeks of your life wearing women's private delicacies."

Stonefist started to consider it, but he could see the glee in Femyn's eyes, the smirk on her lips, as she let her eyes play over his breasts, and he shook his head. "I think I better find another way."

"This is a final decision, you know. If you decide not to do it now, I will not reconsider. I am tired of you changing your mind all the time." The words of the stone warrior came back to Stonefist: what is it when you fail repeatedly? He had seen the way people looked at him each time he limped back to town. He could tell what they were thinking.

But what would they think if they got word of this?

He looked in the mirror, turning side to side. "You sure we can hide this?"

"I am absolutely sure. Listen, here's an idea, why don't you sleep on it and make a decision in the morning? You can say no if you want."

Again, Stonefist could feel that he was about to make a bad decision, that he should turn, walk out and never come back. But he had spent nearly four years of his life now on this quest, everyone in town would laugh if he slunk away, having spent all those years and-just as they all told him at the beginning-accomplished nothing.

"Okay," he said. "I'll make a decision in the morning."

"Good. Let's get you into your stockings, then."

The stockings gave him the fleshy thighs and tiny feet of a woman. "Leave your armor here. You can gear up in the morning. Let's get you to bed." Stonefist followed Femyn, feeling vulnerable and awkward dressed in his corset, his female form moving differently than he was used to.

Femyn, leading him to one of her guest rooms, brought him through the room with the young adventurers. She introduced them, Stonefist blushing

furiously as he reached out a soft, tiny hand to shake theirs. The two men tried to pretend that nothing was unusual, but couldn't, their eyes going from Stonefist's bearded face to his full, womanly body.

"For a warrior," one of them finally said, "you have wonderful breasts."

"Now be nice," Femyn said, but as she led Stonefist from the room, they both heard one of them say, "great ass."

"It will be hard to sleep with your corset on," Femyn said as she led Stonefist into the room. He sat down on the bed, knees together. "But you should really get used to wearing it all the time, as you won't have anyone to lace it up for you in the mountains. If you need anything, just ring the little bell on the table and a familiar will come to help you."

"Okay."

When Femyn left, Stonefist stood up and sat at the room's little dressing table, looking at his cleavage, at the way his breasts pooled at the pink lace at the top of the corset. He put his slender arms on his head and looked at how it emphasized his bust, noticing for the first time that his armpits were smooth and soft—all just like a woman. The undergarments hid his manhood as well, though reassuringly he could feel that it was still there—invisible.

It would only be for a little while, no one would know, and in the end it would make him the most powerful man in the world, so wasn't it worth it? He lifted the desk with one hand, barely able to discern that it had any weight at all.

The young adventurers were just leaving when Stonefist came daintily down the stairs the next morning, feeling both the pull of gravity on his now top heavy body and the inability to bend at the waist very easily. As he knew from prior experience, his armor-being magic-conformed to the new contours of his body, so it was necessary in the end for Femyn to find him a robe to wear over it, and he was soon standing before the mirror in a boxy crimson and white robe, nodding with satisfaction that no one could

really see his figure now.

Before he left, Femyn gave him a hand mirror with an ornate frame of gold, worked to look like it was wreathed in flowers. "You will be able to speak to me through this mirror. Keep me informed."

"Of course," Stonefist answered.

"Would you like a brush to take with you?"

He didn't bother to answer, but only began to make his way back into the mountains.

On his way into the mountains, Stonefist ran into an old trapper as well as a band of adventurers he knew who had been working another section of the ruins. Though people asked him about the new robe- which he claimed was a magic robe to keep him warm against the chill of the mountains-- no one seemed to detect anything else out of the ordinary.

He could not, in a proper sense, get used to wearing the corset all the time, nor did he ever feel comfortable with the shape of his body. But one night he dreamt that he was at an elaborate ball, a party for the queen, and he was wearing his corset and nothing but his corset; all eyes were on his gorgeous figure, and he felt a thrill of power at the realization that he had a beautiful body, a body that women envied and men longed to conquer. "My strength is my beauty and my beauty is my strength."

The next morning, he did his best to forget the dream, and by afternoon he'd put it out of his mind. As long as he was in his robes and armor, in fact, Stonefist found himself increasingly able to forget the fact that he was what he was, but there were times when he just felt the need to take off his armor and his robe, and he found himself out in the wilderness frolicking in his pink and white, beribboned garments.

He slept in the corset, he dove into the wild mountain steams in the corset, and he lay in the sun, the chill mountain air washing over his slender body afterwards--still, of course, wearing his corset-- and finally

he started to realize that Femyn had been right about something: it made no difference what his body looked like when he was alone in the mountains. It felt absurd and shameful, but what did it matter as long as he was alone?

He finally arrived back at the mountain and faced the stone warrior. "Do you have the strength to beat me now?" the stone warrior asked.

"Yes." Stonefist removed his red robe and stood before the stone warrior, a hand on his hip.

"You've become a Warrior Maiden," the stone warrior marveled.

"For now," Stonefist answered.

"Before I was imprisoned in this body of stone," the warrior answered, "I was a Warrior Maiden."

"Interesting. I had assumed you were a male spirit, if you had any notion of sex at all."

"I can't let you pass, but I will not fight with a sister of the shield."

"I will."

"Then, sister, I will thank you in advance for setting me free."

Stonefist picked up the stone warrior and hurled it off the cliff, then sat down, grabbed his hand mirror and, when Femyn's face appeared, began to cry for what he'd done. When he finally wiped the last of the tears from his eyes and told Femyn all that had happened, he said, "I never cried like that before. I am changing."

"Don't worry," Femyn answered. "It's just a side-effect of the corset. It will fade once you remove it."

Promising to give a full report upon entering the tower, Stonefist put his

mirror back into his bag. It was time to take off the corset. He would slip out of it, return to his true form and...

... he just couldn't wait to see the inside of the tower. To see what treasures he had captured. And so, promising he would remove the corset at the first possible opportunity, he threw open the thick granite doors to Steelsinger.

It was days after his first fight with the Crystal Hero that Stonefist finally returned to consciousness. He woke to find himself stripped down to his corset, his long feminine legs in the white, silky stockings dangling prettily off the end of the bed. "What is your name?" The Crystal Hero asked, seeing that his guest was awake.

"Stonefist."

"That's a strange name for one with your shape."

"Yes," Stonefist answered, propping himself up on one arm. "I know."

"It's been a long time since I have seen a woman," the Crystal Hero said, "and I do not wish to be rude, but if you would like to use them, I have fashioned for you the tools needed to shave your beard."

"I'm not a woman," Stonefist answered. "At least in several important ways" A quick palm check told him that one of the most important ways was still true.

"I didn't look."

"Good."

"Will you help me get out of this thing?" Stonefist said, climbing off the bed. "It gives my body a female shape."

"And why would you want that?"

"It also gave me the strength to defeat the stone warrior.

"It will not give you the strength to beat me."

"I have seen that."

When he was finally healed and left the tower, Stonefist was surprised to find the stone warrior back in place, his body chipped and scuffed up from the fall, but still intact. "You're a tough one," Stonefist said.

"Regrettably, yes."

"I wept for you," Stonefist said and turned to leave.

"Will you be back, sister?"

"I'm not wearing the Warrior Maiden thing anymore," Stonefist said, "so let's drop with the sister thing."

The stone warrior did not answer.

By the time he returned to the village, Stonefist's feminine moods and longings had faded, and he found himself once more feeling the stout arrogance of a warrior. Excited by his partial triumph, he carried his gear into the tavern, stood in the center of the floor and bellowed, "I have entered the walls of Steelsinger."

Such displays were common in the tavern when adventurers came upon previously unexplored chambers in the ruins, defeated the strange beasts that swarmed along the mountains or even, in some cases, returned alive. There was murmuring of excitement but also-something else?-- Stonefist wasn't sure what, in the eyes of all those at the tavern. "How did you defeat the stone warrior?" The barkeep, Kojo, called out. Once an adventurer himself, he'd heard enough unbelievable stories that turned out to be true over the years to know that anything-anything was possible. At

the same time, he studied Stonefist's broad, powerful shoulders and masculine, V-shaped body, and he dismissed another rumor he'd heard as childish chatter.

"I did not defeat the stone warrior," Stonefist said with a smile. "He still stands at the gates, but I assure you nevertheless that I entered the tower."

Stonefist took a stool at the bar. Curious people gathered around to listen as he told his tale.

"It must have taken the strength of a hundred men to hurl him from the cliff."

"A thousand men," Stonefist corrected.

"And where did you find such strength?"

"That is my secret."

Eventually, the stories told, curiosity satisfied, people went back to their private conversations, conversations that now turned to the suddenly much more interesting Stonefist and whether and how much of his story was true.

Stonefist guzzled a skin of wine, as was his habit, and talked to any who came near him, his pleasure disturbed, only slightly, as he left, hearing a pair of young female adventurers giggle as they watched him leave, saying something like "he lets her do him as a woman."

Femyn showed Stonefist an exquisite diamond necklace, the sparkling jewels linked together with delicate strands of silver. "This will allow you to defeat the Crystal Hero."

"Don't you have any weapons intended for a man?"

"Why would I need them?"

Stonefist looked at the necklace. "And how will this allow me to win my battle and advance into the tower?"

"It will allow you to hit a particularly high note with such volume that you will paralyze the Crystal Hero."

"Hit a high note?"

"You will sing to Crystal Hero, and you will hit a note so high that his crystal body will be paralyzed. This necklace is left over from the Grand Age as well. These necklaces were worn by the Queen's Royal Sopranos, and it gave them otherworldly beautiful voices, pretty, high voices, to enchant and to-in case, again, of an attempt on the queen's life, to attack."

"This will give me the voice of a girl?"

"It will make you a soprano."

"Which is the voice of a girl."

"Sometimes boys sign the soprano parts before puberty."

"Your sorcery seems limited to finding ways to win that only a woman can enjoy."

"No one is making you do this. Quit now if you choose."

"My pride will not allow it." Stonefist took the necklace and fumbled with it for a time. "How do I put this on when I get to the tower?"

"Well, I'm afraid that I will have to do it for you before you leave. It takes a special spell."

"Of course it does."

"You have my permission to be disgusted about it."

"Why don't you give me a way to do this that won't make me ashamed to be alive?"

"This is the only tool I have that will beat the Crystal Hero, my love. What do you want to do?"

He handed the necklace to Femyn. "Put it on me."

"I am really proud of you," Femyn said, murmuring the spell that would unclasp the necklace and putting it around Stonefist's neck. "You don't let anything stop you from reaching your goals."

"That's true," Stonefist answered, his high, woman's voice sickening to his own ears. It wasn't a tiny voice or a soft voice, but a high, strong woman's voice that came from his lips as smooth and as sweet as a kiss. "I'm going to stop talking now forever."

"Let's get you back into your corset."

The next morning, Stonefist, once again drawn into the shape of a woman, ate in silence with Femyn. She admired the red and white robe he wore over his corset. "It's really lucky," she said with a small smile, "that I had that robe from the First Age of Magic around. It's a rare item, and one I doubt that I will ever use."

"This is magic?" Stonefist hated to speak, but he forced himself to ask the question.

"It has a minor spell on it to hide the shape of the body underneath, and it also offers a minor resistance to magic."

"Why hide the shape? Assassins?"

"Oh no, just a woman's vanity. The robe was called the Cloth ve nas maternite, meaning the cloth of---"

"-this is a maternity robe?"

"But no one knows that, dear. So, what is it to us?"

"And it only hides my shape?"

"That, and, oh, it awakens your maternal instincts."

His Ax slung over his shoulder, his bag on one hip, Stonefist slunk off into the night in his maternity robe, his eyes burning with internal shame. This should stop now, he told himself. The witch is making a fool of you. She has you dressed in women's clothes, speaking with the voice of a woman, and all for what?

For what? Exactly. Power. Respect. Boundless power. He had taken beating after beating, he'd spent years of his life on this project, and if the final cost was humiliation at the hands of this witch, so be it. This brief time of shame will be counter-balanced by a life of power and dominance over all, men and women.

Yes, he thought, men will fear me. Women will crave my attention. I will be the greatest man among all men.

The thought filled him with fire, and he opened his mouth to sing the Song of the Triumphant Knight-

But stopped himself at the last moment, a hand going self-consciously to the necklace at his throat, hidden beneath the robe, but ever present. Instead, he hummed the song quietly, his soft voice more bearable to him in that way.

In a few days, he found himself far away from town and no longer as self-conscious about his clothes or condition. When the morning rose cool and clear one day after a long night of hiking, he set up camp near a mountain spring he knew about, stripped down to his corset and dove into the chill waters. After a quick swim, he perched himself on a rock near the head of

the spring and a mysterious song sprung joyously from his lips:

I sing to the knight who stole my heart
And left me all alone
He came in the storm
And he promised me love
And so I welcomed him into my home

I cooked and I mended
To His wounds I tended
And kisses sweet I gave unto him-

Loud, male laughter cut him short. Stonefist looked up embarrassedly to see the two young adventurers he'd met at Femyn's standing at the edge of the spring. Stonefist stood, he shyly putting his hands to the top of his corset, trying to hide his cleavage.

"It's the mighty warrior we met at the witch's place," one of them said.

"Are you turning into a woman?"

"Get out of here," Stonefist screeched. "Leave me alone."

"Look, do what you want to do," one of them said, "but we really need to clean up, so I hope you won't be embarrassed if we disrobe."

Determined to shame the two men, Stonefist stepped forward. "You can leave now under your own power, or I can make you leave. Your choice."

The two men glanced at each other. Looked at Stonefist's slender little body. And laughed.

Later, Stonefist sat curled on his blanket under a big tree, still wearing just his corset. He was staring into his hand mirror, talking to Femyn.

"So, after I beat them silly, I took their clothes and weapons-everything-and told them they were on their own."

Femyn laughed. "They really aren't bad boys. But, they are young, and the way you must have looked-"

Stonefist looked away. "I know. Oh-I have a question. The song?"

"The necklace does that. You now know all of the songs sung by the sopranos."

"Wonderful."

"If those two boys manage to survive..."

"Everyone in town is going to know. I realize."

The next few nights, Stonefist often found himself looking up at the stars and signing pretty songs in his high, clear voice, enjoying the times when he was in valleys or areas where his sweet, girlish voice wafted back to him. He really did have a beautiful voice, and it was so pretty to hear it out here in the wilderness:

I bath myself in rose water
And slip on my silken dress
Adorn my body with jewels
I paint my face, perfume my limbs
And fix my hair so it looks best

But where is my prince?
Gone off to war
Never to return
I long for him in my woman's breast
With arms empty forever more

Again, Stonefist threw the stone warrior from the cliff. He entered the tower and faced the Crystal Hero. "Do you now have the strength to defeat me?" The hero asked.

"My strength is my beauty," Stonefist answered, "my beauty is my strength."

"You have the voice of a woman now."

"Yes." Stonefist sang the note, his highest note, as loud as he could. The Crystal Hero shuddered, rainbows of prismatic light spilling from his body, which grew dull and lifeless.

"Interesting," he said, as he became inert. "Good luck to you, girl."

The battle with the guardian of the first stair left Stonefist in a comma for a week. He convalesced for a month before he finally asked the Sun Ray to help him out of his corset and began the painful journey back to Femyn.

"I have a weapon that will allow you to defeat the Sun Ray," Femyn said.

Stonefist was sitting on a chair across from her, his legs tucked under him as he sipped from a bowl of steaming tea. "What is it this time?"

"Come and see."

Stonefist was not completely surprised when Femyn led him to the same small room, and brought him to stand before an elegant, floor length ball gown of white and power blue. "You know I won't wear that." Of course, it was very cute, Stonefist had to admit that as he felt the material in the full, flowing skirt. "It's so thin."

"This is ancient stuff, and magic."

"Warrior Maidens, again?"

"No. These dresses were worn by the Princess' Girls, young women skilled in the arts of light, dark and illusion. They guarded against spies and assassins, and because they attended all of the social functions they always had to be dressed as prettily as possible."

"I will not wear that dress."

"It's your choice, but you know the consequences of your decision. You may not ask again."

Stonefist frowned.

After lacing him into his corset, Femyn helped Stonefist into his gown. He felt like he was going to fall out of it, his full breasts swelling magnificently from the plunging neckline, the thin straps over his slender shoulders seeming as if they would snap from the strain. The dress flattered his small waist, celebrated his ample hips and—thank goodness—gave him plenty of room to maneuver. He could move pretty well even in the dainty slippers that came with the outfit, but as he looked at his pretty dress and the ridiculous, shaggy man's head perched above it, he shook his head no. "I don't think we can hide this big skirt under a robe, and I look ridiculous."

"You won't be able to wear your armor, either," Femyn observed, fluffing out his skirt. "The magic of the dress would be repressed by it."

"There's no way, then. I can't go adventuring--- I can't go anywhere-in this dress."

Femyn watched him, a hand on one hip, turning, looking at how slender and pretty he looked, at how the dress flattered his tiny waist and his full, rounded behind and she smiled. "Let's see how you look with your battle ax. And you might want to think about shaving."

"I am not going to shave," Stonefist said, stomping one of his little feet. "It's about the only thing that keeps me believing I'm still a man."

Later, Stonefist was sitting on a chair, his legs crossed at the ankles, smoothing his dress and smiling as Femyn explained how it would all work. "As before, you travel only at night, so no one sees you. You get to the tower, do what you have to do and that's it. You step out of your dress and into being the most powerful man in the world."

"It worked the first time," Stonefist said, shaking his head in admiration.
"You really are a marvelous help to me. I should thank you for it."

"And you are welcome."

"That may have been the spell talking."

"No, it wasn't."

"It's taking longer for the effects of the corset to wear off this time."

"I think it's sweet. You're much more pleasant now."

The next night, Stonefist found himself walking away from Femyn's lair, his ax over one smooth shoulder and a very pretty basket Femyn had given to carry his supplies looped over his arm. At first, of course, he was very nervous someone would see him in his ball gown, but as he walked along in the cool night and drew farther away from town, he whistled a bit, then sung, then even skipped along the hills, just happy to be alive, to be so close to reaching a goal, just happy to be young and pretty on a starry summer night.

Then he heard the first cry for help. Carefully setting his basket down, he hefted his ax and, hearing a second cry for help, he rushed toward the action, one hand on the ax and the pulling up the skirt of his gown so he could run faster. Cresting a hill, he saw a man and two women being assailed by a band of phantom predators -these were people he'd known for years and to his credit the thought of them seeing him in his dress and with this body caused only the slightest hesitation.

As he brought his ax crashing into the ribs of one of the predators, he reached down to pull it off the man it was about to bite and said in his high pretty voice, "I'm ever so sorry I wasn't here sooner." Then spun to burry his ax in the skull of a second.

When it was all over, the three adventurers sat staring at Stonefist,

grateful for his help but completely and utterly at a loss as to what they could say about his fancy dress and-forget that-his gorgeous body, not to mention to occasionally feminine mannerisms. Stonefist, for his part, removed from the heat of battle, stood rocking back on his heels, embarrassed and humiliated.

"I can't tell you how embarrassed I am to have you see me this way," he finally managed, "and I hope you won't find me rude if I leave. Now."

"Thanks," one of the stunned people called as Stonefist rushed away.

"I like your dress," he heard the female yell.

Wanting to get as far away from town as he could, he was sure now that it was only a matter of hours before everyone in town heard about him and his dress. But, after only a short time of rushing along the hills, his cheeks burning with embarrassment, he had to stop, lean against a tree and cry. It wasn't fair, he told himself, it wasn't right, but most of all, it shouldn't ever have been.

How did I ever bring myself to this? How did I ever agree to wear this dress in public? He looked at his tiny hands, his slender wrists and arms. What kind of man am I? To agree to this?

Yet, the only thing to do, he decided, was to complete the mission. People had seen him. That was done. He'd never be able to show his face in town again. But as long as he succeeded, as long as he penetrated the tower and seized the might that would make him a man to be feared, he would never want to go back there anyway.

And no one would believe the stories about Stonefist, wandering in the hills at night in a woman's body, wearing a ball gown and slaying predators. He laughed at the thought. Who would believe such a story in the first place?

In fact, who would believe any of the stories? Stonefist-the great Stonefist-at the springs in a corset singing a girl's song about disloyal

knights? It made no sense.

And it would make even less sense when he penetrated the tower and seized its power. Those two men had learned what they all would learn: if they mocked him, it would be they who were made into fools.

And anyway, what was the big deal anyway, he suddenly wondered, if people saw him like this? It was a very pretty dress. At that, he rallied, began to skip toward Steelsinger's tower once more, and sang to the moon:

Oh give me fine clothes and bright jewels
Give me mirrors of glass
Rare perfumes from the southern islands
Oils from the cold ocean lands
All of this give me not for my comfort
No not to fill my own needs
Give me this that I may draw to my bosom
A strong warrior to protect me

That is all that a girl truly seeks
All that a sweet maiden needs

In the mornings he spread his blanket in meadows or by waterfalls, kneeling down, his full dress pooled all around him as he lowered himself to the ground and slept, dreaming sweet dreams full of soft laughter and singing, china and fine cutlery, plush cushions and jewels: glorious parties and endlessly fascinating chatter. Twice as he continued his march toward the tower fell beasts rose from the shadows to attack him, but he knelt and sang, his sweet voice charming them into submission.

"You are prettier each time I see you," the stone warrior said as Stonefist approached.

Stonefist did a little twirl. "Thank you."

"But the beard?"

"I know." It had begun to bother him. It just didn't fit. He wanted to keep it, to cling to his manhood, but what about having his outfit match? "I think I will have to shave it off if there turns out to be yet another guardian in the tower."

"I told you before I do not know how many more guardians you will face."

"Goodness," Stonefist said, letting his feet turn in and kind of rolling on his ankles. He put a hand to the stone warrior's cheek. "I guess it's time for me to throw you off the cliff again."

"Yes."

"I really am sorry I have to do this to you."

"I know."

"Okay." With that, Stonefist gave the stone warrior a hug and a little sisterly kiss on the cheek before hurling it off the cliff.

The Crystal Hero whistled when Stonefist entered the room. "You look good enough to eat."

Stonefist did another twirl, giggling delightedly. "Isn't this an incredible gown? It was made for-"

"I have seen it before," The Crystal Hero said. "But never have I seen it on such a lovely girl as you."

"Oh, you're too kind." Stonefist glanced away, biting his lip prettily.

"I have a request for you, little dove. Sing me a song before you paralyze me and move on to face the Sun Ray."

"Of course," Stonefist answered. He knelt before the Crystal Hero and

sang, soft lovely songs about lost loves, dead lovers, all the heartache and the desire of young women, he sang with such beauty and feeling that he eventually had to stop and wipe a tear from his eye.

When Sun Ray attacked, he was diffracted and partially absorbed by the gown, which glowed ever more radiantly and left Stonefist giddy with excitement. He dug his mirror out of his basket and when Femyn's face appeared he squealed, "I have defeated Sun Ray."

"That's wonderful," Femyn said with a smile. "Have you climbed the stairs to the next level?"

"Not yet. I was just so excited about Sun Ray I had to tell someone."

"Okay. Now, calm down and get moving. We can chat later."

The next chamber was filled with treasure. Stonefist giggled with pleasure, examining the gauntlets, swords, greaves—all the work of the great Steelsinger. All in perfect shape, all virtually saturated with power. With his smooth white hands, Stonefist hefted the sturdy shafts of the weapons, pleased at their thickness and balance; he let his slender fingers run along the smooth surface of the steel blades. Badly, very badly, he wanted to slip out of his gown, shed the corset and array himself in this fantastic armor, but there was more to the tower than this treasure trove, and as he looked up at the stairs he wondered what trials he might face next.

Be a man again, he urged himself. You have what you wanted. Whatever you face above, you will crush it with the weapons and armor of Steelsinger. Your penance in dresses is done, and it is time to become the man you were meant to be.

But he might need the extra strength he gained from the corset, he told himself. He might need the powers of his voice or the gown. He just felt more confident?—right now that he was better prepared to face whatever he had to face arrayed as he was, and anyway he couldn't take off the

necklace, so did it make sense to shed the rest of his girlhood?

He looked at the heavy armor, the powerful weapons. The man in him hungered for them, to wear them, to be fully a man again and to cast aside this feminine form, but only so he could become the ultimate man, a king among kings...

Later, he decided. Later. There would be time enough later. Delicately, he climbed the stairs, one hand nervously to his bare chest. He opened the door, stepped in and faced the three-headed demon Asmodel: his tongues lolling obscenely from mouths filled with jagged teeth, the three heads misshapen, the many arms and legs, the gross proportions of his nude body, he spoke in three tongues, in three loud voices: "Yes. A woman. I shall I have my way with you."

"I am no woman," Stonefist said, crinkling his nose at the ugly sight, hefting his ax. "I am a warrior proud and-sorry-- but I am going to have to kill you."

The demon laughed. Stonefist smoothed his skirt and hurled himself into battle.

"One thing I noticed during the fight," Stonefist said to Femyn afterward, gazing into his mirror, "is that this dress never gets dirty. Blood, vomit, it just sort of bounces off."

"It's the kind of small magic a young woman appreciates," Femyn answered.

"I am not a woman," Stonefist answered. Femyn let it slide.

"So, you slew the demon, but now you find that there is a magic barrier you cannot pass?"

"Yes."

"Show it to me."

Stonefist held the mirror toward the flickering barrier.

"I have a weapon that will allow you to pass the barrier. Come back and I will give it to you."

"Is it okay if I take some armor with me?"

"We can't let anyone know what you have found. If word gets out, the tower will be swarmed with adventurers. It would be better if you left it all there."

"But, I don't want to have to keep wearing this dress! I want to get out of this, and I want to put on the armor. It's mine."

"Stonefist," Femyn said sternly, "I could order you to leave the armor there, but I want you to do what's right, and you know that I am right about what will happen if people find out the tower is full of these mighty weapons. You'll never get into the tower again."

"Well, I don't like it," Stonefist said, tilting his head to one side.
"And I am not going to go along with this much longer."

"Get some rest. You're cranky."

With that, Stonefist shoved the mirror angrily back into his basket and stomped his slippered foot. Fine. He would stay in this dress for now, he decided, but soon, very soon, he would shed this slender girl's form and return to being the powerful man he was inside. He let his gaze fall in the armor once more, armor shaped for the hard, flat chests of men. Yes, he thought, running his fingers over the contours of the breast plate, hard, powerful chests, muscled chests, and knotty, muscled shoulders.

Among the artifacts, Stonefist found a battle ax of mithril, a slender, silvery battle ax carved with elaborate decorations like nymphs and satyrs. It was pretty, and it would really match his dress a lot better than his old battle ax. He decided he would take it with him when he left. He would

leave the armor for now, but he would take the ax. It was just too perfectly beautiful for him to leave behind.

Downstairs, Stonefist took a nap, and when he woke, he posed before the full length mirror with his new ax, admiring the way it shined, how slender and delicate it was, yet how powerful. It fit in his small, girlish hands perfectly, and the silver really looked great with his dress. But-sweet lady of the seasons-he looked horrible with that ridiculous beard, and he sought out the razor the Crystal Hero had made for him and finally shaved it off before setting out to get back to Femyn's house, skipping and singing all the way.

Along the way, he ran into the two young women he'd seen in the tavern. They giggled at the sight of him, but he just smiled.

"What are you doing all the way out here dressed like that?" One of them asked, more amazed at Stonefist's decision to wear a ball gown into the wilderness than his shapely female body.

"Conquering the world," Stonefist answered prettily. The girls were geared up in armor, heavy packs. Nothing pretty at all. He was glad to be traveling so light and free. "Have you two had any luck?"

"Oh, you know. A little of this a little of that."

"Were still alive," the other added.

"Well, take care girls. Be safe."

As Stonefist walked away, he heard one of them say, "he really seems to be finding himself."

And the other answered, "I think it's kind of cute."

Femyn gave Stonefist a big hug as soon as the pretty little man arrived at her place. "You're my hero," she said.

Stonefist blushed. "Help me out of this dress."

"Not yet," Femyn answered. "First, let me show you the SpiritGate Tiara."

Stonefist sighed. "And what new part of me will end up being made womanly?"

Putting on The SpiritGate Tiara resulted in fistfuls of thick, curly black locks that tumbled over Stonefist's pale rounded shoulders and all the way down to the small of his back. The Tiara itself was a stunningly delicate crown of diamonds that sparkled merrily with each movement of Stonefist's head. He buried his small hands in the masses of hair, lifting it up off his shoulders and frowning at his still angular, masculine face. "So much hair," he said. "I don't know if I'll be able to fight very well with this."

"We'll put it up later," Femyn said, "let's go upstairs and celebrate."

Femyn smiled as Stonefist told her all about his adventures: "And the demon was gross. Naked and gross, his things dangling everywhere. He thought I was a girl, and when his looked at me they all-well, it was disgusting."

Femyn and Stonefist were curled up in their chairs, he in his ball gown, she in her robes, sipping mulled wine. "You seem sad," Femyn said.

"I, well, I am just sad because when I started this whole adventure? Well, I wanted, um, recognition? But now, I have to keep it all a secret, I don't dare show my face in the tavern, it seems like I've gone through all of this for nothing. Does that make sense?"

"We can go to the tavern and celebrate. Let's do it."

"But no one is supposed to know about the treasure."

"They don't have to know why we are celebrating."

Stonefist smiled, excited by the idea. "Great. Then, help me get out of this stuff and we'll be off."

"There's no time," Femyn said, taking him by the hand and dragging him out of his seat. "Just come as you are."

"Femyn! No!"

"Stonefist, everyone knows about you now. The word is out. It's silly to hide it."

They argued, Femyn pulling her brave warrior closer and closer to the door, until finally, Stonefist said "only if you do something about my face."

Femyn smiled. "What do you mean about your face."

"It, well, it doesn't match the rest of me."

"Oh. You want to look more like a girl?"

"It isn't that, but I just-well, my face should match my outfit."

"I have just the thing for you."

Stonefist sat still as Femyn used her brushes to paint his lips, powder his cheeks, paint his eyes and darken his lashes. When she was done, he looked in the mirror and smiled at the pretty young female face looking back at him, the small diamond earrings matching the shower of sparkles coming from his necklace and his tiara.

But the smile turned quickly into a frown. "Everyone will laugh at me," he said.

"They will love you because you're so beautiful."

When Femyn and Stonefist walked into the tavern, all conversation stopped. All eyes turned to the beautiful young woman dressed, bizarrely, in an

elegant ball gown, her body ablaze with sparkling jewels. Those who had heard the rumors about Stonefist recognized, immediately, who this girl was, while others wondered. Femyn put her hand at the small of Stonefist's back and guided him to a table, where he slipped into his chair and smiled as Femyn leaned down and whispered, "they've never seen anyone so gorgeous."

People came to their table as the night wore on. Femyn allowed Stonefist to tell certain parts of his story, parts that explained why he now looked the way he did without revealing anything about his great discoveries. Everyone marveled at how pretty he was, and more than a few at how graceful and well-mannered. The two young male adventurers, chastened by their beating, told everyone how beautifully Stonefist sang and finally, after constant requests, he agreed to get up and sing.

The great fleet set sail into the sunrise
flags snapping into the wind
And I and the other sweet daughters
Wept that me might never see fathers again
Black wore I seven years
Neither courted nor married a man
For I would not offer my soft palm
Without my father's consent

Though her heart may bring tears
And her thoughts fill with fears
A girl must never offer
What is her father's to give

The crowd fell under the spell of the shapely man's pretty voice, the heartfelt strains of his girlish signing, and they called for more, and he sang several more songs before Femyn signaled that it was time to go.

When they left the tavern, Stonefist was glowing with pride. "Thank you," he said to Femyn. "I thought everyone would laugh at me, but it was wonderful. Just wonderful. I, they, respect me."

"You're wonderful," Femyn said, giving her pretty man a kiss on his smooth, powdered cheek. "And everyone could see that tonight."

Stonefist turned, put his arms around Femyn's strong shoulders and whispered, "kiss me just one time, on the lips, like a lover." And he turned his head back, closed his eyes, and parted his full, crimson painted lips, and accepted a long, urgent, complicated kiss from Femyn, a kiss that left him leaning against her for support, sighing with pleasure.

The next day when Stonefist left for the tower, he carried in his basket assorted paints and powders, so he could freshen his make-up each day, as well as a brush for his long locks and pins to fix it up with. He had his pretty ax slung over his free shoulder, like a shepherd's crook, and he sang of mornings and new beginnings, of children gathering flowers in the mist.

How long had it been, he wondered at one point, since he's taken the corset and the dress off? Since he'd worn the form of a man?

It didn't really matter. He'd grown used to it, as least as used to it as he could, and the spell had left him, what would the word be? Happy? Silly? He wasn't sure, but spinning in his dress, feeling the cool air against his firm, rounded legs, he didn't see any reason for concern. This barrier, the one he meant to pass at long last, had to be the last barrier. And, when he passed it, he would shed at last this female form and the world would tremble at his feet, the feet of the most powerful man in the world.

When Stonefist daintily stepped through the final barrier, his mouth dropped open. The room was an elaborate smithy crammed with arcane and ancient tools. In the center stood a suit of golden armor, eight feet tall and as thick as an oak. A gem-studded halberd stood in its hands. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and he stepped forward, meaning to caress the hard, smooth, glittering armor, just as it stirred to life.

"Stand back, woman," the armor commanded in a deep, masculine voice.

Stonefist instantly obeyed, one hand going prettily to his throat.

The suit of armor shifted, dust rising up from its joints. It seemed to shake itself, stretch, and then regard the slender figure before him. "Get out," the armor bellowed.

Stonefist cringed at the deep, manly voice, but he held his ground, smiling as prettily as he could, trying to sound confident. "I come to conquer this tower. I command you to, serve me?"

"No."

Stonefist hefted his ax. "Then I am sorry, but we shall have to fight."

"No."

"Yes?"

"No. Your weapon can not harm me."

Stonefist raised his slender ax, it flickering prettily as he brought it crashing against the massive helm of the enemy with a thunderous ringing, only to bounce off, the force sending painful shocks up and down Stonefist's arms.

"You are a very strong woman," the creature said, "but you see. You can not harm me."

Stonefist tried again, striking at knees, at the shoulder joint, at the-with girlish apologies in advance-groin, but all to no effect. The massive suit of armor merely stood there, impassively.

Stonefist went downstairs and seized some of the most fearsome weapons, bringing them up to the top floor and battering the giant with them one by one, but none of them had any effect, only leaving Stonefist standing there, his breasts heaving with the effort, his face a study in feminine frustration, hair hanging down is his face.

"You are very pretty when you are mad," the armor said.

The comment took Stonefist off-guard and he smiled, subconsciously reaching up to play with one of his earrings. "Thank you."

The armor set its halberd aside, reached up and raised its visor, revealing the face of a man, a man with dark, sorrowful eyes that took Stonefist's breath away. There was pain there, he could tell right away, and his heart fluttered at the thought. "You're a –man."

"Yes." The great suit of armor reached out and placed a thick, gauntlet finger gently to Stonefist's cheek. "Such soft skin."

"Oh."

"And a voice like an angel."

"Well, that's true, but it's partly, well, this necklace?" He looked shyly away and then waved it off. "There's a story, but-you wouldn't be interested." Stonefist dropped his long, damp lashes.

"Tell me," the man commanded in his deepest tones, tones that seemed to pass right through Stonefist, rattling him. "Tell me about your life."

They spoke for hours, telling each other their stories. Stonefist knelt before the great man and sang to him, offering him comfort for the suffering he'd endured, four thousand years alone, trapped motionless in the armor, never seeing anyone, never even seeing the sun. It made him want to weep.

Finally, the great warrior sighed. "You are a sweet young woman, a woman with a heart pure. You can be the ruler of this tower," he said. "You need to do only one thing."

"What's that?"

"Kiss me."

Stonefist slapped at the great warriors steel-encased forearm.

"No. It's true. The one thing that can free me from this armor is the kiss of a virgin."

"Really?"

"Really. Kiss me. Now." The knight commanded.

"Give me just a second."

Stonefist went downstairs, found his mirror, and told Femyn what had happened.

"I have something," Femyn said, "that will solve your problem."

* * *

"So," Stonefist said, eyeing the potion that Femyn held toward him. "This elixir will turn me into a female in-that last-way?"

"And you will be a virgin, free to kiss the knight and set him free."

"Couldn't we just find another virgin?"

"Yes, and then she would become the ruler of the tower."

Stonefist ran a hand through his long, thick hair. He knew it had all been leading up to this, and it seemed now almost inevitable. He'd lived in this female form for months now, so long that it seemed natural, the corset, the dress. The voice. And now it was the ultimate choice. The final choice. He would never, in either case, be the most powerful man in the world. That dream was no longer his to entertain. But he could choose between being a slightly above average man whose greatest accomplishment would have been to don a corset and an evening gown in order to almost accomplish a goal, or a powerful young woman, a woman with the strength of

a thousand men, a woman who could sing the fell beasts to their haunches, who would be the first among women, envied by the other females and longed after by every man.

He sat, looked in the mirror thoughtfully, at his full lips, his wide, pretty eyes. He patted at his hair, tugged at an earring. Stonefist drank the elixir.

As a girl in every way, he returned to the tower and made his way daintily up the stairs. The warrior was waiting for him and smiled. "Will you kiss me now and set me free, sweet maiden?" The warrior asked.

Stonefist did not answer, but walked shyly up the warrior, and, closing his eyes, Stonefist gently met the lips of the great warrior. The warrior groaned with relief, wrapped his powerful arms around Stonefist's slender body and pulled the man to him, Stonefist's soft breasts pressed against his firm, powerful chest. Stonefist gasped and tried to pull away, but the warrior held him tight, put a finger to Stonefist's chin and tilting his head back, kissed him so long and deep that Stonefist saw stars.

When the kiss ended, the warrior lay little Stonefist gently on a thick rug that lay in the center of the tower floor and then knelt down above him. Stonefist trembled as the warrior slipped a finger beneath one of the straps of his gown and slipped it over shoulder, then did the same for the other. "I'm scared," Stonefist whispered.

"Shush," the worry said, brushing the tops of Stonefist's breasts with kisses. "I love you."

In the morning, Stonefist awoke, naked and alone. And he wept, because he knew the warrior would not return. Eventually, slipping back into his gown, he found the mirror and called Femyn. "You are truly a woman now that your heart has been broken by a man," Femyn said.

Stonefist became the lady of the tower. He stood, night after night for many years, at the top of the tower, singing sadly to the stars of lost love, and the sound of his soft voice and the sad tale of his broken heart

spread throughout the land. The witch came and went, using the spells and the magic she found in the top level to further her own schemes and plans. The weapons, as promised, were left to Stonefist, but he no longer cared for them, for the world or for the witch's plans and schemes. He longed only for the caress of the warrior, the one for whom he had become a woman, the one who had broken his gentle girl's heart.