Lady of Steel

Roger Zelazny

Uttering a curse in his well-practiced falsetto, Cora swung his blade and cut down the opposing swords-woman. His contoured breastplate emphasized features which were not truly present.

Simultaneous then, attacks came from the right and the left. Beginning his battle-song, he parried to the left, cut to the right, parried left again, cut through that warrior, parried right, and thrust. Both attackers fell.

“Well done, sister!” shouted Edwina, the aging axe-woman, from where she stood embattled ten feet away. High compliment from a veteran!

Smiling, Cora prepared for another onslaught, recalling when he had been Corak the cook but months before. He had had a dream then, and now he was living it.

He had thought of being a great warrior, laying about him in battle, famed in song and story for his prowess. How he had practiced with the blade! Until one day he realized he need also practice his walk and his speech⁠—as well as shaving closely and clandestinely every day⁠—if he were ever to realize that dream. So he did. And one day he disappeared, Cora appeared weeks later, and a legend was born. Several months into the campaign now, and he was not only accepted but celebrated⁠—Cora, Lady of Steel.

But the enemy, too, had heard of him, and all seemed anxious to claim the glory of reaping his head. Perspiration broke out on his brow as five warriors moved to engage him. The first he took out quickly with a surprise rush. The others⁠—more wary now⁠—fought conservatively, seeking to wear him down. His arms ached by the time he had dealt with the second. His battle-song broke as he dispatched the third and took a cut deep in his right thigh from one of the others. He faltered.

“Courage, sister!” shouted Edwina, hacking her way toward him.

He could barely defend himself against the nearer warrior as Edwina took out the fourth. Finally, he stumbled, knowing he could not rise in time to save himself from the death-blow.

At the last moment, however, an axe flashed and his final assailant’s head rolled away in the direction of her retreating sisters.

“Rest!” Edwina ordered, taking up a defensive position above him. “They flee! We have the field!”

He lay there, clutching his thigh and watching the retreat, fighting to retain consciousness. “Good,” he said. This was the closest it had ever been…

After a time, Edwina helped him to his feet. “Well-acquitted, Steel Lady,” she said. “Lean on me. I’ll help you back to camp.”

Inside her tent, the fractured leg-armor removed, she bathed the wound. “This will not cripple you,” she said. “We’ll have you good as new shortly.”

But the wound extended higher. Suddenly, she had drawn aside his loincloth to continue her ministrations. He heard her gasp.

“Yes,” he said then. “You know my secret. It was the only way for me to distinguish myself⁠—to show that I could do the work as well or better than a woman.”

“I must say that you have,” Edwina admitted. “I remember your prowess at Oloprat, Tanquay, and Pord. You are a most unusual man. I respect you for what you have done.”

“You will help me keep my secret then?” he asked. “Let me complete the campaign? Let me make a record to show the world a man can do this work, too?”

She studied him, then winked, pinched his fanny, and smiled.

“I’m sure we can work something out,” she said.

Notes

Zelazny drew criticism because his early work had no strong female characters, and he corrected that with Mari in “24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai” (see afterword to that story). Here, Zelazny’s strong female characters and irreverent humor manage to poke fun at a few gender stereotypes.

A falsetto or falsely high voice helps Cora[k] sound more like a woman. Parried means warded off a blow. Clandestinely means secretly, often to conceal an illicit act.