

Fluid



Coverfly

FLUID

IS ON THE RED LIST

#1 Fantasy Short Story (Prose) in the past month

Outstanding
Screenplays
Shorts Competition

New Millennium
WRITINGS

HORROR2COMIC
HORROR2COMIC
HORROR2COMIC

Amayine was born a woman but lived as a man, a monk among the brothers of the Temple of Cloud Avalanche. Daoshi Mihael had plucked her from the jaws of death in the aftermath of the K'tul Wars. Within the brotherhood, she found peace, a father's love, and acquired valuable skills. She became an expert healer and master swordsman. She was happy there and did not miss her past, which she no longer remembered.

One day, while foraging for medicinal herbs in her mountains, Amayine met a stranger...



Two hundred years after the Yandar-K'tul wars. *Active thinking in italics. "Mindspeak in italics within quotes."*

My name is Amayine, 'Night Rain' in Yandar. I was born a woman but lived as a man in the Taoist Temple of Grey Avalanche, in the Grey Mountains of the planet Yand.

I'm evenblood, the darkest of all Yandar races, the only one in a brotherhood of silvering men. I'm dark-skinned, but my hair has turned from the prominent black of my race to red, and my eyes from blue to amber. Everyone else around me is of a pale complexion, silver-white hair, and wings—if they had wings. Not all men of my species have wings.

My father, Daoshi Mihael, believes that the K'tul mage fires, which burned me and destroyed my village along with most of our world, altered my appearance. The K'tul Wars ended more than two centuries ago, but the marks on me remain to this day.

The brothers of Grey Avalanche were an order of healers, and their skills were needed aplenty. We won the war, but the K'tul left Yand broken and the scant survivors in tatters. The only medical facility at that remote location, the temple became so overwhelmed with casualties that the monks suffered dark days of rationing care.

My father found me in the rubble of my village while foraging for herbs. When he brought me to the temple's medical compound, I was so damaged that the monks refused me treatment. They gave certain pills to Mihael to ease my passing. But he refused them.

He nursed me for months. My injuries were so grave that even if I survived, my body would be left twisted, and my face scarred. He put me through many treatments and surgeries. When I endured and continued to live against all odds, the brotherhood rallied to my aid. And Daoshi Mihael wanted to keep me and adopt me as his own.

There was a problem with that—my gender. Females were not allowed to live in the brotherhood, but my clever father found a solution. He declared that my gender was fluid and that I would be male while living among them. Consent is always mandatory in such matters, but I readily accepted. I had come to love the old man as my father.

A year after the war ended, our queen journeyed to Cloud Avalanche to present medals and honors to the brotherhood for saving so many lives. I was still completely blind and unable to walk at that time, so my father carried me in his arms to 'see' the queen. He took us to the shadows in a corner of the ceremonial chamber so we wouldn't disturb the

proceedings. Huddled quietly, I ‘saw’ what he saw, images he projected into my mind through our bond.

I watched enthralled through his eyes. How glorious was Her Majesty! She brought along her grandson, the prince who had led our planet’s last defense against the K’tul despite his young age. His valor was already in songs. How handsome he was! But did he seem sad?

As the years passed, I regained part of my sight, and Mihael taught me a skill called ‘vision,’ which allowed me to see projected images using my mind and empathy. He also taught me everything he knew about medicine, which herbs to use for what ailment, and how to compound medications. As my vision improved and I regained better control over my arms, hands, and body, he taught me surgical techniques.

It took several more years for me to walk unaided. The day I threw away my canes, the monks celebrated. When my father determined that my body was coordinated and agile enough, he began teaching me sword skills—the ancient technique of our order known as Sword Fingers.

Many more years passed before I regained the use of my wings. I had suffered permanent damage, and flight would never come easily or be masterful. But as only Mihael among the brothers was winged and very few possessed limited teleportation skills, my modest ability became very useful.

On my bicentennial birthday, I took a long flight for herbs to the high peaks of our mountains, where the rarest medicinals grew among the rocks. I had filled my bag to the brim when booming roars from above assaulted my ears—shibal cats! A few prides lived on these mountains. One made its lair on the next peak above me. I had done my best to avoid them. What could have caused such agitation?

I shouldered my sack and made to fly. Suddenly, a shibal jumped from the ledge above and landed practically on top of me. I whirled to flee, but her mate landed on the shelf behind me. He was enormous. I had an instant to decide whether to fight or flee, but the female charged me, and my moment passed. I shut my eyes and braced for death.

A vigorous flutter of wings came from above, and a pair of hands snatched me from shibali jaws. A large eagle dived onto the cats, raking at them. It harassed the shibal, giving my rescuer a few vital moments to fly us to safety. He soared to the highest peaks.

“Striker, to me!” his mindcalls rang loudly.

And I heard that!

I had no time to marvel. The man dived into a cave and crash-landed. We tumbled to the ground, and I rolled over him. The eagle swooped down after us, landing a few steps away and looking fierce. As I

rolled over the man, I noticed deep gashes across his chest. My rescue had not come for free. The shibal had raked him with their claws of steel.

His arms around my body went limp, and his breaths came labored. One of his lungs had collapsed. I fumbled at my belt for my medical instruments, but they weren't there. I had left them behind! What to do? Ah! My dagger was on my belt; I held it up for him to see.

"Your lung has collapsed," I told him. "I must reinflate it. I need to make a small incision with this."

I spoke out loud, but he mindspoke his reply.

"*Go ahead,*" he said, and I heard him again!

How? Only bonded people could mindspeak each other.

Once again, I pushed the mystery aside and quickly searched my bag for a few narcotic leaves, which I gave him to chew. I cut his shirt off and took a deep breath to steady my hand. The eagle crooned from his perch as if to encourage me. I made an incision on the side of his chest and inserted a hollow reed I had found in my sack of herbs. His lung reinflated. He took an easier breath before passing out.

Only then did I think of mindcalling Mihael for help. He teleported beside me. One look at my charge, and his eyes popped.

"Did I do the procedure wrong?" I asked him.

"No, you did it perfectly. Come on, hurry, let's take His Majesty to the temple."

His Majesty?! Again, no time to ponder. Mihael brought us to the courtyard of Cloud Avalanche, mindcalling for help. Commotion awaited us. Medic brothers scrambled around us. Two lifted the king from my father's arms, but His Majesty would not let go of my hand. I tried to pull away, but his grasp was like a vice, tugging me along.

"Let go of his hand, Amayne!" the chief medic scolded me.

"Me let go? It's him."

"Ah, Your Majesty, please let go of Brother Amayne," the medic implored. "This is beyond his skill. We have you,"

He tried to reason like that for a while, but in vain. Our Grandmaster appeared from nowhere. He touched the king's temples, and His Majesty went limp. I pried my hand loose. The medics rushed him to the infirmary as Mihael and I stared.

We waited nearby in case they needed us. The eagle came and perched on my shoulder.

"What's with the bird?" my dad asked.

"The eagle? His name is Striker."

"How could you possibly know that?"

“He told me, no, I mean, I overheard him...”

Mihael looked at me, perplexed.

“By ‘he,’ you mean the king?” he asked. “Do you know our king? How?”

“I don’t—” I began to reply but didn’t get to finish.

A military detail bearing Yand’s royal arms popped out of teleport in our courtyard. An officer approached us just as one of our med brothers exited the infirmary to summon me. The king had requested my presence.

I walked to the infirmary apprehensively, with Mihael and the officer on my heels. The king was seated on a cot, waving for me to come closer and for everyone else to leave. My father hesitated, and the officer attempted to guide him out by the elbow. That was a mistake. He had her in knots in less than a heartbeat. You don’t touch a daoshi master.

I started to plead with Mihael to follow the good officer, but the king was faster.

“Please, Master Mihael,” he said to my dad, “allow General Saheera to escort you out. I only wish a few words with your daughter.”

“You mean my son?” Mihael replied, surprised to hear the king call his name. “How do you know my name, Your Majesty?”

His Majesty turned to me, the surprise on his face precious.

“Your *son?*” he asked. “I thought... no matter. Please, allow me a moment with your son.”

Mihael bowed and backed out the door.

“So you are his son?” His Majesty asked me when we were alone. “Is this how you hide your identity? In this monastery for so many years?”

“Temple, Your Majesty.”

“What?”

“This is the Temple of the Cloud Avalanche, a Daoist order, Your Majesty. And I don’t hide my identity. I live here. This is my home.”

“But you are female.”

It was not a question. He was affirming that he knew my gender.

“Am I?” I retorted. “I’m a monk, one of the brothers. I live here. No woman is allowed to live here. Why were you stirring up the shibal, Your Majesty?”

“My niece wants a shibali kitten as companion. How long?”

“How long what?”

“Lived here?”

“All my life. How do you know my father’s name?”

“Mihael? From you.”

“I haven’t told you, Your Majesty.”

“You mindcalled him. I heard you.”

“How—”

“Do you not know me? Do you not remember me?” he exclaimed.

His voice started harsh, but it softened.

“Please, love,” he said. “It’s me. Do you not know me?”

His words shook me. He called me ‘love.’ The king of the land somehow took me for one he had loved... and lost? I took a step back. He misread it. He thought he had sparked my memory.

He rose from the bed and reached a hand to me.

“I can hear your mindspeak,” he said. “We were bonded; still are.”

As he took the last step and made to touch me, I found myself transfixed. His eyes were so green, his face so... stunning. But was it familiar? No.

Suddenly, Mihael burst through the door with the general right behind him. He yanked me away from the king.

“Please, Your Majesty,” he cried, “my son has taken our vows. You may not touch him.”

The king stepped backward, and his general supported him from falling. He allowed her to escort him to the courtyard, where a palace mage awaited with a teleport. As they blinked away, his mindvoice reached my head.

“*We are not done. Expect me soon,*” he said.

I was bewildered. How could I hear him?

“I think the king wants you,” Mihael told me, wincing.

“What for?”

“For his wife.”

“You mean husband?”

“No, I mean wife. He needs children. He’s your age and unmarried. The entire realm is holding its breath. But why pursue a man?”

“Am I?” I dared to ask.

“Are you not?” he retorted with a challenging look.

The brotherhood would throw me out instantly if I were not a man.

Two months passed before the first marriage proposal from the King of Yand for Mihael’s son arrived at our temple. Grandmaster didn’t show it to Mihael or me. I learned of it a few months later when Mihael brought me a stack of such letters. All from the king, all for Mihael’s son, and all exclusive. *Exclusive!*

It stunned me! What did the King of Yand want from a disfigured, fluid monk like me? I couldn't give him children. He couldn't possibly find me attractive, with my mangled wings and facial scars and more. My father opined that the king loved me, but how could he? His Majesty had seen me only once!

I walked around dazed for days. The most powerful man in the world wanted *me* when he could have anyone he wished? The strangest part to comprehend was the issue of children. He and Yand needed an heir. Exclusive marriage to me would preclude that possibility. Even as a woman, I was too damaged to have kids.

At some point, Mihael pointed out that I wouldn't have to switch genders if I accepted the king's proposal. His Majesty had proposed to his *son*. That brought me to my most poignant dilemma. Could I marry a man and remain male? When I was born a woman?

So what was my answer? Could I leave the safety of the temple, my brotherhood, my celibacy? Was I ready to show my scars to the world... to a husband? My answer was no. It was moot, anyway. Grandmaster had already refused the proposals. However, the king would not accept a generic rejection. He wanted it in person from me in two days, ready or not. I was not.

I spent most of my private time over those two days crying and despairing about what to do, how to turn down the king. But even Grandmaster had resigned to my fate. He gave me a lengthy lecture about the finer points of marriage intimacies, between two men, mind you. However, he pointed out that consent was mandatory and that no one had the right to force me to break my vows of celibacy.

If that lecture wasn't enough, my brothers, the monks, teased me relentlessly.

"Way to go, Amayine," they'd say. "The king waited all this time for a *man* to clip his wings."

Some even broke their vows of silence just to tease me.

Two days of this, and I was a nervous wreck. The king might have been unmarried, but tales of his popularity among women and his, ah, prowess had reached even our temple. How could I, a virgin, a *fluid*, clip such a man's wings? But no doubt he could clip mine. I'm not sure which of the two bothered me more.

The king arrived with his private mage. He brought two unicorns, a magnificent black stallion, and a shimmering silver mare. How magical they were! It disarmed me. And His Majesty didn't appear to be in any exceptional rush to get my answer.

He exchanged greetings with everyone and then focused his gaze

on me. He smiled and bowed courteously as if I were a princess, not an invalid fluid daoshi.

“Are you ready for Riverqueen, Master Daoshi?” he asked. “My aunt is expecting us.”

His aunt was the Warleader of Yand! I had felt inadequate before, but this plunged me into sheer panic. I had nothing to wear but my monk’s robes or the good leathers Mihael had made for me many years ago. I was wearing those now.

The panic in my eyes must have shown because the king approached my ear. “No worries, love, I’m here,” he whispered.

He led me to the unicorns, lifted me like I was a feather, and set me atop the silver mare. He hopped onto the black stallion, the mage waved his hand, and we were at Riverqueen.

Riverqueen was aptly named the Jewel of the West, and for good reason. It was truly magical to behold. We stayed at the Panorama Inn, enjoying the luxury of the Royal suite together, but the king provided me with my own bedroom and respected my privacy.

The view from my balcony was breathtaking. Meandering rivers flowed from the surrounding mountains, beautifully segmenting the city. Yildun, our sun, set the city aglow with its gentle palette. As night fell, the city danced with lights; its myriad waters transformed into mirrors, reflecting, intensifying the luminance like so many twinkling stars in the skies of Yand.

We spent a week here as if within a spell. We enjoyed walks in colorful streets along the city’s numerous canals, merchants calling to us from every direction, parading their exotic wares to entice us. We took long boat rides and indulged in sweets and cotton candy at the Queen River Docks. We lunched at Restaurant Row, on street-fare or in quaint little establishments with diverse, exotic cuisines.

In truth, everything was exotic to the eyes of this monk. I savored every moment and couldn’t get enough. None, however, could rival the joy of our quiet dinners on our balconies at the Panorama, enjoying the sunsets and the delectable cuisine, all the while basking in the warmth of the man who delighted in watching my eyes widen at each exquisite bite.

In the afternoons, we rode the unicorns along the trails of the Crystal Mountains that surrounded the city. The paths were narrow, with no open space to gallop, but we often trotted briskly. My mare was

magical. Striker flew overhead but sometimes rode on my shoulder or perched behind me on my horse, where I could feel him against my back, between my wings.

One day, on a new path, the king's unicorn suddenly stopped and bucked, throwing him off. I quickly flew off my mount and managed to catch His Majesty before he fell headfirst into a pit. He landed on top of me, and we rolled together from the pit with him still on top. I started to panic, but he got to his feet and offered me his hand.

I took it, but he hesitated, staring at me as if he were trying to divine something. I couldn't imagine what.

"Do you remember anything around here," he asked, "some event, or this location?"

No. This was my first time visiting this place, and it was my first experience witnessing a king thrown by his horse. The incident shook me; he could have broken his neck. He must have noticed my distress because he smiled and pulled me to my feet. We mounted the unicorns, and off we went. The rest of the day passed without any further mishap.

The day after that, he had a regional mage teleport us to the Comi Keys, the fishing villages and towns on Yand's south coast. They were celebrating their annual festival.

We had a fantastic time joining in the festivities. We walked down crowded streets of one village or town after another. He bought me many gifts: a jeweled dagger, bedazzled ornaments for my hair, and, when the sun went down, a warm, silky cape against the misty ocean chill. All these were new luxuries to me. Being a brother at a monastic temple was quite acerbic. I had never known the truth of that until now.

That night, we joined the feast at one of the villages. The entire beach was lit like a living torch. It was so magical! If the villagers knew my companion was our king, they didn't show it. They treated us as if we were their own, inviting us to immerse ourselves.

And so we did. Dish after dish of delicious seafood creations passed by us at the communal table. The wine was different and went down smoothly, paired with the delicacies my date offered me. He fed me all night long. It was so good that I couldn't refuse a morsel, and I fed him right back. He graciously accepted everything, just as I did from him.

I didn't want this night to end. But, like all great things, it had to. We were the last ones to leave.

We walked hand in hand to the local inn where we had taken accommodations. I had my own room again. He escorted me to my door and kissed me tenderly goodnight. He took the few steps to his own door but stopped and turned back to me. I had not gone inside yet; I stood there

and stared at him.

He looked more handsome than any man I had ever seen. All the legends and stories told of him had proven true. If he was popular with the ladies, it was for nothing but for his charm, this innate, incredible magnetism. I should have walked into my room, but I couldn't. I stood transfixed and stared. He returned to me, took me in his arms, and kissed me. Passionately. Aggressively. Needy.

“If you want me to go, I will,” he whispered, his voice deep and raspy, betraying his emotion, his excitement. “But I wish to stay, love. Do you want me to go?”

“No. Stay.”

He lifted me in his arms and walked us into my room. He laid me gently on the bed, where I sat at the edge. He knelt before me.

“Consent is mandatory,” he breathed, “but I beg you, don't send me away. Let me bind you to me again, my love.”

I pulled him into my arms and kissed him gently. My kiss was the feather that broke the dam. He gave back more. Much, much more, his every caress, every intoxicating move binding me to him, utterly, completely. If my scars and various disfigurements bothered him, he didn't give the minutest hint. But when he called out another woman's name, Derya, as he loved me, it hurt me in a way I had never thought possible.

We spent our last day and night at Riverqueen with his aunt, the planet's warleader. It was a pleasant day with a great dinner and amiable conversation. But it didn't end well. We had adjacent bedrooms, and at the evening's end, my king escorted me to mine and then retired to his.

I was to return to my temple the following day, but he wanted to take me to his palace in Dragonslair, Yand's capital city, and announce our engagement. By that point, my dilemma had reached a peak. Could I burden the king with such as me simply because of the magical time we spent together? Yet, how could I return to my monastic existence after experiencing what life would be with him?

My thoughts were interrupted by sounds coming from the next room. There was a knock on his door. It was a woman. *A woman?* My heart raced, and my ears perked up. But it was his aunt. I could hear them mainly through my bond to him! The warleader was berating the king.

“How could you find this woman again?” she scolded. “Do you forget the last time? I will never allow a murderous person like her to be

beside you.”

Only she used a different word than ‘person.’

The argument continued through the night, she admonishing him for choosing me, and he defending his choice.

“You know it was her brother who tried to kill me all those years ago,” he said. “He and not her put the vipers in the pit in Flyer’s path that nearly led to my demise. She was completely innocent, Aunt Shadow. Her brother paid for his crime with his life. Isn’t death by K’tul fire enough?”

I shut my ears and mind, but I had heard enough. The king’s aunt had called me murderous! How did I deserve that? What did I—or my brother—do? Putting vipers in a pit... was it the pit where the king fell when we rode that new mountain path? Did he try to jolt my memory with such a shocking event?

Had I committed that murderous act in another life and didn’t remember? I didn’t even recall having a brother. I could never imagine myself as a murderer in any lifetime. And the king loved me. Why would he love me if I were truly murderous?

I cried all night. The next morning, my eyes were so red and swollen that the king had one look at me and guessed what had happened.

“You overheard my aunt last night—” he began.

He tried to embrace me, but I pushed him away. He didn’t need a murderous queen by his side. It made no difference that it was not true. The fact that his aunt believed it was enough.

“Please return me to my temple,” I begged him. “I will become Brother Amayine again, and you will be free of me.”

“Please, my love,” he begged in turn. “I’ve loved you all my life; I searched for you all my life. Please don’t leave me now that I found you.”

I sobbed in his arms, but I had made up my mind firmly. It wouldn’t do to marry him and have his people think their king had chosen a murderous queen. It was best to return to my temple and try to forget him. So, no matter what he said, did, or begged on his knees(!), there was no changing my mind.

When he couldn’t leave me, I left him. I embarked on the long, arduous journey alone. Back to my mountain, to the safety of my temple, my brotherhood, my monastic world of monks and solitude—and celibacy.

Years passed, and the messages and offerings from the king dwindled. A couple of decades later, they stopped altogether. One lovely

day, a royal messenger arrived with an official announcement from the Palace of Yand. The king was to wed. He would marry the person or people who bested him in a sword duel. All eligible women and men were invited to participate in the tournament at Dragonslair. Four finalists would face the king. Anyone who defeated him would become his spouse.

Shock and awe! *My king was to wed? Had he forgotten me?*

Mihael saw the dismay on my face and pulled me aside.

“If he forgot you,” he whispered, “why not marry outright? Why the drama? He means to draw you out.”

I gave him a dubious glare, unconvinced.

“Well, will you go?” he asked, undeterred.

“They say the one to best him in duel has not yet been born.”

“Right,” my father insisted. “That’s how he controls the outcome of the tournament. I’m telling you, Amayine, he means to draw you out.”

“You think he’d let me best him, Da? Isn’t this a blind event?”

He had indeed declared that all participants had to be masked and avoid any identifying items, such as colors or coats of arms.

Mihael winked at me.

“You think he can’t tell a fluid monk? Tell me, son, does he know of your sword skills?”

“He may. We talked about Sword Fingers one time.”

“Ah. So he counts on you to best him or to come close.”

“Close doesn’t count,” I blurted. “Don’t I have to best him?”

“Will you go then?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t we train just in case? No harm in that.”

We trained in Sword Fingers, that ancient technique unique to our order. Typically, in traditional combat, one grips the sword hilt firmly with their entire hand and uses their arm to move the blade. But we grip and guide with only our fingers. We use our thumb and first two fingers for strength, to hold the sword securely but not too tightly, keeping it fluid to follow our wrist. We use our two smaller fingers to guide the blade’s direction.

We never hack. The height of our sword arm does not exceed our shoulders. It requires dexterity and strength, and much of both. I was skilled at this technique, but my father was better, having many more centuries of practice than I did.

We trained day and night. When I could disarm Mihael without him letting me, he had me spar with the other high masters. Finally, our Grandmaster took his turn. When I disarmed *him*, the entire brotherhood cheered. Would it be enough?

So, was I going then? Why should I? Had I not rejected him? Was I not the same murderous queen or queer person? But the thought of him with another drove me crazy. The thought of someone else kissing him, touching him! The memories of the nights we spent together remained seared in my heart over the past years. He had indeed bound me to him, and I could not let go.

A week before the tournament, I descended my mountain and made my way to Dragonslair. My father and three of our brothers, our best sword masters, accompanied me. I registered for the tournament, received my nonidentifying leathers and my number, and returned to one of the more humble inns where we were staying.

On tournament day, officials ushered contestants into the arena and instructed us about the rules. In our identical attire and masked faces, we all looked the same. There were scores of participants, and I would have to win many a duel to get to the king.

The tournament began, and I won duel after duel, day after day, as my brothers cheered me from the stands. At the end of each day, I returned to the inn to more cheering and teaching from the monks. Our temple was to become renowned, they bragged. Not only would it provide the king's husband, but it taught the world a thing or two about swordsmanship through my performance. I was the only one who practiced Sword Fingers, and I made it seem so easy to disarm my opponents in the first few moves.

In the end, four finalists remained to face the king. I had made it to the end, but what if all four of us bested him? Could I accept being one of four spouses? No. I put it to Mihael; he advised me to win the prize first and *then* decide whether I wanted it or not. It made good sense, so I resolved to do just that.

I was to go last. I sat on the sidelines and studied the king's form, his attacks and weaknesses, as he dueled the other three finalists. But I saw no weaknesses; he appeared flawless. I realized I could go a round or two with him, but I saw no way to defeat him. He was doomed to remain a bachelor.

I was scheduled to take my turn the following day. That night at the inn, my brothers bombarded me with advice. But who walks into the common room? No. Not the king. The king's mother, the lady Worldmaker. We scrambled for greetings and curtsies, but she raised her hand and stopped us. She walked to our table.

"You, young man, you're Amayine?" she asked me.

"I am, my lady."

"You think you can best my son?"

"I... ah... not sure it is possible, my lady."

“It’s possible. I always best him,” she replied.

“But, my lady, who can parallel your skills?”

Did she expect I could possibly match her?

“Have you not seen his weakness?” she persisted.

All my brothers shook their heads, yes. They had all seen it, as had I. But was it a weakness?

“His sword arm is a bit too high in his final thrust when he disarms his opponent,” I ventured. “But I wouldn’t call that a fault.”

He practiced my brotherhood’s Sword Fingers technique, which was a marvel in itself. He applied himself to near perfection. This ‘fault’ would allow his opponent to counterthrust under his blade but wouldn’t render it ineffective. The king’s thrust would still find its mark. In this tournament, he solely aimed to disarm. But if I went under that thrust, he would stab me.

I shared these insights with the lady Worldmaker, surprising and impressing her with my assessment. She chuckled.

“I ought to send him up to your monastery for a few months of instruction,” she said. “Break his bad habit.”

“Temple,” my brothers said in unison.

“What?”

“It’s a temple, my lady,” I explained.

“What is? Never mind. You think you can execute that move?”

“But he will stab me,” I objected.

“Cut, not stab,” she corrected. “Do you want him or not? Now go practice this move.”

She demonstrated a technique with her fingers. When I moved my sword in that way, it would guide his blade upward, turning his stab into a cut—a slice, really—and hopefully disarming him. It required a lot of precision and strength.

My brothers and I found an empty street and practiced with blunted sword tips all night. Every time, I got stabbed. His sword would not be blunted tomorrow. I was dead.

The time for the duel had arrived. I parted from my brothers as we entered the field. The officials led me through the competitors’ entrance, dressed in my indistinct leathers and with my face shield completely covering my features. The king was already present, sword at the ready. I glanced at the spectators and nearly froze. They must have

numbered in the thousands!

As I unsheathed my blade and advanced toward the king, an eerie silence befell the crowd. We exchanged a few passes, with him attempting to disarm me early in the match. I parried easily, ready to execute my counterstrike and disarm **him**, but I hesitated, fearing that stab. He attacked repeatedly, but I dodged every time and didn't counter.

I could see the surprise on his face when we entered the third round. I had assumed a defensive stance by that time. He charged; I sidestepped and parried. But I plainly demonstrated my Sword Fingers' skill, amazing him and everyone else. I could hear my brothers cheering and calling me pointers.

In the fourth round, he came at me like a fury. I gave way, backstepping until he drove me to the edge of the mat with no more room to retreat. I had to make my move. In his next pass. Now.

He lunged into his final assault like lightning. No time to parry or sidestep or think. I dived under his thrust, my guide fingers smashing my blade onto his, sweeping upward. The force of my strike sent his sword flying from his hand. I had disarmed him!

Did he cut me? He did. His blade had been too close to my body. Its tip traced a gash from my left breast to my collarbone and nicked my neck. It didn't cut deep or hit any vitals in my chest, but did it cut an artery? Would I bleed out in the next few heartbeats?

Time slowed. I could hear the crowd gasping. Mihael teleported beside me, defying all the rules. The king caught me in his arms as I fell to my knees, blood spurting from my neck. The emotions on his face were a violent jumble. He applied pressure on my neck and yelled for help.

Lady Worldmaker popped beside us and shoved everyone aside. She glided her hand over my neck and froze the bleeding. Her magic danced about my neck as she repaired my artery, but I had lost too much blood. The world dimmed and darkened. It turned black.

I know not how long that blackness lasted. At some point, my father kissed my brow and told me I was alright and he would not be far from me, just beyond the door.

When I came fully to, I found myself in an infirmary and assumed to be at the palace. Striker dozed by my head with a half-opened eye trained on me. I could hear muted conversation nearby. As I kept my eyes closed, the king's and his mother's voices drifted to my ears.

"The Pathfinder says this is indeed the same girl," Lady Worldmaker said. "But he had trouble confirming it; he had to rely on DNA. Her memories from her past before the war are gone, and with them, her previous identity. That's why he couldn't trace her in the two centuries

of searching. How did she find herself from the Comi Keys to that remote village in the Grey Mountains?"

"Could someone have teleported her?" asked the king.

"But who? Why?" Lady Worldmaker wondered.

An unfamiliar voice cut in at that point.

"The K'tul magical blasts that destroyed her village teleported her. I bet we would have found many displaced remains if we looked," he said.

"Can she recover her memories?" the king asked quietly.

"No, my darling," his mother replied. "It wasn't the trauma from the blast that erased her memories. A worldmaker erased them. Someone like me or—"

"My sister?" the king interrupted. "But why would she—"

"Didn't your sister try to erase your memory of your betrothed after the K'tul destroyed the Keys?" Lady Worldmaker asked her son.

"She did, but it didn't work. I've always remembered her."

"It *did* work, my darling. A spell like that always works. Especially when it has a willing recipient."

"But I wasn't," the king objected.

"Maybe you weren't," the Worldmaker continued, "but your betrothed was. Even as the K'tul destroyed her village and she lay injured, gods know in what rubble or fire, her mind was on you. Through the strength of your bond, she brought your sister's spell onto herself because she didn't want you to forget her. She sacrificed her own memory so that she could live in yours."

The king broke into sobs at hearing that. I made a noise, and everyone's attention turned to me. Lady Worldmaker and the stranger departed, leaving me alone with the king. He came and sat at the edge of my bed and caressed my hair.

"You bested me, Master Daoshi," he whispered.

"Did I?"

"Yes, you did and got injured in the process. You nearly bled out. I could have killed you!"

He caught his breath and paused for a few moments. The thought still distressed him, although the outcome had turned from that.

"You sacrificed yourself again, for the second time," he continued, "so I wouldn't forsake you. Is there better proof that you love me?"

The problem with that logic was that I couldn't remember the first time. But I loved him.

"No," I replied.

"Will you have me? Be my one and only wife, my queen?"

“Don’t you mean your husband?” I blurted. “Did you not propose to Mihael’s son?”

That made him smile.

“I’ll have you however you wish, my fluid love,” he said.

“Then I will be a woman to suit my husband’s preference. *Your* preference, my love.”

It was the first time I called him by the endearment rather than his title, Majesty. That moved him deeply. He bent and kissed me gently and whispered a name.

“My Derya.”

And finally, I understood. Derya was not another woman’s name. It had been my own name before I lost my memory. Before I was transformed—reborn by the K’tul fires and by the love of my father, Mihael, and my brothers, the monks of Grey Avalanche.

But the king caught himself. He had accepted our new reality, my new identity. That the one he loved was no longer the girl, Derya, of his teenage years. It was this woman he was about to wed. This woman who had been a man, a fluid, and now a woman once again.

He leaned and kissed me and whispered my true name.

“My Night Rain, my Amayine.”



