

Aequidiale

Fantasy

"Four worlds now must pass one another, forever divided, spurned lovers all."

- *old Kausi proverb*

Cloud-islands drift, inching between one another. Pieva pictures them growing fat and heavy, bellies full, preparing to offload their damp stowaways.

It is always Spring here in Kevät: the buttery light noses between the leaves, a dappled playmat in the soft moss.

Pieva brushes cherry blossoms from her shoulder. The petals twist coquettishly as they fall, *like confetti*, she thinks, *for the wedding I do not want*.

It is tempting to sit here until the sun cedes to the moon, head pressed into the bark, breaking twigs between her fingers. More tempting still would be to walk, run, until the palace is a memory.

But she is duty-bound.

#

Pieva dismisses the handmaids once the floral wreath has been woven into her braid, inspected and approved. She counts fifty breaths, then fifty more to ensure her solitude. Behind the screen, she parts the swathe of black silk hiding the mirror. *Her mother's mirror*.

"Jaata," she whispers, "are you there?"

The glass swirls, misty, grey; it bubbles like a brook, and slowly a silhouette sharpens.

"Pieva. I am here."

"Jaata, dear friend. It has been so long."

"A difficult harvest, amichi. The ground, solid as stone." The familiarity of Jaata's white locks, pearlescent skin and those startling larimar eyes comfort Pieva. "Is it done?"

When they come, the tears cascade.

"We marry tomorrow," she says between sobs. "Some prince. I cannot even say his name."

Jaata closes her eyes. "Can it be stopped?"

Pieva shakes her head.

"Then," says Jaata, "we try again tonight."

#

He paces. An uneven gait lends an irregular staccato rhythm to his tread, *heavy light, heavy light*, zigzagging across the hall. Her stepfather does not see her, but the *fsh fsh* of her gown alerts him. Irritation first, that she is late, then seething fury.

Pieva bows low. He grips her fingertips, drawing her to his side.

"Make an effort to be plain tonight, Pieva. Do not dance too well or smile too brightly." He plucks a primrose from her crown, grinding it beneath his bootheel. "A forgettable bride may help them forget that your mother was a sorceress."

"Yes, my lord."

She is led to the women's antechamber where he leaves her in the clasp of three stout handmatrons. They prepare the ribbons that bind her wrists before slipping the blindfold over her eyes.

It is darker behind the velvet mask than the darkest violet Kevät nights: Pieva wonders if this is what the night sky is like in Jaata's world. Not for the first time, she wishes she was there.

She is led into the ballroom. The chink of toasting goblets, twittering laughter, the strings of the orchestra cease and a thick hush settles. Pieva is aware of her pulse throbbing in her throat. She counts her footsteps, hears the clack of his, stepping in rhythm with her.

Her ribbons are tied to his and they raise their hands together, pressed as though in shared prayer. Pieva shivers as his moist palms meet the skin of hers. The orchestra begins a doleful waltz.

As is custom here, they must dance, but are forbidden from exchanging words. Still, Pieva feels his hot breath against her ear.

One, two, three, one, two, three. She concentrates on the steps Mama taught her in front of the mirror, their reflections swaying willows in a breeze.

"You dance like a petal in the wind, my little kaani!"

Oh Mama, she thinks. Why did you leave me?

He steps on her toes, once, twice before the music halts. There's muted applause, then the whisper of a blade as the silk holding them together is cut.

Pieva exhales, a brief reprise, though tomorrow's matrimony looms.

#

"Jaata, I am returned."

The lake-surface of the mirror reflects only her sad eyes, her downturned mouth. She touches the glass, forged, so Mama would say, from the lover's tears of their ancestors.

Pieva waits, plucking the baby's breath from the coils of her hair. Then, the mirror fogs, a sleeve rubs the glass clear, and Jaata is there, puff of breath escaping from between her lips.

"Remember your mother's words, amichi," Jaata says. "The mirror will deliver what you need, when you need it."

"Well, it gave me you."

"And it brought me to you." They smile, recalling their first meeting, the honey-kissed girl frowning at her alabaster reflection, puzzling that they didn't move as one. Two lonely, motherless girls answering the call: *who will look after my baby?*

"We've failed before, Jaata. What makes you think we'll succeed tonight?"

"Your need has never been greater, amichi." Jaata moves closer. "Come, Pieva. We must at least try."

Pieva laughs, shakily. "Why couldn't we have been of the same world, Jaata?"

"Maybe soon we will be. "

They raise their hands to the glass, palm to palm, a bridge between their two worlds; Pieva's Spring, Jaata's Winter. Pieva feels only the solid wall of glass against her skin. *Please*, she begs, *please let me go*.

A light, she sees in Jaata's eyes, silver and bright and inviting: she lets the glow grow hazy, soft, a soporific mist coating her gaze. Heaviness settles on her lids, drooping, falling closed.

Surely she is imagining, but isn't that the swirl of skin on a fingertip? The slip of cold fingers sliding between hers? The shock of her warm palm meeting a cold one?

"It's working, Jaata!" She forces her eyes to remain shut, but the tremble that starts in her belly and races through her veins threatens to wrench the lids apart. Beneath her feet and in the air all around, and in the very fibrous roots of the earth, the world shakes and bends and tilts and *oh!* Then Pieva is falling, twisting, gripping Jaata's hands in her own.

#

The blinding white. Stretching like an eternity before her. Everywhere she looks is blanketed in crystal white. It glints and glistens and shimmers and shines; it crackles and glows, illuminating the forest. Whiter than the daisies, cleaner than the hillside breezes, fresher than the pressed linens of her step-father's palace. She does not dare speak for fear of disturbing the crystalline stillness. Jaata could not have described it. Not this. This ghostly beauty.

When she plunges her hand into the ice drift, she feels shards, a million tiny pinpricks of cold tickling her palm, her wrist. She hears the crack of the top layer of ice thin as crisp sugar, and the crunch of the deer's hooves, and the creak of the sleigh ropes. As she raises her face to the moon,

dusted-sugar snowflakes fall from the sky, and she parts her lips, catching the flakes on her tongue. In her mouth, on her eager, searching tongue, she tastes light and the cold-white fire of ice. How can it be that she is falling in love with Winter for the first time?

She laughs and it rings crisp, clear through the night.

"Jaata!" she says. "Jaata, it's so beautiful."

Only then, only minutes after the elation does she realise that Jaata is not by her side.

"Jaata! Jaata!"

"I am here, amichi." Her voice, barely a whisper.

In the frozen pool at Pieva's feet, Jaata's pale face peers out from behind the ice. Pieva's knees land with a crunch through the snow. She shivers, finally succumbing to the cold lacing her veins.

"Jaata! We must get you out!"

Jaata shakes her head. "I am not trapped in the lake, Pieva. I am in your chamber, sitting before your mirror."

"No!"

Without a word, they bring their hands together once more, pressing, pushing; a silent benediction to the magic to bring them together. Pieva bites hard on her lower lip, squeezes her eyes shut tightly.

Jaata sighs. "It's no good, Pieva. I'm trapped."

"Jaata, I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

"Please, Pieva, you must listen or you will freeze to death." Jaata taps her knuckles on the ice surface. "Now amichi, you must wrap yourself in the furs from the sleigh. Command the deer with *vaziet*, and they will take you to my home."

"But Jaata..."

Jaata raises her hand. "Go amichi. Return in the morning with my brother, Maroz. He will help."

Pieva stands, hesitating.

"Please, Pieva. I would never forgive myself if you froze to death. Go!"

#

It is smooth, the sleigh ride across the frozen land. Pieva wants to savour the glimmering quartz of the snow's surface, the captured and refracted moonbeams in the ice, but her heart beats cold. Heavy furs press her into the seat, anchoring her, but though they warm her body she takes no comfort in their embrace.

A cabin stands towards the edge of the forest. Warm, carrotty light spills from the windows onto the snow below; a pine studded with silver beads stands sentry by the door. The air is thick with cloves and cinnamon and wine.

She practically falls across the threshold, caught by a man, Maroz, she assumes. He helps her to a chair by the fire: places a mug of hot spiced cider in her hands.

Between sobs, Pieva tells him of the mirror and the lake; of the years of friendship forged; of the confidences shared, the laughter, the stories. Mug drained and spent, she sinks back into the chair.

"Please Maroz. Can you help?"

He rises without looking at her. "We leave at sunrise."

#

In Kevät, the day arrives with a whisper: flaxen light nudges away night, a mellifluous chorus of birds greet the dawn. Here, the pale sun peeks over the horizon, slowly bleaching the black sky white. Crisp. Clean. Pieva picks at the latticed crystals at the window as Maroz hitches the sleigh.

Speeding across the frozen land, Maroz is silent. Pieva marvels that he cannot hear her thudding, lurching pulse.

She swipes a frosting of snow from the surface of the lake.

“Jaata,” whispers Pieva, “are you there?”

Wide, blue eyes and a pale cheek press against the ice. “Pieva, I’m afraid.”

“Maroz is here, amichi. He can help.”

Maroz lays a pair of stout axes on the snow, blades gleaming, sharp as daggers.

“We must break the ice,” he tells her.

“But what if we lose her, Maroz? What if that severs the connection and we are both trapped in the wrong worlds?”

“This is old magic, Pieva. It should have been destroyed many moons ago.” He glares up at the sky. “But *they* wanted to keep us separate.”

It is weighty, the axe, even in Maroz’s strong hands. She almost drops it when he passes it to her. He picks up the other and raises it high. Pieva copies, though her shoulders balk at the strain.

He closes his eyes. “Stand back, Jaata. This may not work. On my count. One.”

Pieva hears her mother’s voice. *The magic works for those who believe in it, my little kaani.*

“Two.”

Her muscles quiver.

“Three!”

Crack, split, fracture. Axes break the ice in perfect harmony. It cleaves apart in fissures, chasms ripping, water rushing. Pieva screams and falls and falls and her voice echoes alone. She closes her eyes and grasps, flailing before her hand finds another and another and all around her the world begins to solidify.

#

A circle of three: wide eyed, mouths agape.

They stand in a valley between two snow capped mountains, grasses bending with teardrops and shy daisies beneath their feet. Above, the sky is cornflower blue, a biting breeze, cottony clouds gathering.

One world spilling into the next.

Pieva squeezes Jaata's hand.

#

In stories and art, they speak of Brigid and Ostara and Persephone. Of Zephyr and Notos. Few speak of Pieva and Jaata. But if, instead of asking a learned man, you talk to the frost and the buttercups, they'll tell you to look at the patterns in a snowflake, or the crossed stalks of wildflowers, where you can see their clasped hands, their laced fingers.

