



Crimson

Emmarayn Redding

Retold Fairy Tales

* * *

“Can you do it?”

“Yes.”

“There can be no hesitation, no pity, no mercy.”

“I know.”

“For the good of Arcadis, what must be done... must be done.”

“And so it shall be, this I swear.”

* * *

I

A jolt in the coach startled Varro from his sleep, leaving the last grisly vision flickering in his mind's eye.

Instinctively his hand went to his revolver, while the other strayed to the hilt of his sabre.

“Sire?” the valet hesitantly asked, staring back at him with wide, concerned eyes.

As his senses settled back into reality, Varro eased his grip on the weapons, but did not release them entirely just yet. He sat back against his seat, resisting the urge to wipe the sweat from his brow.

“It is nothing,” he replied, looking out the window at the majestic fir trees, stretching far overhead.

“A dream, then?”

Varro wished it were a dream. He said nothing more and deliberately relaxed his hands, focusing on the sights of the forest outside. A cardinal flitted upward, frightened by their presence: a sight which had become all too familiar to him.

Unable to sit a moment longer, he struck the sabre’s pommel against the roof of the coach. “Halt, driver!”

Abruptly, the coachman pulled the horses to a stop, and Varro burst into the outdoors, setting his feet heavily on the moist earth. He clutched the door for a moment before letting go.

The captain of the guard dismounted and bowed. “Emperor Alizarin, what troubles you?”

Varro glared at him, wanting to answer, “everything,” but he waved the matter off. “How much further is it?”

The captain glanced about. “A little more than two hours, sire, without rests.”

Varro nodded, eyeing the rough path ahead. “Then rest here for a while; I will continue on my own.”

The captain shifted in dismay. “Sire... I must remind you that there are enemies still at large. The Kotazoah seek your death now more than ever. It is not safe for you to—”

“We are within the conquered territories, are we not?”

“Yes,”

“And we have flushed the enemy out thrice over, have we not?”

“Yes—”

“Then leave me! I will see my mother alone for once. Wait a quarter of an hour before following again. That is all, Captain.” With a wave of his hand, Varro dismissed him, and the captain backed down reluctantly.

Hiding a sigh of relief, Varro turned and walked off the road, cutting through the paths that would take his entourage hours to get around. He quickened his pace, eager to leave them all behind, even if it were only for a short time. He could rest no longer.

The terrain steepened as he went, and before long, his mouth grew dry as he pulled in deep breaths. By the

time he heard the roaring of the falls, his body almost trembled for want of water. He pulled his empty canteen from his satchel and hastened onward—then stopped short.

Not ten paces away, at the summit of the hill, shrouded by the mist of the falls, stood a young woman, her hands spread wide and her face turned up to the sky. Pistol at the ready, Varro ducked into the shadows and scanned the surrounding area for others. There was no one... no one but the girl, who swayed gently in the silver mist, her feet moving in slow, circular patterns. A smile played on her face, as she lifted her arms to bask in the water, her cloak rippling in the wind.

Slowly, so as not to raise her awareness, Varro moved back, keeping to the cover of the trees. But before he had a chance to correct his step, a twig snapped under his boot, and the girl startled. She twisted, searching for balance, swaying dangerously close to the precipice. Without hesitation, Varro sprang forward and caught her arm, pulling her in and backing far away from the edge.

Uttering a breathless cry, the woman clung to his sleeves, her whole body rigid with fear.

“Step back,” he commanded, “Step back with me. You’re alright, it’s safe.”

“Oh!” she breathed. Swallowing hard, she released him, and their hands brushed as she gathered herself up. She looked up at him with wide blue eyes, gratitude shining brightly. “Thank you, kind sir! I—I nearly...”

Varro shook his head quickly. “I frightened you, I’m sorry.”

The woman blushed, tucking a stray lock of golden hair behind her ear. Folding her hands shyly behind her back, she offered a weak, but lovely chuckle. “It’s not your fault at all! I should have paid more attention. I shouldn’t have been so close to the edge. My granny always tells me to stay away, I just...”

She turned back to the falls, a winsome look entering her eyes. Varro felt he had intruded upon something very private and special.

“I can see you love it,” he remarked. “Do you come here often?”

The woman nodded. “Whenever I visit her. I’ve never seen you here before, are you a traveler?”

She did not know who he was, Varro realized with a start. When was the last time he had met someone who did not know him as the emperor? He searched his memories and found nothing, not a single moment of

anonymity.

“Sir?” She looked at him, questioning.

“Traveler—I, yes. I’m just passing through.” He pulled a hand through his hair. “I’m on my way to visit someone myself. My mother, as it happens.”

The woman smiled. “That will be nice, I’m sure. It’s good of you to go to her.”

His face must have shown his displeasure, for her smile faltered. “I confess, I’m not particularly pleased to go,” he admitted. “My mother and I don’t exactly get along.”

“I’m sorry.” The woman looked down and gripped her skirts awkwardly, and Varro feared he had shared too much and made her uncomfortable. But the next moment she looked up and met his eyes again.

“It’s a pity you don’t get along, so as to come to her more often... perhaps coming by this way.”

She was flirting! Varro hardly knew what to say. Others had flirted with him, of course, on many occasions. Balls and galas and councils and meetings brought many an ambitious noblewoman, and often enough, foreign royalty as well. But it felt so different coming from a peasant woman, whose eyes saw not an emperor, but a traveler.

Her mouth curved upward into a light smile, and she turned halfway to the falls again. Without thinking, Varro found himself stepping closer, a smile teasing at his own lips.

“Yes, maiden... that is a pity.” He inclined his head in a small bow. “I shall bear it in mind on my way.”

“And perhaps pass by here on your return?” She asked.

He doubted it, but he saw no harm in indulging the dream for a moment. “I would be a fool to let such beauty as this go unsavored.”

“Indeed!” she giggled, a wonderful, bubbling sound.

Bowing again, Varro made to step away. “And now I must take leave. Have a care, maiden, and give your granny my regards.”

“I will, sir! And thank you again, ever so much. If you can think how I can repay you, you know where to look

for me.”

Varro nodded and waved, then turned his back on her and continued on his way. Again, he quickened his pace, though this time he fled because he wanted to stay. Great Skies, how he wanted to stay! To be a traveler with a peasant woman for just a while longer... the idea was more tempting than he could have imagined.

But no, he realized, he could not really even enjoy that, could he? For as soon as he took her delicate hand in his, he would remember that his were stained with blood, and the price of his power was the lives of the innocent.

His stomach turned, and his steps faltered. Mopping cold sweat from his brow, he straightened his shoulders and carried on. He could not escape who or what he was, even for a brief moment, and he knew it well. He had taken a vow on his coronation day, and by the Skies he would fulfill it.

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II

Stiff and cold beneath the silken sheets, the Dowager Empress Kaparina twisted her gnarled fingers in the quilt. In this darkened room, time seemed to stand still—but over the years she had become adept at gauging its passage, even without looking to the clock against the wall. Her son was late, again. It was the second time he had seen fit to disrespect her, and she did not like this new development in his temper. For the thousandth time, she cursed the illness that kept her abed and stole the life from her limbs. Had she truly spent twenty-two years of her life molding and shaping her son, only to see him run wild in the last three? Hanged, if she had!

The young pup thought he could run the country by himself. He would be lost and helpless before he knew it. If he wasn't assassinated first. He was weak, like his father, and Kaparina had known it from the time of his infancy. Her efforts to teach him strength, ambition, even brutality, had succeeded only in so much as he could now be seen, at least publicly, as a fit successor to her as emperor. But she knew the truth... Varro had no vision, no drive, no gall. Not like her.

With a great amount of effort, Kaparina pushed herself up in bed, propping her aching shoulders up against the goose-down pillows, her nightgown clinging to the sweat of her back. As much as she disdained the weakness in her son, she was thankful for it all the same. Though she had given up her crown the last three years, as the law said she must, she knew she still reigned. And was that not just what she had wanted when

she had married the emperor so many years ago? Not even her own sister could stand in her way, not when she knew she was destined to rule.

Kaparina sighed, a long, rattling sigh. Now her time was coming, she could feel it. The labored beating of her heart, and the putrid coughs that wracked her body at night told her so. Now was her last chance to impress upon Varro her legacy; to ensure that after she had drawn her last breath, he would carry out her will. Starting with eradicating the filth of the Kotazoah, the so-called First People, and by producing an heir to secure the throne. It was high time the pup took a wife.

Not for the first time, Kaparina wondered if it was a kind of rebellion that caused Varro's failures. Perhaps his lack of decision, and perpetual procrastination, was his way of defying her hold over him. Was he too weak for that? Or was he stronger than he let on?

Kaparina would find out today. He would not leave until she made sure he was in line with her teaching. Bedridden though she was, the power was still hers.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor, and the muffled voices of Varro and her guards reached her ears. Kaparina interrupted, shouting with the shrill and raspy remains of her voice. "Guards! Let him in at once!"

Immediately, the door was opened, and she saw the silhouette of her son as he dismissed the guards. They were reluctant to go, but they would not question him in Kaparina's presence. Varro entered, and swept his crimson cloak across his waist in a deep bow.

"Mother," he murmured.

"Empress. Are you so quick to forget?" she snapped, glaring down at him. She coughed, hard. "Close the doors."

He did so, silent and sullen.

"Well boy, are you proud of yourself?" Kaparina growled. "The battle at Anka was a disaster, thanks to your pathetic indecision."

Varro said nothing, only stood with his hands clasped behind his back, shoulders straight. The cold, slack-eyed look on his face remained firmly in place. It was almost comical, the way he thought his indifference would silence her.

“Did you hear me, child? Have you forgotten everything I taught you? Come closer!”

Stiffly, Varro obeyed, his expression flickering in distaste. Kaparina curled her cracked lips at him. “You think you are your own man now, don’t you? Now that I am shut up in here, you think you can spread your wings and exert your feeble power in defiance of me. You are nothing! Worthless, do you understand?”

“Have a care, Empress,” he spoke, his voice low and hard.

“Silence! Keep your tongue still while I speak to you! If you had any ability to stand on your own, to rule as an emperor should, you would have overthrown me long ago. Had you done so, you might have had my respect! As it is, you will never be more than the spineless fool I always took you to be.”

Varro’s eyebrows rose at this. “Overthrow—you are my mother! And you expected me to—”

“What is blood when the throne is at stake?” Kaparina spat. “When all of Arcadis hangs in the balance? It was my sister who was engaged to your father, but she too would have been weak. I did not let our shared childhood stop my hand. If you were worth anything, you would have no pity either.”

He was shaken, blast him. Pathetic as always. Grimacing, Kaparina settled back into her pillows, pulling in deep, scratchy breaths. “Now, heed me, boy. You will take a wife before the summer is out. Produce an heir whatever the cost. And before he takes his first breath, you will finish the Kotazoah! Exterminate the vermin from our land, once and for all! No more mercy, no more hesitation. Destroy them, give them no quarter.”

Varro shook his head. “I have done so, have I not? I have hounded them day and night! Persecuted them beyond any—”

“No! You have followed my orders with the same half-hearted effort as always. I know you let remnants of them escape at Anka, just as you did in Korek and Zolen. You thought I wouldn’t notice, but I read the reports, and I know. You are far too lenient.”

Varro clenched his fists, his eyes glinting. “Are they so bad, so undeserving of life, they must be dispensed with so cruelly?”

Unbelievable! That he would question even such core lessons as that! Kaparina glared. “They are unnatural creatures of arcane magic. Our people died by the hundreds at their hands when we came. Treacherous

shapeshifters, possessing abilities far beyond what you can imagine. They are too dangerous to be left alive! Even one would be too many! Only when they are gone can our society flourish. They are not human, they are animals, and you will treat them as such.”

“You’re despicable,” Varro breathed, anger flaring up in his eyes. “You’re the inhuman one!” He advanced on her, as if to berate her further, but Kaparina caught his arm, her nails digging into him. She yanked his sleeve up savagely, revealing the dozens of burn scars scattered from his wrist to his elbows.

“How dare you speak to your mother in that way!” she hissed. “Where is the respect I pressed into you from your infancy?” She dug her nails in deeper, drawing blood. “You forget your place, wretch”

Varro seemed shocked the sight of his own arm, but his expression quickly hardened as he gritted his teeth and snarled. Before Kaparina had a chance to fully realize his fury, he seized her throat and pressed hard.

“It is you who are the wretch, woman! And now your reign has come to an end.”

Who was this man? It could not be her son, her weakling brat. Eyes wide, Kaparina struggled for air. In disbelief, she watched as Varro’s face began to morph, growing thinner, smaller, more feminine. In another second, it was a blue-eyed maiden who stared at her, a wolfish grin twisting her pretty features. Though her body shrank, her grip was no less strong.

“You have treated us as no being, human or otherwise, deserves to be treated. How many of my people have you slaughtered? The skies weep for the innocent you have killed!” The maiden squeezed Kaparina’s throat harder, her eyes glinting with fearsome hatred. “And now you will die as well, Empress, and your tyrant son. By sunset today, Arcadis will be free!”

Kaparina kicked her legs, but her body was not strong enough to escape. Her lungs burned, her eyes throbbed, and maiden pressed mercilessly down on her throat. The darkened room began to blur, and all she could see were those cold blue eyes, boring into her own as the blackness closed in.

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III

The old woman’s struggles ceased, and Zelaine released her, stretching her cramping fingers in satisfaction. For a moment, she stared at the dead monarch, disgusting and pitiful in the enormous bed. But there was no

time to savor the taste of vengeance. Her mission was far from over.

She was not strong enough in her own form, so Zelaine changed into the form of her brother and dragged the Empress into the closet, stuffing the swollen body well out of sight. Then, striding to the mirror, she concentrated on the memory of the Empress's hands, digging into her arm, and began the transformation. The thinning hair, the stiff limbs, claw-like fingers, and prunish face took the place of her brother's handsome features, and Zelaine bit back a grimace of disgust as she beheld herself. This was the face of the woman who had tormented the Kotazoah for nearly forty years.

Adjusting the folds of her nightgown, Zelaine crawled into the Empress's bed and situated herself just as she had seen the old woman when she entered. The real Varro would arrive soon, and here meet his own death. Then and only then could her people—her parents, brother, and so many more—be avenged. Before long, the Emperor's footsteps reached her ears. They paused as they reached the door, and it was a moment before the handle creaked downward and he entered the room, tense and wary.

"Where are the guards, mother?" he asked, looking around in confusion.

"They irked me," Zelaine croaked, the Empress's foul breath drifting through her teeth. She coughed a few times for good measure. "I sent them away, for now."

Varro seemed to accept the answer. His shoulders slumped, and his hand went to his brow as he came further into the room. No bow or greeting, only a heavy sigh as he sat down on a footstool by the smoldering fireplace.

"How are you, mother," he murmured, hardly looking at her.

"Empress," Zelaine corrected, as Kaparina had done. She gripped the sheets nervously. Varro behaved nothing like she had expected. She had played him all wrong for his mother. It was lucky the woman hadn't noticed.

At the correction, Varro only nodded. "Of course, Empress Alizarin, most Honorable and Noble Vessel of Authority. How are you?"

The mockery in his voice was evident, but Zelaine wasn't certain how his mother would have responded. He was too far away for her to rake her nails over his arm—his scarred arm, which had evidently felt the wrath of the Empress many times before. Zelaine swallowed. That had surprised her. She had known the Empress to be cruel, but that she would be so cruel to her own son as something Zelaine had never considered.

"I am... as I always am," she responded carefully, choosing to ignore Varro's disrespect.

He looked at her sharply. "You're in a good mood, aren't you? You seem much improved from my last visit. I take it the doctor I sent has had better luck."

Zelaine's heart quickened. This was too dangerous. She did not know the right answers. She needed him to be on the defense, as she had been when she was in his form. She twisted her face into a look of disdain. "Silence, boy! Your pity and concern does you ill. You botched the battle of Anka, now what have you to say for yourself?"

To her surprise, Varro's face—which had been unreadable until this moment—fell into an expression of desolate sorrow. "Nothing."

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Actually, a great deal, mother. But the words escape me. I... I can't..." He drew in a shuddering breath, struggling to finish the thought. "I can't do it anymore."

The last words came in a whisper. Before Zelaine could form her reply, he continued, his voice growing stronger.

"I'm so tired, mother. But every time I close my eyes, I see their faces. Wide-eyed, staring, pale faces, and none of them deserved to die." He grimaced. "I know you think me weak. But this war is too much! I have become a monster for you, and now my hands are stained with blood that will never wash away. And with every thrust of my sword, every death order that leaves my mouth, I wonder, is it worth it? Is holding the throne of Arcadis truly worth all these horrors?"

Zelaine stared at him. All her life, she had wanted to picture him as a vicious, twisted wretch with no soul or heart. But first in the forest, when his concern for her life had shone through his eyes without shame, and now, as his guilt came tumbling from his lips in self-loathing, he proved himself more human than she could have imagined. The man sitting before her was exhausted, pained, and on the verge of breaking.

“Insolent wretch,” she managed to hiss, “you have forgotten all my teaching, all my—”

“Enough, mother! You have insulted me enough, I know your rants by heart. I don’t care anymore! I’m through with this.” Varro rose and began to pace, dragging his fingers through his hair in distress. “How hard would it be to arrange a truce, I wonder? I could forge peace with them if I tried, I’m sure of it.”

Zelaine froze. “Peace? With the Kotazoah? Are you mad?”

“Perhaps,” Varro conceded. “Perhaps after all we’ve done to them, they wouldn’t accept. Perhaps they really are the animals you believe them to be, and to compromise with them would spell the death of our empire. But I cannot hunt them any longer!”

He turned to face her, earnest and determined. “There are so few of them left, how hard would it be to give them a section land, a smattering of rights? Surely at this point all they wish is to live... I could grant them that, if it meant an end to all this killing.”

Zelaine’s heart raced, and she drew in rattling breaths, twisting her fingers in the quilt. “They’ll want more than a smattering of rights. They’ll want payment for the lives they have lost, and they still believe they have a claim to the throne! They would never accept you as Emperor.”

“A marriage alliance then, and full rights granted. Let them put forth a woman they believe should rule, and our heir will be descended of both lines, both races. Whatever it takes to stop this war.”

“Do you even hear yourself, boy? Are you—”

“Stop!” Varro advanced on the sickbed, his eyes lighting with anger. “You are no longer Empress! Your time has passed, old woman. I am Emperor now, and you have no power over me. The fact that you are alive at all is due to my lenience. I will rule this land as I see fit, and I no longer see fit to persecute the Kotazoah. My legacy will not be one of death and destruction, as yours will be. You don’t believe it, but when the history books are written, I swear I will be remembered for the peace I will purchase.”

This was not right, Zelaine thought. This was not the Emperor she was supposed to kill. This was a stranger she had never heard of. She had come here for a monster, not this guilt-ridden man who thirsted for an end to the war as much as she did.

Her people counted on her, and she had sworn to them, no hesitation, no pity, no mercy. For the good of Arcadis, what must be done, must be done. She could not stop now, not even for the tears that glimmered in his tortured eyes. Fighting for control, Zelaine called up the images of her dead family and remembered that it was this man, Varro, who had ordered those deaths. She rose from the bed.

“You talk of peace,” she whispered, baring her teeth, morphing into her own form. Varro stumbled back in surprise. “You talk of alliances and rights, all too late! You think you can just escape what you’ve done? That history will look kindly on you?”

She gripped the dagger in the folds of her dress and rushed at him, pushing him against the wall before he could react. Her forearm pressed against his throat as she brought the blade to his chin in her other hand. Her eyes blazed.

“You are cruelty incarnate, as your mother was before you! You deserve to die, slowly, so that you can suffer the pain you inflicted on my people!”

Though the dagger pricked his skin, sending a drop of thick crimson blood sliding down his throat, Varro did not struggle. He only breathed slowly and met her eyes, no sign of denial, or even fear, in any part of him.

Zelaine struggled within herself, trying to summon the hatred she needed to drive the blade home. She couldn’t look away from his eyes, clear and sad and resigned as they were.

He swallowed. “Go on then,” he said quietly. His hand touched her shoulder gently. “It is as you say.”

Tears blurred her vision. She hated him so much. With a strangled cry, she drew back the dagger and thrust forward, straight for his heart. But at the last moment, just before it touched his breast, someone caught her hand and seized her throat.

She choked and stumbled backward before being thrown to the floor, her head crashing against the carpet. A heavy boot landed on her chest, pinning her down as her arms were grasped by another pair of hands.

Kicking and twisting, she struggled to see her captors and saw the face of the Emperor’s captain of the guard glaring down at her. His soldiers gripped her wrists and pulled tight, stretching her arms wide. Others grasped her legs and held her down, though she strained against them with every fiber. The captain set his sabre against her neck and aimed a revolver between her eyes. The hammer clicked, and she sucked in a breath, preparing

for the shot.

“Stop,” Varro said, shoving the captain aside, even as he fired the gun with a deafening crack. Zelaine’s whole body spasmed, and her ears rang, but she felt no pain. The smell of black powder stung her nostrils, and she waited, trembling. Where was the wound? When would she die?

But nothing happened. Incredulous, she turned her head, ignoring the muted commotion of the soldiers, and saw the bullet hole piercing the floor. The ringing in her ears, and the spinning in her head made everything muddled and slow, but she saw that she was unhurt. She turned back to the Emperor, who held his captain back and looked at her with the tired, lifeless look he had worn when he came in. She snarled. How dare he save her? How dare he do anything to assuage her hate?

Then the soldiers had her again, this time pressing her face into the carpet and pulling her arms behind her, someone’s knee digging between her shoulder blades so that she could do nothing but growl.

“Sire?” The captain prodded expectantly. “She is an assassin! Honorless Kotazoan filth, whose penalty must be death!”

“No,” Varro sighed. “Bind her and imprison her, but do not harm her.”

“Emperor...”

“Silence, Captain. Do as I say.”

There was a pause as the captain struggled with himself, but then Zelaine was hauled to her knees and bound.

“What will you do with her, Sire?” The captain asked as his soldiers dragged her away.

She caught one last sight of Varro’s eyes as she glared through the locks of her hair. They were empty... so empty.

“I don’t know.”

* * *

THE END

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