



# *Pebbles*

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Retold Fairy Tales

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There had always been rumours about Erik Björnson's first wife. There was something in her shifting blue eyes, something in her step, something in the way she tossed her head that was not altogether human. She had been beautiful, of course, but in the same way a summer storm can be beautiful: dangerous and sublime, promising either rain for scorched crops or flaming lightning to set the harvest ablaze.

There were plenty who wanted to make her their wife, but she picked Erik. "He has sweet eyes and soft hands," she said whenever someone asked her to explain herself, and laughed, the sound like falling rain and thunder.

For a while, they were happy. But in a land of ice and rock and thorn, sweet men don't make the best husbands. Thus, she grew restless. She sewed children's clothes at the window, her head with flaxen braids turned to the forest that stood tall and foreboding at the edge of Erik Björnson's land, every year trying to encroach a little further. And, as these things often go, she wished for a child.

Later, people said she must've made a deal with a forest spirit. Others were sure she'd lain with a demon that scuttled from between the naked birches. How else could such children as she birthed be explained? There were two of them, twins. They held hands as they slithered from between Erik wife's legs. Their eyes were open but squeezed into slits. They didn't cry, but breathed steadily. The midwife slapped them both to get them to cry, unnerved by their silence and their black eyes. The boy howled first, then his sister, revealing pink gums with one pearly tooth each.

“Are they alive?” the mother asked, sweat beading on her forehead. Her lips were white as snow. “Are they healthy? Are they strong?”

“Aye, and strange,” the midwife said. She put them together in the cradle that stood underneath the window facing the woods. When she turned around to tend to her patient, Erik Björnson’s wife had started to bleed. A crimson flower bloomed on the sheets, growing bigger and bigger till the young woman had nothing more to give and grew cold on the steaming linen.

Erik Björnson requested a coffin made from the pale birches that his wife had always looked at as she sewed and stitched wishes in white cloth. It was a strange request, and the result was both breathtakingly beautiful and fearsome to behold. The people who attended the funeral saw the coffin, remembered whose corpse the strange wood cradled, and crossed themselves. Erik patted the freshly-dug grave with his soft hands and wept till his eyes were puffy and red. Then, he returned home, to his son and daughter.

He kept to himself for a long time, raising his children by himself.

“Nothing good can come of it,” the town’s folk said. “A man isn’t made to raise children.”

It hadn’t seemed all too bad, at first. But then, the twins grew, and their strangeness could no longer be denied. The woman who sometimes tended them when they were sick and couldn’t be left alone told unsettling tales about them. The boy, Axel, trailed her like a shadow, his thumb always in his mouth, his eyes unblinking. The girl, Greta, followed every move with eyes that were always still, craning and turning her neck so far the joints groaned. Both growled like animals when touched, and wouldn’t talk.

“At least, not with me,” the woman explained. “They talk amongst themselves, though. Not words I can understand. They grunt and groan and make gestures with clawed hands. They’re like two demons.” She shivered, then crossed herself. “No wonder Björnson can’t get a new wife. I wouldn’t marry him with those two creatures lurking inside his home no matter how handsome and rich he is.”

Yet there are always those poor enough to take children like demons for granted. Saga had known how winter could maim, how hunger could bite. She was too thin, but even poverty could not hide that she was a pretty girl.

Erik invited her into his house to see how she would respond to his children. He hadn’t had a wife for five years, and though his sweetness hungered for a warm body to hold and a friendly face to talk to, he was no fool;

a wife that couldn't manage his children was no wife he could want.

Saga didn't try to hug and cuddle Greta and Axel. She simply nodded at them and smiled, then helped them butter their bread. She didn't comment on how they wolfed the slices down, how they licked their sticky fingers. After all, she knew hunger. When they were done, she simply told them to go and wash their hands. The children looked at her with sullen eyes, debated amongst themselves, then did as she bade them.

"You need fattening up, but you'll do," Erik said. He married her the next day. And, like the first time Erik Björnson married, he and his wife were happy for a time.

But then the harvest failed. It wasn't too bad for a while; there were stores of grain, and dried pieces of meat. Though there was little to eat, there was no hunger like Saga had known it. After all, she could still make porridge, could still bake flat breads and chew dried reindeer meat. It was boring food, bland and repetitive, but it was food all the same.

Then the harvest failed again. The stores had been depleted the year before. Erik went out to hunt, but returned with empty hands. He had always been too sweet to set snares properly. Saga tried to collect berries, but the relentless summer sun had withered them till they were shrivelled and sour, not fit for eating.

Saga had known hunger before. Now that her arms and face and belly had grown round, she found it harder to bear than ever before.

Axel and Greta followed her around the house wherever she went. They were silent like cats, their eyes unblinking. They licked their lips and mewled, demanding sustenance that Saga couldn't give. Sweat gathered at the nape of her neck when she felt their gazes upon her. Her hands grew jittery, and she burned the porridge. The children ate it still, then tapped their spoons against the rim of their bowls, demanding more, always more...

They took to carrying their bowls and spoons with them, tapping the cutlery against the windowsills, against the doors and furniture, till Saga could stand the sound no more and snatched their spoons from them, fighting down the urge to smack these strange children. It was not right to punish them for wanting food, yet their wordless clamouring made her angry; it was as if they were accusing her of failing with every click of metal against porcelain.

Not our mother.

Not our mother.

Not our mother.

Their behaviour made her stomach tie itself into knots till she couldn't swallow a bite herself. Doubt grew inside her like a weed. Hadn't she married Erik so that she'd never have to go hungry again? Hadn't she decided to put up with his children because even though everyone told her they were demons, starvation was worse? But here she was, skin surrounding her bones a little snugger each day, hunger gnawing in her belly.

And yet it was hardly the children's fault that they were the way they were, so Saga fed them to the best of her abilities, and tried to strangle thoughts of discontent and violence before they could bloom. She gave them pebbles to suck on to forget their hunger.

All of this changed one morning. The scent of milk filled the kitchen as she made the children and herself breakfast. It was nauseating, thick. It buried itself in her nostrils, forced sickly tendrils down her throat. She gagged, and had to run outside to vomit. As she clung to the gate that separated Björnson's land from the forest another thought popped into her head. She touched her belly, stroking the swollen flesh. "It couldn't be," she whispered.

But it would explain your moods, your lack of appetite, a sly voice said. And your courses stopped.

"That could be the lack of food," she said.

You never missed a course before, even though you were starved. You've shared Erik's bed for two years now. It is not so strange a thing to happen.

The trees beyond the gate rattled their branches together. A twig stroked her face. Saga batted it away and stumbled back, the hair in her neck plastered against her skin like damp fur. Still the forest whispered to her. She went back inside, her hands over her ears.

Greta and Axel had managed to get the pot with porridge from the stove. They'd eaten it all, had licked the pot till it was almost impossible to imagine it had ever contained food. They'd also managed to get their grubby hands on the bread Saga had baked before they'd awoken, and had eaten that, too.

"No!" Saga howled, digging her nails in her scalp.

Axel and Greta turned to look at her. They were chewing the last bit of bread. Axel swallowed first, and grinned at her, revealing tiny teeth with gaps between them. Greta looked at him, then copied him.

Anger coiled in Saga's stomach. "You wicked children!" She slapped Axel first, then pulled Greta's hair and forced the child to look at her. "Must we all starve because you aren't normal?!"

Greta screamed in her face, spittle flying.

"Must we?!" Saga repeated. "I've always been kind to you. Is this how you repay me?"

Greta stopped screaming so she could inhale, then started anew.

Saga let go of the child's braids. "I'm the one who should be crying," she said, but already her anger was making way for shame. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Greta kept up her high-pitched wail.

Like a wounded animal, Saga thought.

"Stop it, Greta. Stop it. There's no need to be upset. I'm sorry. Shall I braid your hair anew?" The child always calmed down when Saga brushed her hair.

She reached for the girl, touched her cheek.

Pain tore through her arm, sharp and hungry. She yelled and pushed blindly with her other arm. Her flesh tore. She stumbled back against the kitchen table. Hot blood trickled down her arm, puddled in the crook of her elbow.

She stared at her ragged sleeve, at the wounded flesh, then looked at the twins. Axel's chin was coated in her blood. He chewed, then swallowed, causing his Adam's apple to bob down and then up again. He licked his lips.

These are not real children, Saga thought. They are demons. If we run out of food, they'll eat me.

The wound pulsed in time with her heart.

She was more afraid than she'd ever been.

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That night, Saga talked to her husband. The children were asleep, sucking on their pebbles. Ordinarily Saga would have made them spit them out, afraid they'd swallow them or choke on them. Now, she felt that their death would be a mercy, a blessing.

"Axel bit me today," she said, and showed Erik her bandaged arm in the rays of the setting sun.

"Is it bad?" Erik asked.

"He tore my flesh. I thought he was going to eat me."

"What did you do to upset him?"

Anger pumped through her veins. "What did I do? He shouldn't bite! He's not normal, and his sister isn't either. They're wicked and..."

"Don't talk about them like that," Erik said, and though he was normally kind, his voice was ice now.

Saga bit her lip and thought. Outside, the forest whispered, even though there was no wind.

"He was hungry, Erik. He bit me because he was hungry. We're all hungry. There's not enough food."

"I'll check the traps in the forest tomorrow." He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I don't like going there much. That place... it's evil. It depresses me."

"And what if there's nothing in the traps? Or the day after tomorrow? Or the day after that? We'll all starve, Erik. That hailstorm ruined the harvest. There's so little to eat... We won't last the winter. We can't feed five mouths."

"There's only four of us, Saga," Erik said. He sounded tired.

Saga rested their foreheads together. He smelled of hunger. She took his hand, one of those sweet, soft hands,

and placed it on her belly, let him cup the swelling flesh. "There'll be five of us soon," she said.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded.

Erik smiled and kissed her, then held her tight to him. "A child," he whispered. "Oh, a child. You've made me very happy, Saga."

How he must hunger for a normal child, she thought. She climbed on his lap and straddled him, slinging her arms around his neck. "A child," she agreed, and kissed him, rocking her hips a little. He held her hips in his hands, pressing the pads of his fingers in her flesh, urging her on. She obliged.

"Boy or girl?" he moaned.

Abruptly Saga stopped. "It doesn't matter. It won't live, not if we have to feed five mouths, not if I have to eat for two and can't even eat for one," she said. She turned away from him.

He clasped her hand. "What do you want me to do?" he whined.

Saga licked her lips. "It would be best if... if the twins didn't live with us anymore."

"But they are my children."

"You must choose, Erik. This child," she said, pressing his hand against her belly, kissing him hard, "or those by your first wife."

He sighed, and held her close. She touched his throat. His pulse was racing. "We'd leave them in the woods," she whispered. She kissed his cheek, his ear.

"We'd go and gather firewood, and then we'd leave them."

"God knows what lurks in that godforsaken forest! Saga, you can't..." Erik began.

She stopped him with another kiss, the one that always drove him mad with need. "The forest doesn't scare them like ordinary people. They wouldn't mind." Their father probably came from the forest.

“But it would be cruel...” Erik sighed, and carded one of his soft hands so unfit for killing through his hair.

“I’ll bake them a loaf of bread to share. They’ll be less hungry than we are. They won’t suffer. They won’t...” She started to cry. Her husband held her and rocked her. “I’m so afraid,” she whispered.

“Don’t be, darling. It’ll be all right, I promise,” Erik murmured in her hair.

“This child and I will die if you don’t do it. We’ll die, surely we’ll die...”

“I’ll take Axel and Greta into the forest tomorrow. They won’t be scared, I know they won’t be. You’re right; the forest holds no danger for them. I’ll leave them there. Please don’t cry, Saga.”

She buried her face against his chest to hide her smile of relief.

She could no longer be selfless. She had a child to think about, her child. And the children would come to no harm, right? After all, everyone knew they weren’t human.

There had always been rumours.

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