

Brynhild in the House of

Flame

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Easy
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The forest ways led him on and up a mountain-side. He came to a mountain-summit at last: Hindfell, where the trees fell away, leaving a place open to the sky and the winds. On Hindfell was the House of Flame. Sigurd saw the walls black, and high, and all around them was a ring of fire.

As he rode nearer he heard the roar of the mounting and the circling fire. He sat on Grani, his proud horse, and for long he looked on the black walls and the flame that went circling around them.

Then he rode Grani to the fire. Another horse would have been affrighted, but Grani remained steady under Sigurd. To the wall of fire they came, and Sigurd, who knew no fear, rode through it.

Now he was in the courtyard of the Hall. No stir was there of man or hound or horse. Sigurd dismounted and bade Grani be still. He opened a door and he saw a chamber with hangings on which was wrought the pattern of a great tree, a tree with three roots, and the pattern was carried across from one wall to the other. On a couch in the center of the chamber one lay in slumber. Upon the head was a helmet and across the breast was a breastplate. Sigurd took the helmet off the head. Then over the couch fell a heap of woman's hair—wondrous, bright-gleaming hair. This was the maiden that the birds had told him of.

He cut the fastenings of the breastplate with his sword, and he gazed long upon her. Beautiful was her face, but stern; like the face of one who subdues but may not be subdued. Beautiful and strong were her arms and her hands. Her mouth was proud, and over her closed eyes there were strong and beautiful brows.

Her eyes opened, and she turned them and looked full upon Sigurd. "Who art thou who hast awakened me?" she said.

"I am Sigurd, the son of Sigmund, of the Volsung race," he answered.

"And thou didst ride through the ring of fire to me?"

"That did I."

She knelt on the couch and stretched out her arms to where the light shone. "Hail, O Day," she cried, "and hail, O beams that are the sons of Day. O Night, and O daughter of Night, may ye look on us with eyes that bless. Hail, O Æsir and O Asyniur! Hail, O wide-spreading fields of Midgard! May ye give us wisdom, and wise speech, and healing power, and grant that nothing untrue or unbrave may come near us!"

All this she cried with eyes open wide; they were eyes that had in them all the blue that Sigurd had ever seen: the blue of flowers, the blue of skies, the blue of battle-blades. She turned those great eyes upon him and she said, "I am Brynhild, once a Valkyrie but now a mortal maiden, one who will know death and all the sorrows that mortal women know. But there are things that I may not know, things that are false and of no bravery."

She was the bravest and the wisest and the most beautiful maiden in the world: Sigurd knew that it was so. He laid his sword Gram at her feet, and he said her name, "Brynhild." He told her how he had slain the Dragon, and how he had heard the birds tell of her. She rose from the couch and bound her wondrous hair on her head. In wonder he watched her. When she moved it was as though she walked above the earth.

They sat together and she told him wonderful and secret things. And she told him, too, how she was sent by Odin from Asgard to choose the slain for his hall Valhalla, and to give victory to those whom he willed to have it. And she told how she had disobeyed the will of All-Father, and how for that she was made outcast of Asgard. Odin put into her flesh the thorn of the Tree of Sleep that she might remain in slumber until one who was the bravest of mortal men should waken her. Whoever would break the fastenings of the breastplate would take out the Thorn of Sleep. "Odin granted me this," she said, "that as a mortal maid I should wed none but him who

is the bravest in the world. And so that none but him might come to me, All-Father put the fire-ring round where I lay in slumber. And it is thou, Sigurd, son of Sigmund, who hast come to me. Thou art the bravest and I think thou art the most beautiful too; like to Tyr, the God who wields the sword.”

She told him that whoever rode through the fire and claimed her as his wife, him she must wed.

They talked to each other fondly and the day flowed by them. Then Sigurd heard Grani, his horse, neigh for him again and again. He cried to Brynhild: “Let me go from the gaze of thine eyes. I am that one who is to have the greatest name in the world. Not yet have I made my name as great as my father and my father’s father made their names great. I have overcome King Lygni, and I have slain Fafnir the Dragon, but that is little. I would make my name the greatest in the world, and endure all that is to be endured in making it so. Then I would come back to thee in the House of Flame.”

Brynhild said to him: “Well dost thou speak. Make thy name great, and endure what thou hast to endure in making it so. I will wait for thee, knowing that none but Sigurd will be able to win through the fire that guards where I abide.”

They gazed long on each other, but little more they spoke. Then they held each other’s hands in farewell, and they plighted faith, promising each other that they would take no other man or maiden for their mate. And for token of their troth Sigurd took the ring that was on his finger and placed it on Brynhild’s—Andvari’s ring it was.

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