

The Catcher in the Rhine

Harry Turtledove

I don't know how I got here. Wait. That's not quite right. What I mean to say is, I know how I got to Europe and everything, for Chrissake. They sent me over here to find myself or something after that trouble I had. I'm sure you know about that. I'm certain you know about it. Practically *ev* erybody knows about it. Some of the biggest phonies in the world think they know more about it than I do. They really think so. It's like they read it in English class or something.

So like I say, I know how I got to Europe. I don't know about this finding myself business, though. I swear to God, if you can't find yourself, you've gotta be some kind of psycho. I mean, you're right *there* , for crying out loud. If you weren't right there, where the hell would you be?

And sending somebody to Europe to find himself has got to be the stupidest thing in the world. You have to be a lousy moron to come up with something like that, you really do. You can't find *any* thing in Europe. Honest to God, it's the truth. You really can't. All the streets go every which way, and they change names every other block, or sometimes in the middle of the block.

Besides, the people don't speak English. Try to have an intellectual conversation with somebody who doesn't know what the hell you're talking about. Go ahead and try. It's a goddam waste of time, that's what it is.

Anyway, I went through France, and some of that was pretty neat, it really was, and all of it was historical as hell—not that I was ever any good at history. What I mean is, every single stinking bit of it happened a long time ago—some of it happened a goddam long time ago—so how am I supposed to get all excited when some phony moron of a teacher stands there and goes on and on about it? It's not easy, I tell you.

After I was done with old France, I went over to Germany because it's next door, you know—and I took this boat trip up the Rhine. I don't know what the hell "Rhine" means in German, but it looks like it oughta mean "sewer." The whole river smells like somebody laid a big old fart, too. It really does. I won't ever complain about the Hudson when I get home, and you can walk across the Hudson, practically.

When I get home. *If* I get home. The boat stopped at this place called Isenstein. It's a real dump, I tell you, but back of it there's a kind of a crag thing with a castle on top. I wasn't gonna get off the boat—I'd

paid the fare all the way up to Düsseldorf, wherever that is—but the river just smelled so bad I couldn't stand it any more, so I left. Maybe they'd let me back on the next one. And if they didn't, who cares? I had piles of money and traveler's checks and stuff.

Well, let me tell you, the streets in old Isenstein didn't smell so good, either. That was partly because it was still right *next* to the Rhine, and it was partly because the people there had the most disgusting personal habits in the world. I saw this one guy standing in the street taking a leak against the side of a crumby old dirty brick building, and it wasn't even like he was drunk or anything. He was just *doing* it. And then he went on his way happy as you please. I wouldn't've believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, and that's the truth.

They had a church there, so I went inside and looked around. I always tried to look at those cultural things, because who knows when I was ever coming back again? Coming back to Europe, I mean—I wouldn't've come back to Isenstein if you *paid* me, you can bet your bottom dollar on that. But the church was pretty dirty and crumby, too. By the time I got done looking at it, I was feeling pretty goddam depressed. I really was. So I got the hell out of there.

I was feeling pretty goddam *hungry*, too. I was feeling hungry as a sonuvabitch, if you want to know the truth. I didn't exactly want to eat in Isenstein—it really was a filthy place. You have no idea how filthy it was. But I was *there*. Where else was I gonna eat, is what I want to know.

Getting something to eat when you don't speak the language is a royal pain in the ass. If you're not careful, they're liable to give you horse manure on a bun. I'm not kidding. I'm really not. When I was in France, I got a plateful of *snails*, for crying out loud. Real snails, like you step on in a garden somewhere and they go crunch under your shoe. With butter. If you think I ate 'em, you're crazy. I sent 'em back pretty toot sweet. That means goddam fast in French. But whatever they gave me instead didn't look much better, so I got the hell out of *that* place toot sweet myself.

Over across the street from the church in old Isenstein was this joint where you could get beer and food. Nobody in Germany cares if you're twenty-one. They don't give a damn, swear to God they don't. They'd give beer to a *nine*-year-old, they really would. If he asked for it, I mean.

So I got a beer, and the guy sitting next to me at the bar was eating a sandwich that didn't look too lousy—it had some kind of sausage and pickles in it—so I pointed to that and told the bartender, "Give me one of those, too." Maybe it was really chopped-up pigs' ears or something, but I didn't *know* it was, so it was all right if I didn't think about it too much. The guy behind the bar figured out what I meant and started making one for me.

I'd just taken a big old bite—it wasn't terrific but I could stand it, pigs' ears or not—when the fellow sitting next to me on the *other* side spoke up and said to me in English, "You are an American, yes?"

If you want to know the truth, it made me kind of angry. Here I was *starv*ing to death, and this guy wanted to strike up a conversation. I didn't want to talk. I wanted to eat, even if it didn't taste so good. So with my mouth full, rude as anything, I said "Yeah" and then I took another bite, even bigger than the first one.

He didn't get mad. I'd hoped he would, I really had, but no such luck. He was a very smooth, very polite guy. He was a little flitty-looking, as a matter of fact—not too, but a little. Enough to make you wonder, anyhow. He said, "We do not often Americans in Isenstein have." He talked that way on account of he was foreign, I guess. I took another bite out of this sandwich—it probably *was* pigs' ears, it sure tasted like what you'd think pigs' ears'd taste like—and he asked me, "What is your name?"

So I told him, and he damn near—I mean *damn* near—fell off his chair. "Hagen Kriemhild?" he said. Boy, he must've had cabbages in his ears or something, even if I was still kind of talking with my mouth full. "Hagen *Kriemhild*?"

"No," I said, and told him again, this time after I'd swallowed and everything, so he couldn't foul it up even if he tried.

"Ah," he said. "*Ach so*," which I guess is like "okay" in German. "Never mind. It is close enough."

"Close enough for what?" I said, but he didn't answer me right away. He just sat there looking at me. He looked very *intense*, if you know what I mean, like he was thinking a mile a minute. I couldn't very well ask him what the hell he was thinking about, either, because people always lie to you when you do that, or else they get mad. So instead I said, "What's *your* name?" You can't go wrong with that, hardly.

He blinked. He really did—his eyes went blink, blink. It was like he'd forgotten I was there, he'd been thinking so goddam hard. He'd been thinking like a madman, I swear to God he had. Blink, blink—he did it again. It was crumby to watch, honest. I didn't think he was going to tell me his lousy old name, but he did. He said, "I am called Regin Fafnirsbruder."

Well, Jesus Christ, if you think I even *tried* to say that like he said it, you're crazy. I just said "Pleased to

meetcha" and I stuck out my hand. I'm too polite for my own good sometimes, I really am.

Old Regin Fafnirsbruder shook hands with me. He didn't shake hands like a flit, I have to admit it. He said, "Come with me. I will you things in Isenstein show that no American has ever seen."

"Can't I finish my sandwich first?" I said—and I didn't even want that crumby old sandwich any more. Isn't that a hell of a thing?

He shook his head like he would drop dead if I took one more bite. So I went bottoms-up with my beer—they make *good* beer in Germany, and I wasn't about to let *that* go to waste—and out of there we went.

"Whaddaya got?" I said. "Is it—a girl?" Could you be a pimp and a flit at the same time? Would you have any fun if you were? I always wonder about crazy stuff like that. If you're gonna wonder about crazy stuff, you might as well wonder about *sexy* crazy stuff, you know what I mean?

"A girl, *ja* . Like none you have ever met." Old Regin Fafnirsbruder's head went up and down like it was on a spring. "And also other things." He looked back over his shoulder at me, to make sure I was still following him, I guess. His eyes were big and round as silver dollars. I'm not making things up, they honest to God were. So help me.

"Listen," I said, "it's been nice knowing you and everything, but I think I ought to get back to my boat now."

He didn't listen to a word I said. He just kept going, out of Isenstein—which wasn't very hard, because it's not a real big town or anything—and toward that tumbledown castle on the crag I already told you about. And I kept walking along after him. To tell you the truth, I didn't *want* to go back to the boat, or to the smelly old Rhine. The farther away from there I got the better, you bet.

All of a sudden, these really thick gray clouds started rolling in, just covering up the whole goddam sky. It hadn't been any too gorgeous out before, but *these* clouds looked like they meant business, no kidding. "Hey," I said, kind of loud so old Regin Fafnirsbruder would be sure to hear me. "You got an umbrella? It looks like it's gonna pour."

"*Ja*," he said over his shoulder. Yeah it was gonna pour or yeah he had an umbrella? It wasn't like he *told* me, for crying out loud, the stupid moron. I'll tell you, *I* didn't have any umbrella. Jesus Christ, I didn't even have a crumby *hat*. And my crew cut is so short, it's like I don't have any hair at all up there, and when it rains the water that hits on top of my head all runs down right into my face, and that's very annoying, it really is. It's annoying as hell.

But old Regin Fafnirsbruder started up this crag toward the tumbledown old crumby ruin of a castle, and I kept on following him. By then I was feeling kind of like a goddam moron myself. I was also panting like anything. I haven't got any wind at all, on account of I smoke like a madman. I smoke like a goddam *chim* ney, if you want to know the truth.

Sure as hell, it started to rain. I knew it would. I *told* old Regin Fafnirsbruder it would, but did he listen to me? Nobody listens to you, I swear to God it's the truth. This big old raindrop hit me right square in the eye, so I couldn't see anything for a second or two, and I almost fell off this lousy little path we were walking on, and I would've broken my damn neck if I had, too, because it was a *crag*, remember, and steeper than hell every which way.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Slow down!"

That's when the biggest goddam lightning bolt you ever imagined smashed into me and everything went black, like they say in the movies.

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When I woke up, there was old Regin Fafnirsbruder leaning over me, almost close enough to give me a kiss. "You are all right, Hagen Kriemhild?" he asked, all anxious like I was his son or something. I think I'd kill myself if I was, I really do.

"I told you, that's not my name." I was pretty mad that he'd taken me all this way and he couldn't even bother to remember my crumby old name. It's not like it's Joe Doakes or John Smith so you'd forget it in a hurry. I sat up. I didn't want to keep laying there on account of he might try something flitty if he thought I couldn't do anything about it or anything. "What the hell happened?"

Right then was when I noticed things had started turning crazy. Old Regin Fafnirsbruder had asked me how I was in this language that wasn't English, and I hadn't just understood him, I'd *an* swered him in it, for Chrissake. Isn't that gorgeous? I figured the lightning had fried my brains but good or something.

Then I realized it wasn't raining any more. There wasn't a cloud in the goddam *sky*, as a matter of fact. Not even one. It was about as sunny a day as old Isenstein ever gets, I bet.

I took a deep breath. I was gonna say "What the hell happened?" again—old Regin Fafnirsbruder hadn't told me or anything—but I didn't. And the reason I didn't is that the breath I took didn't stink. With the nasty old Rhine running right by it, the air in Isenstein always smelled like somebody just laid the biggest fart in the world right under your nose.

But it didn't, not any more. It smelled like grass and water—*cleanwater*—and pine trees, almost like one of those little air freshener things, if you know what I mean. Too good to be true. It wasn't one of those, though, on account of I could smell cows and pigs and horses, too, somewhere way the hell off in the distance. It was like I wasn't by a town any more, like I'd gone off into the country. But I was still sitting right where that old lightning bolt had clobbered me.

Old Regin Fafnirsbruder started dancing around. I'm not kidding, he really did. He had this grin on his face like he was drunk, and he was kind of halfway between doing an Indian war dance and jitterbugging. Watching the old sonuvabitch shake his can like that was pretty damn funny, it really was.

"I did it!" he yelled, not keeping time with his feet or anything. "My magic worked!" He still wasn't speaking English, but I understood him okay.

"Crap," I said. Actually, I didn't say "crap," actually, but what I said meant the same thing as crap, so that was all right. "What do you mean, your magic?"

He still didn't answer me. He was too busy dancing and hollering and having a high old time. He was a very self-centered guy, old Regin Fafnirsbruder was, egocentric as hell. It made him a real pain in the ass to talk to, to tell you the truth.

"What do you *mean*, your crumby magic?" I said again. I hate it when I have to repeat myself, I really do.

Finally, he remembered I was there. "Look!" he said, and he gave this wave like he was in the lousiest, corniest movie ever made. I swear to God, this wave was so goddam big that he almost fell off the side of the mountain himself.

So I looked. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction, but I finally went and did. I looked back over my shoulder, and I almost felt like the lightning plowed into me all over again. There was the Rhine, all right, like it was supposed to be, only it was blue, blue as the sky, blue *er* than the goddam sky, not the color the water in a toilet bowl is when somebody gets there *just* in the nick of time. No wonder it didn't stink any more.

And somebody'd taken old Isenstein and stuck it in his back pocket. Instead of a real town, there were these maybe ten houses by the riverside, and they all had roofs made out of straw or something. So maybe old Regin Fafnirsbruder *had* worked magic. If he hadn't, what the hell had he done? I didn't know then and I still don't know now.

When I got done gawking at Isenstein—it took me a while, believe me—I looked up to the crumby old tumbledown castle at the top of the crag. There it was, all right, big as life, but it wasn't crumby or old or tumbledown any more. What it looked like was, it looked like somebody built it day before yesterday. There wasn't a single stone missing—not even a pebble, I swear—and all the edges were so sharp you could've cut yourself on 'em. Maybe not even day before yesterday. Maybe yesterday, and I mean yesterday after *noon*.

Oh, and there was this ring of fire all the way around the castle. I didn't see anything burning up, but I sure as hell saw the flames. I heard 'em, too—they crackled like the ones in your fireplace do, only these were ten or twenty times as big. When I was a little kid, I had this book about Paul Bunyan and Babe the giant Blue Ox. It was a pretty crumby book with really stupid pictures, but I remembered it right then anyway on account of if old Babe had tried to walk through those flames, he'd've been short ribs and steaks in nothing flat, and I mean well-done.

"Now shall you your destiny fulfill." I already told you old Regin Fafnirsbruder talked like that sometimes. He did it even when he wasn't speaking English. He wasn't much of a conversationalist, old Regin Fafnirsbruder wasn't.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I said. "And where the hell did Isenstein go, anyway?"

"That is Isenstein, Isenstein as it is now," he said, and then a whole lot of weird stuff I didn't understand at all, and what language he was talking in didn't matter a goddam bit. Time flows and sorceries and I don't know what. It all sounded pretty much like a bunch of crap to me. It would've sounded even more like a bunch of crap if I hadn't kept looking back at that little handful of houses where old Isenstein used to be. Then he pointed up the hill. "You shall to the castle go. You shall through the flames pass. You

shall the shield-maiden Brunhild asleep there find. You shall with a kiss her awaken, and you shall with her happily ever after live."

"Oh, yeah?" I said, and he nodded. Just like before, his head bobbed up and down, up and down, like it was on a spring. If he wasn't the biggest madman in the world, I don't know who was. But he was calling the shots, too. I may not apply myself too much—people always go on and on that I'm not *apply* ing my goddam self till I'm about ready to puke sometimes—but I'm not stupid. I'm really not. Old Regin Fafnirsbruder knew what he was doing here, and I didn't have the faintest idea. So I figured I'd better play along for a while, anyway, till I could figure out what the hell was going on.

"Go to the castle up," he said. "You will it is all as I have said see."

I went on up. Now he followed me. Like I said before, the old castle looked so new, it might've just come out of its box or something. Sure as hell, the fire went all the way around the goddam place. The closer I got, the more it felt like fire, too. I pointed to it. I made damn sure I didn't touch it or anything, though, you bet. "How the hell am I supposed to get through that, huh?"

"Just walk through. You will not harmed be. My magic assures it."

"Oh, yeah?" I said. Old Regin Fafnirsbruder's head bobbed up and down some more. He looked pretty stupid, he really did. "Oh, *yeah* ?" I said. He kept right on nodding. "Prove it," I said to him. "You're such a madman of a wizard and everything, let's see *you* go on through there without ending up charbroiled."

All of a sudden, he wasn't nodding so much any more. "The spell is not for me. The spell cannot for me be," he said. "The spell is for you and for you alone."

I laughed at him. "I think you're yellow, is what I think." I figured that'd make him mad. If somebody's a coward, what's he gonna hate more than somebody else coming out and *tell* ing him he's a coward, right?

I guess it worked. I guess it worked a little too goddam well, if you want to know the truth. Because what happened was, old Regin Fafnirsbruder came up and gave me a push, and he *pushed* me right into those old flames.

I screamed. I screamed like hell, as a matter of fact. But I didn't burn up or anything—he was right about that. The fire felt hot, but hot like sunshine, not hot like fire. It hurt a lot more when I fell on my ass from the push, it honestly did.

"What'd you go and do *that* for, you goddam moron?" I yelled, and then I started to go on *out* through the fire. I didn't get very goddam far, though. It wasn't just hot like sunshine any more, let me tell you. It burned the tip of my shoe when I stuck it in there, and it would've burned the rest enough, too, if I'd been dumb enough to give it a chance.

Old Regin Fafnirsbruder was laughing his ass off watching me looking at my toasted toe. "You must what I want do," he said. "Then will you what you want get. When you come out with Brunhild, you may through the fire pass. Until then, you must there stay."

"You dirty, filthy, stinking goddam moron," I said. "I hope you drown in the goddam Rhine."

He just ignored me, the lousy sonuvabitch. He had no consideration, old Regin Fafnirsbruder didn't. I started up toward the fire again, but I didn't stick my foot in it this time—you bet I didn't. I sat down on the ground. I felt so depressed, you can't imagine how depressed I felt.

But after a while I stood up again. What can you do when you're just sitting around on your butt and all? I thought I'd get up and look around a little, anyway. So I did that, and I came to this door. I opened it—what the hell? At least old Regin Fafnirsbruder couldn't keep staring at me through the flames any more. And after I went through, I slammed the hell out of that old door. To tell you the truth, I kind of hoped I'd break it right off the hinges, but no such luck.

I thought I'd end up in this big old hall full of guys making pigs of themselves and getting stinking and pinching the serving girls on the butt the way they did back in medieval times, but that isn't what ended up happening. I walked into this little—bedroom, I guess you'd call it, but it wasn't a bed this girl was laying on, it was more like a little sofa or something.

She was kind of cute, as a matter of fact, if you like big husky blondes. But I'd never seen a girl in chainmail before. To tell you the truth, I'd never seen *any* body in chainmail before, and sure as hell not anybody sleeping. It looked uncomfortable, it really did.

She had on a helmet, too, and a sword on a belt around her waist, and this shield was leaning up against the bed or sofa or whatever the hell it was. I stood there for a while like a crumby old moron. In the fairy tales you're supposed to kiss the princess, right, and she'll wake up and you'll both live happily ever after. That was what old Regin Fafnirsbruder had told me would happen, but you'd have to be a real moron not to see he was playing the game for him and nobody else. And if I kissed this girl and she didn't happen to like it or she thought I was trying to get fresh with her or something, she was liable to *mur* der me, for Chrissake.

I wished I could've figured out some other way to get out of there. I hate doing what anybody else tells me to do. I hate it like anything, if you want to know the truth. Even when it's for my own good and everything, I still hate it. It's nobody's goddam business but mine what I do. Not that anybody listens to me. Yeah, fat chance of that. You think old Regin Fafnirsbruder gave a damn about what I thought? Fat chance of that, too.

But I was stuck in this old castle. I was stuck really bad. If Brunhild there couldn't get me the hell out, who could? Nobody. Just nobody. So I leaned down and I gave her this little tiny kiss, just like it *was* a fairy tale or something.

Her eyes opened. I'd expected they would be blue—don't ask me why, except she was a blonde and all—but they were brown. She looked at me like I was dirt and nobody'd invented brooms yet. Then she said, "You are not Siegfried. Where is Siegfried?" She spoke the same language as old Regin Fafnirsbruder, whatever the hell it was.

"I dunno," I said. I bet I sounded really smart. I sounded like a goddam moron, is what I sounded like. "Who's Siegfried?"

Her face went all soft and mushy-like. You wouldn't think anybody who was wearing armor could look so sappy, but old Brunhild did. "He is my love, my husband to be," she said. Then she sort of frowned, like she'd forgotten I was there and was all of a sudden remembering—and she didn't look any too goddam happy about it, either. "Or he was to have been my husband. The man who came through the fire can claim my hand, if he so desires."

I've always been backasswards with girls. Here she was practically saying she'd *let* me give her the time, but did that make me want to do it? Like hell it did. What it did was, it scared the crap out of me. I said, "I don't want to marry *any* body, for crying out loud. I just want to get the hell outa here, if you want to know the truth."

Brunhild thought about that for a couple seconds. Then she sat up. The chainmail made little clink-clank noises when she moved—molding itself to her shape, you know? She had a hell of a shape, too, I have to admit it. A really nice set of knockers.

"What is your name?" she said, so I told her. Just like old Regin Fafnirsbruder's had, her eyes got big. "Hagen Kriemhild?"

If you really want to know, I was getting pretty goddam tired of that. I said it again, the right way, louder this time, like you would to somebody who was pretty dumb.

But it went right by her. I could tell. Old Brunhild wasn't much for intellectual conversation. She said, "How came you here, Hagen Kriemhild?"

"That's a goddam good question." I explained it as well as I could. It sounded crazy as hell even to *me*, and I'd been through it. She was gonna think I'd gone right off the deep end.

Only she didn't. When I finally got through, old Brunhild said, "Regin Fafnirsbruder is an evil man. How not, when Fafnir his brother is an evil worm? But I shall settle with him. You need have no doubt of that."

She stood up. She was almost as tall as I was, which surprised me, because I have a lot of height and she was a girl and everything. But she really was, so help me God. She took out her sword. It went *whEEP* when it came out of the old scabbard, and the blade kind of glowed even though the bedroom wasn't what you'd call bright or anything.

"What are you gonna do with that thing?" I said, which has to be one of the stupidest goddam questions of all time. Sometimes I scare myself, I really do. Am I a goddam moron, too, just like everybody else?

But old Brunhild took it just like any other question. "I am going to punish him for what he did to me, for this humiliation. Come with me, Hagen Kriemhild, and guard my back. He has besmirched your honor as well as mine."

I don't know what the hell she thought I was gonna guard her back *with*. I had some German money in my pocket, and my traveler's checks and all, and a little leftover French money I'd forgotten to change,

and that was about it. I didn't even have a *pocket* knife, for crying out loud, and I'm not what you'd call the bravest guy in the world anyhow. I'm pretty much of a chicken, if you want to know the truth. But I followed old Brunhild out there just the same. If she could get out through the fire, maybe I could too. I hoped like hell I could, anyway.

There was old Regin Fafnirsbruder on the other side of the flames. He gave Brunhild the phoniest bow you ever saw in your life. "So good you to see," he said. What he sounded like was, he sounded like the headwaiter at this fancy restaurant where all the rich phonies and all their whory-looking girlfriends go to eat and he has to be nice and suck up to the sonsuvbitches all day long even though he hates their stinking guts. "Does your bridegroom you please?" He laughed this really dirty laugh. Pimps *wish* they could laugh the way old Regin Fafnirsbruder laughed right then, honest to God.

Old Brunhild started yelling and cussing and whooping and hollering like you wouldn't believe. She started waving that goddam sword around, too. She wasn't very *care* ful with it, either—she damn near chopped *me* a couple of times, let me tell you. I had to duck like a madman, or I swear to God she would've punctured me.

All old Regin Fafnirsbruder did was, he kept laughing. He was laughing his ass off, to tell you the truth. He really was.

Well, that just made old Brunhild madder. "You will pay for your insolence!" she said, and so help me if she didn't charge right on out through the fire. I halfway thought she'd cook. But she was hotter than the flames, and they didn't hurt her one bit.

Anyway, I figured I'd better try and get outa there, too. Old Regin Fafnirsbruder had said Brunhild was my only chance of doing that, and *she'd* said I was supposed to guard her back even though I didn't know what the hell I was supposed to do if somebody did go and jump on her. So I ran after her. People always say I never listen to *any* body, practically, but that's a goddam lie. Well, it was this time.

I didn't run all that goddam *hard*, though, on account of I didn't *know* for sure if the fire would let me go the way it did for old Brunhild. But it felt like it did when that goddam sonuvabitch moron bastard Regin Fafnirsbruder pushed me through it going the other way—it was hot but not *hot*, if you know what I mean.

Let me tell you, old Regin Fafnirsbruder didn't look any too happy when Brunhild burst out of the ring of fire with me right behind her—not that he paid all that much attention to *me*, the lousy crumbly moron. Actually, when you get down to it, I can't blame him for that, to tell you the truth. Here was this ordinary

guy, and here was this goddam *girl* with chainmail and this sword coming after him yelling, "Now you shall get what you deserve!" and swinging that old sword like she wanted to chop his head off—and she *did*, honest to God.

But old Regin Fafnirsbruder was a lot sprier than he looked. He ducked and he dodged and she ran right on by him. The sword went *wheet!* a couple times but it didn't cut anything but air. And old Regin Fafnirsbruder laughed his ass off again and said, " *Your* blade is my life to drink not fated."

Well, old Brunhild was already madder than hell, but that only pissed her off worse. She started swinging that sword like a madman—up, down, sideways, I don't know what all. I swear to God, I don't know how old Regin Fafnirsbruder didn't get himself chopped into dog food, either, I really don't, Hou *dini* couldn't have gotten out of the way of that sword, but Regin Fafnirsbruder did. He was a bastard, but he was a *slick* bastard, I have to admit it.

Finally, he said, "This grows boring. I shall another surprise for you one day have." Then he was gone. One second he was there, the next second he wasn't. *I* don't know how the hell he did it. I guess maybe he really was a magician, for crying out loud.

Old Brunhild, she needed like half a minute to notice he'd disappeared, she really did. She just kept hacking and slashing away like there was no tomorrow. She'd already hit the ceiling in fourteen different places, and she wasn't anywhere close to ready to calm down. I wanted to keep the hell out of her way, was all I wanted to do right about then, if you want to know the truth.

Only I couldn't. There was this castle with the ring of fire around it, and there was the slope that headed down toward old Isenstein and the Rhine that didn't stink any more, and there were me and old Brunhild. That was it. Talk about no place to hide. If she decided I was in cahoots with old Regin Fafnirsbruder after all, she'd chop me in half. I didn't know how the hell he'd dodged her, but I knew goddam well *I* didn't have a chance.

Anyway, Brunhild *fi* nally figured out old Regin Fafnirsbruder'd flown the coop. She didn't rub her eyes or go "I can't believe it" or anything like that. She just sort of shrugged her shoulders, so the chainmail went clink-clank again, and she said, "Curse his foul sorcery."

Then she remembered I was there. I swear to God, I wouldn't've been sorry if she'd forgotten. She walked over to me, that crazy armor jingling every step she took, and she looked up into my face. Like I said before, she didn't have to look *up* very goddam far, on account of she had almost as much height as I did.

"You came through the fire for me," she said. "You did it unwittingly, I think, and aided by Regin Fafnirsbruder's magecraft, but the wherefores matter only so much. What bears greater weight is that you did it."

"Yeah, I guess I did."

Old Brunhild nodded. The sun shone off her helmet like a spotlight off the bell of a trombone in a nightclub. She took this deep breath. "However it was done, it was done. As I said when first you woke me, if you would claim me for your bride, you may." And she looked at me like if I was crumbly enough to do it, she'd spit in my eye, honest to God she did.

Isn't that a bastard? Isn't that a bastard and a half, as a matter of fact? Here's this girl—and she's a *pretty* girl, she really is, especially if you like blondes about the size of football players—and she was saying "Yeah, you can give me the time, all right, and I won't say boo," only I know she'll hate me forever if I do. And when old Brunhild hated somebody, she didn't do it halfway. Ask Regin Fafnirsbruder if you don't believe me, for crying out loud. And she was holding on to that sword so tight, her knuckles were white. They really were.

I said, "When I woke you up back there, in that crazy old castle and all, didn't you tell me you were in there waiting for Sieg—for somebody?" I couldn't even remember what the hell his name was, not to save my life.

"For Siegfried." Old Brunhild's face went all goeey again. I'd kind of like to have a girl look that way when she says *my* name—or else I'd like to puke, one or the other. I'm not sure which, I swear.

"Well," I said, "in that case maybe you'd better go on back in there and wait some more, don'tcha think?"

She swung up that old sword again. I got ready to run like a madman, I'm not kidding. But she didn't do any chopping—it was some kind of crazy salute instead. "*Ja*," she said, just like old Regin Fafnirsbruder, and then she put the sword back in the sheath. "I will do that." And then she leaned forward and stood up on tiptoe—just a little, on account of she was pretty goddam tall, like I say—and she kissed me right on the end of the nose.

Girls. They drive you nuts, they really do. I don't even think they *mean* to sometimes, but they do anyway.

I wanted to grab her and give her a real kiss, but I didn't quite have the nerve. I'm always too slow at that kind of stuff. Old Brunhild, she nodded to me once, and then she walked on back through the fire like it wasn't even there. I heard the door close. I bet she laid down on that old sofa again and fell asleep waiting for old Sieg-whatever to get done with whatever he was doing and come around to give her a call.

As soon as that door closed, I decided I wanted to kiss her after all. I ran toward the ring of fire, and I damn near—*damnnear*—burned my nose off. I couldn't go through it, not any more.

No Brunhild. Damn. I shoulda laid her, or at least *kissed* her. I'm *always* too goddam slow, for crying out loud. I swear to God, it's the story of my life. No Regin Fafnirsbruder, either. I don't know where the hell he went, or when he's coming back, or if he's *ever* coming back.

If he's not, I'm gonna be *awful* goddam late making that Rhine boat connection to old Düsseldorf.

What's left here? A crumby castle I can't get into and that little tiny town down there by the river where Isenstein used to be or will be or whatever the hell it is. That's it. I wish I'd paid more attention in history class, I really do.

Well, what the hell? I started toward old—or I guess I mean new—Isenstein. I wonder if they've invented scotch yet. I swear, I *real* ly wish I'd paid more attention in history class.

Jesus Christ, they're *bound* to have beer at least, right?

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