

### Brandr, Freya's Blade

They call me a crazy old woman and mostly they're right. I refused to live in town with the family, instead I lived out here in the middle of nowhere. A crazy old woman in a ramshackle old farmhouse a mile back on a dirt road. The small acreage of the land backing up against Sumter National forest. I sat in the old recliner in a room only lit by the flickering light of a television that I had turned down almost forty five minutes ago. It had been almost two decades since I had felt that familiar pain at the base of my neck. Stabbing me in the base of my skull with an intense enough pain to let me know I was no longer alone.

My body was trying its damndest to respond but at one hundred and eighty seven years old it had aged beyond the warranty as the saying goes. My fingers were gnarled with crippling arthritis and it made me wish that I wasn't the oldest lived member of my line. Every nerve in my body screamed for me to go get my spear but there was no way for me to hold it now. I stood and managed to grab onto the padded handles of the walker and began making my way slowly and painfully for the corner near the kitchen which was as close as I could get to a central location. I could hear the clack of the beast's claws on the porch just outside and it spurred me to attempt to move with greater speed. This decision nearly cost me everything as I over-balanced and nearly fell into the floor. I managed to regain my balance and resumed my snail pace progression towards the corner. The door rattling in its frame as something tested the lock. You're going to need more than that asshole but keep playing it cautious. I need every second I can get right now. You may kill This Brandr tonight but I won't be going alone. ByrnHild, grant your daughter the strength to do what needs to be done. Boom! Suddenly the door shuddered under a great impact and I could hear snarling from beyond the heavy wooden door. Five feet more. Boom! Crack! The timbers of the door cracked just below the cross beam. Four more feet. Boom! Shrack! The door disintegrated into a thousand wooden splinters which filled the room with a deadly storm of shards and I let the walker and myself tumble forward which threw me hard to the floor. I managed to get out of the line of the shrapnel but the hard fall jarred my old body badly. Luckily I had fallen forward. One foot. I started pulling myself forward inch by painful inch.

I heard the howl of a wolf that wasn't a wolf behind me. His spittle landing on my back, His fetid breath Making me wretch which caused stars to go off behind my eyes. Six inches. He leans in close and sniffs at me, his head throwing back to howl in triumph. My hand closes around the butt of the shotgun. He senses movement and throws his head forward, jaws snapping. I managed to roll over, shouldering the shotgun as tightly as my hands would allow and laid the short barrel of the twelve gauge just inside his open maw. Our eyes locked and I pulled the trigger.

"Silver pellets asshole. See how you like that." I said. I was grateful for the semi auto action as it chambered another round and I unleashed it into his face once more. Watching his confusion as yet another blast tore through what might have been flesh and bone. The flesh evaporated as it was shredded from the impact and another round slid home and I raised it slightly, triggering it into his eyes and watching his head explode in a spray of blood and viscera that painted the room behind him in noir death. He fell forward and I started to heave him off myself when I felt a stinging in my chest. A sharp pain that was as bad as anything I'd ever felt and I knew that I'd pushed my old body too hard, too fast and now I had to pay the price. My eyes squeezed shut against the pain. Looks like he got what he had come for anyway, Hildy ole girl. It's been a good life and I've got few regrets. I wish my daughter had lived to take this on but she didn't and now it's going to fall to Greta, my granddaughter. I see her face

in my mind even as I start to fade away. I smile but then I feel hands rolling me over. Greta is here! I should have known that she would come. I try to tell her to leave me as she tears my dress to start CPR.

“The closet Greta! Forget me! Go to the closet! You’re gonna need...” My world exploded in pain and I couldn’t speak and I knew it was the end. My heart locked into a death spasm and I screamed and the world went black.

When I returned to consciousness I knew I was dead. I was aware but I was bodiless. I started to panic then I felt others around me and I was reminded that I was far more than old Hildy, Nana Hildy. I was a Brandr, a Blade from the line of ByrnHild, a daughter of Freyja and now that there was a new Bandr it would fall to me to become her mentor. She was going to need help and I would as well. I was grateful that we wouldn’t need language to communicate in this realm. I felt a shift that shuddered deep inside and I knew the transition was underway.

### **Greta**

I raced through the door, well ok the ragged hole where the front door had once been. What in the hell had happened here?

“Nana! Nana!” I shouted as I drew up short to keep from tripping over the mangled body of what had to be the largest dog I’d ever seen. The room was destroyed and filled with blood and gore. The stench was overwhelming and I threw my hand over my mouth and nose as I struggled to fight down the bile rising in my throat. My eyes were wide with panic and I could feel hysteria crowding in on my thoughts but I had to find Nana Hildy. Then, my eyes fell upon her. She was sprawled on the floor, a shotgun clutched in one hand and the other hand clutching at her heart. Pushing past the creature that she had apparently killed with the twelve gauge and knelt beside her. I tore her blouse so that I could allow her to breathe easier as I tried CPR. I saw a scar on her chest and allowed my hand to trace the strange design, discovering that there was something underneath it which shaped the details of the scar. She awoke and reached up to grab my wrist.

“For...get me...the closet, Greta dear. The closet. You need the sp... you need the...” She gasped and then fell back, her heart spasming once more. She screamed and a moment later so did I what was happening? Why was my chest burning as if someone had poured molten steel on it? I could feel myself dropping into a bottomless blackness. When my eyes blinked open sometime later I could tell something had happened to me. I felt different. My body felt as if it were humming with vitality and strength. I was bursting at the seams with some strange energy that seemed to flow through me as if I had closed a circuit.

I rolled over and looked at Nana but she was gone. Her body was already cooling and the room swam before me once more.

“We have no time for that, Greta! Pull yourself together!” I heard my grandmother’s voice. I looked over but she was still dead. Her eyes clouded over. I shook my head and pushed up from the floor, searching for my cell phone.

“You don’t have time for that foolishness Greta! Besides you would just be dragging anyone who responds into danger!”

"Nana? Is that you? Am I losing my mind?" I said. Whether aloud or simply in my mind I couldn't tell you.

"It is and you most certainly are not. Now quit this silly school girl act and listen to me." The voice in my head spoke once more.

"What are you trying to tell me?" I said. This was really weirding me out but somehow it seemed eerily familiar.

"I'm trying to tell you to get that sweet ass in gear, sugar bear! You remember the scar you felt on my breast bone just before I died?" The voice said.

"You mean you really are...?" I said.

"Yes Greta my child, I'm truly dead." The voice said.

"Then how are you talking to me?"

"Remember the scar you felt on my breast bone just before I died?" Nana said.

I just nodded, unable to speak.

"Feel your own now" The voice said gently. My hand lifted and with trembling fingers I touched my chest and felt the scar now on myself in the same spot as it had been on Nana. With growing terror I traced the shape feeling the same depiction of the phases of the moon as I had seen earlier.

"My body is dead but as a Brandr my consciousness has been drawn into the amulet. Every Brandr since Freyja freed Brynhild when the Gods still roamed Midgard resides in this amulet after death. We are neither mortal nor immortal. We are Brandr, The Blade and chosen by Freyja.

"So we are like some kind of superhero?" I said. Even a disembodied voice filling my head couldn't convince me of such foolery. This world wasn't made for heroes, super or otherwise. The world favored those who were cold and calculating. Those that placed personal avarice over the welfare of others. The ruthless and the wicked. I was only 20 years old but I knew that as surely I knew the sun rises in the east.

"Pay attention child! You're not a superhero or a fairy tale legend. You're the current Brandr. You're the chosen of Freyja and the last line of defense in the darkness."

"I'm a college student who just found her grandmother dead underneath the nearly decapitated body of some large animal." I said.

"That's only the surface you. Search deep within and discover what lies there. Trust your instincts, make your choice but hurry because if you want to survive the next few minutes you'll push doubts aside and embrace your destiny. They're drawing closer even as we speak. "

"They?" I asked.

"The beast laying on the floor was not alone. The others are at the woodline waiting to see the results of their leader's attack." By this point they are growing anxious, impatient and as soon as the smell of his blood reaches them they will swarm this house. If you wish to live Greta, my child, then you will do as I

say." I stood listening and a sound that was hardly a whisper reached my ears. I realized that my hearing was somehow keener than it had been just mere moments before. The energy racing through my body seemed to reach out and suddenly I could feel them all around me drawing closer from all sides. My mind was rebelling at the information which my newly enhanced senses were relaying to me. Another heartbeat and I shook my head and pushed my questions and doubts away. In all likelihood I was about to die but better a slim chance than no chance.

"Very well, what do you want me to do Nana?" I said.

"The closet under the stairs. Quickly, now." Nana said. I took two large steps and opened the door to the closet. Inside was not the usual old clothes and broken junk that one normally finds in the home of an elderly person. The walls were polished steel and there were weapons of all kinds hanging on the walls and a low bench which ran along the back wall. There were also shields and bucklers and bracers. I marveled at the names for all of these pieces of lethal equipment which I had never seen before. I then realized that the information was being supplied by Nana.

"Quickly child. Arm yourself and buckle on the armor that I'm showing you now." She said as an image of myself wearing a set of armor and carrying weapons. I could hear the clacking of claws on the drive and around the house now and I started throwing everything as she had shown me. A howl rent the air as if the very hounds of hell had been loosed upon me and I heard padded feet pounding against the would floor tearing towards me at breakneck speed. I reached down and grabbed a sickle and a short handled mace which had strange runes standing out from its surface. I spun low to the floor, my right hand holding the sickle slicing upward. I felt the point hang in flesh for just a moment and then it raced upward to pull free just below the breast bone. A thin bloody trail marked its passage and then he reached for me and it was like a zipper on a cheap overnight bag. I dived between its legs even as it burst open, a pinata filled with visceral and blood. I had no time to dwell on it though. The next one was in my face, its large claws lashing out tearing at my shoulder joint. Four bloody furrows opened up along the path of its claws even as my arm filled with a liquid fire. I gritted my teeth against the scream that fought to escape my throat. I swung out with the sickle and it bit through the arm severing bone and flesh as it dropped free and the mace in my left hand arced around and connected with the base of his skull. The bone shattered like an eggshell, splinters driving deep in its brain. The small room allowed me to strike out with impunity against the horde while their large size and numbers hampered them. Wild chaos erupted, conscious thought cast aside as inefficient, instinct took over and for several long minutes there was nothing but blood and death.

I stood, bloodied and wounded but unbroken as the last one fell. Pulling deep heavy breaths into my tortured lungs, I let my twitching muscles relax for just a moment.

"Hurry child, empty the closet into your auto and then we will torch the house. Freyja will send a fire that will burn hot enough to consume the bodies."

"I must retrieve yours first then Nana." I said.

"No child. It is just an empty husk now. Let it burn with the rest. Though I wouldn't mind you retrieving that Browning shotgun." Nana said. I could hear the fondness she felt for the gun.

I hurried and placed the weapons and armor in my trunk and my backseat. The little Honda bursting at the seams. I stood in front of the house which held so many memories and so much love. My throat

closed up as the emotions of the little girl overwhelmed the already shaky sanity of a woman who had seen too much without time to process the changes of this night. My hands flew up as if of their own accord and a spell whispered from my lips in a language that I had never heard. A guttural chant. Powerful and strong and harsh. The night wind throbbing with power.

Suddenly the entire house exploded in flames, catching all at once and I was forced backward by the heat.

Standing in the light of the flames I remembered my wounded arm and grimaced. The arm was caked in dried blood so I couldn't see the extent of the damage but I remembered how deep the gashes had felt when he had struck. I reached into the car and pulled out a bottle of water and wet the sleeve of a spare shirt and washed away the chunks of flesh caught in the thick, black rivulets of dried blood. As the blood gave way to the water and the scrubbing, I discovered to my amazement that the wound was healed with only the pink of new flesh to show where less than a half an hour before there had been deep, ugly gashes, pouring blood.

"Child we need to leave now. We shouldn't be here when the authorities arrive." The voice of Nana that wasn't quite Nana said in my mind.

"Where am I supposed to go? I can't ride around with all these weapons. That's what they like to call probable cause." I said.

"Why, home, dear."

"What? I can't take all that to my apartment. I have three roommates you know and there's no way I'm taking it to dad's and pulling him into this insanity." I said. Panic creeping into my guts.

"No. Certainly not. I would never involve Harold in this." Nana said.

"Then where is home Nana?" I asked.

"Just think of it as the batcave dear." She said, my head filling with directions as she prattled on. Nana was wrong about one thing, heroes are real and I was on the journey to discover if I had what it takes to join them. I turned on the radio and smiled as Born to be Wild roared from the speakers.

I don't know how this journey is going to end but it's going to be one hell of a ride.

**The End**