CINDA
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CHILDREN of RAGNAROK

THE RUNESTONE SAGA

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SUNDGARD SAGA

ON A MORNING LATE IN autumn, the year he turned five, Eiric Halvorsen was milking the cows in the summer barn when he heard his modir calling him.

"Eiric! They're home!"

He scrambled to his feet, nearly kicking over the steaming bucket in his haste. He did not have to ask who was home. Most other vessels had already returned to the village of Selvagr for the winter, but his fadir and grandfadir had sailed off alone in late summer and had not returned. Several times a day, his modir climbed the headland and looked out to sea. As the days grew shorter and darker and colder, he'd seen the shadows of worry gathering in her eyes.

By the time he'd put the milk out of harm's way, released the cow from her cross ties, and run down to the beach, the little ship was already pulled up on the sand, and his grandfadir Bjorn was wading back and forth, unloading. There wasn't much–none of the usual gold, silver, tools, and trade goods they brought back from summer raids.

Something else was wrong. His fadir, Leif, stood at the water's edge, holding a little girl by the hand. His modir, Sylvi, faced them,

her arms crossed over her chest, a dangerous light in her eyes.

Eiric wanted to greet his fadir and grandfadir, but the tension was so thick he didn't dare.

The stranger had golden skin, chestnut eyes, and hair the color of comb honey. She was taller than Eiric, so he knew she must be older. In her ragged moss-colored tunic, she resembled a landvaettir—a forest spirit from Bjorn's stories.

Was this the only treasure they'd brought back after weeks on the water?

Bjorn hung back as Leif led the little girl up to Sylvi. "This is my dottir, Sylvi," he said. Leif was always a man of few words. He spoke better with his blades and fists. "Her name is Liv."

"Liv is not my name," the little girl said, her voice quivering. "My name is Heidin. I brought the gift of magic to Asgard—and they betrayed me. I have returned to make them pay."

Leif ignored her. "I met her modir the summer after you and I were married. Now her modir is dead." He gave Liv a little push toward Sylvi.

"She's not dead," Liv announced to everyone. "I don't need another modir."

"Nor do I need another mouth to feed," Sylvi snapped, looking at Leif.

Leif stood his ground. "Please, Sylvi," he said. "She doesn't have anyone."

"I don't *need* anyone," Liv said, clutching a pendant that hung from a chain around her neck. But Eiric saw the tears pooling in her eyes, threatening to spill over.

Maybe Sylvi noticed that, too. She hesitated, stormy faced, biting her lower lip.

"The girl has magic in her, Sylvi," Bjorn said, finally speaking up. "And this world could use a little magic."

Eiric edged closer so that he could see the magic for himself. One side of Liv's face was puckered and scarred, to the point that she could scarcely open her left eye. Her left arm, also, was shiny with scar tissue. Had magic done that?

If that was magic, he wanted no part of it.

"She's been through a lot, as you can see," Bjorn said to Sylvi's silence. "She needs a safe haven."

Sylvi glared at Bjorn, a look cold enough to freeze milk inside a cow. "This is your fault, Fadir," she said. "You promised me you wouldn't go back there."

Then she turned back to Leif. "If I accept this child," she said, "then you must promise me you won't return there."

"Sylvi, I–"

"You must promise," she repeated. "Or sail away with your dottir for good."

"All right," Leif said. "I promise."

"Both of you must promise," Sylvi said, looking at Bjorn.

"I promise," Bjorn said, not meeting her eyes.

"I've heard promises before," Sylvi said. "To make sure that you keep it, you must give me the sunstone."

"No!" Bjorn protested. "That's not right. Since when does a dottir tell her fadir what to do?"

"Since her fadir breaks his promises," Sylvi said.

"I gave you the farm when you married," Bjorn protested.

"Aye, you did," Sylvi said. "So I ought to be able to decide who lives here, who I cook for, spin for, plant for, make butter and cheese for. I'd rather live proud and penniless on the streets than be shamed in my own home."

"All right," Bjorn said finally. "The stone is yours."

Sylvi extended her hand. "Now."

Eiric edged closer to the young stranger. "What's a sunstone?" he

whispered, hoping she might tell him when the adults would not.

"Shut up, barbarian," she said.

Bjorn fished in his carry-bag and drew out a sealskin pouch. Reluctantly, he dropped it into Sylvi's hand.

Now Sylvi shifted her gaze to Leif. "And the amulet."

The girl clutched her pendant with both hands. "No," she said.

"Let her keep it," Leif said. "It's the only thing she has from–"

"If she wants to join our household, then that is the price. You say she has magic in her. I cannot risk an eight-year-old sorceress with a grudge in this house."

It took both Bjorn and Leif to wrest the pendant from Liv. She ran back down the beach to the water's edge, gripped the prow of the longboat, and attempted to push it off the sand and out into the bay. In the end, Leif slung her over his shoulder and carried her back to Sylvi, setting her on her feet, but keeping one hand on her shoulder to prevent another attempted escape.

"Give it back," Liv said to Sylvi. "Give it back, or you'll be sorry." Something about the way she said it made the threat convincing.

"You leave my modir alone," Eiric said, stepping between them.

"Such a wee fierce warrior," Liv said, appraising him.

"Eiric," Sylvi said, quelling him with a look. "Liv has lost her modir and she is far from home. Think how frightening that must be."

"I am not frightened," Liv said, glowering. "You detain me at your peril."

Sylvi stowed away the sunstone and the pendant, then knelt next to Eiric, putting her hand on his shoulder but speaking to the stranger. "Hello, Liv. Welcome to Sundgard."

"My name is Heidin," Liv said.

Sylvi searched her face. "You have an old soul, and no doubt countless names. But here at Sundgard, your name is Liv." She

paused, and when Liv said nothing, continued. "This is my son, Eiric. He could use an older systir."

Suddenly, Eiric found himself pinned by those chestnut eyes. Liv lifted her chin and looked down her nose at him. After a long moment, she seemed to reach a decision. "He does look like he needs help," she said. "I will stay here for now."

From that day forward, the farm at Sundgard became the richest, most productive farm in all of Muckleholm.