

BANE of ASGARD

THE RUNESTONE SAGA

Also by Cinda Williams Chima

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BANE
— of —
ASGARD



THE RUNESTONE SAGA

HARPER

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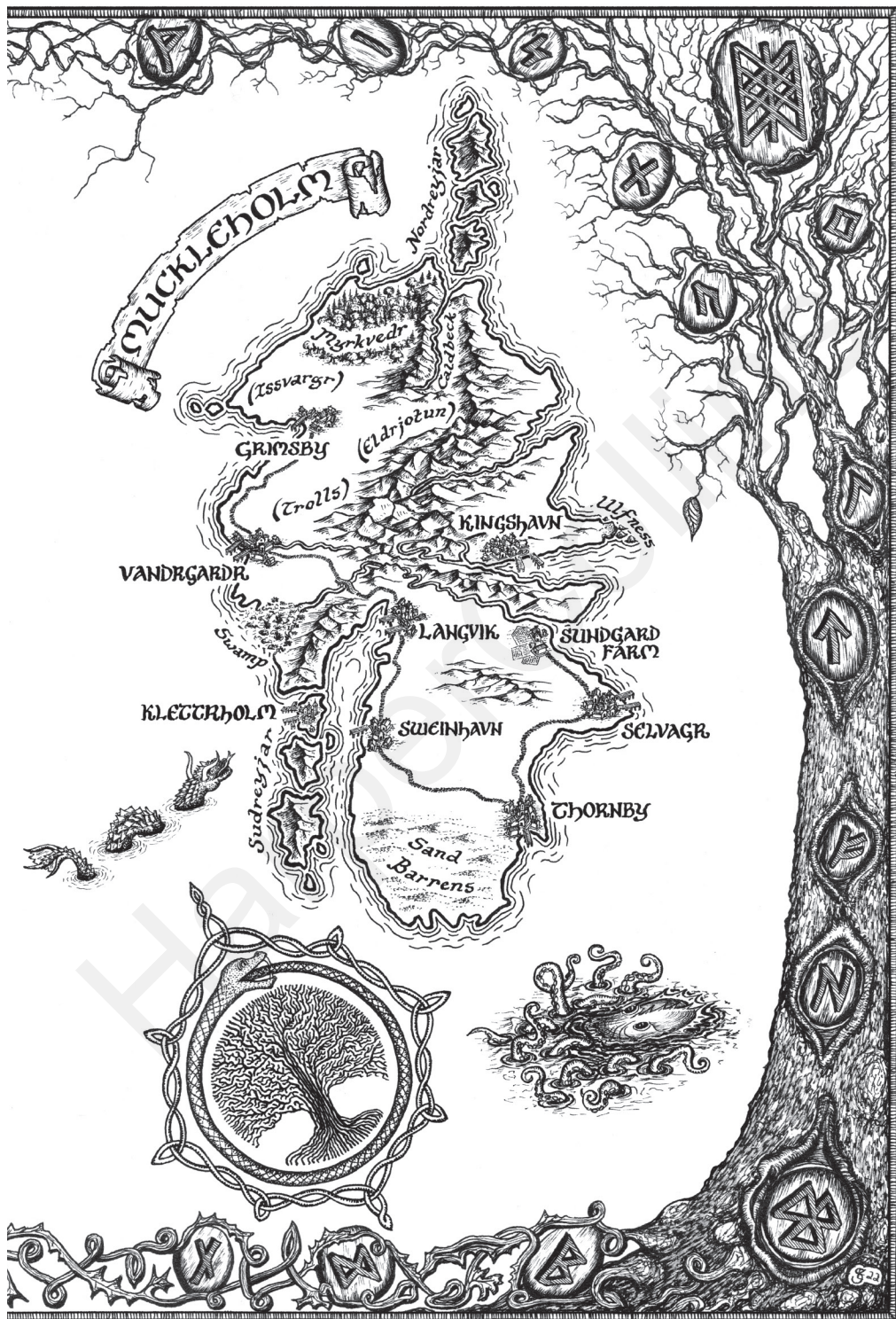
To my grandsons, Jack Archer and Isaac Williams Chima.

*May books take you to all the magical places and open your
hearts to the people and possibilities just beyond your grasp.*

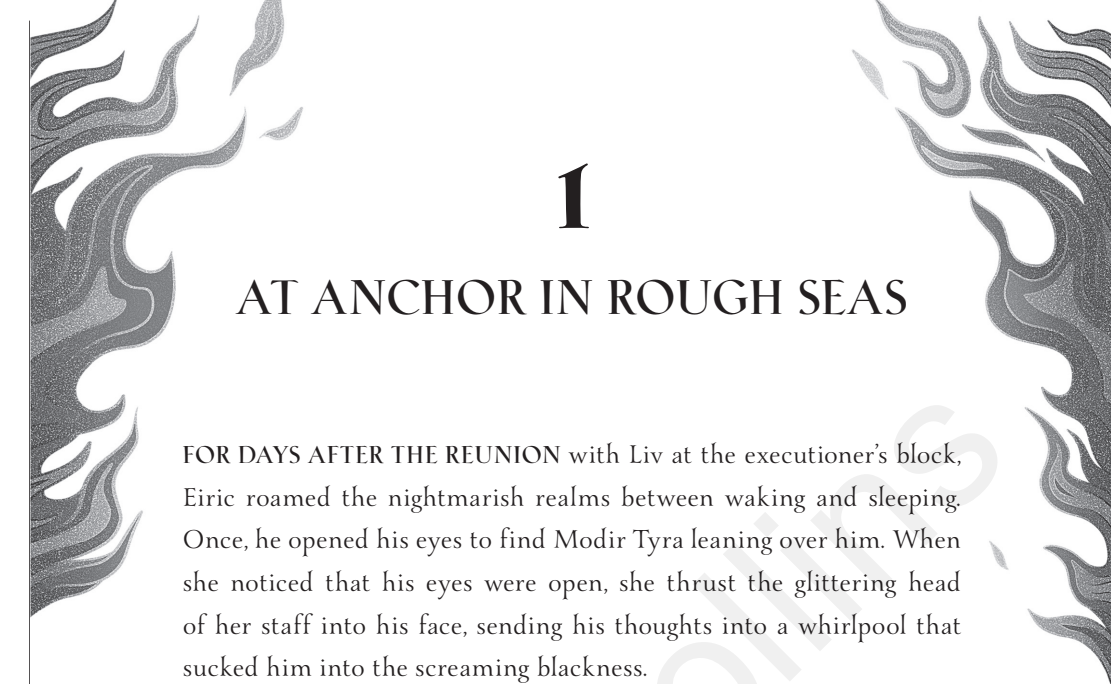
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1

AT ANCHOR IN ROUGH SEAS

FOR DAYS AFTER THE REUNION with Liv at the executioner's block, Eiric roamed the nightmarish realms between waking and sleeping. Once, he opened his eyes to find Modir Tyra leaning over him. When she noticed that his eyes were open, she thrust the glittering head of her staff into his face, sending his thoughts into a whirlpool that sucked him into the screaming blackness.

Or maybe that never happened. Maybe it was a dream.

His mind was a mingle of old stories and new, some his own, and some unfamiliar. Whenever he tried to sort them out, he encountered barriers and bridges that he couldn't cross. One thing he knew—he'd done something unforgivable, and he deserved to die for it.

He heard Liv's voice, felt her calloused hand on his forehead. He opened his eyes, catching a glimpse of blue silk before his head went spinning and he closed them again.

"What's wrong with him?"

"I don't know, dottir," Tyra said. "I have tried to restore his wits, but he's unreachable. This must be the result of his time in the deadlands. No one has ever gone there and survived. It explains his attack on the council and the keeper. He will never be the brodir you remember."

Liv's breath hissed out in frustration. "It's not his fault."

"Maybe not, but in his present state of mind, he poses a danger to us all." Tyra paused, lowered her voice. "You shouldn't spend so much time here, Firebird. It serves no purpose, and it only breaks your heart."

Liv straightened the bedclothes around him. "I hate to see him like this."

"Which is why you should have let the execution proceed."

"No," Liv said flatly. "I am not giving up on him. There has to be something that can be done."

"He will betray you, Heidin."

"He is my brodir. He will not."

"He cannot help it. It is in his nature. Your fadir betrayed us, and his son will, too."

Heidin? Her name was Liv. A memory pricked at him. A little girl on the beach, clutching her amulet, saying, "Liv is not my name."

Tyra's voice again, like syrup of poppy dripping into his ears. "You must let go of him. There is too much to do." After a brief pause, she said, "I have something that will ease his path. He will feel no pain, I promise."

Maybe that would be best, Eiric thought. No guilt, no pain. No chance he would kill again. And, since he didn't believe Bjorn's stories about Valhalla, no penalty for dying in his bed.

But Liv wasn't having it. "Without Eiric, I never would have made it home," she said. "In the Archipelago, we looked out for each other. If he is in this situation, it is because of me."

"Even if he recovers, he cannot be allowed to return to the Archipelago, Heidin."

"He can stay here," Liv said. "Who wouldn't choose New Jotunheim over Muckleholm?"

"You cannot keep an Asgardian warrior like a pet," Tyra said.

"Don't forget—my fadir was Asgardian, too."

"Yes," Tyra said. "He was. He provided the spark of divinity we needed. We've all made sacrifices so that you can ascend your rightful throne. I worry that you are not taking the long view, that you are blinded by an affiliation that—"

"Do *not* force me to make a choice, Modir," Liv said in a voice as brittle as ice at midwinter. "You may not like my decision. And if anything

happens to Eiric—anything at all—I will lay it at your door.”

After a long, charged pause, Tyra said, “Very well. We’ll hope for the best.”

That was the end of that conversation.

He remembered little about the days that followed, beyond the dreams that came and went. A few times, he was aware of Liv in the room, glaring at him as if she could will him back to his senses.

There was a kind attendant who bathed him and washed his hair and tried to persuade him to take a little broth, a bite of porridge. She was wary as a skogkatt, but when he tried to speak to her, to reassure her, it came out all wrong.

Other times, it was Tyra, stirring his thoughts like a poisonous cauldron.

You are a danger to your systir. People blame her for what you did. You stand in the path of her ascent to greatness. The days of the Asgardians are past. You must step aside.

I would never hurt Liv, Eiric said.

You already have. The best thing you could do for her is to leave this world for the next.

He couldn’t have said for how long he drowned in an ocean of regret, with some consciousness of people coming and going. Liv. No. Heidin. Liv was gone. Tyra. Once, Eiric opened his eyes to find a soldier leaning over him, elderflowers pinned to his tunic, a dagger in his hand and death in his eyes.

“Troels!” someone hissed. “Leave him be. It’s not worth it. He’ll be dead, soon enough.”

Eiric closed his eyes again and waited for the prick of a blade that never came.

Until one day a mix of familiar voices called him up from the depths. Liv’s and . . . one other. He swam desperately toward the light. He’d nearly broken the surface, when all at once he startled awake, feeling as if someone were running a lit taper over the skin at the base of his neck.

He opened his eyes.

She leaned over him, her finger on his collarbone, tracing a design. Her hair smelled of flowers, and flame, and flint against steel. Her face was familiar, bringing memories of healing and kisses and goodbyes.

But who was she?

"Please," he whispered. "Stay." He grabbed her wrists, so thin and breakable, afraid that she would fade away like every good dream. This was one dream he wanted to live in a little longer.

"I'm not going anywhere, Eiric," she said. "But you must let me go."

Eiric. Was that his name?

"Who are you?" he said. "I think I know you, but I can't remember."

"My name is Reginn," she said. "We met in Langvik."

He whispered her name so he wouldn't forget.

Reginn.

She tried to pull free, and he tightened his grip. "Don't leave," he said, as if she were a raft in a killing flood.

"I will come back," she said, "if you let go. You're hurting me."

"I'm sorry," he said, finally releasing his hold.

He settled back, overcome with weariness, and fell into a sleep more peaceful and healing than any he'd had since he'd awakened on the beach on Ithavoll.

At first, she came nearly every day and sometimes twice a day. Often she would sit by the side of his bed and bring out her flute. Sometimes that was the only thing that would quiet the waking dreams that ambushed him constantly.

Each time, when she left, he would whisper, "Don't go."

And Reginn would say, "I'll be back."

Liv came less often now—she seemed to be busy day and night. He missed her fierce and disappointed gaze.

And still, nearly always at night, Modir Tyra came. She looked

disappointed, too, though he guessed for different reasons. Several times, he heard Liv and Tyra arguing in the hallway outside his cell.

Nobody could argue like his systir Liv, but Tyra came close.

He was aware of time passing, of rising and falling like a boat anchored in rough seas, the winds shifting constantly. He didn't seem to be improving. He knew, better than most, that the best-made craft would founder eventually, if left to the mercy of the weather.