THE GIRL WHO DREAMED IN MAGIC

Maria Kuzniar



PUFFIN

PUFFIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Puffin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

www.penguin.co.uk
www.puffin.co.uk
www.ladybird.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2024

001

Text copyright © Maria Kuzniar, 2024
Illustrations by Nakul P.

The moral right of the author and illustrator has been asserted

Set in 11/16.5pt Sabon LT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–62466–1

All correspondence to:
Puffin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

For Paul Kuzniar, who will always be my little brother,
even though you're now much taller than me!


SAGA'S VILLAGE
RUVSÁ'S WINTER CAMP
THE WITCH'S CAVE


BIFROST
THE SORCERERS' ICE CASTLE
THE FAR NORTH
CANUTE'S VILLAGE
NORVEGR



PROLOGUE

One day, some years ago, a seer walked into a village. The village had been carved out between mountains and sea, on lands that were born on the winds of magic. As the seer passed through, her staff thumping into the snow, people stepped back, afraid of her power.

It was said that she could see a thousand years into the future and could tell you the day you'd die . . . whether you wanted to know or not.

Just beyond the village square, she stopped before a wooden house shaped like a ship, and when she knocked on the door of the longhouse with her staff it opened with a creak. A tall man stood in the doorway, taking in

her clouded eyes and hands gnarled like roots. He nodded sadly. 'I knew she was special,' he murmured.

The seer made her way over to a fire crackling and spitting in the centre of the room. On a fur before the flames lay a baby and a bear cub, curled up together like two crescent moons.

The seer peered down at them milkily. 'The seers speak of a girl,' she said. 'A girl braver than a raider and fiercer than an eagle, who will ride a bear over the tundra during the dayless night.'

The man watched as his baby granddaughter opened her eyes and smiled up at him, her gaze as blue as the oldest glacier. 'You have a magical destiny, Saga,' he told her, filled with pride and worry.

The seer turned to leave.

'Wait,' called out Saga's grandfather. 'Why have you come to tell us this?'

The seer hesitated before the door. 'The girl will dream magic.' Her lined face drooped. 'And she holds the fate of the North in her hands.'

PART ONE

THE VILLAGE

The village had been carved out between mountains and sea, on lands that were born on the winds of magic.



CHAPTER ONE
A MAGICAL DESTINY

'Bjørn, no!' Saga Thorolfsdottir laughed as her brown bear lumbered over to the cauldron on the fire. It was breakfast time inside their cosy longhouse, and Saga was twelve years old today. She'd been left in charge of the porridge while her grandfather fetched a mystery present from his little workshop next door.

Bjørn looked at her, then back at the cauldron filled with the porridge he was particularly fond of. Slowly, he lifted a paw.

Saga narrowed her eyes at him. '*Bjørn*.'

With a playful snuffle, Bjørn dipped his paw into the cauldron.

Saga squealed, 'No!' The last time they'd had porridge, Bjørn had accidentally tipped the whole cauldron over in his excitement and it had taken *days* to get all of the clumps out of his fur.

But this time Bjørn huffed cheekily and waved his paw – his *clean* paw – at Saga, delighted that she'd fallen for his teasing.

Saga giggled.

The longhouse door thudded open. Snow flurried around Saga's grandfather, who stood there dressed in furs, his hair tied back above his silvering beard. He grunted as he carried something large and wooden inside.

'There,' he said proudly, standing the sledge next to their table. 'I have finished.' His bright blue eyes twinkled at her.

'Thank you, Afi.' Saga ran over and hugged him, breathing in the smell of the tundra and forest on his furs. She had grown up on stories of her afi's bravery, how he had sailed to distant lands and battled other clans that lived in the North. But there had been no more of that since Saga's parents had died. Now the only wars he fought were against the wood he shaped into wonderful things for the village, and instead of spending his days at sea he spent them with Saga. It was funny to hear of her afi being a fierce warrior when he had the kindest eyes she'd ever seen.

Saga examined her new sledge eagerly, already excited to try it out. It had carved wooden runners that would fly over the snow, and it was reinforced with iron to make it strong enough for her bear to sit on too. She ran her hands over it, but when her touch reached a tiny engraving, she pulled back as if she'd been bitten.

'Saga,' her grandfather began, 'you cannot avoid the runes forever. It is time to –'

'The porridge will be done now,' she interrupted, walking back to the fire.

She knew what he was going to say. Runes were a gift from Odin, the one-eyed god of wisdom and magic. They were tools – ways to channel magic. But, when used by the right person, they could be unbelievably powerful. Over the years, Afi had taught Saga all kinds of useful things – like how to start a fire in the snow, how to fight with a sword and how to make the tastiest porridge – but she'd never let him teach her how to use magic.

Saga's mind flew back to the day when the trolls had last lumbered over the mountains and stormed their little village. Saga had been just five. She remembered hearing screams and hiding under the table as her parents turned to the runes to defend the village. The magic of the runes tore through their longhouse with a great ice-bright *whoosh*, splintering the wooden walls and turning little Saga's hair silver.

The trolls were blasted away yet the magic soared on, gathering and growing, until the entire village was protected by a shimmering shield of magic. It glimmered from mountaintop to mountaintop, leaving only a secret sliver open in the harbour. A doorway for boats to sail through. No trolls had been able to invade since; the shield remained in place to this day.

But Saga's parents had not survived channelling such great power. And, though Saga couldn't remember them dying, whenever she thought of magic it was tangled up with the horror of that day and the details that had somehow stuck in her memory: the cracking of wood as their longhouse was split open and the stench of the trolls. She had vowed to the gods that she would never carve a single rune. Shuddering, she kept her head turned from the sledge – and the rune for safe travel that her grandfather had engraved on it.

Bjørn snuffled at her sympathetically, patting her back with a paw as she ladled out porridge into three bowls, two small, one large. She drizzled honey on top and placed the bowls on the low pine table. Her grandfather had shucked off his furs and was sitting, watching her silently. Saga started eating her porridge, sweet and sticky, not sure what to say. She told her afi almost everything; there was nobody better to cheer her up with a story or sort out her problems with his wise advice, but lately this old

argument kept rearing up between them, attacking their conversations with teeth and claws. Saga didn't like it one bit. They were all the family each other had. Except for Bjørn.

Saga rested one hand on her bear's side, his fur comforting and warm, making her feel better right away. Their little family of three might look a bit different to other families, but for Saga they were her home and, though she sometimes missed her parents, she couldn't imagine life any differently.

Bjørn dunked his nose into his larger bowl and began slurping. Saga giggled. When she glanced at her grandfather, his mouth twitched. But it wasn't long before he pushed his bowl away and sighed. 'You are twelve years of age today, Saga. You must learn to battle this fear against magic.'

Saga's heart filled with frost. Some days it felt as if magic was soaked into the land itself, from the runes scattered around her small village, to the sorcerers that lived in their ice castle in the islands of the Far North, ruling from the source of magic and guarding Bifrost, the burning rainbow bridge that led to the world of the gods. It was getting harder and harder to avoid it. To everybody else, magic was wondrous and exciting. But for Saga it was the stuff of nightmares.

'We can start small,' her afi continued, pulling his knife from the scabbard he wore, strapped across his

right shoulder. He dug the blade into the table and carved a rune for protection.

Saga could hear it, humming through the wood. She stood up, shaking her head. The sound seemed to rattle her bones and she turned cold with fear.

'No, I don't want to.'

Her grandfather stood too. 'If you do not practise, there will come a day when you wish you had,' he said. 'Do not forget –'

'I know – you keep telling me that I have a magical destiny.' Saga's voice cracked like sea ice. 'But I don't want it.'

She ran to the door, pausing only to snatch up her furs and her skates before fleeing outside. 'I never have!'