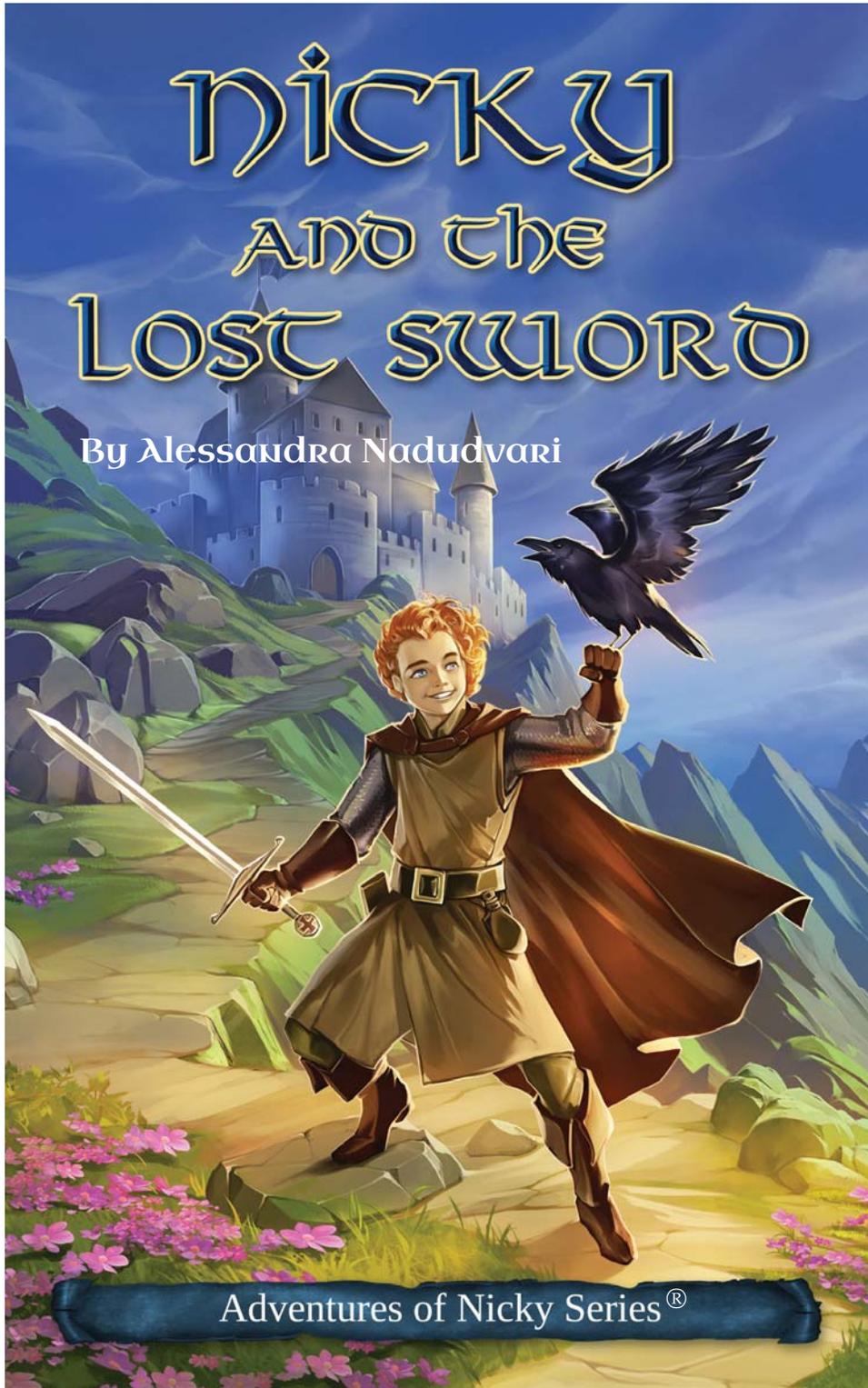


nicky AND THE LOST SWORD

By Alessandra Nadudvari



Adventures of Nicky Series®

nicky AND THE LOST SWORD

Book three of Adventures of Nicky

by Alessandra Nadudvari

First Edition



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To my family and motherland, Slovakia

Also by Alessandra Nadudvari

NICKY AND THE LOST TEMPLAR
NICKY AND THE LOST STAR

Reviews

NICKY AND THE LOST SWORD

"I loved the first two books in the series, but *Nicky and the Lost Sword* blew my mind, captured my heart and sent my soul soaring. Even long after finishing it I feel as though a part of me continues to live within the story. Alessandra Nadudvari has a knack for writing magical novels, and this great book is destined to become a timeless classic."

Tim Loncarich, *Trillions magazine*

NICKY AND THE LOST TEMPLAR

"I'm four chapters in, and I am really liking it! I enjoy stories of mythology and fable, but rarely get to see Canadian-ish stories shine through. The disparity between Norse, Templar, and Mi'kmaq is intriguing! I'm going to promote your reading to every student in grades 4 and up!"

Eric Drew, *Youth Services Librarian—Halifax Public Libraries*

“In time I exist, and of time I speak. What time is, I know not.”
– St. Augustine

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story is about many things, but primarily it is about Slovakia. It is the country of my childhood and youth – a place I continue to visit and dream about. In my mind, Slovakia is a land that is both real and magical. It is a realm of tall mountains, ice caves, medieval castles and Slavic gods. As such, it is a perfect setting for the third adventure of our young hero, Nicky Reed.

When we first met him, Nicky was just a boy of 12 years. He had no friends outside his family circle – only pets. He yearned for an adventure and found one on the south shore of Nova Scotia, Canada. (Or should we say the adventure found him?) Once he arrived on Talon Island in St. Margaret's Bay, strange things started to happen. A pair of talking ravens called Hugin and Munin popped into his life. An old steamer trunk with a false bottom came into his possession. In it was a silver flask with a rhyming treasure map. When the ghost of a 14th-century knight named Jean Baptiste de Saisi appeared, he recruited Nicky into the Order of the Knights Templar. The boy was entrusted with the Order's secrets and became the new guardian of its treasure.

After his first adventure, Nicky took a detour to Saskatchewan. He turned 13 and got a job as a junior newspaper reporter. His story about a famous gangster car from the Prohibition era attracted the attention of a Texan millionaire seeking the long-lost Irish crown jewels. While Nicky tried to solve the mystery of the diamond Star of Ireland, he fell in love with a Métis girl and made friends with a Sikh boy. Things became more complicated with the arrival of Special Agent Pinkerton of Interpol, who accused Nicky's parrot, Plato, of espionage. Our hero came face to face with a ghost train, a UFO and the spirit of Scarface, a gangster who guarded the entrance to an old steam tunnel. Nicky recovered the Irish crown jewels from the tunnel and was rewarded for his efforts. The Reed family used the reward money to permanently move to Nova Scotia.

Nicky and the Lost Sword is Nicky's third adventure, in which he reunites with his raven friends, Hugin and Munin. Their boss, the Norse god Odin, pays him a visit and delivers a disturbing prophecy. Nicky is about to fly to Slovakia – the land of his mother's ancestors – but Odin's prophecy makes him worried. To increase his chances of a safe return, he decides to bring Hugin on his trip. Their future is wrought with peril – the kind that lurks in medieval castles, underground tunnels and forests inhabited by forgotten gods. Nicky's character will be put to the test once more, as will his Templar oath...

The future is always rooted in the past. My own roots are firmly

set in Slovakia and extend all the way to Hungary. Because of my mixed heritage, I decided to populate this novel with characters of both Slovak and Hungarian origin. The pronunciation of their names, as well as the names of traditional dishes, clothing, etc., is listed at the end of the book. There, you will also find a glossary and a short compilation of Slovak proverbs.

And now, if you are ready, take my hand and step with me through a portal in time. It leads into a distant past where castles loom, Templars ride and a great adventure awaits.

CHAPTER 1

The light of day was fading. Our ship was becalmed in an ocean of fog that was growing thicker by the minute. Its long tendrils wrapped around the oars that dipped in and out of the malachite waters of the Atlantic. The men seated on the rowing benches worked in silence, their ears pricked for the smallest sound indicating a shore was nearby. A distant cry of a gull, the surf crashing against jagged rocks... anything that would uplift their weary hearts. But the dense fog smothered all such signs of hope.

We were lost.

“Release the raven!” commanded a tall man whom I instantly dubbed “Longshanks” because of his long legs. He was gripping the rudder and watching the swelling waves with some concern. A pointy helmet sat atop his mass of blond hair. Its matted strands were crusted with sea salt and hung like dreadlocks down over his red cloak. The word “Viking” came to mind, and I wondered if I was dreaming. There were no Vikings in the 21st century, not real ones anyway – the kind that smelled like a marooned goat and could split a skull with one axe stroke.

“Are you sitting on your ears? Release the raven, I said,” Longshanks repeated and pierced me with his cold blue eyes.

I glanced over my shoulder, but everyone else was either rowing or sleeping. It would appear he was talking to me. A deep croak that could only have come from the throat of a raven made me look down. On the planks of the deck rested a crude cage with a blanket thrown over it. Intrigued, I pulled it away and met the stare of a grown male raven.

“Hugin?” I ventured, wondering how my winged friend had wormed his way into my Viking dream. Or was it the other way around? Maybe I was in *his* dream, which would make it even more interesting. But why would Hugin dream about sailing on a *knarr* and being in a cage? This had to be some kind of archetypal vision quest.

The raven I knew in my real life was a half-normal, half-magical creature who dwelt in the forest behind my house and who frequently popped into my life and occasionally invaded my sleep. He and his twin brother, Munin, were as wild as the wind and as wise as oak trees. They were my best friends. Trustingly, I reached for the cage in my dream and unlatched the door, only to come within a centimetre of having my fingers taken off by the raven’s mighty beak.

“Ouch,” I said, withdrawing my hand hastily. I scowled at the

naughty raven who was obviously not *my* Hugin.

“Careful, they bite,” chuckled an old man seated nearby on a studded sea-chest. He was dressed head to toe in a blue woollen cloak with a hood that fell deeply into his face, obscuring all but his white beard. I moved aside so that he could reach the cage and watched his gnarly fingers close around the bird from behind, pressing its wings down as if it were a docile chicken. He then whispered something into the raven’s ear and released it into the air. Heads turned as black wings fluttered and disappeared in the milky-white fog.

An uneasy, expectant silence fell over the ship’s crew. But it did not take long before the bird circled back, landing atop the mast.

We were still lost.

The sailors grumbled and shook their heads. One of them besought the Christian god while his friend was fingering Thor’s hammer, an amulet hanging around his neck. The morale was dropping as fast as the temperature. I hoped the Vikings wouldn’t vent their frustration on the navigating raven. The rascal was ignoring the crew below and casually preening his feathers.

“What’s the raven’s name?” I asked, turning to the old man who had so kindly saved my fingers from amputation.

“Why, Hugin. What’s yours?”

“Nicky Reed,” I replied hesitantly and shot another curious look at the raven.

The revelation that his name was Hugin stumped me. Just how many Hugins were there? I personally knew one, and I also knew he was descended from the Norse god Odin’s spy raven by the same name. Munin told me once that their exalted ancestor had drunk some strong mead and woken up on a Viking ship bound west. It was a fascinating and humorous story based on an event from over a thousand years ago, when the Norse sailed from Iceland to Canada. *Hmm.*

I looked around me and took in the creaking ship and her motley crew in bright red or blue tunics, furs and strips of linen or wool wound around their legs for thermal insulation. The dented helmets, the sea-chests that held swords and booty, the square sail with red and white stripes that hoped to harness the wind... This *was* a thousand years ago.

“Whoa,” I breathed out and pinched myself.

If this was a dream, it was very realistic. Perhaps someone could clarify it for me.

“Um, excuse me.” I turned to the old man, who was watching me intently from under his hood. “What did you say your name was?”

“The Wanderer,” he said and leaned forward conspiratorially. “Would you like me to tell your fortune, Nicky Reed?”

I was about to decline when the raven flew down from the mast

and took a seat on the Wanderer's shoulder. The man stroked the navigating bird's long beak and gave him a morsel of food. I could swear the raven whispered something into his ear, but I couldn't make out the words. I sensed an omen was forthcoming.

"Hugin tells me you need to see your future in order to save your past," the Wanderer translated.

"I don't understand," I said, shaking my head and wishing I would just wake up from this strange dream.

"Let's ask the runes," the old man suggested and reached into the recesses of his cloak. A rather ordinary leather pouch materialized. The Wanderer shook it and unwound the thong that held it shut. He then peered inside to make sure all of the pieces were still there and stuck the pouch under my nose.

"Pick three runes," he said. "No fewer and no more."

After a moment's hesitation, my innate curiosity prevailed. I reached inside the pouch, half expecting to be bitten by a tiny dragon that might be living there. My fingers brushed against what felt like domino tiles – only these were not plastic; nor was their shape rectangular.

"Bones," the Wanderer explained. "I carved them myself."

I swallowed hard and selected three pieces that I then placed on top of the raven's cage. All three of us – the Wanderer, Hugin and I – stared at the runic symbols. I knew they were much like letters of the alphabet.

"F," the raven screeched, and the Wanderer nodded.

"Right you are. F stands for *Fehu*."

"And what does that signify?" I asked.

"Wealth," he said. "This first rune describes your past."

"It's true," I murmured, thinking of a treasure that had come into my life two years before. It was the treasure of the Knights Templar, who had brought it to Nova Scotia in the 1300s. I had met one of them, Jean Baptiste de Saisi, or, rather, his ghost. He had felt that he was fading and chose to transfer the guardianship of the treasure to me. It was a huge gift and an even bigger burden.

"Wealth causes strife among kinsmen," the Wanderer mused.

Once again, he was correct. I still remembered vividly how the treasure had driven Chester Seaboyer, a local diver, completely mad. The last time I saw him, he threatened me with bodily harm unless I divulged the location of the Templar cache. Thanks to a ruse, I saved both the treasure and myself while dispatching Chester to an uncertain fate. He disappeared and was never heard from again. Maybe he was still out there, plotting a comeback. I shivered at the prospect.

"G," the raven read from the next rune, which had the shape of the letter X.

“My favourite,” the Wanderer said as he cracked a smile and stroked his beard. “*Gebo* means gift and stands for the now.”

“Does it mean I get a present?” I perked up. How cool would it be to receive a genuine Viking gift, even if it was only in a dream?

“No, you have to give a gift first,” the old man corrected me and turned his right palm up, a universal sign of receiving.

I blushed and searched my pockets hastily. Because all of this was occurring during my sleep, I hoped I could simply conjure up something valuable. It was not to be. In the end, all I could find was an oatmeal cookie, a relic of last night’s bedtime snack. Presently, I offered it to the Wanderer, who snatched it up.

“My mother made it,” I explained. “It’s organic, made with sultana raisins and sweetened with maple syrup.”

He bit into it and chewed thoughtfully. After he had eaten one half, he gave the rest of the cookie to the raven. Hugin caught it nimbly in his large beak and took off, presumably to eat in private.

“What’s maple syrup?” the Wanderer asked.

“It’s made from the sap of maple trees. They grow abundantly in Canada, where you are headed right now.”

“Do you have any more?” he asked, licking his lips and consuming the remaining crumbs.

“Sorry, that was the last cookie I had.”

“And I thank you for it. Now, on to the last rune.” He rubbed his veined hands and pushed his hood back a little to take a better look at the yellowed piece of bone. “Hmm.”

“What is it?” I asked, suddenly feeling anxious. The third rune, which should stand for the future, was blank.

“Ah. You’ve drawn *Wýrd*,” the Wanderer pronounced softly. “*Wýrd* is what we call fate.”

“Is it good or bad?” I pressed him impatiently.

“I do not know. All I know is that your *Wýrd* has disappeared.”

“What?”

The old man pointed at the cage top where the last rune had been lying. The spot was conspicuously empty. I bent down to see if it could have fallen onto the ship’s deck. Nothing there. I brushed the planks with my hands, just in case, but came up empty. When I righted myself, the Wanderer cleared his throat and spat out some phlegm over the gunwale. Then he lowered his hood. My blood ran cold when I saw that he only had one good eye.

“Odin,” I whispered and gripped my seat to steady myself.

The Wanderer was one of the epithets of the one-eyed god of the Vikings. According to Norse mythology, Odin had traded his eyesight for wisdom and obtained the secret knowledge of runes. High above,

his raven cawed and showered me with cookie crumbs.

Odin, if the Wanderer was indeed him, gave me a wink and pulled his hood back up. He clearly wished to travel incognito. Then he brushed the remaining runes into his pouch and secured it with the leather thong.

“Wait!” I said after recovering my voice. “Why did my *Wyrð* disappear like that?”

“Because you don’t have one in the future,” he replied matter-of-factly. It was like stating the stock market would crash but not to make a big deal out of it – it happened all the time. But this was my fate that was at stake. Mind you, I didn’t know what it was, only that I should have one. How could it have disappeared? It felt unnatural, arbitrary. It was unfair.

“What should I do?” I implored Odin as if he were somehow responsible.

“You should go and find it,” the Wanderer advised and called out to his raven. Hugin, who was in the middle of preening himself, cursed in Old Norse and took off into the curdling mists.

“Where’s he off to?” Longshanks wondered out loud, patiently manning his station at the rudder.

“Land,” Odin presaged and clapped his hands. “Now we can get more of this maple syrup.”

His rumbling laughter was the last thing I heard. Gradually, the merriness went out of it, until only the rumbling remained. The sound grew louder and filled the whole sky. My world had gone dark and cold. I felt a splash of water on my face. Dazed, I wiped it off with the back of my hand and tasted it. It was not salty at all but as sweet as summer rain. We were no longer at sea.

I opened my eyes. At first, all I saw was the pitch-black night, but gradually I registered familiar objects around me. This was my bedroom in the attic of a former Baptist church on Talon Island, Nova Scotia. I was at home. I was safe and in my bed. Suddenly, a jagged lightning bolt split the sky and I realized it was storming outside. Somehow, the window had unlatched itself and rain was pouring in freely. Just as I got up to close it, another purple blast illuminated a figure perched in a nearby tree. It was drenched and bracing itself against the wind, looking mighty pitiful.

“Hugin, is that you?” I shouted and stuck my head out.

What was my raven friend doing outside in this inclement weather?

“Aye, it’s me,” the raven rasped sadly.

“Come in or you’ll catch a cold!” I gestured for him to fly into my room and closed the window behind him.

“Please make yourself at home,” I said and pondered whether or

not I should turn on the light. Best not to wake my parents up. I could handle this myself. Out of habit, I patted my pockets for food I could share with the bird. Didn't I have an oatmeal cookie somewhere, the real one? I distinctly remembered putting it in my pyjama pants before going to bed. Now that cookie was gone.

"Um, Hugin, can I ask you something?" I sat down in front of the raven, whose talons gripped the headboard of my sleigh bed.

"If the question is about why I'm stalking you at night..." he said evasively.

"No, that's not what I was going to ask. Wait, *are* you stalking me?"

"Of course not! I just happened to be flying by."

"Thought so," I said, smiling wryly.

At the back of my mind, a small voice was objecting that, one, ravens didn't fly at night and, two, Hugin had been sitting in that tree for hours, given his present state. Something wasn't right, but at the moment my one great fear trumped all else.

"What's your question then?" the raven's voice grated in the dark like the sound of an ancient sea-chest opening.

"Here goes. What does it mean when Odin appears in your dreams with a bag of runes to read you your fortune?"

Hugin gave a surprised squawk and fell off the headboard.

"We're not going to get any sleep tonight, are we?" I sighed and turned on the bed lamp.

CHAPTER 2

Tell me your dream exactly as it unfolded, and don't leave anything out," Hugin rasped and climbed back up onto my bed. I sat a metre away from him, quilt around my shoulders. The cats, of which I had five, spread out on the floor, enclosing me and the raven in an imaginary circle.

"Why do they always act like they want to cast me out?" Hugin said, eyeing the felines with deep-rooted suspicion. "Am I a dark spirit?"

"They are just keeping you in check, should you decide to stay," I chuckled.

My cats had always been ferociously protective of their territory, whose nucleus was my bedroom and whose outer border ended on the shores of Talon Island.

"Huh." Hugin puffed out his wattle to make himself look bigger. "It seems I am not wanted anywhere."

"Oh come on. This is your second home."

"If not my only home," he said, sounding fatalistic.

"Is something the matter?"

I offered him a cat treat, because that was all I had in my room. I decided to forgo a trip downstairs to the kitchen lest I wake my mother up. She had ears like a bat, and there was no telling what she would do if she caught me with a raven in my room.

"Now that you've asked, there is," Hugin replied mournfully. "Ever since Munin found himself a mate, I have felt all alone in the world."

"Alone? You have me!" I protested and stroked the feathers growing along the root of his beak. They were black, just like the rest of him.

"Indeed, your steadfast friendship is much to be thankful for, Nicky Reed," he bowed. "But I have never been without my twin brother before. I have no one to patronize, terrorize and dote on. Just yesterday, I raided his secret stashes of food for old times' sake, only to find a squirrel had beaten me to it. I am afeared that Munin is gone forever!"

To my horror, Hugin started to cry.

How does one console a wild raven without losing a finger or an eye? I suppressed my worries and hugged him. He tucked his head into my armpit and shook with racking sobs.

"It's going to be all right," I crooned softly.

It had the very opposite effect on him. Instead of calming down, he started bawling. His grief was like a cloud that needed to rain itself out.

"Nevermore," he mumbled.

“There, there,” I said, stroking his head until the crying was done. Finally, he drew a deep breath and freed himself, shaking off the remaining blues.

“No one is to hear about this,” he abjured me. “Especially not Munin.”

I indicated that my lips were sealed and that I had thrown away the key.

“What happens in my room stays in my room.”

“Your rule is to be applauded, foster brother. Now, tell me about your troubles.”

“Well, it was just a dream,” I said, sidestepping the woefulness of it.

“If Allfather pays you a visit, it is never *just* a dream.”

And so I opened up to him. A look of intense concentration registered on Hugin’s face. I knew that everything I described would be recorded not only in his memory but in the annals of his clan and saved for posterity. This is how Clan Rune had been able to amass great knowledge and was now considered to be the wisest of all the raven families in Nova Scotia. I watched his eyes closely when I got to the part about a raven inside a cage and was not disappointed. He blinked with surprise and hung onto my every word as I described his great ancestor, Hugin.

“Are you sure it was him?” Hugin’s voice jumped by an octave.

“That’s what the Wanderer told me,” I confirmed. “I thought it was you in that cage. The resemblance was uncanny.”

A look of smugness came over him, followed by a wave of annoyance. I suspected it had to do with his recently married brother.

“I’ve always thought it was old Munin who got inebriated in a feasting hall and was carried off to Vinland on a ship. But you’re saying it was actually my namesake, Hugin,” he snapped, feathers bristling.

“Well, what’s wrong with that?”

“It’s downright embarrassing, that’s what.”

“Maybe the story about drinking is just that, a story. I didn’t see any alcohol aboard the ship. Besides, the raven had not come alone but with the old man.”

“The Wanderer,” Hugin pumped his head, excited. “Describe him.”

“Sure. He was ancient and wrapped in a long cloak. He hid his face under a hood. I didn’t get to see it until the very end.”

“Did he have a magical spear called Gungnir?”

“No, not unless it was telescopic and stashed inside his sea-chest. I wish I had a sea-chest like that, with dragons and snakes and trees carved on it.”

“I know where one like that was buried,” Hugin said casually.

“What? Where?”

“In the forest, although it might have disintegrated in the acidic soil. It’s been a thousand years, after all.”

“So it’s true then, about Vikings in Nova Scotia?”

“Of course it is. They even carved a rune stone in Yarmouth.”

“I thought academics pronounced it to be fake,” I said, remembering an article about the so-called Fletcher Stone that was housed in the Yarmouth County Museum.

“Academics!” Hugin sputtered, dripping contempt like beads of hot wax from a candle. “What do they know? They’ve ruled that Vikings did not sail past Newfoundland, and nothing short of a Viking sword dug up on Citadel Hill in Halifax would persuade them otherwise.”

“Now there’s a thought. What if you helped me dig up that sea-chest you mentioned previously? The one in the forest.” I squirmed, eager to find it. “That’s bound to make the front page of *The Chronicle Herald*.”

“Don’t hold your breath, Nicky. People would immediately accuse you of having planted it.”

“Why would I want to plant a Viking sea-chest?” I wondered, confused.

“So that you could be on the front page of *The Chronicle Herald*. Classic attention seeking.”

Naturally, Hugin was right. Nobody would believe me if I found a genuine relic from the Viking Age because such an object wasn’t supposed to exist. And if it did exist, then it had to be a fake. Classic denial.

“It’s unfair,” I said sullenly. “Why are grown-ups so cynical?”

“I don’t know, but that’s why I have vowed to never grow up,” Hugin snickered.

“You’re like Pippi Longstocking,” I chuckled.

“Not even close. But it beats getting married.”

“Is that why you despise Munin? Because he got married?”

“No! I don’t despise him. I am happy for him. But he abandoned me, and I’m so mad at him.”

“Why don’t you find a mate?” I asked.

“Never. I’m a sworn bachelor,” he said haughtily.

“Until the day you see an attractive she-raven and then I’ll be the one who’s all alone,” I teased him.

“Huh. I can’t see into the future, but I gather you’ve had a glimpse of it,” Hugin leaned forward and opened his beak.

Just then, the power went out and the attic became pitch-black. Outside, the tempest raged on and lashed the island with cold rain. The distant roar of the ocean carried on the wind, which sowed through the trees. Their branches thumped and knocked on the old church, as if the

spirits of the forest were demanding to be let in. It did not help that we lived next to a cemetery.

"I should have a candle somewhere," I said and felt in the dark for my nightstand. A strike of a match later, the darkness was forced to retreat beyond the yellow circle of candlelight.

"And now for the runes," Hugin reminded me, unfazed by the storming elements.

"They were carved into pieces of bone," I recalled. "And I got to draw three. One for the past, which was *Fehu*."

"Wealth."

"Precisely. The only wealth I possess is the Templar treasure – or what will be left of it after Clan Rune takes its cut."

I was referring to the compensation I had authorized for the clan's 700 years of service to Jean Baptiste de Saisi and now me. In reality, the ravens couldn't collect their fee until I discovered a way to access the underground vault on Shut In Island.

"Uh-huh." Hugin's eyes shifted nervously.

"The treasure is still in its place, correct?" I asked, frowning a little.

"Sure, sure, nothing wrong with it," the raven croaked.

"Good. We agree on the meaning of the first rune then. The second rune was related to it. It was shaped like an X."

"*Gebo* – gift."

"Right again. The Wanderer solicited a gift from me."

"Oh?" The raven's eyes flashed. "What did you give him?"

"A cookie," I blushed. "It was in my pocket."

"A midnight snacker, are we?" Hugin cocked his head.

"It's not my fault I get hungry all the time. I'm experiencing a growth spurt."

"I've noticed your legs hang all the way to the floor."

"Ha-ha. Well, the Wanderer ate the cookie and shared it with his raven too. The strangest part is that now the real cookie is gone from my pocket."

"Of course it is. You gave it away," Hugin snorted and rolled his eyes.

"But it was just a dream!"

"Maybe you ate it in your sleep," the raven shrugged. "I wouldn't worry about it."

"Huh. You'll worry about this one: The third rune was *Wyrd*."

"Fate?" Hugin gaped. "What did it look like?"

"I don't recall. I thought the bone piece was blank, like an unwritten page."

"That means you are the creator of your own fate. It's a powerful sign, not a bad omen."

“Only it went poof! Disappeared completely. Even the Wanderer couldn’t find it.”

Hugin scratched himself behind the ear. This was a tough one.

“Hmm. Traditionally, there was no rune for *Wyrð*. But we ravens don’t remember all of the runes that existed. You see, some of them became lost in time.”

“So what you’re saying is that I drew a secret rune?”

“My young friend, the word ‘rune’ itself means ‘secret.’ I think we need to consult Munin, who, after all, is the expert on long-term memory retrieval. He may know of a precedent when a rune disappeared during divination.”

“But I don’t even believe in all of this stuff. Divination. Fate.”

“Ah, but fate believes in you. We will fly out at dawn and find Munin before his mate saddles him with the usual long list of chores. It will be like the old days – just you and me and my little brother.”

Hugin cheered up and rubbed his beak. Gone was his loneliness, replaced with a new sense of purpose.

“And now I think I really need some sleep.”

I yawned, and my cats yawned too. Hugin did not reply. He had already tucked his head under his wing and dozed off. I blew out the candle and curled up in my bed. The warmth of my quilt cocoon soon relaxed my body and senses, and I drifted away into dreamless sleep. It would be morning soon, and no doubt my mother would have a long list of chores for me too. I’d need to wake up early to slip out unnoticed, before she roped me in.

CHAPTER 3

The next morning, Mother waltzed into my room, brimming with energy and plans. She pushed the door open with her back because her arms were laden with a stack of bed linens. I was still rubbing sleep out of my eyes when she gave an ear-piercing scream.

“Aaah!”

“Mom, what’s wrong?” I said in a muffled voice and sat up.

“There’s a dead bird on your bed!” she pointed with one accusing finger, trying not to drop the linens.

“What?”

“A dead crow, look! Oh, it might be carrying diseases, like avian flu. And we are just a week away from opening our bed and breakfast,” she wailed.

The alleged dead crow opened his eyes, which swivelled in their black sockets. Hugin must have fallen off his perch and onto my quilt during the night. Deeply embarrassed, he scrambled to get back on his feet. He fixed my mother with a suspicious stare and ruffled his feathers.

“Mom, this is Hugin. He’s a raven.”

“Hello,” Hugin cawed and then added, “Welcome to Temple Inn.”

“Ooh,” a hand flew to my mother’s mouth. “He can talk!”

“You can actually hear him?” I asked, puzzled. In the past, I had attempted several times to share my strange adventures with my parents, but they never quite believed me. Moreover, only I seemed to have the ability to converse with ravens – other people only heard *caw*.

“I think he said hello to me,” she giggled.

“He also said, ‘Welcome to Temple Inn.’”

“How does he know the name of our business?” she frowned.

It had been her idea to convert part of our home, a former church, into a bed and breakfast to generate income. Our community, Indian Harbour, was along the route to Peggy’s Cove, a popular tourist destination, and there was a chronic shortage of lodging in the area. A local artisan, Joel Seaboyer, had created the shop sign that was yet to be hung. This is why Mom was so surprised to learn that Hugin already knew the name “Temple Inn.”

“He’s the god Odin’s spy. He notices and remembers everything. He can even read.”

“I see.” My mother patted the bed linens, which were getting heavier by the minute. “Does the magical raven carry any diseases?”

I bent down to Hugin, who was preening himself and pretending he

was not offended by the question.

“He says he only has mites,” I informed her. “Totally harmless to tourists.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” Mom rolled her eyes and dumped all the linens on my bed. “Here. Change your bedsheets and then take the clever raven to the forest.”

“Um, I may be a while – in the woods, I mean. I have to take Hugin to his brother, Munin.”

“How convenient, a second raven. Are you sure you aren’t making this up to escape your responsibilities?” Her eyes narrowed.

“Not at all. I’ll do anything you want afterwards.”

“Good. I need you to go to Seaboyers’ Emporium today. Margaret called and said the glass floats are in. I plan to hang them up in the guest rooms.”

“Consider it done. I’ll go to the emporium straight from the forest. Where’s Dad, by the way?”

“He’s already gone to Mahone Bay. They are shooting the first episode of *The Accursed Treasure of Oak Island* today. It’s all hush-hush, and he can’t talk about the production because of a non-disclosure agreement. Not even with me, his wife!”

“Maybe he can take us on a tour of the island.”

“I’m sure he can, after they are done filming. Until then, we can watch Oak Island with binoculars from Black Sails Bakery. I talked to Vivian yesterday. Ralf proposed to her!” she squealed with happiness, making Hugin jump with fright and caw.

“I never thought she’d marry a baker, but they are as deeply in love as they were two years ago,” she continued, ecstatic. “By the way, we are invited there for dinner tonight.”

“We’re going to Chester?” I asked, excited, and climbed out of my bed. “To see Ralf and Vivian?”

“Yes, that’s what I just said, silly. We leave at 4 p.m., so you have to finish all your chores before then.”

“Yessir,” I saluted and started dressing myself in haste. “Um, can I bring Hugin to breakfast?”

“Absolutely not.”

“But Mom...”

“No. I don’t care if he can read the morning paper or do the puzzle. No animals are allowed at the table, on it or under it.”

I slumped and shot an apologetic look to Hugin, who had transferred to the windowsill and was now pecking at the glass pane in Morse code.

“He says he’ll eat the old cat food,” I translated.

“Hmm, would he? In that case, he may eat on the porch,” my mother

acquiesced. "I'll bring him the food."

Half an hour later, with our bellies full, Hugin and I set out to find Munin. We crossed the dirt road that ran by our house, skirted the cemetery and entered the forest. We owned five whole acres of it. It was not a huge amount but enough to house Clan Rune. The land sloped down toward Seal Cove, where a huge rock shaped like a pyramid marked the edge of our property.

The forest was rather wet after the previous night's storm. The moss underfoot was soaked with rainwater, and there was quite a bit of mud. My shoes squelched, and my pants brushed against damp leaves. I did not mind. Hugin gripped the padded shoulder of my jacket and looked ahead with grim determination. As we entered the realm of trees, we became engulfed with the heady fragrance of sap and wildflowers steeped in the briny air.

After long moments of striding in silence, Hugin started making noises. There was a sharp *tock* and a series of louder *quorks*. I assumed he was calling out to his brother, who had a nest in the densest part of the forest. Suddenly, Hugin gave a loud caw and cocked his head to receive an answer sounding from the north side.

"That's my brother," he confirmed.

"Is he going to meet with us?" I asked and noted we were almost to the coast, where the forest gave way to the naked boulders that lined the shore of Seal Cove.

"Yes, at the pyramid rock."

"Excellent."

At low tide, the aforementioned rock was as tall as my dad. At high tide, half of it was submerged and not as impressive. I had climbed it on many occasions and found a geodesic marker, a steel rod, driven into its pinnacle. But this rock had served as a landmark for much longer than that. It was already in existence in Jean Baptiste's time, and it had a counterpart on the opposite side of the island, on the property of Ariel de la Mer, an aboriginal artist and shaman. The two pyramid rocks and another huge round rock formed the pommel and hilt of an imaginary sword whose blade extended all the way to Shut In Island. The tip of the sword marked the location of the entrance to the underground Templar vault. I figured all of this out two years ago, when I first arrived here, and never tired of the mystery.

"Okay, we're here," I said when we stopped at the foot of the pyramid rock. "Where's Munin?"

"Kraaa!" Hugin's call carried far away, over the rippling surface of Seal Cove, where it echoed strangely.

"You don't have to shout, Brother," said someone concealed in a spruce tree behind the rock.

“Munin!” I exclaimed happily.

He was the gentler twin, all heart, whereas Hugin was the harsher one, all brains. When they were together, they were complete. But when they were apart, they were thrown out of balance. Without his brother’s heart, Hugin was forced to feel things he had been able to avoid before. Without his brother’s sharp logic, Munin had to solve worldly problems on his own. It was tough. Both brothers had to acquire each other’s strengths. True, they suffered in the process, but they had also matured. It was quite obvious with Munin, who now exuded an air of parental authority. Hugin scowled, not accepting it. Yes, it was just like the old days.

“Greetings, Sir Nicolas. Hello, Brother.”

Munin stuck his head out of the green camouflage and looked right and left. He had the harried look of a male whose wife makes constant demands on his time and energy. Only when he was satisfied that we were alone did he come out of his hiding and hop down onto the pyramid rock.

“You look thin,” Hugin observed. “Have you been shedding?”

“I’m just a little stressed out,” Munin mumbled. “It’s my family.”

“How are they?” I asked. “I heard you have young ones.”

“I do. Two girls,” Munin said proudly.

“He means twins,” Hugin interjected with emphasis.

“Twins, like you two?” I raised my eyebrows. “It runs in the family then.”

“Yes,” Munin said weakly. “My girls hatched at the same time during a full moon. But that is not all.”

“What’s the matter?” I frowned. “I thought raven twins were a special occurrence in Clan Rune.”

“Too special,” Munin said, lowering his voice. “They are white!”

“My nieces are albino twins,” Hugin pronounced gravely. “It has never happened before.”

“But what does that mean?” I asked with growing curiosity. I had never seen a white raven before, let alone two.

“Pragmatically speaking, it means they can’t be left alone. Their plumage stands out and makes them an easy target for predators,” Hugin explained. “They have to be accompanied at all times.”

“Mystically speaking, they are a gift from Allfather and possess special powers. They have not demonstrated these powers yet, probably because they are still so young. But we are on edge. Constantly,” Munin added and plucked out one of his feathers.

“How fascinating,” I said.

Hugin decided to leave my shoulder and landed near his brother atop the pyramid rock. I liked to see the brothers side by side, the way

they were meant to be during council. I took a deep breath.

“Munin, I know you have your own problems and that I shouldn’t bother you with mine, but I’ve come to you for help.”

“No, please do bother me. I need to take my mind off hungry eagles, preying weasels and ruthless trophy hunters.”

“If you’re sure.” I shifted my gaze to Hugin, who nodded in approval.

“Okay then. Something unusual has happened. Last night, I had a strange dream. There was a Viking ship with a raven in a cage and an old man who called himself the Wanderer. He offered me a pouch with magical runes.”

“Magical, you say? And how many did you draw?” Munin stared down his beak at me.

“Three,” I gulped, feeling on edge myself. “*Fehu, Gebo* and *Wyrð*. The last one, *Wyrð*, disappeared.”

“Was it swallowed by the raven?” Munin cocked his head toward Hugin.

“No. It just vanished into thin air. Even the one-eyed Wanderer was surprised.”

“One-eyed, was he? Hmm.”

“Yes, but he could see into my future. He tried, anyway, until it disappeared. That’s bad, isn’t it?”

“‘Bad’ is not the word I’d use,” Munin mused.

“How about portentous, catastrophic or apocalyptic?” Hugin suggested helpfully.

“I’m going to die, aren’t I? If my *Wyrð* disappeared, it can only mean one thing.”

I shivered and wrapped my arms around me. I was only 14, and I wanted to live.

“Every man must die,” Munin intoned.

“But some men die sooner,” Hugin rasped.

“I am not a man, I am a boy!” I protested. “Besides, I have too much to live for. Friends and family. The Templar treasure. My summer holiday.”

“What summer holiday?” Hugin asked, squirming.

“We haven’t heard anything about a holiday. Where are we going?” Munin asked with excitement.

“We are not going anywhere. *I* am going to Slovakia to visit my grandparents, uncle Bojmír and cousin Sebastián. My uncle is going to take us to Castle Raven.”

“Castle Raven, you say,” Hugin mulled this over. Munin couldn’t care less about the name – he was hurt because I had excluded him from my travel plans. This is what happens when you get adopted by Clan Rune – the ravens lay claim to all that is you. And, right now,

Munin laid claim to my vacation and possibly the castle.

“Castrum Corvinum, as it was called in the Middle Ages. It’s an awesome 13th-century castle in which my uncle leads a historical re-enactment group. They put on sword-fighting shows for tourists. He said I could join them. It was supposed to be the best summer holiday ever. But now...” I hung my head.

“You can’t go,” Munin croaked. “It may be dangerous.”

“I fail to see why,” Hugin rasped. “Especially if Nicky takes me with him as a chaperone.”

“That’s a marvellous idea!” I cheered up considerably.

“Ha!” Munin shrieked. “And what if both of you disappear in Slovakia? Have you thought of that?”

“Brother, that’s a possibility, but I’m itching to go with Nicky. If I stay here, I can’t do anything about the prophecy, but if I travel with him, I can protect him. In the dream, it was Hugin who sat on Odin’s shoulder, not Munin. Can’t you see? It was meant as a message for me.”

“There is wisdom in your words,” Munin acceded. “But the disappearing *Wyrd* still bothers me. Nicky, what else did Odin say?”

“Um, something about understanding the past in order to have the future...” my voice trailed off.

“Ah,” Munin’s sleek head bobbed knowingly. “The prophecy is as clear as day.”

“Not to me, little brother,” Hugin said, giving Munin an affectionate peck on the head.

“Nicky’s future seems to be conditional upon his past,” Munin philosophized.

“That’s logical,” Hugin said testily. “The past flows into the present, which then flows into the future. You can’t have a future without having a past. It’s a circular argument.”

“But time is circular, not linear. Destiny unfolds in time. There is a moment when the circle of Nicky’s time becomes broken. You must find the spot and repair it like a hole in a sweater.”

I still did not understand what the ravens were talking about, much less what Odin had prophesied for me. But I was no longer afraid; nor did I think I was going to die. Something strange and magical was going to happen in the future, and it had to do with my past. If I was going to tread on that foreign path, I wanted Hugin to have my back. Meanwhile, the ravens had begun to quarrel.

“You should start packing,” Munin was harrying his brother.

“What could I possibly pack?” Hugin chuckled.

“Your passport, to start with. Only you don’t have one,” Munin jeered. “It looks like you’re staying home after all.”

Hmm, a passport. I stroked my chin and found a strand of fuzz. I tugged on it. Did the passport office issue passports for animals? And were ravens even allowed on an airplane? I would have to investigate. I knew just the expert to call: Agent Pinkerton, who was an old acquaintance of mine from a previous adventure.

"I can get you a passport – don't worry," I assured Hugin. "You'll also need a cage."

"And some money," Munin suggested with a sly wink.

"What money?" Hugin played innocent.

"The neat pile of silver coins you hid in a hollow tree behind our old nest. Or the gold coins you stuffed under the moss in the graveyard."

"Shut-up-shut-up," Hugin hissed and glowered at Munin.

"Wait a second," I said. "What silver and gold coins?"

"The ones from the Templar hoard," Munin cawed. "You gave us our share, remember?"

"Yes, but I thought it was still underground on account of there being no entrance to the Templar vault. No easy entrance, that is."

The ravens went silent and gazed across Seal Cove, pretending to be interested in a small lighthouse that was blinking on the southerly side of the island.

"Well?" I said sternly. "If there has been a breach, I ought to know."

"Relax. The surface entrance remains sealed," Hugin replied at last.

"And no one has entered the cave through the blowhole either."

"Except for Chester Seaboyer," Munin added sheepishly.

"What did you say?" My voice was like thunder.

The ravens huddled together and pulled their heads in, as if a winter gale had started to blow in the middle of summer.

"Chester Seaboyer breached Shut In Island? No, it cannot be," I shook my head in disbelief. "I told him about the scrying mirror, and he went away to get it. I thought... I was sure he would fall under the spell of the dark entity in the mirror and that it would swallow him up. Isn't that what happened?"

"Not entirely," Hugin mumbled. "An owl that lives in the rafters of Seaboyers' Emporium saw him. He did activate the mirror and talk to the entity."

"But instead of Chester stepping into the mirror, the entity stepped into Chester," Munin said. "He got possessed!"

"Oh, no."

"And then the entity, in control of Chester's body, led him to Shut In Island and past all the booby traps."

"This is bad, really bad," I moaned and put my hands to my temples, where a nasty headache was beginning to form.

"Do not despair, young friend. Chester is trapped like the rat he is

and can't get out," Munin consoled me.

"You mean he is still alive?"

I was aghast and perplexed at the same time. How could a man survive down there for two years?

"Well, there's a ventilation shaft, so he has air and rainwater," Hugin clarified.

"Plus, we drop him a mouse or roadkill from time to time," Munin added compassionately.

"That's disgusting!" I almost retched.

"We charge him for it too," Hugin chortled. "At first, he wouldn't pay up, but hunger got the better of him."

"We've kept him alive for you," Munin explained. "He's your mortal enemy, but we knew you'd be angry if we let him die."

"Aye, you have a soft heart, Nicky," Hugin nodded.

"I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing."

"I don't know what to do."

"Do nothing, for now. Let Jean Baptiste sort it out. He's still coming back, isn't he?" Hugin eyed me curiously.

"Yes, that's right. He promised he'd return with *La Templiere* and her crew at the end of the summer, after my holiday."

At the sound of Jean Baptiste's name, we both tensed and relaxed. It was no ordinary thing to be in the presence of the esteemed Templar ghost. He was our knight in shining armour, our leader and beacon of light. I would be excited to meet him again – and the crew of his phantom ship. But I was also nervous. What would he say when he found out that our arch-enemy, Chester Seaboyer, was pawing the Templar treasure? I felt like I had failed in my duty, and I had not known about my failure until five minutes ago. But there was nothing I could do – only wait – and I might as well have fun in the meantime.

"Here's the plan," I said. "I will take Hugin with me to Slovakia and secure my future. Then I will return here and face Jean Baptiste. I don't know what he'll do with Chester, but at least we can make the decision together."

"So I can use my Templar coins now?" Hugin perked up.

"No. They are too valuable and would only arouse suspicion. Let people continue to think the treasure of the Knights Templar is on the legendary Oak Island. As long as they look for it there, they will leave Shut In Island alone," I ruled.

"But I don't want to travel unprepared."

"I'll prepare you, Brother," Munin rasped. "You're going to need a language upgrade."

"Eh?"

“You don’t speak Slovak!” Munin shouted into Hugin’s ear as if he were deaf.

“That’s a great idea. Can I get the same upgrade? My vocabulary could use some expanding,” I said.

“I don’t see why not. Meet us in two days on the beach and we’ll get you all upgraded.”

“The old continent...” Hugin said dreamily. “I wish I could stop over in Iceland and see Godafoss, the Waterfall of the Gods.”

“It’s Slovakia for you, not Iceland!” snapped Munin, feeling a little jealous.

“I’ll bring you a souvenir,” Hugin tried to soothe him. “Or would you prefer a postcard?”

A brief skirmish ensued, in which beaks flashed and feathers flew. Hugin and Munin were bonding again. I knew that after they got the emotions out of their system, all would be well. And it was.

When we parted ways, the ravens took off together. I watched them rise higher and higher into the clear blue sky on an updraft of warm air. How marvellous summer in Nova Scotia was, even if it was so short. I would have a hard time leaving it behind and heading east, where my future lay in peril – if dreams could be relied upon. As if the ravens wanted to cheer me up, they made a sudden roll in the air and one of them flew upside down for nine wingbeats. I chuckled to myself and then went to Seaboyers’ Emporium on the errand for my mom.