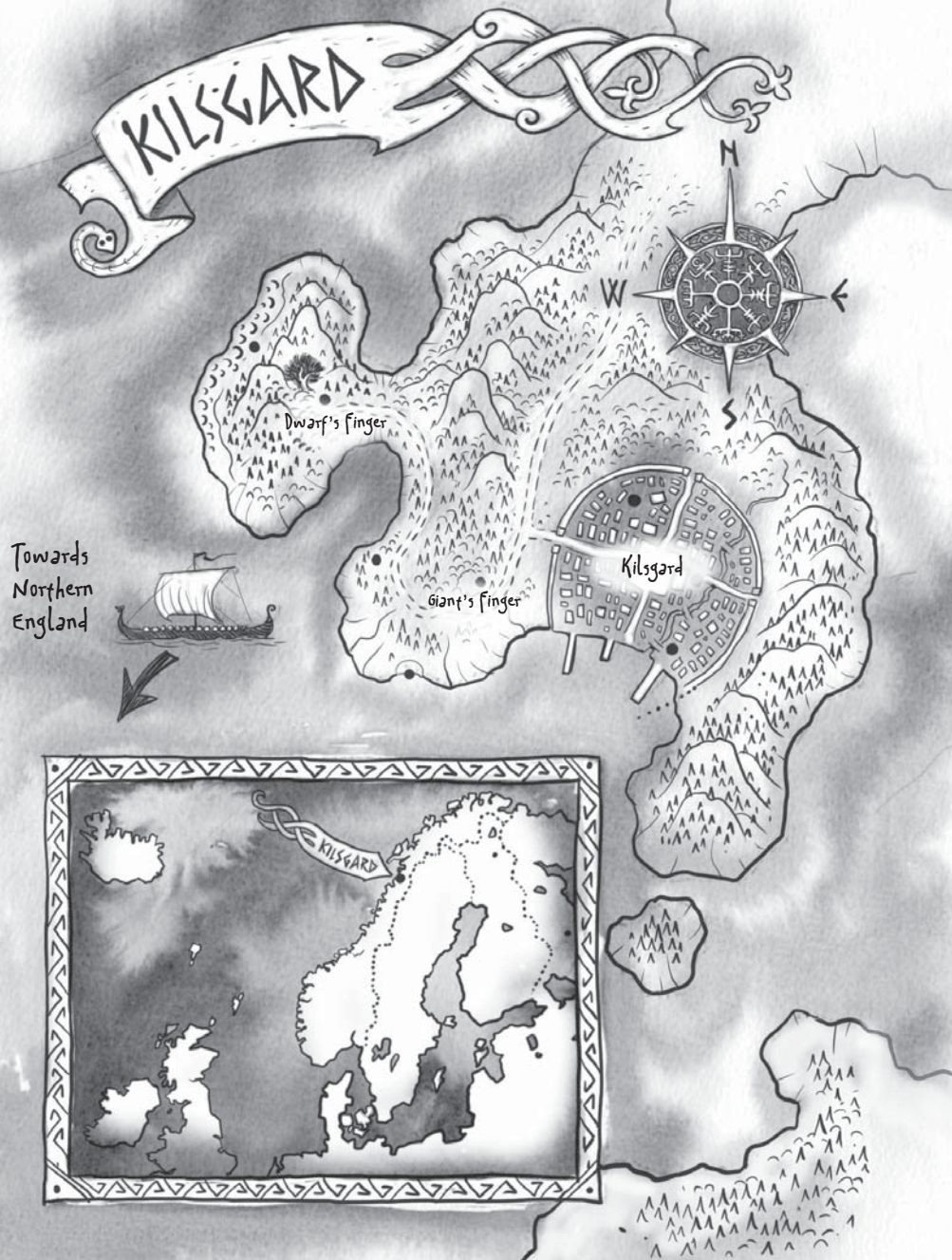


# Meet the characters



Alva



Fenrir



Hraf



Uncle Magnus



Brianna



Sigrunn



This is dedicated to the young minds  
that feed mine every minute of every day,  
Kuba and Kama. Our journey together  
will be full of adventures.

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Use the viking alphabet at the back of this book to unlock the hidden  
meaning behind the rune shown at the start of each chapter.

**JANINA RAMIREZ**

# **RIDDLE OF THE RUNES**

**A VIKING MYSTERY**

**ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID WYATT**

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS



## In search of Great Treasure

Alva was running. Running so fast the wind whistled in her ears and the braids in her bright red hair lashed against her face. She was like a wolf. She was stealthy. She was strong. The tallest mountain in Kilsgard, Giant's Finger, rose ahead through the sunken mist. To her left, sheer cliffs reached out over the angry, black waters of the river howling against the rocks below. She was faster than the water. She was faster than the wind. But one wrong step and Alva would become water and wind. She must be sure on her feet. She must not fall.

Sharp branches cut the skin on her bare legs as she smashed the forest floor beneath her shoes. No time for pain. Now she needed the wits of

a shield maiden. She must see everything, and be prepared for anything. Her pet wolf, Fenrir, kept dipping in and out of view ahead of her, his paws silent on the leaves, and his silver fur flashing in and out of the moonlight. He had the scent. He was taking her where she needed to go.



But as her leather soles leapt over rock and branch, suddenly the forest reached out a knotted hand. Alva's foot caught against a root and time slowed. Tumbling, the edge of the cliff filled her vision. The roar of the river grew deafening, as her heart bashed hard against her ribcage. She could see the black jaws of the river's mouth reaching towards her, and Giant's Finger reared up, dark, over her head as she fell.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Alva sat bolt upright on her straw mattress. She wasn't in the water. She was home. A film of sweat wrapped around her body like a shroud. The fire still gave off an orange glow and she saw her family stirring, disturbed by the loud thud on the door.

'Thor's bones!' Her Uncle Magnus was shouting now. Her little brother, Ivan, gave a howl at having been roused from his sleep, and her mother, Brianna, pulled the grizzling child into an embrace to comfort him. 'In the name of all the gods, what do you want?' Magnus bellowed, swinging his woollen cloak over his bare shoulders. In the half-light Alva could see the scars of old battles etched on his back, but she looked away quickly and squeezed up next to her mother, who wrapped her long, pale arms around her.

'Magnus!' A deep voice called through the thick wooden door. 'There's an epic saga playing out in the hall right now! Jarl Erik says we need you.'

'What time is it?' Magnus replied, swinging open the door to reveal two karls armed with swords. 'And why have you come to my home with iron in your fists?'

‘Forgive us, but there is danger in the air tonight. You will learn more when you get to the hall. We are in the small hours between night and morning.’ One of the men poked his bearded young face inside and saw Alva, Brianna, and Ivan huddled together at the far end. ‘Our apologies for rousing you all. We just need Magnus, but please, there is nothing to worry about. Go back to sleep.’ Alva, still reeling from her dream, bristled at the sight of the armoured men inside the safety of her home. She nuzzled closer to her mother and pulled the covers over her body.

Catching the look of concern on the two men’s faces, Magnus went to his boots and began pulling them onto his feet. ‘I’ll bring the bird. He may be useful.’ Lifting his tame raven, Hraf, from his perch by the door, Magnus placed the black bird gently on his shoulder. Hraf ruffled his feathers and let out a sleepy caw. Alva felt a stab of jealousy towards the bird. Despite the cold and the darkness, she wished that she could join her uncle and discover what was happening in the great hall.

‘It’s not time for waking yet,’ her uncle said gently towards the back of the hut. ‘You three must get some more sleep, because that rascal

Ivan will be up, wailing for his breakfast, before long.’ As if seeing her thoughts, he caught Alva’s eye before adding, ‘All of you need to go back to sleep.’ Then, grumbling to the two karls, he slammed the door behind him and Alva heard his voice drifting away down the street.

‘Magnus is right,’ Brianna said, giving her daughter a squeeze and laying her back down on the mattress. ‘We must get some sleep. I need you to run some important errands for me tomorrow. Plus, we will have to keep this one busy.’ She gestured at the bundle of red hair that was the top of Ivan’s head. Alva’s brother had already fallen back to sleep and now Brianna curled herself around him.

Calm fell over the family, and soon Brianna’s quiet snores sank into a broken rhythm with Ivan’s. But Alva was wide awake. Her nightmare had stayed imprinted on her memory and her heart was still pattering much too fast in her chest. Had she seen her own death? Perhaps the gods were sending her a warning. She lay still, eyes closed, and, in the darkness visualized herself as a raven swooping over Kilsgard—peering into the hall, where she could see her uncle in conversation with the Jarl.



From the expressions on their faces it was clear that the karls brought news of danger and drama. Something serious was happening in Kilsgard and her mind began turning over possible scenarios. Was the town under attack? Had something happened to the Jarl? Had there been an omen from the gods? She knew she shouldn't give in to her desire to know more, but Alva was desperate to hear the speeches in the hall tonight. Her mother would be so angry if she awoke and found her daughter missing. But she had to take that risk. She had to follow Magnus. She had to investigate. After all, that's what she was—an investigator.

As she eased herself up from the mattress, the straw inside crackled and creaked. Alva held her breath, but her mother and brother snored on. Fetching her cloak from a hook, she wrapped it tightly around her and slid on her shoes. She moved silently across the room, carefully avoiding the floorboards she knew would make a sound, and bent down to look under the table. Here, on a thick woollen blanket, her wolf Fenrir lay fast asleep. She pressed her face up close to his muzzle, and whispered, 'Fen.'

His eyelids snapped open, revealing two black

pupils outlined with sea-blue rings. As Fenrir realized it was Alva, he rapidly began to bang his tail on the floor in excitement.

'Shhhhh!' she said, placing her hands on his wagging tail to muffle the sound. 'You're coming with me, silly wolf.' Alva got to her feet and Fenrir followed, padding quietly across the rushes on the floor.

The door made a loud whining noise as she heaved it open. Catching her breath, Alva turned back to see if anyone had noticed. Her brother was staring at her from underneath a curtain of her mother's auburn hair.

'Go back to sleep, Ivan,' she whispered across the room. He held her gaze for a moment, then shut his eyes. With dread flowing through her veins like ice, Alva slid through the door. She found herself in a biting-cold night, and Fenrir gave a small, gruff snort, to show that he too was rather annoyed at being outside.

'Come on, Fen,' she said, setting a quick pace in the direction of the hall. Only a silvery, pale glow from a half-moon lit the edges of the houses, but she knew the way without needing to see. Alva had lived in this town her whole life, and she knew every alley, every person, and

everything that happened within the walls of Kilsgard. She made it her business to know. A lost chicken or a broken fence, an argument over payment or a secret message passed between lovers—she saw everything.

Alva's hunger for investigating mysteries had been fed by her uncle. Magnus had travelled the world, growing in knowledge with each of his forty winters. He knew so much about so many things, and could pick apart information like a mouse unfurling a nut. But she knew more than him about one thing—Kilsgard, and all that happened in it. She could go unnoticed, hide behind hedges, and peer through cracks. She knew the people of this town inside out. So really, it was her business to know what was going on in the hall right now. Wasn't it?

This hall, this town, and these people were all Alva had ever known, and to her they were perfect. Kilsgard had its own harbour, which could be filled with up to twenty ships when the men were getting ready to go a-Viking. The huts of the villagers were comfortable and warm, even in the cruel winter months. Their yards—noisy with the calls of chickens, pigs, and sheep—backed on to one another, so Alva

could leap over the fences to reach the homes of her friends, and disappear for adventures in the woods. Her insatiable need for adventure would land her in trouble, everyone said so. Everyone said the Fates would not protect her forever.

But the villagers were all asleep now and the only flicker of lights came from the great hall—Meginsalr. This was the home of Jarl Erik. He could trace his ancestry back to the founding fathers, and from there to the god Odin himself. His hearth was the centre of Kilsgard.

Even though it was the dark heart of the night, Meginsalr was vibrating with activity.

Drawing closer, Alva could hear her uncle's voice ringing out across the room. She leant silently against the doorway, pressing her ear to the wood. The sounds from inside were clear and Alva immediately realized all the karls were inside together. That was not good. It meant something that affected the whole town was unfolding in the dark of the night.

'I don't understand what you are telling me, Erik!' Magnus bellowed. 'It is such a strange story. There are too many holes in it, and if I am to investigate any further I need all the information laid out before me. The karls can take

to the benches and I will hear from this stranger myself about what has happened tonight. I know the tongue he speaks.' Alva could just make out strange words in a foreign language murmuring nervously beneath the noise of the hall.

'He babbles in a messy manner,' one of the karls answered. 'We can't understand him.'

'He speaks the words of the men across the sea,' explained Magnus. 'The English. On my travels I learnt enough of their words that I can translate and tell you what he says. But you must sit silently as he is frightened and I must work hard to unravel his tale.' Alva could hear benches scraping as men sat down to listen, and her heart quickened. She was going to hear a man speak the language of the English. Magnus spoke again, 'Bring the monk forward.'

A voice rose up, 'What is a monk?'

Magnus responded curtly, 'I said no interruptions! You're in the presence of a monk. This man here is one. Just look at his robe and hair.' Alva cursed the solid wooden door obscuring her view of this fascinating man from overseas. Magnus continued, 'the English worship one god, not many. They do not have

seers, they have priests who speak to the people, and another group of holy men and women who lock themselves inside sacred buildings to say prayers all day. These are monks, and this is one of them. Now quiet so we can hear him speak.'

A different voice began, quietly and anxiously, to talk in a version of Alva's own tongue which sounded like it had gone loose at the edges. She listened intently. The language was like the Norse they spoke, but the words were longer, rounder, and softer. As the monk spoke, Magnus relayed his phrases back to the hall.

'The stranger says his name is Edmund, of the monastery of Lindisfarne in the Kingdom of Northumbria, along the coast of the Northern Sea. He has been a monk of that place since he was a young boy of eight winters, which means he has passed fifteen years inside its walls.'

Alva knew tales of the island of Lindisfarne. She had heard them from her father and her uncle. A shiver ran down her spine at the mention of it. One of the karls yelled out from the benches, 'Lindisfarne! That useless little island on the northern coast of the English? I remember our trip there well. The promise of great wealth was hardly fulfilled, and the simpering weak



men there would not lift an arm in defence of their lands. He is one of those weaklings—our enemies. Why should we listen to him?’

Magnus replied furiously, ‘why do you Norse men know nothing but the sounds of your own voices! Listen, he has come to us from our mountain, and his story is bound up with our town. We should hear more.’ Speaking again to the monk, he continued translating. ‘He says he has travelled a long, hard journey to Kilsgard in search of “a treasure beyond compare”. He and his companion, an English warrior named Wiglaf of Bamburgh, have followed clues etched on a mysterious bone casket, which they “found” while travelling abroad.’

Crouched by Alva’s feet, Fenrir gave a loud snuffle. She hushed him gently and continued to press her ear to the cold wood, straining to hear more about this enigmatic box.

‘The monk says this casket was covered in symbols which he and his companion struggled to decode, and that the individual they had collected it from was a drunkard from our land. This man of Kilsgard had a loose tongue, and told them the runes would lead to Lindisfarne’s lost treasures. It brought them here, but they

could go no further, since they could not get the final clues from the casket.’

‘This is crazy,’ another karl shouted suddenly. ‘A mystery casket, “found” abroad yet speaking of treasures here? We know what treasures there are in Kilsgard, since we brought most of them here to the Jarl’s hall after we went a-Viking. This is all nonsense. Who is this drunkard from our land, and why would the monk and his companion travel all this way because of some runes?’

‘I don’t yet know all the answers, Eluf,’ Magnus replied, sounding frustrated. Alva steeled herself. She had learnt never to question Magnus part-way through his investigations. ‘If you keep interrupting me, we will never get to the heart of the mystery.’ He turned again to the monk, and continued with his broken narrative. ‘He says he and his companion, Wiglaf, set up camp in a clearing on Giant’s Finger, but were attacked in the night while sleeping. The monk watched a figure in a cloak strike his friend over the head, drag him to a horse, and then ride away. Terrified and alone, he has come to the home of his enemy in the hope of saving his friend.

‘The monk speaks all of this sincerely.’

Magnus said. Alva shuddered as the twinned voices of her uncle and the monk died down. This tale was fascinating! A secret casket covered with codes that needed deciphering. Travellers across seas searching for hidden treasure. A lone figure attacking men on the mountain and dragging them away. It was the stuff of Alva's dreams and yet it was unfolding right now. Her body thrummed with excitement and fear.

Another voice spoke up. 'But why should we waste our time on this English monk?'

Magnus spoke with anger. 'Can't you see the importance of this? A man is missing on our mountain. He was attacked and dragged away. This means there is a kidnapper, or potentially a murderer, roaming the outskirts of Kilsgard. We have to protect the people, and to do that, we have to unpick the strands of this story.'

'Ha ha!' thought Alva, 'I'm just the person to unravel this mystery. Magnus will definitely need my help tonight!'

Magnus continued speaking behind the wall of oak, 'Jarl Erik, we must treat the monk as a guest of this hall. His people have been attacked by our people, and it took courage to come here in the death of night. You should set up safe

quarters for him outside, since he will not want to sleep inside the hall with the men.'

Alva heard the familiar and warm tones of Jarl Erik. 'Magnus, you are the best at leading such investigations. You shall take two of my karls with you to the place the monk said he was attacked, and then you can test the truth of his words.' A slight grumble murmured through the hall. Alva knew the men would not be pleased that Magnus was yet again being shown special favour by the Jarl.

The conversation shifted to discussing where the man should sleep, who should support his claim for hostage rights, and who should travel with Magnus. Stepping away from the doorway, Alva rapidly turned over the monk's story in her mind. She knew she should creep back to bed. Her mother was so tired, because Ivan had a touch of elf-shot and had been screaming in pain for the last few nights. She should do the right thing and be ready to help at daybreak. But then Alva saw the monk's travelling cloak lying by the entrance, and the decision crystallized in her mind. The mystery was too much temptation for her.

She was going to help her uncle unravel the

monk's story. Magnus was taking too long, discussing all the details and worrying over the visitor. She had to move fast, as clues could be lost if they delayed. Hadn't he told her that himself? Grasping the monk's cloak, she rubbed its scent under Fenrir's muzzle. 'Follow,' she said, and the silver wolf set off at once, leading her deep into the forest.

The main gates of the town were unguarded, because all the karls had rushed to the hall when the stranger arrived. There was a long pathway which ran along the river. It branched off after a few hundred paces, with one road leading out to the north, and a second winding up towards Giant's Finger.

The mountain looked silent and brooding in the moonlight. It had many moods and Alva knew them all. She spent more time exploring its rocks and crevices than was normal for a girl of her age. In her twelve winters, she had been drawn back to the mountain time and again, in search of evidence for the tales her people told of the Great Battle, when giants and dwarves carved out the landscape.

She wanted to believe these myths, but her keen eyes found no sign of the tens of thousands

of bodies that were supposed to lie at the root of the mountain. Alva always believed what her eyes saw over what her ears heard. But recently she had been drawn to the mountain for another reason—for the connection it held with her father. They had walked here together before he left, and here she could feel a little closer to him. She could also escape the tense atmosphere of the family home.

Alva carried on running up the steep slopes of Giant's Finger, as the main route twisted away from the high incline. Her mind wasn't on where she was going, after all she had climbed these paths hundreds of times before. Instead she thought about her uncle and the tensions that had been increasing within their once close little family. When her father was in Kilsgard everyone was happy. He would take her on adventures. Magnus would occupy her with stories from his travels and insights into the many mysteries he'd solved. Her mother would gently chide both men for the way they treated Alva like their equal. But since Father had left the mood was very different. Why was there so much quiet hostility in her home?

Blindly she raced forward through the







darkness as Fen bounded confidently ahead of her. Their passage became more treacherous. The rocks under her feet were slippery and Fen was guiding her towards the ravine, where the river raged beneath a sheer drop. Alva's heart sank and realization dawned. This was where she had been in her dream. Was it a prophecy? Had she seen her own death? Her mind told her to stop and turn back, but her heart and feet were dragged along by the silver outline of Fenrir ahead.

Alva began to run faster, trying to get past the point where she had fallen in her dream, and on to safety higher up. But—as if the gods were pulling her by strings, laughing at her—she felt the anticipated root catch on her shoe, lost her footing, and hurtled forward, towards the edge of the ravine. She knew what was coming. She'd seen it already. She was falling. She would become water and wind. The river yawned up at her . . .

But as quickly as she had been falling, Alva felt her body jerk and a sharp tug against her back. The black rocks and raging waters still seemed to reach up, yet they were not getting any closer. She heard a muffled noise behind her. Turning slowly, she saw Fenrir, his sharp fangs glinting in the light of the moon. He had her cloak between

his teeth, and his paws rooted to the ground. Half Alva's body was hanging free over the edge of the cliff, but Fenrir dug his claws into the earth, growling as he slowly paced backwards, dragging her towards the safety of solid ground. She used her hands to scramble back over the edge and the two collapsed, wheezing and exhausted. Fenrir had saved her.

Alva gasped, pulling the wolf over to her by the scruff of his neck and burying her face in his soft, thick fur. 'You're always one step ahead, my silver saviour.' Fenrir turned two watery dark eyes upwards, nudging his muzzle against her cheek. She and Fen had beaten the Fates; death would not take her today.

She took a moment to catch her breath, as her chest was aching and she could taste fear in her mouth. Clambering back to her feet, she urged Fenrir on.

'Come on, boy. You've got the monk's scent. We need to get there before the others.' He turned, and in an instant became a flash of light between the trees ahead. Her canine guardian knew the way, and now Alva must follow.