

A DARK TALE OF JÖRMUNGANDR



# WHERE THE SERPENT SLEEPS



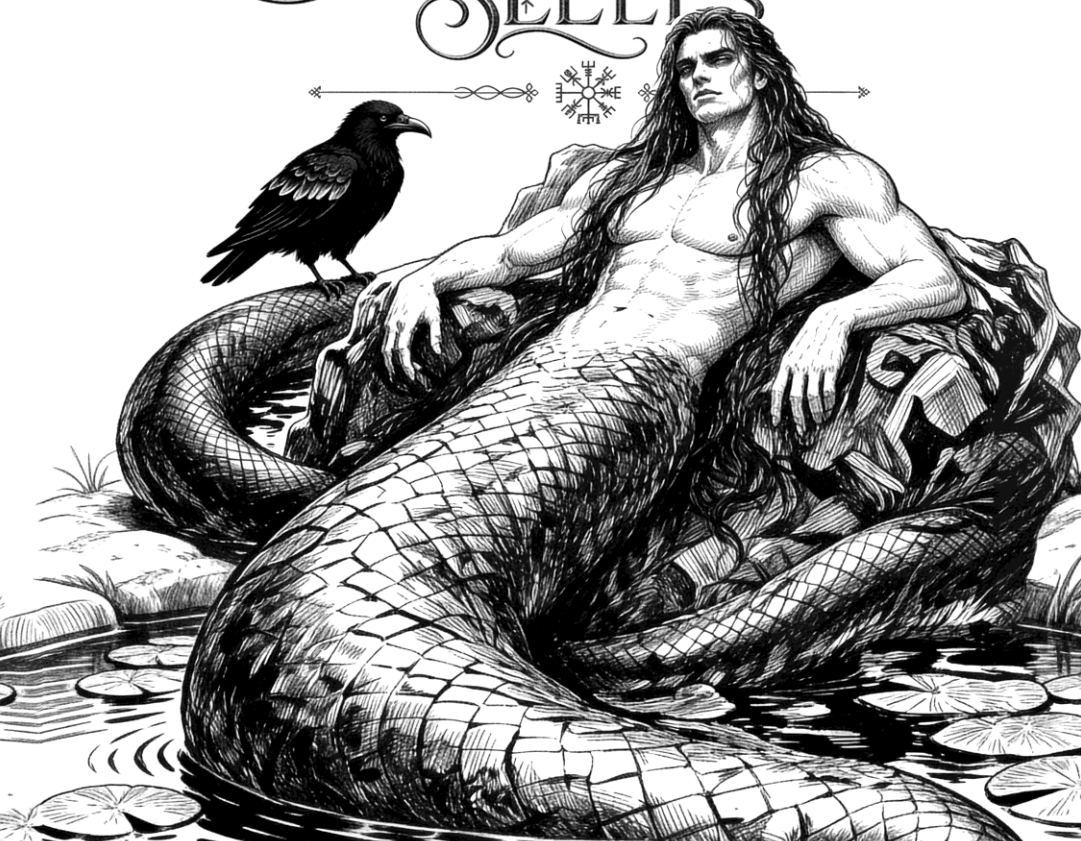
*From the author of the Ancient Legacy series*

N. VON WOLF



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WHERE  
THE  
SERPENT  
SLEEPS



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*“I looked upon the beast’s grave eyes,  
Where serpent fire and sorrow gleamed;  
I feared him not, though Death leaned near,  
And in his shadow, I softly dreamed;  
I gave my hand, my heart, my plea —  
And let the beast make home of me.”*



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# TRIGGER WARNINGS

Graphic violence,  
Blood,  
Gore,  
Body horror,  
Decapitation,  
Dismemberment,  
Human consumption,  
Cannibalism,  
Murder,  
Mass murder,  
Death,  
Parental death,  
Grief,  
Threats of child harm,  
Child endangerment,  
Infant endangerment,  
Threats of infanticide,  
Attempted sexual assault,  
Sexual harassment,  
Sexual intimidation,  
Victim-blaming,  
Misogyny,  
Women treated as  
property,  
Forced marriage,  
Marriage coercion,  
Financial coercion,  
Blackmail,  
Familial betrayal,

Emotional manipulation,  
Emotional abuse,  
Threats,  
Intimidation,  
Physical assault,  
Choking,  
Panic attacks,  
Loss of Consciousness,  
Class exploitation,  
Human sacrifice,  
Blood magic,  
Curses,  
Captivity,  
Magical bondage,  
Power imbalance,  
Immortal/mortal age gap,  
Explicit sexual content,  
Moral ambiguity,  
Religious/mythological  
blasphemy,  
Ragnarök/end-of-the-  
world imagery,  
Poison/venom,  
Threats of torture &  
mutilation,  
Social ruin/shame,  
Coercive family politics.



# GLOSSARY

**Aesir** [AY-seer] – One of the two main groups of Norse gods, associated with power, kingship, battle, law, wisdom, and cosmic order. Gods that were identified historically to belong to the Aesir: Odin, Frígg, Thor, Baldr, Höðr, Týr, Heimdallr, Bragi, Víðarr, Váli, Ullr, Forseti, Loki. Their counterpart are *Vanir*.

**Angrboda** [ANGR-bo-tha] – A jötunn woman in Norse mythology and the mother of several monstrous children by Loki, including Jörmungandr, Fenrir and Hel. Her name is often interpreted as ‘*she who brings sorrow*’, or ‘*the bringer of grief*’

**Asgard** [AHS-gard] – The realm of the Aesir gods in Norse mythology. It’s a home to gods such as Odin, Frígg, Thor, Heimdallr, and Bragi, and is connected to the mortal world by the rainbow bridge, Bifröst.

**Bifröst** [BIFF-rost] – The burning rainbow bridge in Norse mythology that connects Midgard, the world of humans, to Asgard, the realm of the gods. It is guarded by Heimdallr and is often associated with divine passage, celestial protection, and the boundary between mortal and godly realms. At Ragnarök, Bifröst is foretold to break beneath the weight of the forces marching against the gods.

**Bragi** [BRAH-ghee] – The Norse god of poetry, eloquence and storytelling. He is often associated with skalds, wisdom of words, and the preservation of heroic tales.

**Fólkvangr** [FOHLK-vangr] – The field or meadow ruled by the

goddess Freyja, where she receives half of those slain in battle. The other half go to Odin's hall, Valhalla. Fólkvangr is associated with Freyja's powers over war, death, fertility, beauty, magic, and chosen warriors. Its great hall is called Sessrúmnir.

**Freya** [FRAY-ah] – A Vanir goddess associated with love, beauty, desire, fertility, magic, war, and death. She is the sister of Freyr, the daughter of Njörðr, and is often linked to seiðr, a form of Norse magic, as well as Fólkvangr, the field where she receives half of those slain in battle. In this story, Freya either shows as the goddess of love, beauty, desire and fertility when she wears just the grey clothes and veil; and as the head of Valkyries in full armour when she represents magic, war and death.

**Freyr** [FRAYR] – A Vanir god in Norse mythology associated with fertility, prosperity, peace, kingship, sunlight, harvest, and sacred abundance. He is the son of Njörðr and brother of Freyja. Freyr is closely linked to wealth, land, virility, and the flourishing of both people and kingdoms.

**Frígg** [Frig, with a hard G like in good] – the queen of the Aesir and wife of Odin. Frígg is associated with prophecy, motherhood, marriage, fate and divine sovereignty, though she is often said to know the future without revealing it.

**Heimdallr** [HAYM-dahl-er] – the watchman of the gods and guardian of Bifröst, the bridge between Asgard and Midgard. Heimdallr is known for his extraordinary senses and is fated to blow the Gjallarhorn at Ragnarök.

**Hel** [Hell] – the goddess or ruler of the underworld realm that bears her name. Daughter of Loki and Angrboda, she governs those who die of sickness, age, or causes outside heroic battles.

**Huginn** [HOO-gin, with a hard g like in good] – one of Odin's two ravens, whose name means *thought*. Alongside Muninn,

*memory*, Húginn flies across the world and returns to Odin with knowledge of what he has seen.

**Jörmungandr** [*YER-moon-gand-er*] – also known as the Midgard Serpent or World Serpent, he is one of Loki and Angrboda's children. He is cast into the sea surrounding Midgard, where he grows so vast that he encircles the world and bites his own tail. He is fated to battle Thor at Ragnarök.

**Jötunn** [*YEH-tun*]/**jötnar** [*YEHT-nar*] (*plural*) – beings from the race often translated as *giants*, though jötnar are not always physically giant. In Norse mythology, they are ancient, powerful beings associated with wilderness, chaos, primordial forces, magic and opposition to the gods.

**Loki** [*LOH-kee*] – a complex trickster figure in Norse mythology. He is cunning, shapeshifting, and disruptive, sometimes aiding the gods and sometimes causing disaster.

**Midgard** [*MID-gard*] – the realm of humankind in Norse cosmology, situated between the worlds of the gods and the outer realms of chaos. It is protected by a boundary formed from the body of the primordial giant Ymir and is encircled by Jörmungandr, the World Serpent.

**Niflheim** [*NIV-el-haym*] – one of the primordial realms in Norse cosmology, associated with mist, ice, cold, and darkness. Niflheim is often linked to the origins of creation and to the realm of the dead.

**Njördr** [*NYUR-thur*] – A Vanir god associated with the sea, wind, wealth, fishing, ships, and prosperity. He is the father of Freyr and Freya, and is often connected to seafaring fortune and coastal abundance.

**Norns** [Norns] – Powerful female beings in Norse mythology associated with fate, destiny, and the shaping of lives. They are often linked to the past, present, and future, and are said to sit

by the Well of Urðr [OOR-thur] beneath Yggdrasil, where they determine the paths of gods and mortals alike, and tend to Yggdrasil by drawing water and clay from the well to preserve the tree.

**Therianthrope** – a being who combines human and animal traits, or who can shift between human and animal forms. The term in fiction is often used for shapeshifters, were-creatures, or hybrid beings with both human and beastlike characteristics.

**Thor** – the Norse god of thunder, storms, strength, protection, and sacred order. He wields the hammer Mjölnir and is one of the chief defenders of gods and humans. In the scrolls, he is fated to kill Jörmungandr at Ragnarök, but dies from the serpent’s venom soon after.

**Yggdrasil** [*IG-dra-sil*] – the immense World Tree at the centre of Norse cosmology. Its branches and roots connect the realms, including Asgard, Midgard, Niflheim, and others. It represents the structure of the cosmos, fate, life, death and renewal.

**Poetic Edda** – A collection of Old Norse mythological and heroic poems preserved mainly in the medieval Icelandic manuscript known as the *Codex Regius*. The *Poetic Edda* contains many of the central stories of Norse mythology, including accounts of the gods, giants, creation, fate, Ragnarök, and figures such as Odin, Thor, Loki, and Jörmungandr.

**Prose Edda** – A medieval Icelandic work written by Snorri Sturluson in the thirteenth century. The *Prose Edda* explains Norse mythology, cosmology, poetic language, and skaldic tradition, and is one of the major sources for surviving stories about the Norse gods, Jörmungandr, Ragnarök, and the wider mythic world.

**Ragnarök** [*RAG-na-rok*] – The prophesied doom of the gods in Norse mythology: a final, world-shattering series of battles,

deaths, natural disasters, and cosmic collapse. It includes the death of many major gods, including Odin, Thor, Loki, Heimdallr, and Jörmungandr, followed by the rebirth of the world.

**Snorri Sturluson** – a thirteenth-century Icelandic writer, poet, historian, chieftain, and politician. He is best known as the author of the *Prose Edda*. He lived in Christian medieval Iceland, so his writings preserve older pagan myths through a later literary and scholarly lens. Because of this, Snorri is invaluable, but not neutral: much of what modern readers know about Odin, Thor, Loki, Jörmungandr, Ragnarök, and the structure of the Norse cosmos comes through his retelling and interpretation.

**Vanir** [VAH-neer] – One of the two main groups of Norse gods, associated with fertility, prosperity, magic, nature, wealth, and the forces of life and abundance. Gods that were historically identified as Vanir: Njördr, Freyr, Freya (though while born as Vanir in origin, they live among the Aesir). Their counterpart are *Aesir*.



# PROLOGUE

## *The Legend*

Before the world learnt to fear the sea, the gods feared what slept beneath it.

Jörmungandr was born of Loki and Angrboda, child of trickery and sorrow, one of three offspring whose names were spoken carefully in Asgard.

Odin saw what fate had woven around them and cast the serpent into the waters surrounding Midgard, the mortal realm.

But the sea did not kill him.

It kept him.

There, in the black deep, Jörmungandr grew until his body circled the world and his jaws closed around his own tail. The earth known as Midgard rested inside the ring of him. The tides moved over his scales. Sailors crossed waters that were, in truth, his silence.

The gods called him monster.

Fate called him necessary.

Of all the gods, Thor was bound to him most bitterly. Thunder and serpent. Hammer and venom. Come Ragnarök, when the old world breaks and the sky darkens with doom, Jörmungandr will rise from the ocean and spill poison into sea and air.

Thor will strike him down.

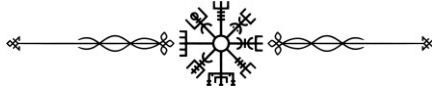
Then the thunder god will take nine steps.

And fall.

So the old stories still remember Jörmungandr not as a creature easily slain, but as a force the world was built around: vast and patient and feared. Fated to wake when the gods must die.

—*Inspired by the Old Norse myths of Jörmungandr, the Midgard Serpent, as preserved in the Poetic Edda and Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda.*

~I~



## *The Serpent*



o you *mind*? Húginn flaps his wings in irritation, a single black feather shaking loose and spiralling to the ground.

I sigh and halt my long tail halfway up the birch from where His Brooding Majesty's has chosen to conduct judgment.

The garden offers no shortage of more dramatic places for him to sulk. Moonlight spills over the silver-edged leaves, turns the vast pond into a sheet of liquid glass, and gilds the moss-covered rocks with a perfection that only ancient magic can achieve and obscene wealth can purchase.

Beyond it, walls of clipped yew unwind across the estate in vast coils, their narrow passages twisting back upon themselves until even moonlight seems to lose its way. I let my gaze settle on the slender channels of water cut between the hedges, catching the star-kissed glow in broken ribbons, while dark paths vanish beneath archways of leaves and reappear where no sensible route should lead.

A snare laid open beneath the sky – beautifully built to keep whatever enters from finding its way out.

I'm lounging at the water's edge, half-draped over a slab of black rock; ancient enough to have watched kingdoms drown, cursed enough to find myself trapped beneath ornamental birches, and vain enough to wonder if the iridescence of my

scales has dulled.

‘Do you think I’m getting sick?’ I ask the bird as though the answer is of no consequence, while inspecting a patch near my hip where the light no longer seems to catch quite so brightly.

‘Is this a trick question?’ Húginn turns his head towards me with an abrupt, unnatural jerk peculiar to birds. The moon glints off Odin’s mark that clasps the bridge of his beak, just between his eyes, like a piece of silver worked into the shape of a rune.

I narrow my eyes first, but don’t even try to hold myself back. With all the grace and restraint expected of a captive, immortal therianthrope, I flick the end of my tail against the trunk of the tree. The whole thing shudders and hisses violently, and the raven explodes from his branch in a frantic beating of wings, scattering black feathers and resentment everywhere.

‘How mature!’ he complains. ‘Exactly what I’d expect from an ancient serpent who’d let himself get leashed by a mortal enchantment because some duke asked nicely to help with another meaningless war.’

I bare my teeth at that, the hinges of my jaw creak as my fangs unfold from the roof of my mouth. ‘He did *not* ask nicely.’

My reluctant, feathery companion ruffles his feathers but does not contradict me.

‘No,’ he ponders as he lands on a higher branch of the same tree. ‘As I recall, there were runes, chains, a blood oath, and you spouting threats about eating his young. And then the world.’

The raven says it as though the thing had been simple. As though the mortal had strolled to the edge of Midgard with simply his courage and a leash for my neck.

He had not.

The bastard had prised ancient runes from graves that should never have been opened, found witches starved enough to trade their souls for coin, and vile enough to bleed their craft into iron, salt and bone.

They had not commanded me. No mortal mouth could.

They had summoned something older to lend weight to their spell – a cold whisper from Hel’s halls, my dear sister giving her breath to a war that promised to swell her kingdom.

They had dragged me from the black deep, bound me before my full shape could make sense of itself, then fastened the spell to the duke’s bloodline and turned my everlasting hunger upon the battlefield until I swallowed every name upon it.

My tail coils around the birch tree and squeezes tighter. Bark splits beneath my hard scales, and one of the lower branches cracks abruptly enough to send the bird hopping sideways.

‘Temporary inconvenience,’ I mutter.

He huffs. ‘It *would* have been temporary if you hadn’t actually wiped out a whole nation.’

‘He was supposed to let me go right after. What are a few mortal lives anyway? There’s plenty of them mucking about.’ I wave boredly at nothing at all.

‘Frígg seemed to have disagreed,’ he grinds out, because the purpose of his eternity is to make mine feel as unbearable as possible.

Just the sound of that name lifts my scales and sets venom dripping from my fangs.

Frígg. All-seeing, all-sighing, mother of mercy when mercy suits her, executioner when it does not. She had looked upon my little massacre with those calm, mournful eyes and decided to teach me humility in the only way I deserved – or so she said back then.

She meant to make me understand the weight of mortal lives by forcing me to guard them, to teach them. Until I learnt that soft bones, brief breaths, and foolish – though juicy – hearts were not as meaningless as I deemed them.

Even now, when I think of her, the old magic tightens around the part of me that remembers what it felt like to be endless.

Oh, but the *merciful* mother did not *bind* me to the man or the

land. No, that would have been too clean. She bound me to his filthy lineage. Father to son, warlord to wastrel, generation after generation of soft-skinned heirs inheriting me like a cursed portrait no one dares take off the wall.

Yet even her mercy had left room for mortal spite. She permitted the duke to set the bounds of my leash – to decide how far I could wander from the bearer of his name.

Until I made amends, she'd said.

And if it took eternity, then eternity would have me: bound and watching and waiting like a pet on a bloody leash; guarding the bloodline I'd rather devour, while the goddess who damned me sat somewhere above the roots of the world and spoke spite into justice.

As if I – Jörmungandr, the Devourer of Worlds – could make *amends* so easily.

I'd rather eat his young.

'Stop it,' Húginn mutters, annoyingly. 'I know you're thinking about eating the Duke's offspring again – you forget I can hear thoughts.'

'Can't you fly off somewhere to the south with the rest of your kind? Must you be talking me into oblivion?'

I push my palms to the earth and command my scales to slide beneath skin; the long column of the tail divides at the hip, bone knitting into two human legs with a wet series of cracks that makes the raven shake out his wings as though the sound has hooked into his feathers. A familiar tingle runs from my newly formed heels to the tips of my toes.

'I wish I could, but *no*. I am cursed to report on your progress. And I am *not* a garden sparrow to be dismissed southwards! I am the *Thought!* The raven of *Odin!*'

*Ugh.*

As if the curse and the leash weren't punishment enough, the goddess had also seen fit to leave me with one of the All-Father's two sacred ravens. Instead of flying across the worlds

and returning with wisdom, mine had been, naturally, assigned to perch in a tree and criticise my dietary habits.

I rise and reach for the black silk robe left folded upon the stone by the last footman foolish enough to disturb the centre of the maze after dusk. Whether he died of fright or became dinner depends entirely on how generous Húginn feels when telling the tale.

‘I can tell,’ I murmur into my chin.

‘Rude.’

‘Enough of your yapping. Call him over.’ I stretch out on the slate set into the pond’s edge. Its surface is already worn from where my scales have scraped it smooth. Forty summers would do that.

Húginn lingers. When several breaths pass without movement, my gaze climbs the old birch and finds his beady yellow eyes trained on me.

‘I’m *hungry*,’ I reason.

‘You ate the footman *yesterday* – thank you for that, by the way.’ He flicks his head and aims it towards the grand rooftop that rises just across the labyrinth of green shrubs. *Labyrinth* – to stop curious eyes from wandering into my domain. ‘The more mortals you devour, the longer we stay trapped here.’

‘Oh? Is there such a thing that lasts beyond *eternity*?’ I counter, wiggling my toes. The tingle remains too long after I morph into



my human form. Unnerving.

‘Forget it. You’re a lost cause!’ He launches into the air. He knows I can hear him from miles away, so I force my focus off his muttering and meet the face of the moon in the still water.

The silence he leaves behind does nothing to soften the weight on my shoulders.

Hunger is a simple thing because it can be fed.

Whatever ails me is worse. It sits deeper than appetite, lodged where even venom cannot reach, reminding me that it was not Odin who brought me down, nor Frigg with all her merciful cruelty. Nor was it Thor, as the Norns had whispered he one day would. It had been a warm-blooded, soft-boned mortal duke, arrogant enough to fasten his name to mine and call it triumph.

His line has mistaken survival for ownership ever since. Father to son, heir to heir, each of them would inherit my cage.

And one day – curse or no curse – I *will* collect. I *will* teach them the difference between what I am and what they made me.

I groan aloud at myself.

Once, I considered eating this world simply because it was there. Too green, too bright, crawling with noisy little lives that took permanence for birthright.

Now, trapped in a garden barely able to contain my tail, listening to my own captivity breathe through the trees and shrubbery, I consider it with utter devotion.

The shaking of the branches and the soft give of earth beneath his footsteps reach me even here.

I clear my head of all thoughts and focus on his pace. Húginn lands on the tree shortly after, and we both await the wretched mortal’s arrival.

The hedges shiver. The breeze carries the scent of his blood, fouled with wine and candle-smoke, and the sour trace of fear disguised as superiority.

My gums itch – *itch* to feel the tearing of his flesh upon my

teeth.

Soon, he stops where the labyrinth opens into the heart of the garden; at the mouth of the monster's shrine, where I forever plot the demise of him and every heir who carries his blood.

He holds his breath. He knows what I will ask for; what I always ask for: a small amusement for me and a considerable punishment for him.

'What do you get,' I start quietly, 'when you put a shackle on an ancient beast, and forget to feed it?'

He clears his throat, but I hear the tremor in his words.

'Grand Leviathan of the North,' he starts, but it just scrapes at my already frayed nerves, 'I was informed you had some... *nourishment* yesterday.'

Reaching down into the pit of myself, I summon the old rage. The endless hunger. Let them crawl up my throat and behind my teeth. Streak into my eyes until the world turns winter-pale and the light flares over my cheekbones.

'*Yesterday*. And what did you bring me today?' I croon, tilting my head sideways.

My fangs snap free with a delicate little click – just the big ones.

A useful sound, really.

His eyes, indecisive in colour, widen most marvellously, the whites showing as they do in all properly frightened creatures.

He doesn't take a step back the way he used to. Simply squares his shoulders and gathers himself as though he's speaking to a chained dog, forgetting that some chains teach patience – not obedience.

'I will have to remind you that I keep this meagre shape only because I'd hate to ruin my temporary dwelling. I so adore the little pond.'

My body shifts as I stand, my bare feet sinking into the close-cropped grass while I take a few measured steps towards him.

For a human, he's tall. Unfortunately for him, I have chosen to remain several nightmares larger.

'I can still expand until this world disappears between my jaws.'

For emphasis, the human spine I'm currently entertaining stretches with a series of crackling pops. Each one makes him flinch. How considerate of him to appreciate the effort of my pettiness.

'The goddess might not take kindly to it.'

'Oh...' Húginn groans in tandem with the grind of my teeth.

The mention of her has me hungry and bothered all over again.

'Do I look like I give a damn what the wench wants?' I hiss quietly through my teeth.

In that moment, a cold breeze rushes between our forms like a warning from the witch herself.

I swallow with distaste and tilt my head sideways until I feel the vertebrae realigning into relief again.

Which reminds me... there was a rather loud ruckus in the mansion not ten moons ago. Servants were in a fuss, the sharp scent of blood filled the air and then a new kind of scent filled the grounds. Milk. Blood. Rose-scented powder.

*Very well. If taking on the world is too ambitions, I should begin with something... smaller.*

I smile slowly, watching his shoulders fold.

'If you don't bring me nourishment, right now, I'll start quenching my hunger with the cradle.'

I watch as his throat works around a swallow. His eyes flit accusingly to Húginn who, for once, remains silent. The duke keeps forgetting I have no need of the bird's reports – my senses tell me more than enough.

'By all means,' I croon, 'keep me waiting, mortal. Perhaps I'll make your wife choose which piece of your legacy to nibble on first.'

‘My *wife*,’ he says quickly with something heavy in his voice, ‘is too far gone for your poison to reach her.’

The pain changes shape in the air. Grief spills from him in a warmer, richer current, and my forked tongue slips between my teeth for a quick, savoury taste.

Loss has texture. Sometimes it tastes like salt, heat, rot within the sweetness. This one has a fresh tang to it.

The world stills around those words as I draw his misery across my senses and let it settle behind my ribs.

*Ab.* That is where the wound lies.

For a cruel moment I deliberate pressing my long, sharp nail into it. I could ask if she screamed. But something ancient holds my tongue.

His eyes start blinking rapidly, as if he’s calculating which unlucky sod would be missed the least.

His gaze flies towards the hedges. ‘I’ll send the gardener.’

The answer comes far too quick. He has considered this before.

‘Not the gardener!’ I flick my hand in the air with annoyance and turn on my heels as I step away from him. ‘I like his work. I need something more – that little footman was far too scrawny to sate me. Do you even *feed* your minions?’

He shifts his weight. The pressure alters in the earth. ‘They... f-feed themselves,’ he stammers out.

I turn swiftly at the waist, relishing the way he flinches. ‘Themselves?’ I ask, puzzled.

‘Yes. They work here. The old laws of slavery were abolished a decade ago. They come to work and leave again to go home.’

My lip curls as though I’ve tasted rot.

‘How dull,’ I grumble. ‘You humans are getting more boring by the decade.’

Returning to my rock, I collapse across it with a sigh and enough force to make the water jump against the bank. ‘Send the cook.’

Silence.

Too long.

I glance over my shoulder, slowly.

‘Go on,’ I murmur. ‘Say it. Defy me, mortal. *Give* me that delight.’

As I watch his mouth close slowly, that’s all the assurance I need. Then I face the pond where the moon’s reflection shimmers in broken fractals.

‘Of course, oh Great Serpent.’

‘Spare me. Begone.’

I listen to his feet shuffle quickly back whence he came.

For a while, I watch only the water surface, the silver orb trembling whenever the night breeze drags itself over the pond’s surface. There is something almost insulting about this beauty – all that softness wasted on a cage.

‘So you *are* going to persist with this nonsense.’ It’s not a question. Húginn sighs high above in the treetop. His feathers rustle along with the leaves as another gust pushes through the Labyrinth.

Adjusting on the rock, I trail one finger through the water and split my reflection in two; man and monster rippling apart before the pond calmly stitches us back together. Even the garden insists on healing what I would rather leave ruined.

I let my skull knock against the hard slate as I close my eyes. ‘Don’t start again. I’m in a mood.’

‘When are you *not* in a mood? At this stage, I’m not entirely certain you aren’t a thirteen-summers-old girl suffering through her first moon-blood.’

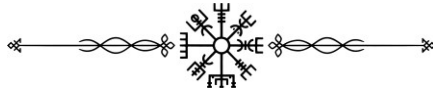
I don’t respond, only focus on the warmth of the summer, the scent of the elderflowers nearby, and the ache beneath my ribs that no feast has managed to quiet.

‘We’ll forever be stuck on this plane,’ is the last whisper to fall from Odin’s raven that night.

Beyond the tall hedges, the mansion sleeps. My gaze drags

to the window, where a single candle shivers, and the scent of milk still clings to the night.

## ~2~



### *The Serpent*



he sun takes too long to die the next day.

It feels intentional on nights like this.

I lie watching the last of it bleed through the hedges, gold sinking into green, green blackening into shadow. Every cloud drags its belly across the sky like some bloated beast determined to taunt me.

As if the world knows... *remembers* what happens when the moon swells full and silver, and the old curse eases one tooth from my throat.

Only one night. That was Frígg's mercy: one night beneath the full moon when the garden stops being a prison, the roots slacken and the stones forget to hiss beneath my coils.

It is not freedom. But it is enough for now.

And I feel it already.

Under my skin.

Restless as a nest of snakes.

My fangs ache as it presses against the hinges of my jaw.

My gaze slides over and down to where the mansion settles for the evening, windows glowing, servants flitting about, doors closing. Lives continuing with that unbearable confidence mortals have when they believe the dark is meant for resting.

But tonight, the dark belongs to me.

That cook the duke sent this morning was not enough to sate

me – especially not on a night when the moon has invited me out to play.

Húginn makes a low, unhappy sound behind me, high above ground.

‘Don’t start,’ I murmur.

I’m not sure why I keep saying that. He never listens.

‘I haven’t opened my beak.’ Like he needs to.

‘Mm.’

His talons scrape against the branch. ‘Your gaze has been fixed on the mansion since the sun began bleeding out. That is never a harmless matter.’

I cannot help but smile at that.

Because the duke knows I’m free tonight. He’ll be waiting for me with shaking knees and damp britches, pretending at manhood before whichever poor soul he has decided to sacrifice to my mood.

These mortals who inherit old bargains...they stand straighter when the moon is full. Speak softer. Lock doors they know won’t hold me. And as their wives hide behind curtains and their children hide behind prayers, I close my eyes and let the scent of blood floating my way envelop my hunger.

‘You are plotting something heinous, aren’t you?’ Húginn says.

‘Oh yes.’

‘So why are you still here?’

I lift a shoulder. Let it drop slowly. ‘Anticipation is half the meal.’

The raven gives a judgmental click of his beak.

I stretch my fingers, feeling the joints loosen and the curse thin thread by thread around my bones.

It is... refreshing. Like submerging into the cold, black waters of Niflheim, where the first rives froze before this world had the audacity to turn warm.

The duke has had a whole turn of the moon to contemplate this night: every door opening, every candle guttering, every

shadow in his nursery twisting as I walk where I please.

‘Jörmungandr...’ Húginn clicks his beak several times. ‘You are not to go near the nursery.’

‘Have you ever wondered,’ I say, smiling at the first window going dark, ‘what would happen to the curse if there *was* no offspring left?’

Half a breath – that is all it would take for me to devour the two sons; pale little replicas of the duke, tucked behind tutors, guards and locked doors. As though narrow steel, Latin and Old Norse lessons could keep godly fangs and nails from finding them.

The infant offers scarcely enough flesh to warrant the effort, though its loss would leave the deepest wound.

Three offspring.

How thoughtful of the duke to provide a selection for me.

Húginn flaps his wings once, then settles upon my shoulder.

‘Of course,’ he murmurs, far too calm in the face of the threat I have laid before him. ‘But I already know the outcome.’

Ah, right. I forget what he is at times.

‘Did you see it?’ I ask. ‘In Frígg’s gaze when she condemned us?’

Húginn’s throat works around a sound too old to be speech.

‘Curses like this...’ he murmurs, his tongue filtering what should be shared and what should remain in the void. ‘They do not break kindly when you try to outwit them. Besides—’ he glances at me, ‘—Frígg made certain you could not end the bloodline yourself.’

Yes, I tried the duke first, after he made me wipe out the first kingdom that dared raise its hand against him. But with all the reasonable intention to bite his head clean from his shoulders, my fangs would not unfold. My venom would not flow. Even my hands, wrapped around his miserable throat, refused to tighten beyond discomfort.

And I tried again when the firstborn came squalling into the world ten winters ago. The same result.

Frígg's curse had a tiresome fondness for precision – the *male* heirs could not be ended by my appetite.

Alas, the soft *female* scent drifting from the nursery might yet prove loophole enough.

Húginn does not need to say anything further.

Knowing Frígg, I'd probably remain chained to this world for eternity after tonight.

The bird bristles at that thought; a small black clot of divine disapproval.

Thankfully, the mansion is far more amusing. Polished glass and weak lamps. The warm, frightened blood moving behind walls paid for by wars I was dragged into winning.

The duke thinks the curse protects him.

And it does – in a way.

It keeps me from ending his line.

But that is a clumsy lesson.

Fear?

*That* endures. It has *flavour*.

It can be fed and pulled and stretched into shape. It can be taught to live in a man until he drops every cup he lifts. It can be tucked into his pillow and folded beneath his tongue so every command tastes of ash before it comes out of him.

I do not need to kill the duke, just remind him that I could hurt him in different ways. That every servant crossing his halls is alive only because my appetite has, for the moment, found better sport in restraint.

'You're smiling again,' Húginn mutters.

I do not look at him even as he flies off with resentment beneath his wings and lands on a nearby branch.

Rather than indulge him further, I take my first step towards the mansion. He means only to keep me from tonight's game.

The Labyrinth parts for me as if it knows better than to confine me this evening. Beyond its silvered hedges, the estate rises from the plane like some old tyrant's temple. Pale marble columns tower

beneath the sky, too white and too pompous, almost bright enough to remind me of that ghastly Asgard.

Laurels bow along the path. Cypress spires cut the sky. Water spills from the mouths of stone nymphs into long reflecting pools, and blue-gold braziers burn before doors tall enough to admit a god.

A pity there is but a frightened duke inside.

I no longer find these mortal temples of self-worship comical. How little they know of true godhood, and less still of the dark belly awaiting them at the end of all things.

No light spills across the marble steps or the gravel path behind me as I open the door. The candles are out.

Pure silence greets me from within.

My smile returns.

The whole house knows what this night brings. No maid comes running. No footman challenges me. Moonlight lies across the floors and fresh bolts above the old locks. The mansion holds its breath around me, every corridor swallowed in darkness and every door shut tight and locked tighter.

Makes me almost giddy. As if iron teeth and polished wood have ever kept a monster from entering.

My bare feet sink into the long, red carpet as I move deeper, the fabric plump and soft beneath my human soles. Portraits stare from the walls – rows and rows of dead Ambrlyns in powdered wigs and gilt frames. Scales and serpentine figures hide inconspicuously among the painted background.

At least *some* acknowledgment of my efforts.

I stop just to take in the same arrogant mouth and the same fragile bones of the painted flesh staring back at me.

At the end of the corridor, amber light spills through the half-open door of the drawing room.

I can smell him already.

Duke Landon Ambrlyn waits beyond that warm slit of light, dressed in courage he does not possess, with his hands most likely

folded over the pommel of a sword he knows won't draw fast enough should the curse ever allow me to end him. The scent of cold steel drifts aimlessly from it.

A soft laugh almost escapes me, but I bite it back.

He thinks I'm going to simply obey the rays of light and come directly to him.

So I stop in the middle where the path divides between two long, winding staircases, both climbing towards all that is precious to him. Then I turn my head slowly where the shadowed balustrade leads to the left wing, and where I can smell that curious scent from before.

It is far too fresh to be fear. No... it's something softer.

Soft linen. A little salt from dried tears, perhaps. Milk, certainly.

*What is this peculiar smell?*

I follow the scent of powder, roses and something I can't place as the staircase curves upwards. It leads me along a narrow gallery lined with moonlit windows and statues I don't care to examine too closely, past locked rooms, extinguished lamps—

There—

The scent settles just beyond a closed white door adorned with ornaments I find utterly distasteful. They are for gods and temples, not *mortal* dwellings.

But nonetheless, the scent is strongest behind that door.

My hand closes around the gold handle. The lock powders silently beneath my grip, and the door yields.

The small wreath of dried roses reeking of witchcraft fixed at eye-level is probably some charm or hex – as if that could form a barrier against something like me.

I am not a demon to be repelled – I am the end of all things.

In hindsight, I can't decide if it makes me sad or wrathful that the mortals have forgotten the old gods and their ways so soon. Hasn't been a thousand years, and barely forty had passed since the duke summoned me and I'd made my grand appearance at the Battle of the Seven Continents.

Four kingdoms had vanished before dawn. I devoured their kings, their armies, their horses until their histories went screaming down my throat and into Hel's halls. My sister must have been insufferably pleased with the harvest – as I was pleased with the chaos.

To think such a matter was tucked into pages of history books and merely clasped between praying hands... An insult.

For a breath, I stand before the door and listen.

A small, stubborn pulse beats behind the wood.

And I let myself in.

Once inside, I'm not entirely certain I haven't gone colour-blind. Everything is white. The moon claims the white of the walls, gauze curtains and a thick white rug. A lavish cradle trimmed in gold sits in the middle – pompous enough to make a priest weep. On a table between it and the window stands a bouquet of white roses, their perfume hanging too sweetly in the air. But that is not the source of the scent.

Beside the roses rests a small gilt frame with a black-and-white portrait of a woman. To call her beautiful wouldn't be above me. Her expression is soft, almost serene, yet something in the fixed darkness of her eyes makes the room feel more like a shrine than a nursery.

The mother.

A heartbeat trembles through the room, so vivid it might be thudding inside my own chest.

How sweetly it ought to slip down my throat.

I stand in the doorway a little longer, wondering whether tonight is the night I test the curse in earnest. Whether I take one of the duke's heirs and let Frigg herself come down to tear me apart for it. If only to bother her a little.

The scent, though, does not make my gums ache.

That is the first curiosity.

It does not call venom to my fangs. My jaws do not tighten, my fangs do not stir. Even the hollow in my stomach remains

treacherously still.

Odd.

My gaze flits sideways to a female slumped in plain clothes, her hair wrapped beneath a cloth. Asleep. Must be what passes for protection nowadays.

Then comes a soft sound from inside the cradle.

I step closer, intrigued.

No sleeping meal waits within.

Whatever it is, it's small. It lies awake beneath the coverlet, plump-cheeked and bright-eyed. One tiny fist knocks clumsily against a silver rattle fixed above the bedding, setting it chiming.

The way it moves its limbs is too vivid to be claimed by sleep. Too content and oblivious as my shadow falls across it.

I curl my fingers around the edge of the cradle and give it a little thump with my forefinger.

The cradle rocks a little. The creature blinks up at me with eyes infuriatingly similar to its sire's.

'I've never particularly enjoyed the taste of infants,' I tell it, sliding one hand beneath that ridiculously small body and the other beneath its loose, heavy head. I lift the thing with appalling ease; it leaves the bedding without resistance, fitting into my hands with an almost offensive lack of substance. Fragile joints. Pulsing throat. Foolish, open trust.

One squeeze would ruin it. One careless flex of my thumb would turn the duke's guarded treasure into a lifetime of torment.

A life so easily ended that ending it would almost be considered a vulgar thing.

Lifting it higher, I examine the little beast.

This is what he has guarded so fiercely – a warm, wriggling scrap of bone and breath?

Its hands open and close against mine, then strike my fingers in a frenzy of ungoverned excitement.

A damp-palmed little tyrant it is, with cheeks too round for dignity and fingers too small to strangle even a moth.

I turn it slightly one way, then the other.

Its head lists against my palm with alarming bonelessness.

Is it supposed to do wobble like that?

‘You are badly designed,’ I inform it, my nose wrinkling without remorse. ‘No armour, fangs or claws. The jötnar would eat you before you drew breath.’

One soft foot kicks against my chest with astonishing confidence.

I look down at it, then back up at the creature. It looks insufferably pleased with itself.

Allowing myself another moment of studious patience, I simply stare at it. Then that old, dark instinct rises in me. Made of deep sea and cold graves and the echo of the worlds once broken between my teeth.

In defiance of Frígg herself, I open my mouth wide enough for the first pair of my fangs to snap down – the venomless pair. The second, shorter pair, slides free beside them. Venom beads at their points and gathers hot and sweet upon my tongue.

The infant stills beneath the shadow of my jaws, its little throat pulsing as those big colourful eyes fix upon the points of my teeth.

I tilt my head towards it, close enough to already feel the flutter of its breath against the wet points of my fangs—

—and the creature slaps both damp hands onto my cheeks.

I stop. Incredulous.

It pats me.

Once.

Again.

My fangs flick back into their sheaths before I command them to.

For a single, humiliating breath, I can only stare.

‘Do you mind?’ I whisper. ‘I am trying to eat you.’

It smiles.

Indents appear in both cheeks.

Every inch of me tenses at that. The fine hair on my neck lifts.

Its eyes hold me captive. They are... strange.

Gold-brown swirls through vivid green, molten as honey poured into moss-dark water. Like summer trapped beneath glass.

I stare incredulously until the venom on my tongue cools and turns bitter. The creature's mouth opens in another dimpled smile, its irrational trust brightening every feature.

I study my meal as one might study a verse wrought by Bragi's own tongue and carved upon the wall of a mead hall: irritatingly beautiful; impossible to eat without first noticing it.

Its fingers curl against my jaw then.

Before I can decide whether to be offended, the creature leans towards my open mouth with the grave concentration of a scholar examining runes, and pushes its entire hand between my teeth.

I go rigid. The last pair of teeth snaps back into its sheaths too late. Though the venom is gone, the smaller points still remained half-bared, long enough to pierce through that soft palm if I so much as breathe wrongly.

I glare at the infant in absolute horror.

And not because this abomination has put its hand into my mouth – though that is revolting enough.

But because... my fangs are gone.

*I retracted my fangs.*

For *its* sake.

I did not command it.

The thought is so grotesque I almost drop the cub.

The creature, delighted by my suffering, pats my tongue as if testing its quality.

I draw my head back with as much decorum as one can manage while being inspected orally by a milk-scented goblin too small to understand fear.

*Well.*

*That has thoroughly spoiled my appetite.*

I lower it towards the sheets. My palm cups its skull. Two fingers remain beneath its neck until the mattress bears its weight.

I nearly curse aloud when I realise I'm being careful with it.  
Not merely controlled – *irritatingly careful*.

I cradle the soft bend of its neck as though it were governed by some law older than Frígg's curse, then search its delicate palm for the slightest mark from my fangs.

I recoil, head snapping towards the glass of the window where my reflection stares disbelievingly back at me.

*What am I doing?*

And that? Flares hot. Burns hotter. Hits somewhere wrong.  
Beside me, fabric rustles.

I look to the side. The female by the wall stirs in her chair, drawing in a slow, waking breath.

And I look back at the creature. Its brilliant eyes meet mine.  
'Perhaps another time,' I murmur to the infant.

In the back, a breath catches halfway into the woman's lungs.  
The chair creaks beneath her body.

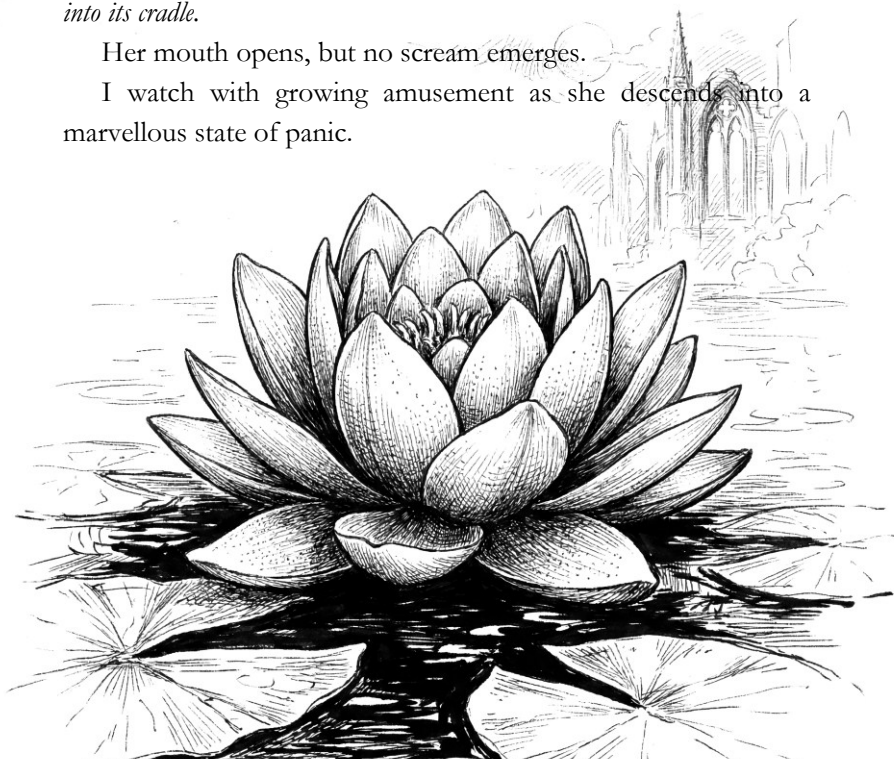
Turning my head, I meet her wide, horrified stare.

She has woken to a monster in the nursery.

Worse – she has woken to a monster just placing the child *back into its cradle*.

Her mouth opens, but no scream emerges.

I watch with growing amusement as she descends into a marvellous state of panic.



# THE AUTHOR

N. von Wolf writes dark, emotionally intense romances where desire collides with danger and power always has a price. Her stories blend myth, dystopia, and slow-burn obsession, featuring morally grey characters, lush prose, and worlds built to unravel both reader and heroine. Influenced by Eastern European folklore, Scandinavian myth, and Celtic mysticism, and the complexities of today's world, her work explores the line between surrender and survival – often with teeth.

When not writing, she works as a Technical Engineer Team Lead and balances life as a mother and wife.

Expect bloodstained love stories, broken heroes, and heroines who refuse to stay soft.

She genuinely loves hearing from readers. Reviews, messages, and reader feedback mean the world to her.

You can get in touch with her via [www.nvonwolf.com](http://www.nvonwolf.com) or on Social Media: <https://linktr.ee/nvonwolf>

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I hope you enjoyed this excerpt from ***Where the Serpent Sleeps***!

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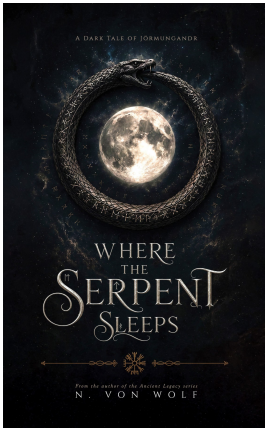
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