A Dark Tale of Jörmungandr



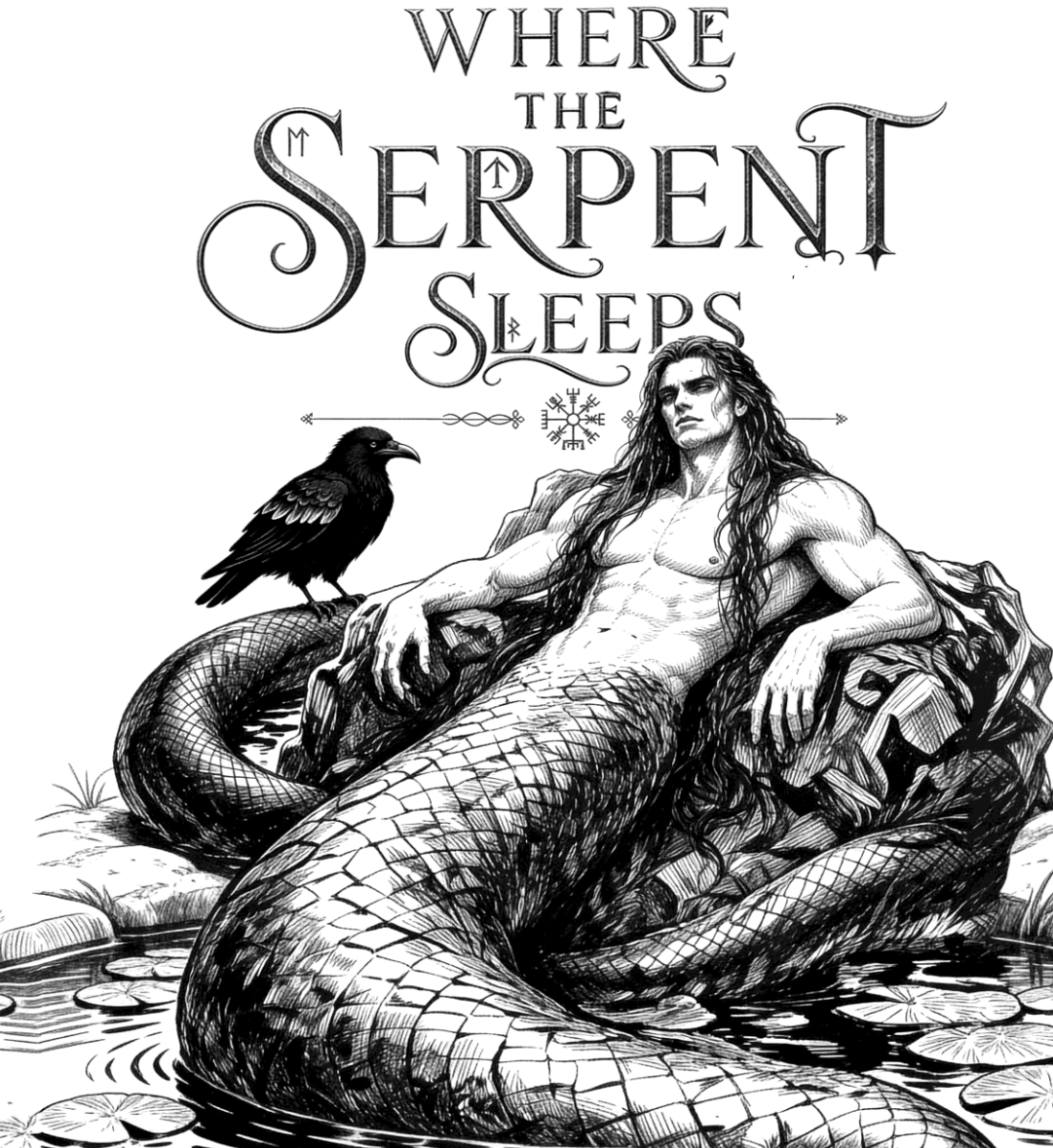
Where the Serpent Sleeps

From the author of the Ancient Legacy series

N. VON WOLF

N. von Wolf

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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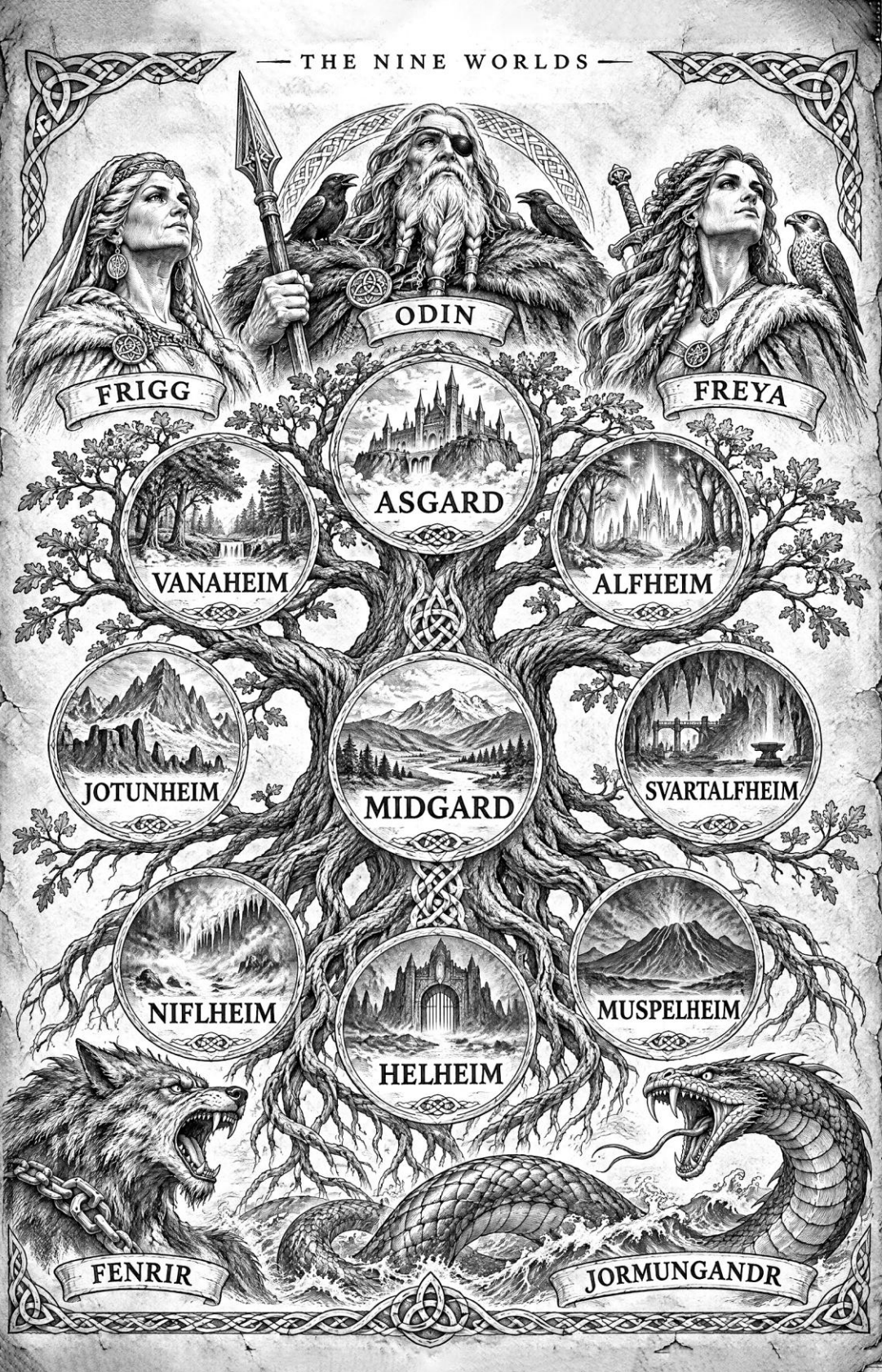
TRIGGER WARNINGS

Graphic violence,
Blood & gore,
Mutilation (decapitation, dismemberment, bone-breaking, head trauma, tongue removal),
Body horror & serpentine transformation,
Human consumption & cannibalism (including devouring imagery and threats),
Murder & mass murder,
Wartime atrocities,
Animal death (referenced),
Death & bereavement (parental death, death of a romantic partner),
Maternal & foetal death,
Pregnancy loss,
Child & infant endangerment (including threats of infanticide),
Sexual assault & abuse (attempted, implied, repeated),
Marital rape / spousal sexual assault,
Step-sibling sexual abuse & incestuous coercion,
Sexualised torture & violence (blades, restraints, blindfolding),
Sexual harassment, intimidation & coercion,
Coerced consummation,
Misogyny & victim-blaming,
Women treated as property,
Forced & coerced marriage (including between step-siblings),
Reproductive coercion & forced pregnancy,
Traumatic pregnancy & violence against a pregnant woman,
Childbirth-related trauma,
Breeding / impregnation themes,
Financial coercion & blackmail,
Familial betrayal & manipulation,
Emotional abuse & neglect,
Domestic abuse,
Physical & ritualised torture (cutting, scarification, bloodletting),
Threats & intimidation,
Physical assault & choking,
Panic attacks,
Trauma flashbacks &

dissociation,
Loss of consciousness,
Captivity & abduction (including threatened abduction),
Magical bondage & imprisonment,
Forced proximity & power imbalances,
Immortal/mortal age gap,
Grooming-adjacent themes (childhood attachment to an immortal adult figure),
Possessive & obsessive behaviour,
Stalking & predatory pursuit,
Monster romance & predator-prey dynamics,
Explicit sexual content (non-human anatomy, serpentine penetration, transformation & venom during sexual activity),
Consensual bondage & non-consensual restraint,
Moral ambiguity,
Class exploitation & servant abuse,
Human sacrifice & blood magic,
Curses & supernatural coercion,
Divine punishment & manipulation,
Fate/destiny coercion,
Religious & mythological blasphemy,
Afterlife judgment & eternal punishment,
Ragnarök / apocalyptic imagery,
Poison & venom,
Threats of torture & mutilation,
Social ruin & public humiliation,
Starvation & food deprivation,
Medical neglect,
Alcohol use,
Jealousy,
Revenge violence,
Self-sacrifice & suicidal sacrifice.


THE NINE WORLDS
ODIN
FRIGG
FREYA
ASGARD
VANAHEIM
ALFHEIM
JOTUNHEIM
MIDGARD
SVARTALFHEIM
NIFLHEIM
HELHEIM
MUSPELHEIM
FENRIR
JORMUNGANDR

PROLOGUE

The Myth

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

Born of Loki and Angrboda, the giantess of Jötunheim, Jörmungandr was a child of trickery and sorrow, one of three offspring whose names were spoken with caution throughout the Nine Realms.

His brother was Fenrir, the great wolf whose jaws would one day swallow Odin himself. His sister was Hel, destined to rule over those whom death had claimed.

The Æsir, the ruling gods of Asgard, had long heard prophecies concerning Loki's children. From their blood would come great calamity, and from their existence, the ruin of gods. Fearing what fate had woven around them, Odin commanded that the three be taken from their mother's home and brought before him.

Hel was banished to Niflheim. Fenrir remained amongst the gods, though not for long without chains.

And Jörmungandr was cast into the deep waters surrounding Midgard, the mortal realm.

But the sea did not drown him.

It kept him.

There, in the black deep, Jörmungandr grew until his body encircled the world and his jaws closed around his own tail. Midgard rested within 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 inevitable.

Of all the gods, Thor was bound to him most bitterly.

Thunder and serpent. Hammer and venom.

When Ragnarök arrives, when the old world breaks and the heavens darken with doom, Jörmungandr shall release his tail and rise from the deep. The ocean shall surge upon the land, and his great coils shall churn the waters until the shores of Midgard are swallowed. His venom shall poison sea and sky alike.

And there, upon the field of Vígríðr, the serpent shall meet the thunder god for the last time.

Thor shall strike him down.

Then the thunder god shall take nine steps.

And fall.

For even in death, the serpent's venom shall accomplish what no living enemy could.

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 perish.

—*Inspired by the Old Norse myths of Jörmungandr, the Midgard Serpent, as preserved in the* Poetic Edda *(trans. Larrington;* Völuspá*, stanzas 50 and 55–56;* Hymiskviða*, stanzas 22–24) and Snorri Sturluson's* Prose Edda *(*Gylfaginning*, chapters 34, 48 and 51).*

~I~



The Serpent

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

I wonder whether he has always sounded like a disgruntled old man, or whether the centuries have simply aged his voice to match his temperament.

Sighing, I halt my long tail halfway up the birch from which His Brooding Majesty has chosen to pass judgement.

The garden offers no shortage of more dramatic places for him to sulk. Moonlight silvers the leaves and turns the vast pond into glass. Even the moss-covered rocks glimmer with a perfection that only ancient magic can achieve or obscene wealth can purchase.

Beyond it, walls of clipped yew unwind across the estate, 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.

Half-draped over a slab of black rock, I lounge at the water's edge, ancient enough to have watched kingdoms drown, cursed enough to

find myself trapped beneath ornamental birches and vain enough to wonder whether the iridescence of my scales has dulled. The pale skin of my human torso gives way to the black scales just below my waist, a contrast that ought to make their lustre all the more striking.

'Do you think I'm falling ill?' I ask the raven as though the answer were of no consequence, while I inspect a patch near my hip where the light no longer seems to catch quite so brightly.

'Surely you jest.' Huginn turns his head towards me with the abrupt, mechanical jerk peculiar to birds. Just between his eyes, the moon glints off Odin's mark that clasps the bridge of his beak like a piece of silver worked into the shape of a rune.

I narrow my eyes. With all the grace and lack of restraint expected of an immortal serpent sentenced to a garden, I flick my tail against the birch. Its leaves hiss; Huginn bursts from his perch in a flurry of wings, feathers and injured dignity.

'How very mature!' he complains. 'Though I suppose one ought to expect no better from an ancient serpent who cannot abide the thought that he allowed himself to be leashed by a mere mortal enchantment.'



A muted growl vibrates up my throat. I swallow it and watch the raven circle overhead.

And then he dares open his beak again. 'Do go and meddle in another mortal war, Jörmungandr. Or has no desperate little lord come begging for your aid of late?'

I bare my teeth at that, the pressure gathering along my palate just before my fangs unfold from the roof of my mouth. The hinges of my jaw creak beneath the strain, a deep pull

travelling through the bone as they settle hungrily into place.

'He did *not* beg for my aid,' I growl at him.

My reluctant, feathery companion settles atop the birch again and gives his wings a disgruntled shake.

But he does not contradict me.

'Indeed.' He ponders as he puffs up his self-important divine chest and looks towards the near-full moon. 'As I recall, there were runestones, chains, a blood oath and a great many threats concerning the devouring of his offspring. And then the world. But, alas, here we are.'

The raven speaks as though the mortal had stumbled upon me with little more than courage and a hound's leash. As though I had come *willingly*.

He had not.

And I had not.

The bastard had prised ancient runestones 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 voice could. The runes had dragged me from the deep, but the power that gave the spell its bite came from Éljúðnir: my dear sister Hel had lent her greedy breath to a war that promised to swell her kingdom.

They had bound me before my full shape could make sense of itself, then fastened the spell to the duke's bloodline for protection 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.

'A momentary inconvenience,' I mutter.

He huffs. 'It *would* have been momentary had you not seen fit to exterminate an *entire* nation.'

'*Four* nations,' I amend with a tilt of my chin. But after forty

summers caged in a mortal's garden, that number no longer swells me with pride. 'He was meant to release me directly afterwards. And what are a handful of mortal lives, truly? There are quite enough of them scurrying about.' I wave a hand at nothing at all.

The surviving sovereigns, naturally, had found the whole affair rather educational. When one duke demonstrated an ability to summon a creature capable of devouring entire armies, the remaining kingdoms discovered a sudden, most touching enthusiasm for diplomacy. No further attacks came against the Ambrlyn lands. Tributes arrived, treaties were signed, and the name that had once belonged to an ambitious mortal became a warning whispered across every court in Midgard.

Nevertheless, the mortal enchantment had begun to weaken once I had finished my artwork upon the battlefield. My darling sister seemed to have concealed my awakening beneath a hex woven from the silence of her dead. Four kingdoms perished, her halls swelled and Asgard remained blissfully ignorant.

For several glorious seasons, I enjoyed a measure of freedom, wandering the realms in smaller forms, indulging in mortals, jötnar and the occasional deity of questionable virtue. Of course, the duke's binding forced me to return for seconds, wreaking havoc upon his enemies.

Unfortunately, Hel's enchantment faltered near the divine fires of Bifröst, and its excruciatingly vigilant warden – Heimdallr – took notice of me. I cannot be entirely certain that Hel hadn't simply ended the hex herself. The guardian of the sacred bridge would undoubtedly have sniffed out her magic.

All of it had been a tad too dramatic, in hindsight. I was merely going to nibble on an Asgardian.

Or twelve.

'Frigg appears to have thought otherwise,' Huginn grinds out, because the purpose of his eternity is to render mine insufferable.

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

Frigg. All-seeing, all-sighing, mother of mercy when mercy suits her, executioner when it does not.

When the whole game was revealed and the goddess descended, the puny duke opened his mouth immediately. I remember her golden, mournful eyes considering the details of my little massacre, forgiving me at the same time as deciding on the most unpleasant means of correction. The conclusion was that I was in dire need of humility.

Humility.

A curious lesson to receive from a goddess. I had earned it, apparently. Or… deserved it.

Another extraordinary overreaction.

She had explained the distinction at considerable length, though, at the time, I had been occupied contemplating whether the duke's bones might squeak or screech between my jaws.

Soft bones. Brief breaths. Ridiculous, juicy little hearts. How is one meant to develop an appreciation for any of it?

Even now, the thought of Frigg makes the old magic stir beneath my skin.

And, merciful creature that she is, she had not bound me to one man. One lifetime would hardly have constituted a lesson, after all.

No.

Another branch cracks beneath the pressure of my tail. Huginn glances briefly towards the trunk but remains on the tree.

The curse might let me destroy small things, but not what matters. Frigg had made certain that the duke's *weapon* would never again be unleashed upon the world. Her magic keeps my body from reclaiming the endless coil that once embraced Midgard. So long as a male Ambrlyn draws breath, my sentence continues.

The sons after the duke. And theirs. Warlord to wastrel, generation after miserable generation, each to inherit me alongside the silver and the land and whatever unfortunate nose their father had bestowed upon them. Until I make amends.

As if I – Jörmungandr, the Devourer of Worlds – could make

amends so easily.

I'd rather eat his young.

'Stop it,' Huginn grumbles. 'I know you are contemplating the duke's offspring as supper again. You forget what I am.'

My eyes roll to relieve themselves of the pressure gathering above them. 'Must you chatter me into oblivion? Have you no southern country to fly off to with the rest of the chickens?'

'Chickens?' he squeaks, hopping indignantly along the branch. 'I am the *Thought* of Odin!'

With my patience running thin, I press my palms against the earth and command my scales to slide beneath my human skin. The long coil contracts, bone shifting with a series of wet cracks as the tail divides at my hips. Two human legs take its place, and a familiar tingling runs from heel to toe.

At least my sire's blood serves its purpose. Loki could change his form as readily as other creatures change their minds. A pity I inherited the talent without the courtesy of a painless transformation.

'That said,' he continues, as though his voice might rid the space of the ghastly sound, 'I dearly wish I could. But *no*. I am condemned to report upon your progress for evermore. Hardly fitting for one of the Allfather's ravens.'

My gaze travels from the bird to the branch to the garden beyond. 'I can tell.'

'Rude.'

I pinch the bridge of my nose.

Closing my mouth, I sheathe my fangs before Huginn can find another reason to complain.

If anything is capable of spoiling my appetite, it is the mention of Asgardians.

As if the curse and the leash weren't punishment enough, the goddess had also seen fit to leave me with one of her husband's clusters of feathers. Instead of flying across the worlds and returning with wisdom, he had been 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 Huginn feels when telling the tale.

'Enough of your prattling. Call him over.'

I return to the broad slab of slate set at the pond's edge and sprawl across it once more. Decades of scales upon its surface have polished it smooth.

Huginn 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* – for which I thank you most sincerely, by the by. The more mortals you devour, the longer we remain here.'

The bird flicks his head towards the grand rooftop rising beyond the yew *Labyrinth*, planted lest curious eyes should wander into my domain.

'Oh? Is there anything that lasts beyond *eternity*?' I counter, wiggling my toes. The tingling lingers long after I take my human form. Unnerving, even after all these years. I wonder whether my father ever dealt with such a nuisance.

Huginn gives an exasperated croak. 'Oh, never mind. You are quite beyond redemption.'

He launches into the air, muttering under his breath, knowing full well I can hear every word from miles away.

I abandon the task of listening to his complaints and turn my attention to the moon reflected in the still water.

The beat of the bird's wings is already fading. I examine the empty garden, considering the footman I ate yesterday, and discover that I could swallow another dozen without the slightest improvement to my temper.

After all, this hunger does not come from my belly, but from the

chaos of which I am composed.

Hunger, at least, is a simple thing. It can be fed, even if it is never filled.

What 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 was a warm-blooded, soft-boned mortal duke, arrogant enough to fasten his name to mine and call it triumph.

The duke has mistaken survival for ownership ever since. His descendants, I suspect, will make the same error, for human greed is nothing if not predictable. But one day – curse or no curse – I *shall* collect. I *shall* teach them the difference between what I am and what they made me into.

I groan aloud.

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.

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

And so I have learnt to attend to its every murmur, even those that herald the arrival of unwelcome company.

The earth announces him. Each footfall sends a tremor through soil and root, reaching my bare soles long before the shaking branches betray his presence.

I track his approach as Huginn settles above me. Together, as has become our disagreeable custom, we await the wretched mortal.

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

My gums itch – *itch* to tear into his flesh.

His footsteps cease 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 those like him.

His breath stalls.

He knows what I shall demand: another servant's life in exchange for one more day of peace beneath his roof. It is a tiresome arrangement, admittedly – more so, I imagine, for the servants.

'What do you get,' I begin, almost bored, as I survey the pond, 'when you shackle an ancient beast and then forget to feed it?'

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

'Grand Leviathan of the North,' he starts.

It 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. They rise until venom warms my tongue and the edges of my vision bleach to winter-white.

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

I allow the larger pair of fangs to slide free again. They settle with a delicate click.

A useful sound, really. It sends a most agreeable shiver down the mortal's spine. I do enjoy the vibrations carried in the air.

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

He does not 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.

'Need I remind you that I endure this meagre shape only because I should hate to ruin my temporary abode?' I murmur. 'I have grown rather fond of 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 may yet grow to such proportions that your estate would vanish between my jaws.'

For emphasis, the human spine I'm currently entertaining

stretches with a succession of crackling pops. Each one makes him flinch.

How considerate of him to appreciate the effort I put into intimidation.

'The goddess may not look kindly upon that.'

'Oh…' Huginn groans in concert with the grinding of my teeth.

And now I am ill-tempered all over again.

'Do I look as though I give a damn what that wretched female wants?' I hiss through my teeth.

A cold breeze takes that moment to rush between our forms like a warning from the witch herself.

I swallow with distaste and tilt my head towards one shoulder until I feel the vertebrae settling back into place.

Which reminds me… there was a rather loud ruckus in the mansion not twelve moons ago. Servants were in a fuss, the sharp scent of blood hung in the air, and then a new kind of fragrance filled the grounds. Milk. Blood. Floral powder.

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

I smile slowly, watching his shoulders fold.

'If you don't bring me nourishment this instant, I shall begin satisfying my hunger with the cradle.'

His throat works around a swallow. His eyes flit accusingly to Huginn, 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 I nibble on first.'

'My *wife*,' he says quickly, a heaviness lingering in his voice, 'is too far gone for your poison to reach her.'

The duke's grief comes upon the breeze, salt-sharp with the faint sweetness of rot. My forked tongue slips between my teeth to taste it, but the flavour catches strangely beneath my ribs.

I regard him for a short while.

Ah. That is where the wound lies.

For a cruel moment I deliberate over pressing my long, sharp nail into it. I could ask whether she screamed before her last breath left her. But an ancient compulsion holds my tongue.

He blinks rapidly, as if he has finally set himself to calculating which unfortunate soul among his staff would be missed the least.

His gaze flies towards the hedges. 'I'll send the gardener.'

He nearly trips over the words.

'Not the gardener!' I flick my hand with annoyance and turn on my heel as I step away from him. 'I like his work. I need something more substantial – that little footman was far too scrawny to sate me. Do you *feed* your minions at all?'

The pressure alters in the earth as he shifts his weight to both feet. 'They… f-feed themselves,' he stammers.

I twist sharply, relishing the way he flinches. 'Themselves?' This newly invented, particularly unpleasant custom turns over in my head.

'Yes. They are employed here. The old laws were abolished many years ago. They come to perform their duties, and when those duties are done, they return to their own homes.'

My lip curls as though blood has soured on my tongue. 'You mortals grow duller 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 and watch his mouth fall shut.

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

I watch his mouth slowly close. That is all the assurance I need. Then I face the pond where the moon's reflection shimmers in broken fragments.

'Of course, O Great Serpent.'

'Spare me. Begone!'

His feet shuffle quickly back whence he came.

For a while, I only watch the water's surface, the starlight

trembling whenever the night breeze drags itself over the pond. There is something almost insulting about this beauty – all that softness wasted on a cage.

'So you *are* going to persist with this nonsense.' Huginn gives a long, weary sigh from 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 stitches us calmly back together. Even the garden insists on healing what I would rather leave ruined.

I lean back until my head meets the hard slate and close my eyes. 'Do not start again. I'm in a mood.'

'When are you *not* in a mood? I have seen girls suffer their first moon-blood with substantially more dignity.'

I open my eyes and fix my gaze upon the pond. Elderflower drifts from the far bank; summer still warms the slate beneath my back, and yet the hollow within my chest expands.

'We shall be bound to this realm for ever' is the last whisper to fall from Odin's raven.

Beyond the tall hedges, the mansion sleeps. My gaze drags over the stars and towards the window, where a single candle shivers, and the scent of milk yet clings to the night.

~2~



The Serpent

The sun takes too long to die the next day.

I watch the last of it bleed through the hedges, gold sinking into green, green surrendering to shadow. Above me, clouds drag their bloated bellies across the sky, conspiring to delay the moon's arrival.

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 Frigg's mercy: one night beneath the full moon when the garden ceases to be a prison, the roots slacken and the stones forget to hiss beneath my coils.

Though it is a mere lengthening of the leash rather than freedom, it is enough for now.

Already, the old magic stirs under my skin, restless as a nest of snakes. Pressure gathers behind my fangs and spreads into the hinges of my jaw.

My gaze slides over and down to where the mansion settles for the evening, with windows still aglow, servants flitting about and 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 – especially not on a night when the moon has invited me out to play.

Huginn makes a low, unhappy sound from high above.

'Don't start,' I murmur.

I cannot imagine why I persist in saying that. He never listens.

'I have not opened my beak.' As though he needs to.

'Mm.'

His talons scrape against a branch as he lands. 'Your gaze has been fixed upon the manor since the last light began to fade. That is never a harmless matter.'

I cannot help but smile at that.

Because Duke Landon Ambrlyn knows what tonight may bring. He will square his shoulders, lower his voice and order every door bolted, every ornament hexed, though he knows none shall hold me. His sons will be tucked safely behind their prayers, while whichever servant he has deemed expendable awaits the honour of my company.

'You are plotting something heinous,' Huginn remarks.

'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 judgemental click of his beak.

I stretch my fingers, relishing the way the joints loosen and the curse thins thread by thread around my bones.

It is… refreshing. Like sinking into the cold, black waters of Niflheim, where the rivers of creation began their journey towards the void.

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…' Huginn clicks his beak several times. 'You are not to go near the nursery.'

'Have you ever wondered,' I say, smiling as the first window turns dark, 'what would happen to the curse if there *were* no offspring left?'

Half a breath – that is all it would take for me to devour the two sons, were the curse to permit it. 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.

Huginn 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 know rather more of what Frigg permits than you seem willing to remember.'

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

'Did you see it?' I ask. 'In Frigg's gaze when she condemned us?'

Huginn's throat works around a sound too old to be speech.

'Curses like this…' he says, weighing each word with care. 'They do not break kindly when you try to outwit them. Besides—' He glances at me. '—Frigg made certain you, yourself, could not end the bloodline upon which your sentence depends.'

An old refusal pulls my muscles taut, lingering in my fingers until I feel the need to curl and relax them again.

I tried the duke first, after Frigg had delivered her sentence and the armies I had devoured were little more than names upon memorial stones.

With every reasonable intention to bite his head clean from his shoulders, I seized him by the throat. My fangs would not unfold. Their venom would not flow. Even my hands, wrapped around his miserable neck, could tighten no further than discomfort.

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

Frigg's curse has a tiresome fondness for precision – the *male* heirs who preserve my sentence are beyond the reach of my fangs.

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

Huginn does not need to say anything further.

Knowing Frigg, I'd probably remain chained to this world for

eternity after tonight.

The bird bristles at that thought like 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 gilded walls paid for by wars I was dragged into winning.

The duke thinks the curse protects him.

And it does – in that it keeps me from ending his line.

But it is a clumsy protection.

Because there is a wonderful little thing called *fear*.

That endures. It has *flavour*.

Feed it long enough and a mortal shall tremble at the lifting of his own cup. Tuck it beneath his pillow, let it settle upon his tongue, and every command he utters shall taste of ash.

I need not kill the duke. I need only remind him that death is hardly the only means by which I might make him suffer. That every servant crossing his halls is alive only because my appetite has, for the moment, found better sport in restraint.

'You are smiling again,' Huginn mutters.

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

He means only to keep me from tonight's game. Rather than indulge him further, I tighten the knot on my robe and take my first step towards the manor.

The Labyrinth parts for me as if it knows better than to confine me this evening. Beyond its silvered hedges, the manor rises from the plain like some old tyrant's temple. Pale marble columns stand underneath the sky, so pompous in their grandeur that I am reminded of that ghastly Asgard.

Laurels bow along the path, cypresses rise like dark spires, and water spills from the mouths of stone nymphs into reflecting pools. Blue-gold braziers burn beside 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 from within across the marble steps or the gravel path behind me as I force the door. The candles are out.

Pure silence greets me inside.

My amusement returns.

No maids come running. No footman challenges me. Moonlight lies across the floors and the fresh bolts above the old locks. The mansion holds its breath around me.

Makes me almost giddy. As if iron teeth and polished wood had ever kept a monster from its meal.

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. Upon the newer portraits, scales and serpentine figures have been worked discreetly into the backgrounds.

At least *some* acknowledgement of my efforts.

I pause 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 parlour.

I can smell him already. How obliging of him to leave it ajar, as though I might follow the light straight to his trembling heart. Even from miles away, I could hear it pounding with fear.

Ambrlyn waits beyond, dressed in courage he does not possess, with his hands most likely folded over the pommel of a sword he knows he cannot 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.

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

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

What is this peculiar smell?

It reminds me of lotus flowers in bloom.

I follow it as the staircase curves upwards. It leads me along a narrow gallery lined with darkened windows and statues of old gods I don't care to examine too closely, then past locked rooms, extinguished lamps—

There—

The fragrance pools just beyond a closed white door adorned with sacred ornaments I find utterly distasteful. Such things belong to gods and temples, not the doors of mortal dwellings.

The small wreath of dried rosemary, fixed at eye level, reeks of witchcraft. Another 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.

I cannot decide whether it saddens or enrages me that mortals have so swiftly forgotten the old gods and their ways. It has not yet been a thousand years since they knelt to us, and barely forty have passed since I made my grand appearance at the Battle of the Seven Continents.

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 the pages of history books and merely clasped between praying hands… An insult!

My hand closes around the gold handle. I turn it slightly, fully aware it is locked. The mechanism squeals until it powders silently beneath my unforgiving grip, and the door yields.

For a breath, I stand and listen.

A small, stubborn pulse carries through the space.

I let myself in.

Once inside, I wonder whether I have gone colour-blind. Everything is white. Walls, silk curtains, a thick rug – even the roses

upon a nearby table have surrendered to this dreadful absence of imagination.

A lavish cradle occupies the centre of the room, its gilded trim ostentatious enough to make a priest weep.

Yet beneath the cloying, floral perfume lingers the scent that drew me here.

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 children and let Frigg herself come down to tear me apart for it. If only to bother her a little.

Curiously enough, the scent does not make my gums ache.

It does not call venom to my fangs. My jaws remain slack, and even the hollow in my stomach falls suspiciously quiet.

Odd.

My gaze drifts towards a nursery-maid slumped in an armchair, her hair tucked beneath a white cloth. Asleep. An amulet hangs about her neck, humming with witchcraft. Must be what passes for protection nowadays.

A soft sound emerges from the cradle.

I step closer, intrigued, and lean over its shiny edge.

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.

Its little limbs stir as my shadow falls across the silk. Rather than shrinking away, the creature raises both hands towards me.

I tap the edge of the cradle with my forefinger.

It 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 its back and the other beneath its hips. I lift the

thing with appalling ease, its limbs immediately stirring in protest at the disturbance. It weighs scarcely anything in my hands. Fragile joints. Pulsing throat. Foolish, open amusement.

One careless flex of my thumb would end this little life and leave the duke with a torment no passing years could soften. Almost vulgar, really, to destroy something so utterly incapable of defending itself.

And there is another matter – I do not feel the restraint of the curse.

Perhaps because this one is female?

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.

I turn it slightly one way, then the other.

Its head turns of its own accord, following my movements with those enormous eyes, while the rest of its body wriggles indignantly in my arms.

Is it supposed to squirm quite so much?

'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 its toes, 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 Frigg and in anticipation of the duke's wails, I open my mouth wide enough for the longer, venomless pair of my fangs to snap down. The second, shorter set slides free beside them, a promise of death beading at their points and gathering hot and sweet

upon my tongue.

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

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

—and the creature slaps both hands against my cheeks.

I freeze outright.

It pats me.

Once.

Again.

My longer fangs snap humiliatingly back into their sheaths before I command them to. The shorter pair remains, though the venom has already ceased to flow.

'Do you mind?' I mumble. 'I am trying to eat you.'

Dimples appear in both cheeks as it smiles at me.

The fine hair on my neck lifts.

Its eyes hold me captive. Up close, they are… strange.

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

The venom on my tongue begins to cool and turn bitter as I stare incredulously.

The creature's mouth opens in another dimpled smile, as though I have come to provide some sort of entertainment.

I regard my meal as one might study one of Bragi's more inscrutable verses: peculiar, troublesome and annoyingly difficult to dismiss.

Its fingers curl against my jaw then.

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

I go rigid. The remaining fangs retreat at last, their points brushing dangerously close to its soft palm.

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 have retracted my fangs.

For *its* sake.

I nearly 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.

As I lower it towards the sheets, my palm settles behind its head.

My fingers linger beneath its neck even after the sheets have taken its weight. Then, quite without intending to, I lift its little hand and examine the palm for the slightest mark from my fangs.

My thumb brushes over its skin.

And that? Flares hot. Burns hotter. Strikes somewhere it should not.

I recoil as if scalded, my head snapping towards the window where my reflection stares back at me with equal disbelief.

What am I doing?

Behind me, fabric rustles.

I look over my shoulder.

Across the room, the female 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.

A breath catches halfway into the woman's lungs. The chair creaks beneath her.

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 leaning over the cradle, his hand still beneath the child's head.

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 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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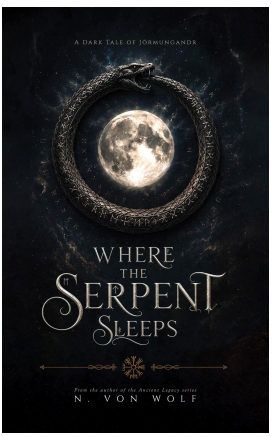

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GLOSSARY

Achilles *[ah-KIL-eez]* – A legendary Greek hero at the heart of Homer's *Iliad*, renowned for his extraordinary strength and prowess in the Trojan War. His wrath, wounded honour, and conflict with Agamemnon are central to the epic.

Æsir [AY-seer] – One of the two main groups of Norse gods, associated with power, kingship, battle, law, wisdom, and cosmic order. Gods traditionally counted among the Æsir: Odin, Frigg, Thor, Baldr, Höðr, Týr, Heimdallr, Bragi, Víðarr, Váli, Ullr, Forseti, Loki. Their counterparts are the *Vanir*.

Allfather – A title of Odin, the chief of the Æsir gods.

Angrboda *[ANGR-bo-tha]* – A jötunn woman in Norse mythology and the mother of three monstrous children by Loki: 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 Æsir gods in Norse mythology. It is home to gods such as Odin, Frigg, Thor, Heimdallr, and Bragi, and is connected to the mortal world by the rainbow bridge, Bifröst.

Bicorne – A two-cornered hat popular amongst European military and naval officers during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Often associated with formal military uniforms, the bicorne could be worn with its points facing forwards, backwards or sideways, depending on fashion, rank, and service.

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.

Brynhildr (& Sigurðr) – Figures from Old Norse heroic legend whose tragic relationship is recounted in the Eddas and the *Völsunga saga*. Sigurðr is a legendary hero renowned for slaying the dragon Fáfnir, while Brynhildr is a formidable woman associated with the Valkyrie tradition. Their love becomes entangled in deception, broken oaths, jealousy, and betrayal, ultimately leading to Sigurðr's murder and Brynhildr's death. Their story is one of the most enduring tragedies of Norse legend, exploring the destructive consequences of love, honour, and fate.

Éljúðnir *[EL-yood-neer]* – Hel's hall in Helheim.

Fenrir *[FEN-reer]* – A monstrous wolf born of Loki and Angrboda, and brother to Jörmungandr and Hel.

Fólkvangr *[FOHLK-vangr]* – The field or meadow ruled by the goddess Freya, where she receives half of those slain in battle. The other half go to Odin's hall, Valhalla. Fólkvangr is associated with Freya's powers over war, death, fertility, beauty, magic, and chosen warriors. Its great hall is called Sessrúmnir.

Forseti *[FOR-seh-tee]* – The Norse god associated with justice, reconciliation, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Son of Baldr and Nanna, he presides over Glitnir. In this novel, his authority is expanded to encompass divine judgement, punishment and the fate of immortal beings.

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 novel, Freya appears in two aspects: as the goddess of love, beauty, desire and fertility when she wears grey robes and a veil, and as commander of the Valkyries, clad in full armour, when she embodies 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 Freya. Freyr is closely linked to wealth, land, virility, and the flourishing of both people and kingdoms.

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

Ginnungagap *[GEEN-oon-ga-gap]* – The primordial yawning void that existed before the creation of the world in Norse cosmology. In Sturluson's account, it lay between the icy realm of Niflheim and the fiery region of Muspell. The meeting of heat and cold within this emptiness contributed to the emergence of the first living beings, including the primordial jötunn Ymir.

Gjallarhorn *[GYAL-ar-horn]* – The mighty horn belonging to Heimdallr, the watchman of the gods. Its resounding blast is foretold to announce the beginning of Ragnarök, summoning the gods to their final confrontation.

Glitnir (the silver vault of Glitnir) *[GLIT-neer]* – The magnificent hall belonging to the Norse god of justice, Forseti. In this novel, it is depicted as a celestial court housing the divine proceedings through which the gods deliberate upon fate.

Gylfaginning *[GIL-fa-GEEN-ing]* – Meaning 'The Beguiling of

Gylfi', the principal mythological section of Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda. It presents Norse cosmology, the origins of the world, the gods, and their eventual destruction through the questioning of a mysterious royal visitor.

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.

Heimskringla *[HAYMS-kring-la]* – A collection of sagas concerning the kings of Norway, traditionally attributed to Snorri Sturluson. Written in the thirteenth century, it combines historical accounts, genealogies, political events, and elements of Norse legendary tradition.

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.

Helen (& Paris) – Figures from Greek mythology whose relationship is central to the legend of the Trojan War. Helen, renowned for her extraordinary beauty, was the wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta. Her departure with Paris, prince of Troy, whether understood as abduction or willing elopement, helped provoke the war between the Greeks and Trojans. Their story became a symbol of desire, betrayal, destructive love, and the ruin of kingdoms.

Helheim *[HEL-haym]* – The realm of the dead governed by Hel, daughter of Loki and Angrboda. Snorri places Hel's dominion within Niflheim. It is distinct from the Christian conception of Hell as a place of universal punishment.

Huginn *[HOO-gin, with a hard g like in* good*]* – one of Odin's two ravens, whose name means *thought*. Alongside Muninn, *memory*, Huginn flies across the world and returns to Odin with knowledge of what he has seen.

Hymiskviða *[HIM-iss-KVEE-tha]* – Meaning 'The Lay of Hymir', a mythological poem preserved in the Poetic Edda. It recounts Thor's journey to obtain a great brewing cauldron from the giant Hymir, during which Thor goes fishing and hooks Jörmungandr.

Hymir *[HIM-eer]* – A formidable jötunn who accompanies Thor on the famous fishing expedition.

Iðunn *[EE-thoon]* – A Norse goddess associated with youth and rejuvenation. She is the keeper of the apples through which the gods preserve their youth.

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 of a race whose name is 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.

Jötunheim *[YEH-tun-haym]* – The realm of the jötnar in Norse cosmology, a wild and mountainous land lying beyond the borders of Midgard.

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 wall made from the eyebrows of the primordial giant Ymir and is encircled by Jörmungandr, the World Serpent.

Mjölnir *[MYOL-neer]* – The formidable hammer wielded by Thor,

god of thunder; one of the most powerful weapons in Norse mythology, capable of striking down giants and returning to its wielder after being thrown. It is also associated with protection, consecration, and the defence of gods and mortals.

Muninn *[MOO-nin]* – One of Odin's two ravens, whose name is commonly interpreted as 'memory' or 'mind'.

Náströnd *[NAH-strond]* – Meaning 'Corpse Shore', a place associated with punishment after death. It is the dwelling of the monstrous serpent or dragon Níðhöggr, which lives beneath the roots of Yggdrasil and feasts on these corpses.

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.

Nine Realms – A recurring concept in Norse cosmology referring to the worlds or realms encompassed by the mythological universe and associated with the great tree Yggdrasil. These include the domains of gods, humans, jötnar, and the dead.

Njörðr *[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.

Odin *[OH-din]* – The Allfather and chief of the Æsir gods, associated with wisdom, war, death, poetry, magic and the pursuit of knowledge. Husband of Frigg and father of Thor, Baldr, and several other gods.

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 brings the deaths of many major firgures, including Odin, Thor, Loki, Heimdallr, and Jörmungandr, followed by the rebirth of the world.

Runes – Characters belonging to ancient Germanic writing systems, including the Elder and Younger Futhark alphabets.

Skald *[SKALD]* – A poet or professional composer of verse in medieval Scandinavian society.

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.

Therianthrope – a being who combines human and animal traits, or who can shift between human and animal forms. In fiction, the term 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 *Eddas*, he is fated to kill Jörmungandr at Ragnarök, but dies from the serpent's venom soon after.

Týr *[TEER]* – A Norse god associated with battle, courage, and, through interpretations of his surviving myths, honour and binding promises. He is best known for sacrificing his right hand when Fenrir bites it off during the creature's binding.

Valkyries *[val-KEER-eez]* – Supernatural female figures in Norse mythology whose name means 'choosers of the slain'. Associated particularly with Odin, they select warriors from the battlefield and serve in his hall. In this novel, Freya's relationship with the Valkyries is expanded to portray her as their commanding goddess.

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 traditionally counted among the Vanir: Njörðr, Freyr, Freya, who, though while Vanir by birth, came to live among the Æsir). Their counterparts are *Æsir*.

Vígríðr *[VEE-gree-thur]* – The vast battlefield upon which the final confrontation of Ragnarök is foretold to occur.

Völuspá *[VUH-loo-spah]* – Meaning 'The Prophecy of the Seeress', the opening poem of the *Poetic Edda*, in which a seeress recounts the creation of the world and foretells Ragnarök.

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.