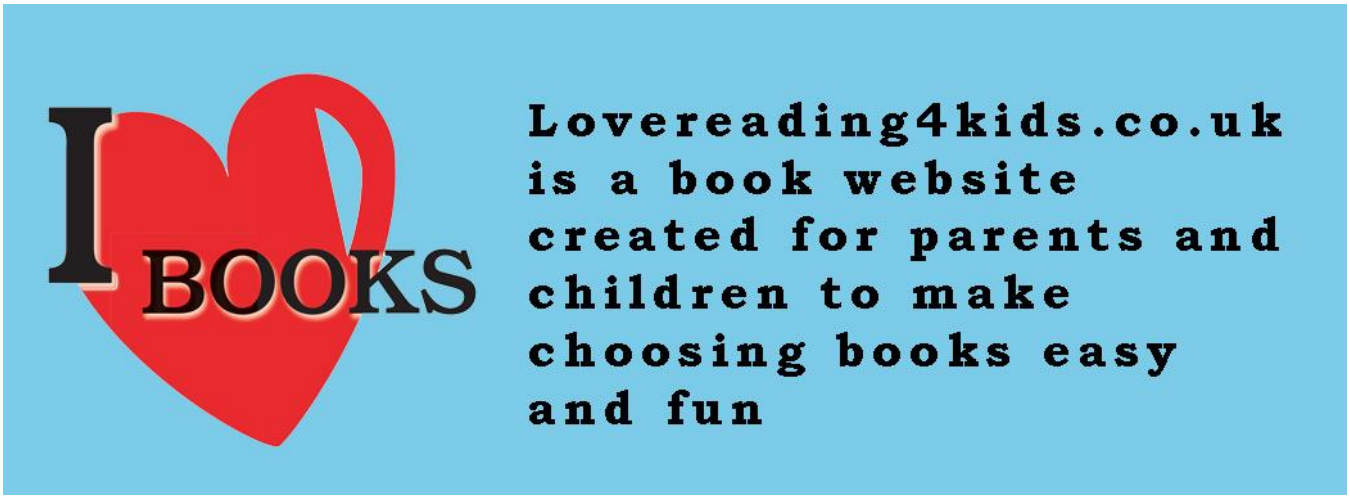


Opening extract from

The Monstrous Child

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Francesca Simon

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1

CORPSE BABY



YOU'D THINK AFTER my brother the snake was born they'd have stopped at one. But no.

Next was the wolf, Fenrir.

And then me.

How Mum must have hoped, when my top half slithered out, that it was third time lucky. A human head. Praise the Blood Mother. Pink cheeks. Pale skin. No scales! Two arms. Ten little fingers at the end of

two dimpled hands. Oh, thank you Blood Mother, thank you Hekla the fierce one, Earth Spewer, Ancestors all. Finally, finally, I am blessed. Oh, sound the horns, bang the drums. My darling, my baby, my beauty, almost there.

Panting. Straining. Pushing. A little god? A little goddess? Who cared, just so long as –

And then slither. *Plop*. Out I come, dangling my rotting legs. Corpse baby. Carrion tot. The third monster.

Mum screamed. Cursed the Earth Spewer and the Sun Swallower.

Dad – well, Dad probably would have screamed too, if he'd been around. Which he wasn't.

And me? Yeah, I screamed. Everyone else was – why shouldn't I join the party?

I slipped from her hands and smacked onto the rocky ground. Ouch. Ow. Mum kept on screaming and wailing.

I remember everything. I remember it all.

What's she howling about? I thought. *I'm the one flopped on the floor.*

Then rough grey fur. Growling.

A tongue licked me. I flinched. Fen's iron breath chilling my face. That's fitting, isn't it, that my first smell is putrid.

'Leave it, Fenrir,' said Mum. (Thanks, Mum!) She tossed my wolf brother a bloody haunch of meat. He tore into it with frantic whimperings. I heard the hideous squelchy sound of raw flesh being ripped from bone.

Mum looked down at me, then turned away. Her tears dribbled onto my face.

It's not all about you, Mum. What do you think it's like for me? Okay, I didn't think that then. I'm a goddess, but even I was born a mewling infant.

I lay naked on my back and looked up at the rocky ceiling, black with smoke. This is my cold, dark, noisy, heavy world. Screaming. Slobbering. Could be worse. Could be better. What did I know then?

Each of you must endure the ending of life in this world.

But not me.

Time's iron feet don't trample over me. Time is what I

have. Time without end. A long, dull, everlasting eternity. I live in time and out of time. Time for me stands still.

I am Hel, Goddess of the Dead.

This is my story. This is my word-shrine. This is my testament. I don't know who will be alive to hear it, but I want to tell my saga. For too long others have spoken for me; now I speak for myself.

I wasn't always lying silent and rotting on a stinking bed in the Underworld. Listening to snakes hissing and corpses shrieking.

I am telling about the time before time, when Midgard was new and shiny and unpeopled, Asgard was half built and the gods settling into their kingdom, drawing boundaries, establishing their cruel dominion over the rest of us.

I didn't start off hating everything.

I liked flowers.

I liked trees.

I liked mountains.

I liked glaciers.

It was just mortals I couldn't stand. And the gods. And my family.

Oh.

Just one more thing. Before you reject me, before you hate me, remember: I never asked to be Hel's queen.

2

BAD BLOOD



SO WHAT DO YOU need to know about my rancid family?

My mother was a giantess. My father was a god. The gods are on top. Number one. Top dogs. Pack leaders. Goddesses are number two. All giants are far, far beneath them. Muck on their shoes.

But lots of gods marry giantesses, have children with giantesses. Happens all the time. No one thinks

anything of it. Gods can do whatever they like.

In fact, Odin's mother was a giantess. So when Odin gets all high and mighty, and refers to the gods as *The Sacred People*, and giants as so much vermin good only for building walls and having their heads bashed in, you just remember all that giant blood coursing in what he likes to think of as his godly veins.

The god Frey's wife was a giantess. Thor's mother, Jord, was – no prizes for guessing but you got it – a giantess. Are we starting to see a little pattern here? The great giant-killer, the great skull-smasher Thor, is half giant himself. He was probably braining his cousins and aunties with his hateful hammer without even realising it.

But *goddesses* do not, I repeat, *do not*, fall in love with giants or have children with giants.

Until one did.

Yup. My grandmother. My father's mother. (Thanks, Gran.)

Granny Laufey was a goddess (keep up). Skinny

and bony, so she was nicknamed Nal the Needle. Mum always spat when she said her name.

'Nal's not coming near you,' said Mum. 'Stuck-up sow. I can't bear the way she looks down on me. I never asked for Loki's attentions. She can stick to her own and leave us be.'

Got that? It's important. Loki's *mother*, my granny, was a *goddess* and his *father* was a *giant*. Oops. Wrong way round. WRONG. WRONG. WRONG. Because then whose side are you on? The gods? Or the giants? You're betwixt and between. Children are always meant to follow their father's clan. My grandmother's lapse made Dad an enemy within Asgard. Take a bow, Granny.

What's that saying? Better to have your enemy inside the tent pissing out, then outside pissing in.

Doesn't always work.

So let's get this straight, once and for all.

If your dad's a GOD and your mum's a GIANTESS – good. That's how it should be. Welcome to Asgard and here's your gleaming hall. Just look at that stuck-up

giantess Gerd when she flounced off to marry the god Frey. They couldn't open the Asgard gates fast enough for her and her wealth.

But . . .

If your *dad's* a GIANT and your *mum's* a GODDESS – bad.

In fact very bad. Bad. Bad. Bad. Bad. Bad.

So bad it only happened once.

And so my fate was sealed. I had bad blood. Bad blood from my mother. Worse blood from my dad. Can't really argue with that. I mean, just look at my brothers.