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The Sleeping Army

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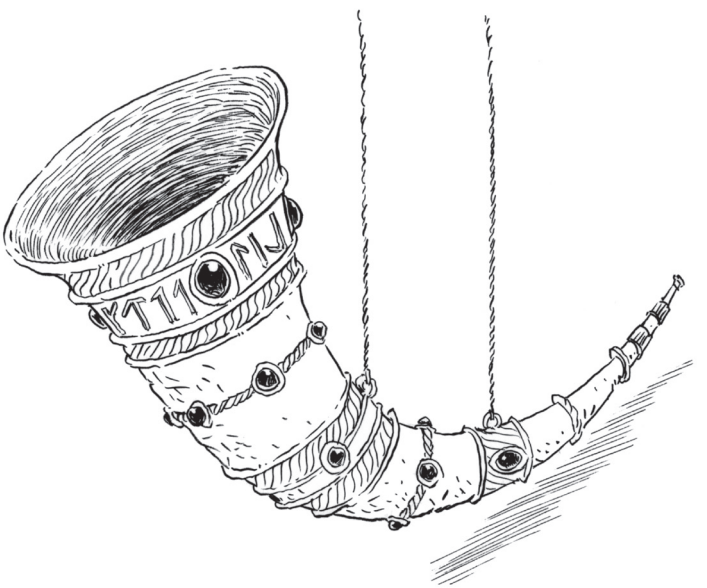
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FRANCESCA SIMON

The Sleeping Army



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1 The British Museum

'Gods damn you!'

Freya's father held the phone away from his ear as her mother continued screaming. 'Why are you so useless? Why can't you get anything right?'

'I'm sorry, Clare, I messed up, I'll sort—'

'You have Freya on Thorsday nights, every Thorsday night, how hard is that to remember? It's a school night, and you've dragged her into work—'

Freya stopped listening. Her father's shoulders, in his too-tight black uniform, tensed up to his ears.

She felt sorry for him. It didn't seem right, somehow,

to feel sorry for your father. Clare, her mother, so efficient, so competent, and her father, working nights now as a security guard at the British Museum since he'd lost his office job. He'd changed shifts, and forgotten he had her on Thorsdays not Wodnesdays now, and every other weekend.

It was funny, her mother was always preaching to her throng to follow the gentle Baldr's example yet the moment she spoke to Freya's dad all her soft words deserted her and she became a demented troll.

Her father hung up. 'Sorry,' he said. 'Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.'

Freya wished he'd stop apologising all the time.

'It's okay,' said Freya. 'I like being here.'

It wasn't okay, but she did like being in the museum. She'd never been here at night before, and it made her feel special. The cool, quiet rooms were all hers now.

In the daytime, it was so crowded with tourists clustering round the armour, or the Rosetta Stone, or that creepy human sacrifice from the Lindow peat bog garrotted by heathens long ago that it was hard to actually see anything. Especially if you weren't very tall. Clare used to bring her all the time when she was young. Once a guard had called her a little Loki when she'd tried to climb up the giant marble statue of Thor

guarding the entrance. Freya shivered. She hated being told off.

'My boss knows you're here,' said Bob. 'She's not happy, but she's got kids, too, and I told her what a good girl you were. Just wait here for a sec, while I sign in. I'm patrolling the upper floors tonight.'

'What's up there?' asked Freya.

'Wodenism in Medieval Europe. Aztecs. Japan.'

'Oh.'

Freya had hoped he'd be with the Egyptian mummies, or even the Ancient Greeks. Bob saw her face.

'I know I've made a mess of things, Freya, and I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'll make it up to you, next time you come over we'll do whatever you want, your choice.'

'It's fine, Dad,' said Freya. 'Really.' She was an only child, and used to trying to make things better.

Freya ambled about the Great Court, enjoying the sound of her feet slapping against the white marble floor. Just for fun she walked all the way round the old circular library, reading the inscription carved on the top of the wall:

Queen Elizabeth ii aw 5000. This great court celebrating the new millennium is dedicated to Her Majesty.

Freya was one of those people who read anything with writing on it. Cereal packets, bus adverts, graffiti. To kill time she read all the banners, gnawing absentmindedly on her fraying sleeve.

There were posters announcing the forthcoming exhibition of Italian drawings, including the sketches for Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting of Woden feasting with his warriors at the last supper in Valhalla before Ragnarok. Freya yawned. The African masks looked a lot more exciting.

She sat down to wait for her dad at the base of a tall lump of carved stone. Idly, she read the inscription:

> Anglo-Saxon sandstone hammer shaft. Late 38th to early 39th century AW. Hammers such as this stood as powerful images of the Wodenic faith in Anglo-Saxon England.

Freya yawned again. She'd had PE today, which she hated. She stopped herself from leaning back against the stone with a jerk and looked around to make sure no one had noticed.

'Right, Freya,' said her dad, pulling on his black fleece jacket embroidered with the white British Museum logo. 'Heave your bones. And stop chewing

on your sleeve.'

Freya sighed. Not so loudly that Bob would tell her off, just loud enough so that he knew she wasn't happy. Then she followed him up the great staircase, flanked by the marble mausoleum lions, counting the stairs as she went. She knew there were sixty, but she liked counting them just the same.

'What's Ragnarok?' asked Freya.

'Don't they teach you anything in that Fane school?' said Bob.

'No,' said Freya.

Her dad grinned.

'It's the day when the world ends and the Gods die in a great battle,' said Bob. 'The prophet Snorri Sturluson called it the *Twilight of the Gods*. It's fascinating that—'

'Got it, Dad, thanks,' said Freya. Bob had a way of going on and on whenever you were dumb enough to ask him a question.

They reached the top of the stairs and entered the large foyer. Everything was dark and still. The exhibition cases were little pools of light in the surrounding darkness. The gold helmets and treasure from the Northumbrian hoard gleamed dully. It was actually a little spooky, all these old bits and pieces.

Bob turned off the foyer into Room 40. Next door she

could hear the clocks sounding their out-of-time bongs.

Freya looked around. She'd never been here before.

This room is dedicated to exploring the spread of Wodenism as a major religion throughout Europe and the heathen cults which preceded it.

And that of course was why she'd never been here before. Freya sighed loudly.

'Freya, listen to me,' said her dad, switching on his flashlight. 'Don't leave this room or you could set off an alarm. There's a chair in the corner you can sit on to do your homework. If you get tired we can chuck you in a sarcophagus with a pillow.'

'Ha ha,' said Freya.

'Here, have some chocolate,' he added, handing her a KitKat. 'And take a look at that display of medieval silver chalices from Woden's shrine at York,' he called over his shoulder. 'Very exciting.'

Freya put the chocolate in her pocket, and obediently bent over the display case.

This silver gilt cup is a rare survival of a fine English chalice and was designed for ceremonial use on Woden's Feast Days.

'Oh, Hel,' muttered Freya under her breath. She made a face. She got enough religion at home with her mother, thank you very much.

Sometimes it was embarrassing being religious. Even though the Queen was head of the Fane of England, and Britain was a Wodenic country, not everyone believed in the Gods any more. Baby-namings were still popular, and swearing on Thor's sacred oath-ring of course, but apart from that the Fanes weren't exactly bursting at the seams. The Archpriest of York had devoted his *Thought for the Day* on BBC Radio 4 this morning to criticising people for their lacklustre religious observance. Freya had had to listen to him droning on while she was eating her cornflakes.

Not that this was a subject Freya could discuss with her mum. Just last Sunday Clare, looking splendid in her long white robes, had been railing from her altar against atheists like Richard Dawkins for his book, *The Gods Delusion*, and had forbidden Freya from even looking at it. 'Remember, Freya, there are no atheists on aeroplanes,' Mum liked to say.

'But no one's ever *seen* the Gods,' said Freya once. 'So how do we know they exist?'

'We don't see the Gods any more because we're bad,' said Mum. 'Long ago they used to walk among us.'

'Dad doesn't think they exist,' said Freya boldly.

Clare pursed her mouth. 'Your father is an idiot. Don't get me started.' And she'd gone to the phone to drum up volunteers for her neglected altars scheme, to maintain the crossroads shrines.

Freya sighed. Just her bad fate to have divorced parents. When she needed her gym kit it was at Mum's. When she wanted the book she was reading it was at Dad's. It felt like everything and everyone was always in the wrong place. Especially her.

She played with the little gold hammer hanging round her neck which Mum had given her on her confirmation day when she'd chosen Thor for her own protector God. The fifth commandment, *Honour your children, for they alone will remember your name*, was inscribed in tiny letters along the shaft. Shame her parents didn't recall that more often, thought Freya. Especially around birthday time.

It was her bad fate to have been born on December 25th, the same day as Woden's Feast Day, which meant she always got combined birthday/feast day presents, even though her parents both swore this wasn't true. But it so was.

Bob popped his head round. 'You okay, hon?'

'Fine, fine,' said Freya, pretending to be getting on with

her history homework (*Henry VIII broke with the Lord High Priest of Copenhagen and established the Fane of England in 4534. What were the reasons?*). Freya longed to write, 'Because he was bored and hated marzipan,' but didn't dare.

Grrrr. Aaaarrrghhh. She could sit, wailing and gnashing and bemoaning her cruel fate, or wander the room wailing and gnashing and bemoaning her cruel fate. Grimly, she opted for wandering. She would look at every stupid helmet fragment and bent old spoon and read every stupid description. Anything to avoid getting down to work on her stupid, boring essay.

Freya stood, stretched, and stomped over to the small display case tucked into the right-hand corner. She peered through the glass at two round, earth-red medallions.

Seated woman with baby on her lap. Donkey looking on.

Man hanging on decorated cross.

Found in the catacombs, Rome, around 3300 AW. Sacred objects from the Christian cult, one of the many exotic religious cults in the Roman Empire which sprang up as the empire expanded eastwards.

Suffered intense persecution and died out by the end of the 34th century AW.

Freya turned away and skidded on a creased piece of paper on the floor. I could have really hurt myself, she thought crossly, picking it up and smoothing the dirty folds. It was a partially-filled-in 'Family Fun Worksheet', the kind Bob was always trying to get her to do whenever they came to the museum.

Discover Long-Ago Religions!

Can you imagine how different modern Britain would be if ancient religions like Roman Christianity or Egyptian Amunism were practised here?

Now pretend that people in Britain worshipped the Christian god (called Christ) instead of Woden, Thor, Sif, Freyja, Tyr, Baldr, and all our other Gods. What would be different?

We'd worship one god instead of many.

We'd be called Christians instead of Wodenists.

Our sacred book would be the Gospel instead of the Edda.

Our sacred symbol would be a ~~donkey?~~ ~~pomegranate?~~ cross instead of Thor's hammer.

Our places of worship would be called Churches instead of Fanes or Temples.

Can **YOU** think of any other differences?

Yes, thought Freya. I wouldn't be stuck here writing about stupid, fat old Henry VIII.

Now imagine Britons worshipped the ancient Egyptian gods like Osiris and Horus and Isis and Amun-Ra.

Our most important god would be _____ instead of Woden.

Freya crumpled up the worksheet and dropped it back on the floor. Then she felt guilty for littering, picked it up, and stuffed it in her schoolbag. She'd put it in the recycling bin when she got home.

The next case exhibited axes and knives used in the long-ago days when humans and animals were sacrificed to Woden. Ugh. No one really liked talking about *that*.

In the centre of the room was a large display case containing several creamy ivory chessmen. Freya peered at the pale, golden-brown figures.

67 ancient chess pieces, found partly hidden in a sandbank on the Scottish island of Lewis.

Their origins, how they came to be buried, and why there are so many 'extra' pieces are shrouded in mystery. Displayed here are eight queens, eight kings, fifteen knights . . .

Freya stopped reading and gazed at the chessmen. They looked weary and glum, with bulging, startled eyes, frowning mouths, and hunched shoulders. Some of them appeared positively disgruntled. Mostly they looked sad, as if something terrible had happened, something they were helpless to do anything about except brood for eternity. The sorrowful queens looked a lot like Clare did sometimes, late at night when she thought Freya wasn't looking, after she'd just been on the phone with a depressed member of her throng.

Wonder what they're so worried about, thought Freya. She especially liked the ferocious-looking berserks, the ancient warriors sacred to Woden, biting their shields with their big teeth. Those fearless, terrifying soldiers, who went into a battle frenzy and fought like wild animals, impervious to pain, had always fascinated her. She'd seen pictures of berserks in primary school, and they'd had a fun day dressing up and running around snarling and attacking each

other. But the rows and rows of pawns looked like tombstones. She shuddered.

And then there it was, resting on an open stand behind the Lewis chess pieces, like an offering. The carved ivory horn, decorated with enamelled silver panels inset with green jewels, dangled from the ceiling on two ornate chains. Runic inscriptions circled the wide bell. Freya went over and peered inside. She couldn't see from one end to the other. The curved horn was enormous, bigger than she was.

Ceremonial horn from a Viking silver hoard. Origin unknown.

The urge to touch it was overwhelming and irresistible.

Freya glanced around. No one could sneak up on her, not the way footsteps creaked on these wood floors. Slowly, she reached out and brushed the wide-brimmed bell of the horn with her fingertips. The ivory was ridged but velvety-smooth. She jerked her hand back quickly, waiting for an alarm to sound and guards to come running and throw her into prison. But no alarm sounded.

Freya circled it again and stopped before the ornate

tip. Hypnotised, Freya stood on tiptoe, put her lips around the horn's narrow mouthpiece and blew.

A thunderous roaring ringing shrieking blast rumbled and swelled, pealing and blaring louder and louder and louder until Freya didn't know where her body ended and the sound began.

Freya jerked her mouth away but the ringing horn blasts continued reverberating. The roaring, swelling earthquake exploded around her, clap upon clap of thunder, pealing, clanging, booming, banging, booming, banging, booming, banging until she thought her head would split.

She pressed her hands against her ears but the blasts were inside her now, controlling her heart, her breath, her life's blood.

The white carved ceiling and walls cracked and a gigantic gash zigzagged across the floor. Armour and shields crashed from the walls while all around her was the sickening sound of smashing pottery and glass. Every alarm in the museum went off.

There was a humming in her ears. A feeling as if the moving air was cracking and thinning then thickening around her. There was an overpowering smell of frost and fur. She felt as if her body were breaking apart.

The air hissed and bubbled, splintering into shards

of ice. The glass case containing the Lewis Chessmen shattered. Freya was caught up in an icy whirlwind, like a wave snatching her ankles and spinning her through space.

Bob, running into the room shouting her name, glimpsed a queen. A king. A berserk. A riderless horse. And Freya, spiralling together through the air, sucked into a vortex of flashing lights.

Then they vanished.

'Freya!' he screamed, stumbling as he crunched through the ivory pieces and glass scattered across the floor. He stood in front of the smashed display case and buried his face in his hands.

Oh Gods, he thought. Oh Gods. Clare will kill me.

