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Opening extract from

The Lost Gods

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For Martin

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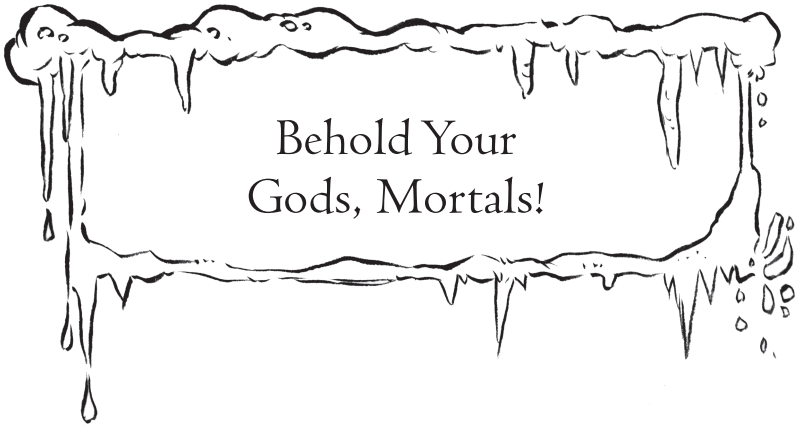
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Behold Your Gods, Mortals!

Two men and a woman stood in the middle of the Millennium Bridge in the Thorsday morning rush hour, forcing the hordes of rushing London commuters to dodge round them. One wore a long blue cloak, and hid his grim face beneath a broad-brimmed hat, pulled low over his missing eye. Anyone glancing up would have noticed two magnificent ravens circling above him with easy, dipping swirls.

The other man, tall, red-bearded and muscular, dwarfed him, while the woman stood a bit apart, tossing her golden curls and scowling at the crowds pushing past her. Her nostrils

quivered, as if she'd sniffed an offensive smell. The exquisite gold necklace draping her delicate neck caught the sunlight, writhing and weaving in shimmering patterns over her face.

A teenage girl in stripy apple-green tights, a woollen scarf and Doc Marten boots jostled her with her backpack. The woman recoiled as if she'd been electrocuted.

'It is time to reveal ourselves,' said the one-eyed man. His rich, deep voice vibrated with emotion. 'We have waited an eternity for this moment.'

'Behold your Gods, mortals!' thundered red beard.

'Bow down and worship!' commanded the golden-haired woman.

'Move, you nutters,' muttered a workman hurrying past.

'We have returned!' boomed the man in the blue hat. 'It is I, Woden, the Father of Battles, God of Inspiration, Giver of Victory, Waker of the Dead. Tremble in awe, mortals, and

worship us! ON YOUR KNEES!'

'Oh Gods, the hippie brigade on a Thorsday morning, I can't face it,' groaned a smartly dressed woman clutching two mobiles.

'BOW! WE ARE YOUR GODS!' roared Thor. 'We command you to bow!'

Two girls jogging by began to giggle.

'Move, you're blocking the bridge,' scowled a man, shoving through them.

'Weirdos,' snapped another.

'Gods, I hate street theatre.'

'Go home.'

'Bloody foreigners.'

The three Gods looked at one another. Thor's mouth gaped open.

'You are talking to Thor, the Thunder God, you worthless pieces of driftwood!' he bellowed. 'Hold your tongues, or my hammer will shut your mouths!'

Everyone hurried by a little faster, in case the madness was contagious.

'What's going on?' asked Thor. He looked

suddenly shrunken. 'Why aren't they obeying? Why are they . . . *ignoring* us?'

'Why don't you look where you're going, you fat cow,' snarled a girl as she collided with the gawking, golden-haired woman.

Freyja jerked her beautiful head.

'Fat cow?' she gasped. '*Fat cow?* I am Freyja, the immortal Goddess of Love and the Battle-Dead.' Her body shook with rage. 'How dare you,' she hissed. 'I'll teach you to call me fat cow, you ugly hag. I'll turn you into a pig.' She began to mutter under her breath. 'You'll smell worse than Ulf the Unwashed.'

'I'll split open their ungrateful heads!' bellowed Thor. 'I can bring down this bridge with one blow of my axe.'

'If only,' muttered Freyja.

'Patience,' said Woden.

'Then *you* do something!' screeched Freyja. 'Show them who's boss.'

Woden drew himself up to his full majestic height. His face was cold with fury and his

single eye burned. Should he smite them all? Cause the River Thames to jump its banks and sweep away this ungrateful city? Whip up the northern winds and blow down these huge halls that mortals had built to challenge the Gods during their long absence? Who did these thralls think they were, anyway? They needed to be taught a lesson.

'Pestilence and panic overtake you all!' roared Woden. 'May this bridge crumble to rubble. May you run crazed like ants escaping boiling water. May frogs fall from the sky. May you all hurl yourselves into the river and drown!'

He closed his eye and intoned a charm.

For a moment, the teeming crowds froze. Then a frog dropped from the sky and plopped onto Freyja's head.

She squealed and flailed and hurled the frog smack into the face of a passer-by, who reeled and knocked her down. She clutched Woden's tunic as she fell, tripping him and sending him crashing into Thor, as oblivious commuters,

jabbering into their phones, stumbled over them.

The Gods lay prone. Freyja lifted her dishevelled head, her golden curls matted, her robes torn, her necklace glinting in broken pieces around her. She screamed and scrambled about collecting the scattered jewels. Beside her Thor groaned. Slowly Woden picked up his crumpled blue hat and placed it back on his bruised head. He was breathing hard, as if he had just run a marathon.

'That went well,' said Freyja.

'You want to marry a troll?' rasped Woden. 'Then keep talking.'

'I told you it wouldn't work,' said Freyja. 'But did you listen to me, Lord High and Mighty? Oh no, you said—'

'If you don't have anything good to say, then don't say anything,' bellowed Woden. 'It's the ill fortune of the unwise that they cannot keep SILENT.'

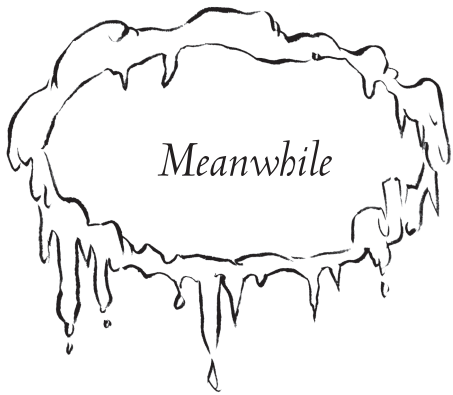
'What just happened?' asked Thor.

Woden shook his head.

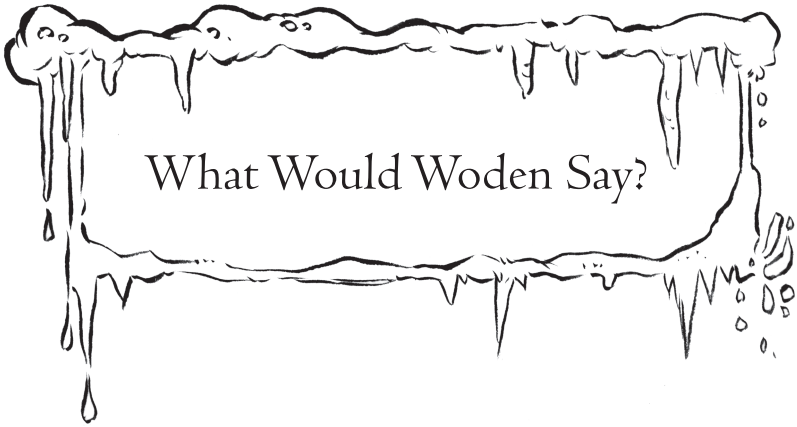
'QUIET!' he roared. 'I must think.'

The circling ravens swooped down, perched on Woden's aching shoulders, and whispered in his ears.





In icy lands heavy with frost there was a steady drip drip drip. Cracks zig-zagged across vast sheets of jagged ice. A giant glacier shuddered, split, and a huge chunk broke off and crashed with an ogre-ish scream. The surging sea exploded, lashing the frozen cliffs as more and more ice poured into the water. The cracks widened across the glistening plains.



What Would Woden Say?

'Freya! Wake up.'

She'd been having the falling nightmare into Hel again.

Freya sat up, shaking. She was at home, twisted up in the blue and white duvet, looking into the sad face of the knitted snowman she'd slept with since babyhood.

Her mum squeezed her arm.

'It's over, honey. Time to get up.'

'Was I screaming?' asked Freya.

Clare raised her eyebrows. 'No louder than usual.'

Half an hour later, Freya sat at the table and ate her cornflakes. Her mum bustled round

with her phone under her chin, making Freya's lunchtime herring sandwiches while trying to sort out the Fane cleaning rota and the food for Woden's forthcoming festival. Freya watched as Clare added lettuce to the sandwich. Once Freya would have objected, and sulked if she thought she'd get away with it, but her food fussiness had vanished since her 'return'.

That's how her nine-day disappearance last spring was referred to. She'd been 'gone'; then, thank the Gods, she'd come back. 'Concussed,' the doctor at Baldr's hospital had said, as if that explained everything.

Did it? Sometimes Freya wondered. It was a convenient excuse, which explained nothing about what had happened to her. Sometimes, when it all seemed most dream-like, she'd go to the Clark's shoebox she kept hidden at the back of her wardrobe and pull out a thick stack of yellowing newspaper clippings. For a few days she'd been headline news:

EVENING STANDARD

FREYA IS ALIVE!
MUSEUM MYSTERY DEEPENS

Missing schoolgirl Freya Raven-Gislason was found earlier today wandering in a confused state by Woden's Temple, near the spot she was reportedly seen nine days ago with two teens in fancy dress. She was bruised, dehydrated and suffering from exhaustion, but otherwise in good health.

Police are continuing their search for the four stolen chess pieces from the priceless Lewis hoard, which vanished from the British Museum last week. A King, a Queen, a Berserk, and a Knight's horse are still missing. Police would only confirm that Ms Raven-Gislason was helping them with their enquiries.

Sunil, the policewoman who first found her on the Millennium Bridge had been kind but insistent. Had she seen who'd stolen the chess pieces? Had *she* stolen the chessmen? No, Freya had said. They stole me, more like, she'd thought.

Had she run away from home or been kidnapped? And what of the two oddly dressed teenagers she'd been seen with on the bridge? Did she know them?

No, she'd said. That wasn't entirely a lie: how could she claim to *know* Alfi and Roskva, mysterious beings from another time and place?

Sunil had persisted: 'Around the time you were seen on the bridge, there was another incident involving a man wearing a bear skin attacking several cars on Upper Thames Street with a sword. A number of people were injured, some seriously. Did you see this man?'

'No,' lied Freya. Silently she'd wished the policewoman good luck trying to arrest Snot. They'd pressed her and pressed her to say where she'd been. When she told them she'd been to

Asgard and Jotunheim and Hel, and met the Gods, her mum had intervened and insisted they take her to hospital and get a lawyer if Sunil was going to accuse her daughter of theft. Freya was frightened she'd be arrested, but after the initial questioning, she was never summoned to the police station again. Everyone just treated her like a runaway, and that was that.

Beneath the cuttings, Freya kept a handful of business cards, from all the journalists who'd jostled for exclusive interviews, and the publicists who'd begged to represent her and sell her story. Clare was adamant that Hel would warm up before Freya sold a story to the newspapers, or even spoke to journalists, and Freya had been so bewildered and in shock after her return she hadn't known what to do, so she did nothing.

Eventually, interest died down. People still occasionally pointed at her in school, and whispered about her behind their hands, but that she could live with.