

FRANCESCA SIMON

# The Lost Gods



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PROFILE BOOKS

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FABER & FABER

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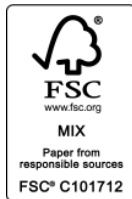
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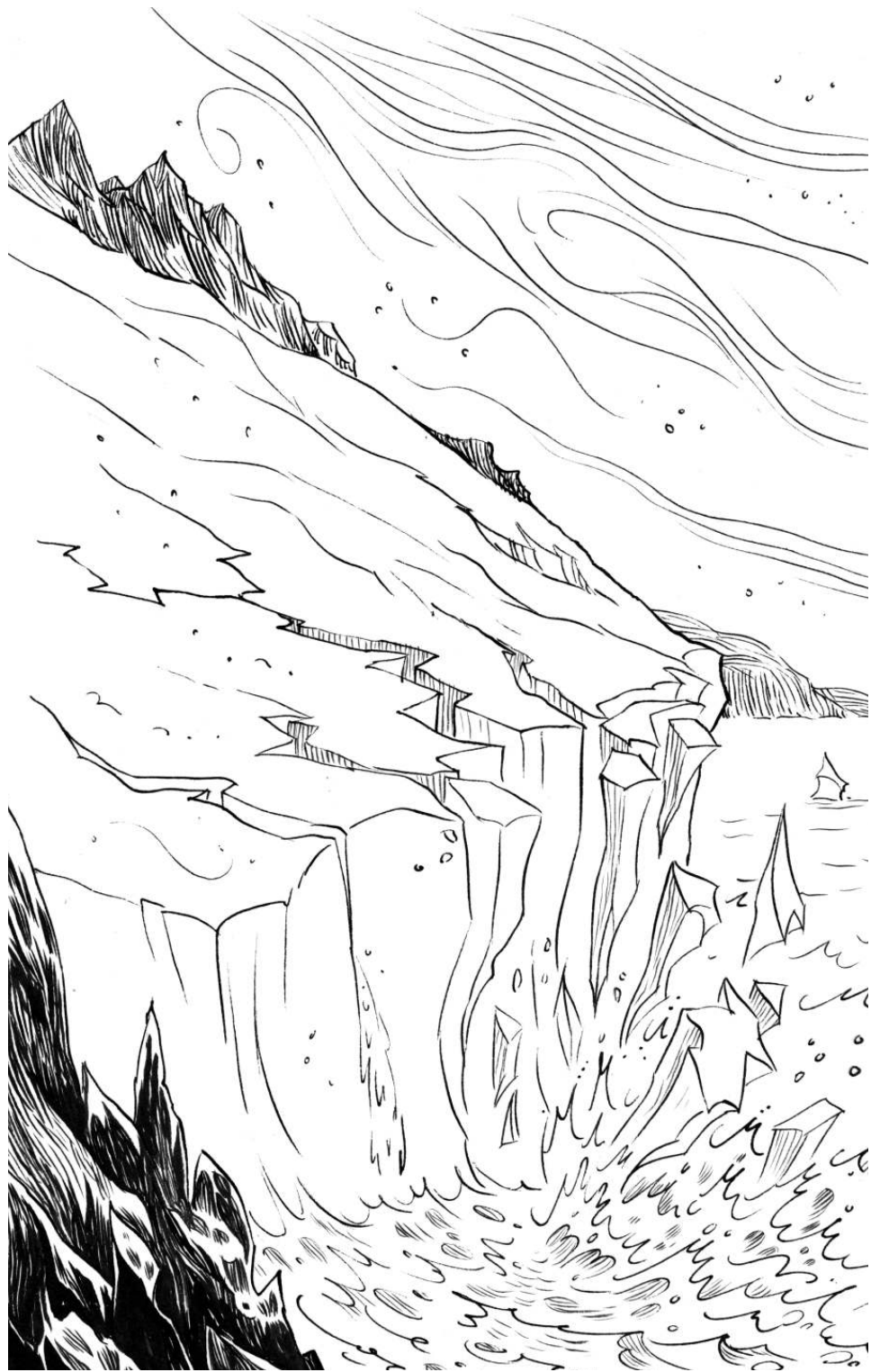


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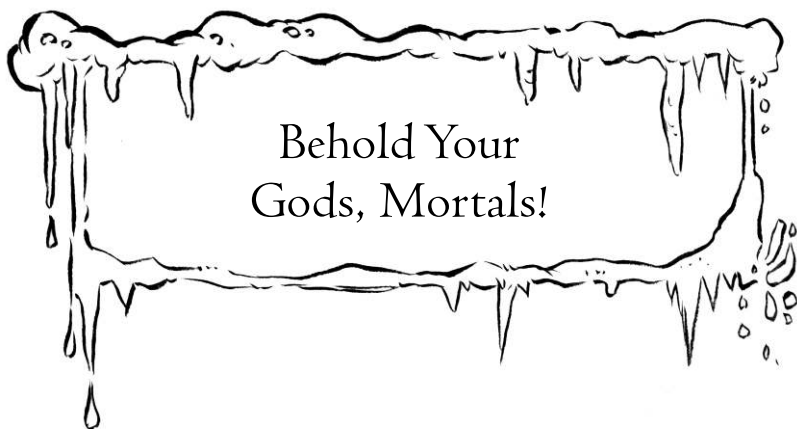


The background of the page is a black and white line drawing. The top half shows a sky with long, sweeping, curved lines representing wind or clouds. The bottom half shows a sea with wavy lines for water. In the center of the sea, there is a large, shark-like creature with a pointed snout and a dorsal fin, swimming towards the left. There are several smaller, sail-like shapes scattered across the water, possibly representing other creatures or objects.

PART I  
THE GODS DESCEND

The bright, unbearable reality  
when gods appear on earth  
not in disguise but as themselves.

Homer



Two men and a woman stood in the middle of the Millennium Bridge in the Thursday 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 Thursday 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.’

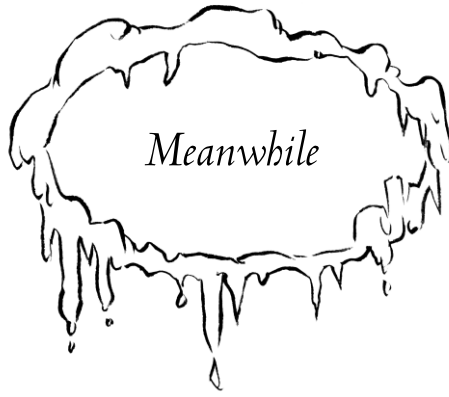
‘What just happened?’ asked Thor.

Woden shook his head.

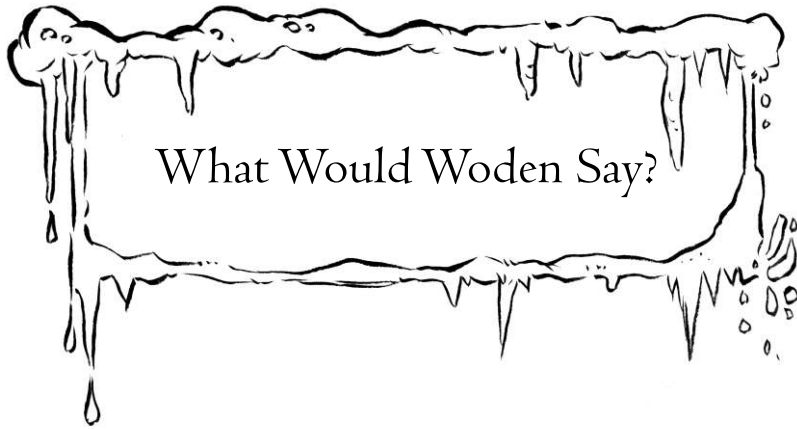
‘QUIET!’ he roared. ‘I must think.’

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.



'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