

FRANCESCA SIMON

The Lost Gods



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PROFILE BOOKS

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For Martin

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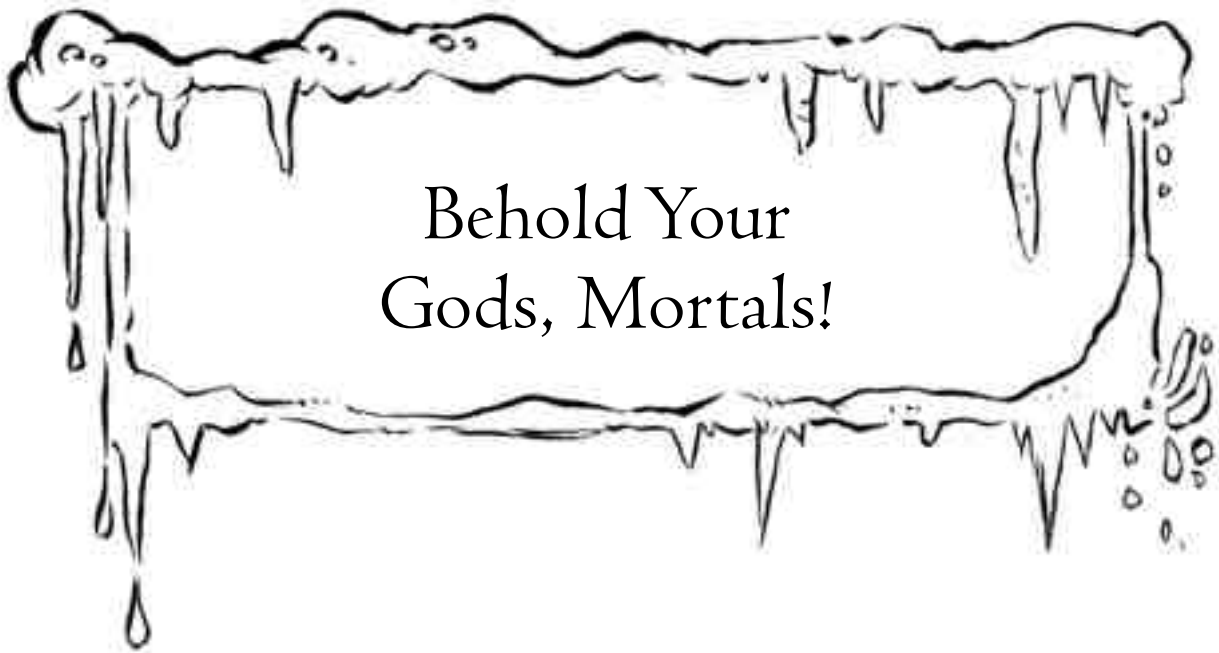
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PART I
THE GODS DESCEND

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