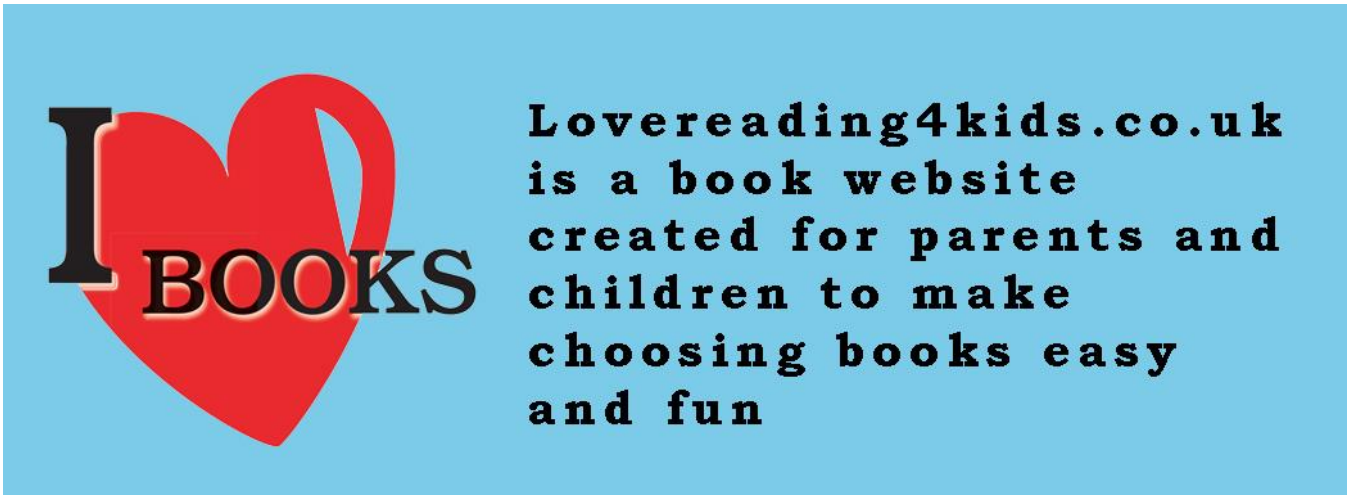


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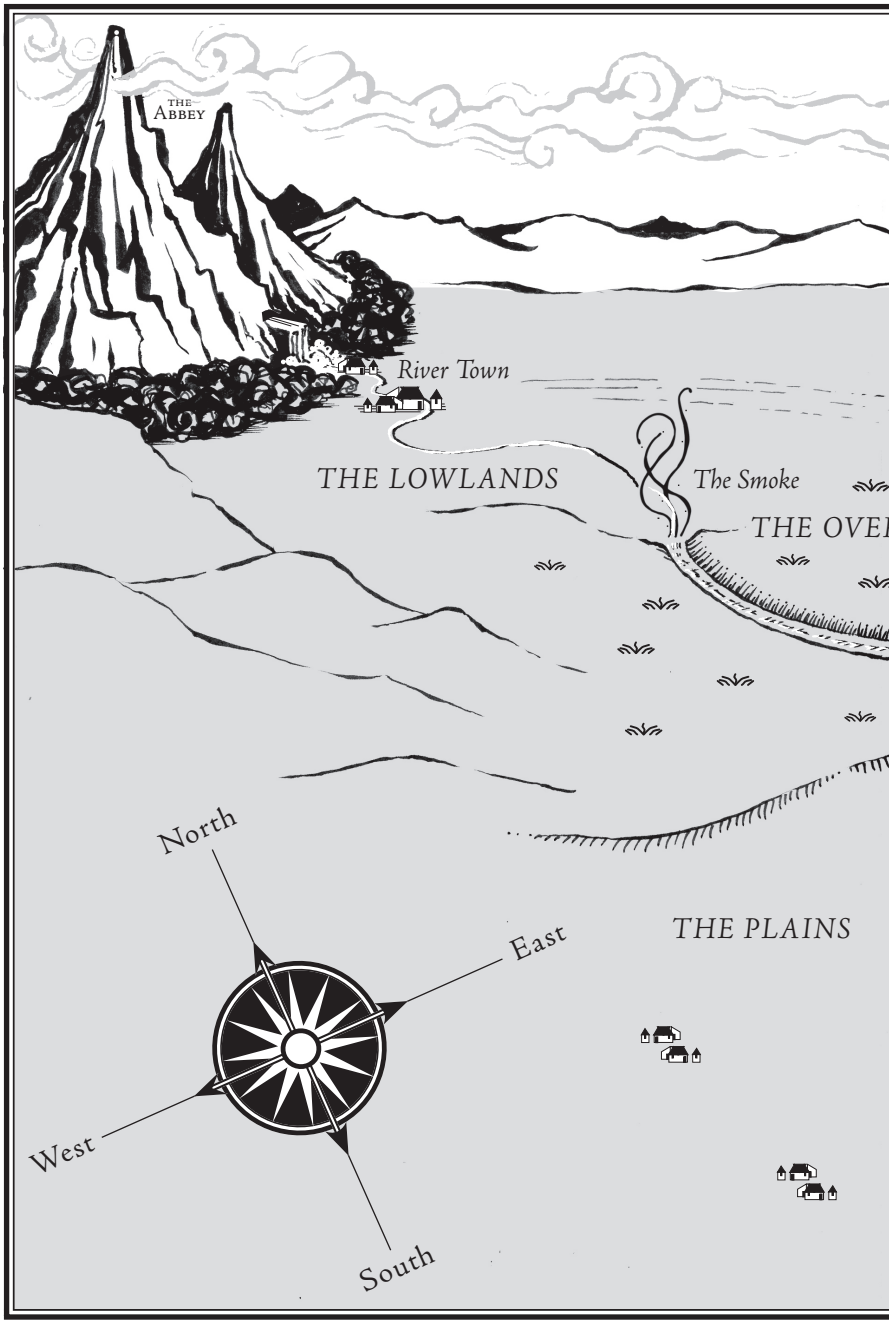
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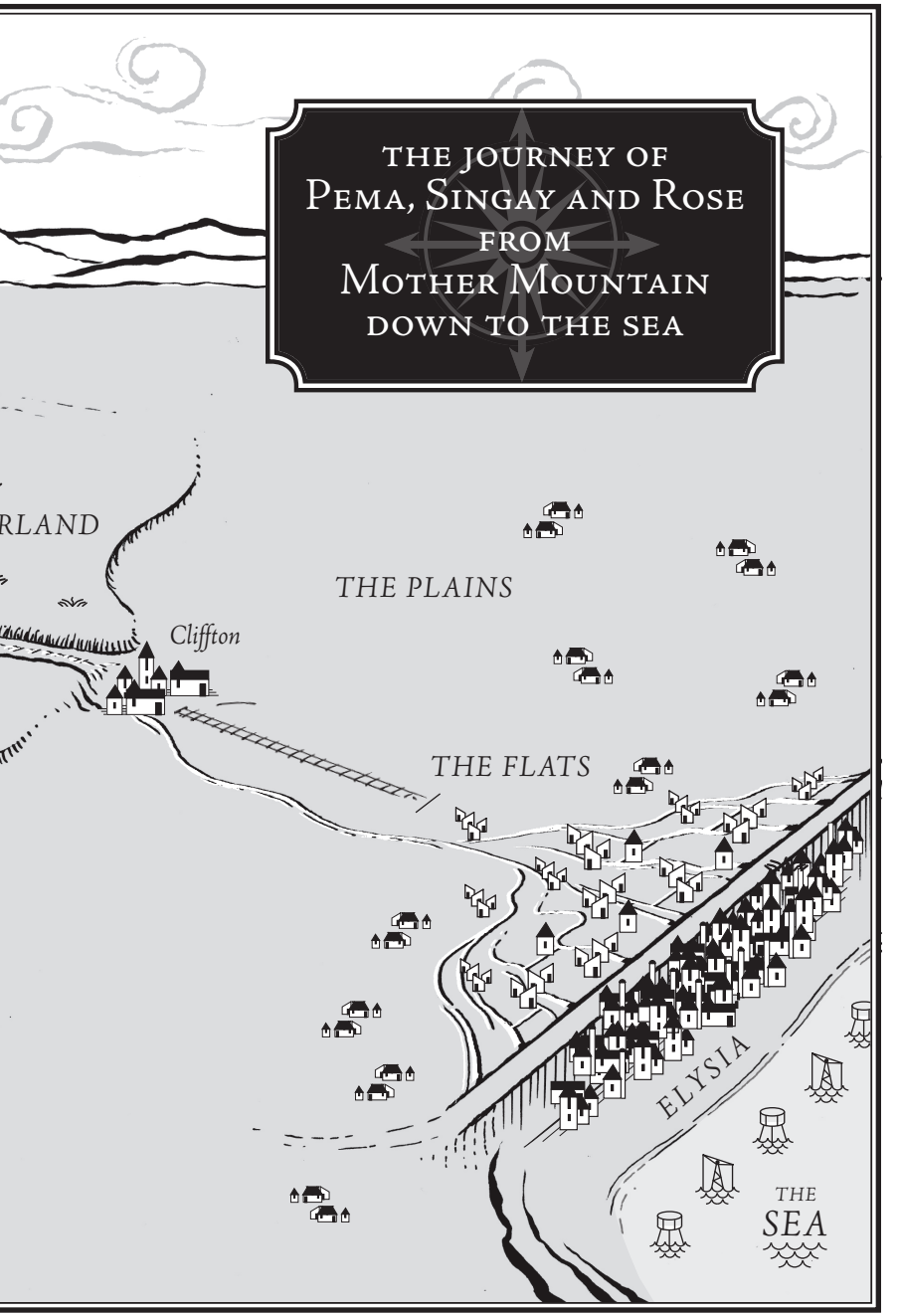
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THE ABBEY
River Town
THE LOWLANDS
The Smoke
THE OVE
North
East
West
South
THE PLAINS


THE JOURNEY OF
PEMA, SINGAY AND ROSE
FROM
MOTHER MOUNTAIN
DOWN TO THE SEA
RLAND
THE PLAINS
Cliffton
THE FLATS
ELYSIA
THE
SEA

BOOK ONE

Look to the Mountain

Thanks be to Mother Mountain. She is the arrow of light and the giver of life. The rain-clouds are her skirts: she wraps her shoulders in the deep snow; her head brushes the sky. She is the eater of death and her footprint is the world. Thanks be to Mother Mountain.

(High Land Prayer)

CHAPTER ONE

The Rogue

It shouldn't have happened.

There were strict rules about leaving the herd to its own devices.

That close to a busy solar system, the Drivers should have been on constant high alert. They were experienced. They understood the dangers. But it had been so long since they'd had a party, and the herd of meteors had seemed so peaceful, grazing contentedly on the outer asteroid belt. There had been no hint of trouble, and the Drivers had let down their guard. They tethered their comets in a circle and mingled and danced and shared stories and jokes and laughter.

After the party, when they counted the herd in preparation for setting off once again, no one could believe it at first. They checked, and checked again. But there was no denying the stark fact. The count was one short.

One of the meteors had escaped. And not just a small one. A huge bull meteor.

The Drivers looked at each other. Waiting.

Who will go after it?

There was a pause, and then . . .

I will.

I will.

I . . . will.

And so it was decided. The herd must move on. The

Drivers knew that if they stayed they'd over-graze the belt. The three volunteer Drivers would go into the solar system, find the rogue meteor and bring it away again before it could do any harm. Then they would do their best to catch up with the rest of the herd.

If not, we will meet at Harvest, said one of the volunteers.

At Harvest? Surely long before that! squeaked the youngest.

Of course. Of course, they reassured.

There was no time to lose. Three by three, the Drivers turned their comets and began to manipulate the magnetic field around the edges of the herd, gently detaching the meteors from the asteroids and nudging them back into the depths of space. Back onto the Great Circuit.

The route was unimaginably old and long. Beings shorter-lived than Drivers would never survive long enough to complete the great elliptical way. Even Drivers themselves rarely volunteered for the trip more than once. But it was known as *the* great adventure. To gather a herd, gradually adding to it, visiting grazing grounds among the asteroid belts of the universe, drawing feral meteors in by the strength of the others' magnetic field, increasing the bulk of the individuals. Always moving on, round the great loop of the Circuit, back to the Drivers' Homeworld and the Harvest, where minerals in the meteors would be processed into a silvery nutrient dust to feed everyone.

That was the reason for the Circuit.

To feed the Driver world – but, in the process, *to do no harm*. Driver philosophy had few tenets and this was the chief of them. *Do no harm*. Something a rogue meteor from a herd could do a lot of.

The three Drivers in search of the missing meteor moved anxiously inwards towards the system's central star. They checked each moon and planet they passed for any sign of recent impact. They lost precious time at an inner asteroid belt, looking for any indication that the rogue was somewhere near, accruing yet more mass.

We should have found it by now, the youngest of the three wittered nervously. *We should have found it.*

The others said nothing, but urged their comet forward at ever greater speed.

And then they did find it. They spotted their rogue in time to see the blue-green planet it was streaking towards, but too late to adjust its path. All the herding skills the Drivers had amassed were of no use. It was too late to send all those tons of accelerating rock off the collision course, send the meteor safely past the planet, back towards clear space.

There was nothing they could do.

In silent horror, the Drivers watched the sudden flare as the rogue screamed through the blue-green planet's atmosphere, trailing a tail of flame. They watched the sickening judder of the world as it hit, the giant circle of the meteor's impact growing outwards at ferocious speed. They watched the dust and ash from a hundred triggered volcanoes begin to rise up, a hundred plumes that caught on the winds and melded into one great towering canopy, till the entire planet was wrapped in a blanket of grey.

The Drivers knew what the greyness meant.

They knew what they had to do.

CHAPTER TWO

The Aeons Passed, Until . . .

'Wadipa, you bake-brained, stiff-backed, stubborn old groat, you're not *listening* to me! After all the years we've known each other, do you seriously think I'd make something like that *up*? And if I *did*, would I climb all the way to the top of the world just to tell *you* about it? Put some more logs on that fire, for the sake of Snow – I'm freezing to death!'

Outside, Pema paused, surprised. They hardly ever had visitors. Even their nearest neighbours were a day's climb away. Besides, who would think of this balmy spring morning as *cold*? He shoved open the cottage door with his shoulder – his hands were full of the last of the lichen his grandmother wanted for her end-of-winter tonic – and managed to bang his head, yet again, on the lintel.

Snows! When would he get used to this latest growth spurt?

He tried to rub his head with his arm and dropped half the lichen onto the floor.

'Pema,' sighed his grandmother.

'Sorry, Dawa.' He bent to pick up the mess while still holding on to the rest, before his grandmother took it all from him and shooed him out of the way, tsk-ing. She went to the window, where the light was better, to clean any twigs and dirt out of the lichen. The other ingredients were already bubbling in a pot on the fire.

'Pema! Hello, lad!' bellowed their visitor. Then, in a

loud whisper, he added to Wadipa, 'That's *Pema*? What have you been feeding him?' It was Zeppa, all the way from Jungle Head. So that was why the room was so hot. Zeppa was a short, blustery man, an old friend of Pema's grandparents. He lived in the settlement right at the bottom of the Mountain, where it met the green Jungle. He was a sort of unofficial headman down there, in charge of the trading post where the High Land people brought their cheeses and wool and leather to exchange for weird and exotic goods like celeriac and botatoes brought up from the Low Lands, and even the occasional oil-powered gadget all the way from Elysia, the City by the Sea. Zeppa was born for the job, right at the heart of everything, knowing everybody, and everybody's business. Pema had last been to Zeppa's shop with his grandfather the summer before. He hated Jungle Head – the heat, the humidity, the way the air seemed too thick to breathe.

'Holy Mother Mountain, can you not shut the door? I'm perishing here.'

Pema grinned as he pushed the door to.

'You talk to this mad man, boy, before he melts my brain with his craziness and his jungle blood,' Wadipa grunted, wiping the sweat from his face.

Zeppa glared at his old friend and huddled himself tighter inside his coat.

'Why, what's happened?' asked Pema. What in the name of Snow was so important it had made their visitor drag himself all this way up the Mountain? 'Oh!' He squatted down beside Zeppa's chair. 'I didn't know you had a dugg!'

Zeppa grunted. 'I didn't, but someone had to take the poor brute in. Hey, careful!' he warned as Pema reached out a hand. 'He's a biter!'

'Don't worry,' said Wadipa. 'The lad's got a way with beasts.'

'He'll need more than a way with this one,' grunted the shopkeeper, but he moved aside to let Pema get near.

The dugg was pressed against the wall, its lips pulled back in a silent snarl. Pema hunkered down, crooning low in his throat, not staring. He sent calming, you-can-trust-me thoughts to the animal. The snarl became a whimper and, after a while, the dugg crawled over to lean up against him. Pema gently stroked the dugg's chest and under its chin, then ran his hands over its sides and back. He could feel the ribs starkly under the rough coat.

It didn't take special gifts to recognise the animal had been abused.

'How'd he get in such a state?' Pema demanded through gritted teeth. 'I'd like to get my hands on whoever did this!'

Zeppa made a warning gesture and shook his head. 'Best not speak ill of the dead, boy.'

'What?'

'It's what I've been trying to tell your grandparents. About the Mountain. You know it's been getting worse – the lurchings and the judderings, the splits and the chasms coming out of nowhere, the avalanches … Well, I don't need to tell you about that.' Zeppa nodded to Dawa, and reached out a hand and awkwardly patted Wadipa on the knee. Their son and daughter-in-law, Pema's parents, had been killed in an avalanche the year Pema was born.

The shopkeeper cleared his throat. 'We've all had to learn to live with the Mountain's moods. It's the price we pay for the new strip of land that she leaves us every year, as she walks north. But trust me, *all that's changed*.'

Even in the heat of the room, Pema felt a sudden chill. Zeppa noticed him shudder and shook his head.

'None of us wants to believe it,' he said. 'That poor beast's owner, for one. As bad-tempered an old . . . Well, as I say, best not to malign the dead. He refused to believe that he was in danger. He thought we were trying to trick him or steal from him when all we were trying to do was *warn* him – get him to leave – for his own safety! "Get off my land or I'll set the dugg on you!" was all he said, and since everyone knew he kept the poor thing half-starved and crazy, no one wanted to tangle with it. And the next morning it was too late. When we went back, we found that in the night the Mountain had done more than just shudder or shake. It had walked . . . *backwards*. There was nothing left of the old man or his house. Only the dog, whimpering at the full stretch of its chain, the Mountain's edge only inches from its nose.'

Pema stared, horrified.

It was no secret that the Mountain walked. It had been moving north at a steady pace for as long as anyone could remember, and who knew how long before that. Every year, the story was the same: when the winter rains ended, another new strip of bare ground was revealed at the base of the Mountain, ready for the Jungle to creep out its green fingers and claim it. That was the way it was. That was the way it had always been.

'What are you saying?' said Wadipa.

Zeppa slammed his fists into the arms of the chair. 'I've *said* what I'm saying! How many times do you need told? It's turned around! *The Mountain's walking south!*'

The dugg whimpered, unhappy with the raised voices. Pema soothed its ears absently, comforting himself as much as the animal. His mind struggled to take in what Zeppa had just told them.

In the silence, the quiet shuffling sounds of Dawa's fingers sorting the lichen eased the tightness in his chest. Very few things agitated his grandmother.

'And they all expect you to fix it,' she said to the shopkeeper, her voice amused.

Zeppa turned to her, wringing his hands. 'That's been the worst of it, Dawa. They *do* expect me to fix it! Me! Stop the *Mountain*!' His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. 'I don't know what to do.'

'Well, of course you don't,' said Dawa calmly. She washed her hands and dried them on her apron. 'How in the world could you? No, the Mountain is the Sisters' responsibility. Always has been.'

Zeppa looked doubtful. 'The old Abbess' door was always open, true enough. But this new one, well, you know how people like to gossip and I've heard—'

'We don't want to know,' said Dawa firmly. 'Going to the Abbey is what needs to happen. But not you. By the time you got there, you'd be too ill to speak – it's far too high for you. You can't deny you've got a killing headache already, and we're but halfway to the Abbey. The sooner you go back down to Jungle level, where you belong, the better.'

Wadipa stirred, but she turned on him before he could speak.

'No, you're not going either. I need help with the cheeses and the gows, and I'm not having you crippling yourself with a two-day climb. We're sending Pema to the Sisters, just as soon as he's changed his shirt.'

Pema's hand froze on the dugg's head.

What?

Wadipa and Zeppa started to protest at the same time.

'He's just a boy!'

'It's my responsibility!'

Dawa ignored them both. She turned to where her grandson squatted on the floor. 'No time to waste. Close your mouth, boy! What are you waiting for?'

Well, for one thing, Pema had to wait for Zeppa and Wadipa to argue with Dawa some more. And then he had to wait while Dawa considered which of the winter cheeses was the best to send to the Sisters, and then she fussed over the fact that because Pema had grown again his best shirt was getting short in the arms (if the world turned upside down she'd be as cool as dew, but a too-short sleeve on public display threw her into a tizzy). And then he had to wait for Wadipa to wonder whether the bothy Pema would be spending the first night of his journey in would still have a roof after such a hard winter as they'd just had, and *then* to tell him in painstaking detail what the best way up the Mountain to the Abbey was, and then the second-best way, in case there'd been slippages since the autumn, and then the third best, in case of, well, just in case.

It was too much, too fast! His head was spinning. When

he'd got out of bed this morning, Pema's biggest worry had been how to get through the day without knocking himself out on doors. Now he was being told that the Mountain had turned in its tracks and was starting to eat the world and kill people, and somehow now it was his job to climb up to the White Women and get them to do something about it.

He'd never been to the Abbey. *I'll knock something over! I won't know what to say! Dawa would know. Why doesn't she go?* But he knew why. His grandparents were old, though he rarely thought about that. He looked at them suddenly, as if for the first time.

'Will you be all right without me?' he whispered to Dawa, as Zeppa and his grandfather argued about something manly on the other side of the room. She just patted his cheek. She had to reach up to do it, which made Pema feel even more wobbly inside.

'Take the marmole,' she told him. 'He'll fret if you leave him behind.'

With a dry tongue, Pema clucked to his pet. Jeffrey, a friendly rodent the size of a kitten, trundled over, climbed his trouser leg and settled into his coat pocket . . .

And then, suddenly, there was nothing left to wait for, and he was on his way, alone (except for Jeffrey), head buzzing, on the long climb to the Abbey of the Sisters of the Snow.