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Nevertell

Glassheart

Mountainfell



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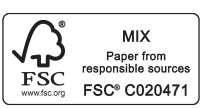
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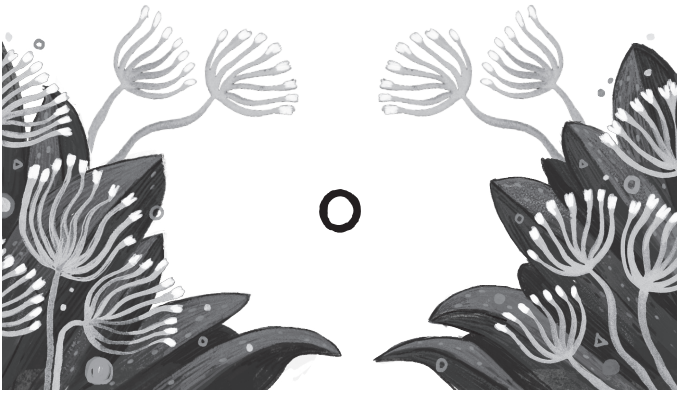
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This book is for anyone who has ever felt different.
Let's be different together.



At first, the tremor from the mountain was too slight to notice. The villagers of Lofotby, caught between the coast and the dark towering mass of Mountainfell, slumbered on. The rumblings barely invaded their dreams. But the gentle tremor soon became a shake. The shake became a quake.

The final, violent shudder came with a thunderous crack. It lasted only seconds, but it was enough. Throughout the village, eyelids snapped open and hands groped in the darkness for their bedside lamps. Babies cried, and children buried their heads under blankets.

In her home, at the very foot of the mountain, Erskin gripped her sheets until the final rumbles subsided. Nothing like this had ever happened before. For a long time afterwards, she lay awake and listened

to the cries of the strange creatures living on the slopes above, knowing that few others would be close enough to hear the eerie yaps, snarls and squawks. She'd heard the odd cry or shriek before, but nothing quite like this – so many, all together.

Though her father always told her not to dwell on such things, it was hard not to wonder what sorts of monsters could make those sounds. Lying there in the darkness, with her heart in her mouth, it felt to Erskin like they may never be silent again.



I

In the twilight hours after the tremor, an anxious crowd gathered in the market square. To Erskin, it seemed like the air coursed with the same dread she'd woken up with as she and her sister moved closer to the dimly lit throng. They, like the others, had come for answers from the Lordsson. What had made the mountain shake? What did it mean for the village?

And then there was the other question that burned in her mind. The most unthinkable question of all. The one that made her blood run icy cold.

Would Lofotby, their village, be attacked? Would those terrible creatures come down from the mountain?

Erskin risked a glance at the looming, misty form of Mountainfell. Towering above this small coastal village that people only ever came to or left by sea,

it was a natural barrier between them and anything else. A nightmarish place, where even the trees were said to conspire to make sure you never came back. And yet, the people of Lofotby were tough. They refused to be driven out by fear of a mountain. They had made this place their home.

The legend was that when their ancestors had first crossed it looking for a new land all those years ago, many had been lost to its terrors. There was talk of witches, beasts with long teeth and even sharper claws – and of course, the dragon. Since then, none of the few who had stepped onto the mountain had ever returned. Not that many of them did so by choice. Every year one – sometimes two – people were chosen by the Lordsson to leave their families behind and go to Mountainfell for good. It was to appease the dragon, and make sure that the village was left in peace. Erskin knew, just as everyone did, that it was necessary for the village's safety – though she hated to see the pain it caused, and lived in dread that it would one day be a member of her family. No one knew for sure if they were dead. But not one of them had ever come back, either.

Erskin's pulse quickened as she glanced up at the wall on which the names of the missing were listed: Alrick, Ragna, Jakob… The list was long –

and it wasn't just villagers. Recently a whole team of scientists came from the mainland, wanting to do research on the mountain. They wouldn't listen to sense, and had never been seen again. At least that year, no one else had to be sent from the village.

Among the carved names was Sibella Sifsdotter's, and it caught Erskin's eye, just as it always did. Aleksander the Lordsson's own sweetheart, who had disappeared on the mountain after it was discovered she was a hex-addled witch – proof, in any were needed, that the rumours about her were true. It had been a huge scandal at the time, and Aleksander had never been the same since, but Erskin had been too young to remember. Still, it sent a shiver through her.

She pushed her hand under the lid of the satchel that was slung over one shoulder. Inside, she felt fur of impossible softness, the nuzzle of a gentle nose, then the soothing rub of a whiskered cheek. The telltale vibration as the warm body within began to purr.

Shh. Back to sleep, Scrattletak, Erskin thought, smiling to herself. She was now much calmer. *Stay hidden and safe, you big fluffball.*

As if in response, the cheek stopped its rubbing, and the weight of the body inside the satchel shifted as it readjusted itself to the most comfy spot. Erskin glanced at her elder sister, Birgit, but luckily Birgit

was scouring the crowd with her glow lamp held high, and hadn't seen the satchel move of its own accord. Erskin had kept Scrat hidden ever since she'd found him as a tiny, starving kitten by the great wall. Her sister would be furious if she knew Erskin had taken the cat in. People didn't keep pets in Lofotby – only farm animals, strictly for food, clothing, or pest control. And besides, even Erskin had to admit there was something unusual about Scrat. He was quite … odd-looking. But she loved him anyway.

He always seemed to know what she was thinking, and she him. He was her best, and her only, friend. But the villagers didn't need any more convincing that they, the Mountain Keeper's daughters, weren't normal. Erskin keeping a cat as a pet and carrying it around in a satchel would surely make this worse, if they found out.

Guilt at the thought of how Birgit would react if she knew made Erskin cringe. It felt like every tiny thing she did embarrassed her sister, so something like *this* might finish her off. But Erskin needed Scrat with her for courage – for comfort. No one else had to know. Besides, if she and her sister could just keep their heads down and bring any news straight back to Mam and Dad at the cottage as they'd been asked, all would be well.

Squinting to see better in the gloom, Erskin scanned the crowd absently, until she caught sight of a boy from school. She froze – he was looking right at her. Leif or something, he was called. He was Mara Azidi's son from the market, and in the year below her. They'd never spoken, but this wasn't the first time she'd caught him looking at her. Probably he'd laugh at her later with his friends, like all the others did, although she couldn't remember him ever shouting names at her. He smiled at her now, but she looked away quickly. She didn't want any trouble.

"Erskin!"

Erskin jumped at the annoyance in her sister's voice. "Pay attention for once, will you?" Birgit snapped, dazzling her with the glow lamp. "Stop daydreaming."

A wave of shame rolled over her because Birgit was right: she hadn't been paying attention. Erskin tried not to daydream. She tried really hard. But trying isn't the same as succeeding. Sometimes she focused so much on the *idea* of paying attention, that she forgot to actually do it. Still, she couldn't help a quick glance back to where she'd caught sight of Leif, watching her – but the bustle of bodies had now shifted, and he was gone.

Together, Erskin and Birgit skirted the edge of the crowd in search of a decent view of the man on

the platform: Aleksander, the Lordsson. Gold glinted from the embroidery on his lapels as he addressed the gathering. Aleksander was always well dressed, and always wore the golden pin which bore his family crest: two joined spirals that twisted in opposite directions. Erskin didn't know anyone else who had such a thing, but it was obvious how much his family's position meant to him by the way he always showed off the pin. Their bloodline had governed Lofotby, and overseen the sacrifices, for generations, and Aleksander clearly couldn't wait to be Lord himself. But although Aleksander's father, the Lord of Lofotby, was much older these days, it seemed to Erskin he only ever gave Aleksander the pettiest or worst jobs to do – like addressing a frightened crowd of farmers in the gloom before dayspring.

Erskin looked around. It was still dark enough for the two crescent moons to be visible, and the sprawling web of multicoloured fey-lights were lit. Later today Erskin knew that the warm, sugary smells of the traditional pastries and sweet treats made here would carry all the way to their cottage on the cold, salty air from the sea. Erskin's mouth watered to think of those – but she snapped herself out of it, quickly. She'd almost drifted off in a daydream again.

"… here to reassure you that everything is being done to keep our village safe," the Lordsson was saying. "The wall is stronger than ever thanks to the improvements I've put in place. Understand this. We are now safer from the mountain and its dangerous magic than we've been since our ancestors built the wall over two centuries ago. Safer than we've *ever* been, in fact."

"What was that tremor then?" someone from the crowd called out.

"Could it be a sign that the dragon is on the move?" another shouted. "Looking for victims to carry back to the summit? They say its nest is littered with bones…"

Aleksander raised his hands. "Now, now," he boomed. "Let us all just keep calm. No one has seen the cloud dragon in generations. Our offerings keep it happy, and so it doesn't attack. The tremor was likely just a natural phenomenon," he added. "An earthquake. A one-off event."

Erskin shuddered. The Lordsson called the people who were sent to the mountain "offerings", but everyone knew what they were really: sacrifices. The bones littering its nest that people talked about were probably theirs.

"There's nothing natural about that mountain," someone called out.

"They say the cloud dragon breathes fire and eats people whole," someone else hissed.

"And it has teeth like needles."

"And claws as sharp as scythes."

The whispers were growing.

"Now, now," Aleksander said. "Let's all calm down."

"What if the offerings aren't enough? What if it's run out of food up there and is coming down for us?"

"For our children!"

At this came a sudden hush, and even Aleksander the Lordsson's face fell for a moment. He paused, and his hand went to the golden crest pinned to his lapel, as if for reassurance. Then he seemed to take a deep breath.

"Friends," he said, picking through his words. "The wall is strong."

"But dragons fly!"

Aleksander coughed. "The dragon has never come to the village. We are safe as long as we stay here and keep sending offerings; it will not venture into our territory and the wall will hold back the other creatures."

"How do you know?" came the same swift voice.

The reply was so quick it seemed to catch Aleksander off guard. The crowd grew so quiet that everyone might well have been holding their breath.

Erskin definitely was.

A chill wind blew across the square, as icy as saltwater depths. It made the fey-lights shake and clank in the waiting silence. Erskin feared that at any minute the lights might shatter, showering them all with shards of glass. A flurry of donderline seeds carried on pale feathery wisps shaped like tiny umbrellas whipped across the square. *Tell the seeds who is on your mind before you blow on them*, their mam had once told her and Birgit. *And they will go to the one you're thinking of. So, if you're lucky enough to catch a donderline seed, it could mean someone is missing you, too.* Erskin reached out for one, but it twirled away out of her reach as Aleksander cleared his throat.

"Our people have been safe here for over two hundred years. The wall has not failed us yet, and as is our tradition the current Mountain Keeper watches for danger, night and day. If he'd seen any trace of a threat, or any sign that…" He hesitated. "Any sign that the cloud dragon was on the move, he would have raised the alarm. That's what the warning bell is for, after all."

The crowd erupted into whispers and mumbles. Erskin felt the air turn instantly sharp. This would have been a great time to use her ability to "switch

off her ears", as her family called it – but that only seemed to work when she didn't mean it to. Before she could help it, the whispers slithered in.

"The Mountain Keeper – that outer-edge dweller…"

"His whole family is hex-addled from living up at that cottage, if you ask me. It's too close to Mountainfell. Dangerous to be that near to all that magic. All that evil…"

"Can he even be trusted to ring the bell, if there's an attack? He's not as young as he was."

"Look, there are his daughters."

"Something's not quite right with them, especially the younger one…"

"Who would want to raise their kids so close to that…?"

A flurry of people swivelled to stare at Erskin and Birgit. Suddenly, they were the centre of attention in an ever-growing mob. Erskin's gut twisted. She wanted to hide and she wanted to be sick – but preferably to hide first.

The fey-lights started to clank again, though Erskin could feel no wind this time. Birgit, her face even paler and harder than ever, whipped round. "We've heard enough. Let's go," she growled, and grabbed Erskin roughly by the arm as if it was all

somehow *her* fault. Erskin was about to cry out, to protest, but a strange noise stopped them both. It seemed to come from Erskin's stomach.

She looked down at herself, instantly frightened that she really was going to vomit, but the noise hadn't come from her… It had come from her satchel. The satchel which now wriggled and writhed, and mewled again: a sound so eerie and jarring that the people watching gasped, and even Birgit staggered back in fright.

Oh, no, Erskin thought, panic rising in her throat. Scrat.