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THE GIRL WHO LOST a LEOPARD
NIZRANA FAROOK
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THE GIRL WHO LOST a LEOPARD

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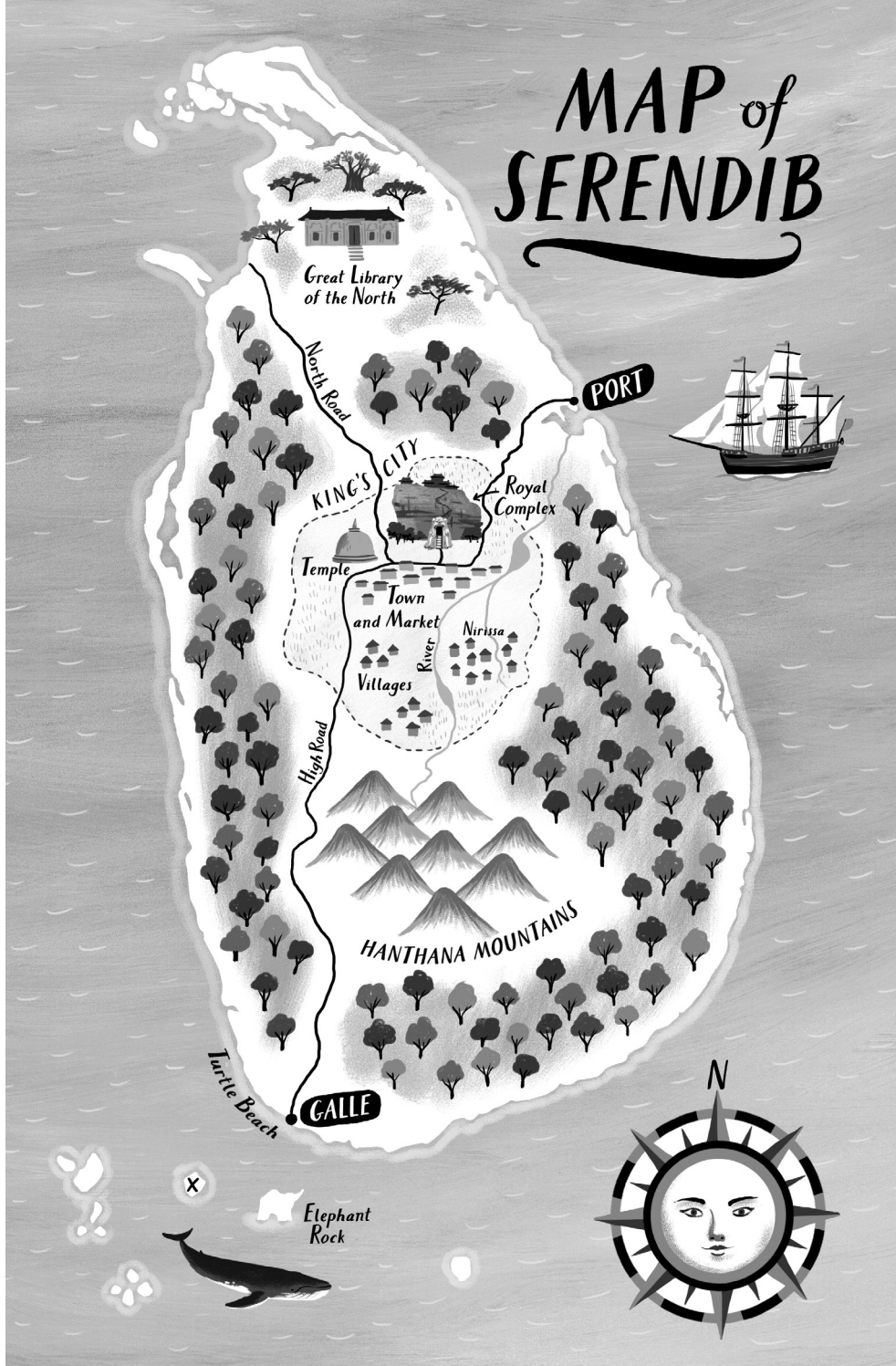
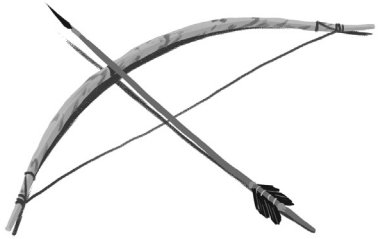
To my nieces,
Simra, Naadira, Salma
Zahra, Zamra, Zaeema, Nabeeha
Heba

And my nephews,
Waleed and Yussof


MAP of SERENDIB
Great Library of the North
North Road
PORT
KING'S CITY
Royal Complex
Temple
Town and Market
Nirissa
River
Villages
High Road
HANTHANA MOUNTAINS
Turtle Beach
GALLE
Elephant Rock
N



Chapter One

Selvi frowned as the man with the bow and arrow took aim at something in the bushes. She bent low and watched him from her hiding place. What was he hunting?

A whistling thrush called from a tree above him, taking off in a flutter of sleek dark blue. The man twisted in place slightly, as if following a moving target, one eye narrowed in line with the nocked arrow. Next to him, partly obscured by trees, two other figures watched silently.

Far above him in the mountains, Selvi

crouched down further. What was going on? She knew the man with the bow by sight, though only vaguely. Jansz was a large man with a big head and chipped teeth, and he and his two companions were known for being troublemakers. If Selvi's mother were here she'd tell her to stay away from them.

From her vantage point, Selvi had an eagle's view of the mountain range. Misty green hills rose around her to varying heights, all covered in a thick wilderness occasionally broken up by exposed rock. Tall eucalyptus trees shot upwards like arrows from the slopes, their balmy fragrance sharpening the breeze. On her right and away to the south lay a vast plain of velvety grassland.

The man exclaimed angrily and lowered his bow. He moved towards the others underneath the tree. Whatever he'd been aiming at, it was gone now.

The men's voices drifted up and it sounded like an animated discussion was going on. Selvi ran light-footedly towards the other side of the mountain, anklets jingling softly. They wouldn't see or hear her here, as long as she didn't make too much noise. She would scale down this side of the mountain and be away from them.

Selvi set off climbing down the bare rock face. She

was adept at this. Even the dangerous climbs that no one else could manage. She was small and light, and that helped as she gripped the rock.

She'd learned to climb by instinct, feeling the sun-hot surface with her feet and arms as she used every hand- or toe-hold to help her down. She knew the type of vines to hold on to, the tufts of bracken that could take her weight best. Her toes curled into foliage and grasped on, as agile as the toque macaques that swung around these parts.

She was partway down the rock face when a movement below caught her eye. She paused and looked down. A clump of yellow daffodil orchids swayed softly among their pointed grassy leaves. Could it be…? Her heart soared. But no, she hadn't seen Lokka in over two weeks. Maybe he'd moved on? It made her sad, but he was a wild animal after all. She shook her head and turned back to the rock face.

But then she caught the soft swish of trees and knew that something was definitely moving below. She held her breath and suddenly caught a glimpse of a sinewy figure with a hint of gold rippling past the foot of a keena tree.

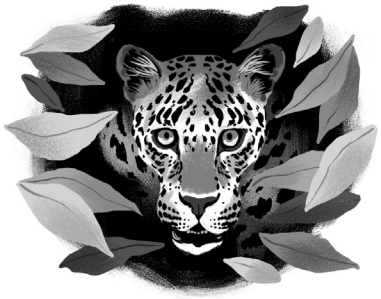
Selvi smiled broadly, her heart singing in her chest. The familiar powerful body, the glossy golden coat

with dark rosettes and dabs of softest orange in them. Lokka! She'd missed him so much and was glad to see him sloping around the mountains again.

A whisper floated up in the breeze. Selvi froze as a sudden appalling thought came to her. The men were being very quiet now. *Too* quiet. She scaled back up the rock quickly and crawled to the edge she'd been on before, anklets jingling and elbows scraping the rough ground.

All of a sudden, several things happened at once. An arrow whistled through the air into the bushes. A loud roar from an angry animal echoed up the mountains, followed by a crashing sound coming from the bushes.

Lokka!



Chapter Two

Selvi screamed. They were shooting Lokka! Her dear, strong, magnificent leopard!

The noise echoed over the mountains, reverberating from all sides. The men looked up in alarm.

Selvi fell backwards and scrambled to her feet. One of the men pointed and shouted something indistinguishable. She picked herself up, her heart in her mouth.

The man was now racing up the mountain towards her. Selvi started to

scramble back down the rock face again. What were the men doing?! Everyone knew that hunting leopards had been strictly outlawed by the Queen. The men would be punished severely if they were caught.

Which explained why they were so keen to find her.

Before the men reached the summit, Selvi had made it to the ground, dropping on to a patch of striking purple binara flowers. She thundered down the slopes, anklets jingling as her feet raced through scratchy ferns. But what about Lokka? Could he have been injured? Or worse? She shoved the thought out of her mind. No! He was quick and strong. She'd have to go and find him later and check that he was all right.

But for now she had to save herself.

She stopped momentarily to rip off her anklets. She held the bells tightly in her fingers to muffle the sound as she ran on.

Two men were hurtling down the slope behind her and soon they'd be close enough to see her. Selvi crawled quickly under a low bush. She held her breath as the men stopped nearby, gazing intently over the mountains.

"Where did she go?" said the large man, panting.

The other one peered over the slopes to the valley below. "She couldn't have got very far. We'll find her."

Selvi shrank back as Jansz's massive feet passed close to the bush.

"We'd better!" he snapped, infuriated. "I can't believe we didn't get that stupid leopard again. And I don't want the girl yapping to anyone."

Didn't get the leopard. Selvi exhaled and closed her eyes. Lokka must have escaped. Which was more than she could say for herself…

Jansz hollered to the third man, who was skittering down the slope towards them. "We must find her before she gets home!"

"I can't see her," he replied, holding a hand over his eyes as he scanned the area.

"She'll be hiding close by then," said Jansz. "Spread out around the mountains. We'll get her."

Selvi craned her neck to see one of the men pick up something from the ground.

"Look what I've found!" There was a tinkling as the man threw the small object to Jansz, who caught it in one hand. He held it up – a short chain with a jingling bell at the end.

Selvi shivered and opened her fist. There was only

one anklet clutched in her palm.

"I know who this belongs to," said Jansz. "I'd recognise that annoying sound anywhere. It's Selvi."

Chapter Three

A wave of panic washed over Selvi. They knew her! She'd seen Jansz around the village but didn't think he'd recognise her or know her name. That meant he knew where she lived, or could find out. She stiffened, thinking about Mother alone at home.

"Let's comb the area," said Jansz. "We need to speak to her and make sure she doesn't say anything. If she's difficult we'll just have to talk to the family a little."

Selvi shivered. She knew what that

meant. *Talking* was code for something altogether more threatening. She had to protect her mother from Jansz and his thugs.

The men had split up now, and were moving slowly through the mountains. She didn't want to bump into them. She didn't want to leave them to hurt Lokka either.

Selvi peeked out from the bush again. The men seemed to have moved on a little. She watched as one of them headed away from her down the hill.

Quietly, she crept towards the path leading to her village below. It was a winding mountain track, cool and rain-washed, overhanging with tree ferns and with a sharp drop on one side. It was really hard to see if anyone was coming towards her or approaching from behind. She stumbled and brushed against some overhanging ferns, and a shower of water fell on her.

"Did you hear that?" came Jansz's voice. "That way!"

Selvi changed direction and ran nimbly along a small path that wound steeply upwards. She made it to the top, panting with the effort. To her surprise, there was a house standing in the centre of a neatly swept yard under a large neem tree. Thankfully no one seemed to be home and the front door was closed.

She ran towards the back to find somewhere to hide.

Jansz's voice drifted up from the path below, the trees muffling the sound. "Where did she go now?"

Selvi crept to the back door and pressed herself against it. They wouldn't be able to see her from their position and she couldn't see them either. She prayed they wouldn't notice the little winding track.

"She has to be here! Must be hiding somewhere."

Selvi shivered in her hiding place. The sound of the men's feet swept far and near. A couple of times they came heart-stoppingly close to the bottom of the path, but then they receded again.

Just when she thought they'd moved away and she was readying herself to leave, she heard the sound of light footsteps in the front yard.

Selvi swallowed a scream and flattened herself against the roughness of the back door. The footsteps started to speed up, and suddenly a person rounded the corner of the house and appeared right in front of Selvi.

It was a boy, about her age. He stopped short and let out a yelp of surprise.

"Shh!" whispered Selvi fiercely, recognising him. He was a boy from school, Amir. And, just her luck, one of the mean ones. She guessed that this was his

house. “Keep your voice down!”

He stared at her in astonishment. His meanness seemed to have deserted him due to shock. “Why?” he said.

“Just please do,” she implored, before he talked too much. The men might be lurking close by. Then more politely, and by way of explanation, she whispered to him, “I don’t want people to know I’m here.”

“What people? There’s no one around,” said Amir, although thankfully he’d dropped his voice.

He frowned suddenly and, much to Selvi’s horror, said, “Oh wait, who’s that?”

Laboured footsteps sounded at the front of the yard, as if someone was trudging up the track.

It was one of the men!

Amir went and stood at the side of the house, watching where the top of the track came up to the front yard. Selvi was immobile with shock.

“Hey, boy,” the man said, his voice shaky from the climb. It was Jansz! He was here, just feet away from Selvi. She couldn’t see him from where she stood, but she sensed the urgency in his voice. “Have you seen a girl run this way?”

Chapter Four

Amir’s eyes swivelled immediately to look at Selvi, cowering in the doorway. Selvi shook her head hard.

Jansz came closer. Selvi could hear him now, breathing heavily, though he was still thankfully hidden by the side of the house.

“Well?” said Jansz to Amir. “It’s not a hard question, is it? Have you seen her?”

Amir just stood there, his eyes darting all about the place as if wondering how to answer.

“I have a coin if you’ve seen anything

useful for me," said Jansz's voice, and he must have shown Amir something that made his face light up.

No! Selvi mouthed. *Please don't.*

Amir dragged his eyes away from Jansz and scratched his head. "Er, no. I haven't seen any girl. But I'll keep an eye out."

Selvi closed her eyes in relief.

"Good," said Jansz. He shuffled off, his footsteps rustling slowly down the track.

Selvi stood motionless for a while until all sounds of him had died away. She felt faint with relief once he was gone. She leaned her head back on the door and looked up, exhaling noisily.

"Thank you," she said to Amir, who was scuffing his toe on the sandy ground.

"What does he want with you?" asked Amir.

Selvi hesitated. She didn't really want to tell him, but she felt she owed him an explanation. "I saw him and his thugs try to kill a leopard."

Amir's eyes goggled. "Out here?"

Selvi nodded. It was acceptable to kill leopards that strayed into villages and posed a threat to humans, but going out to the wilderness to hunt one was a punishable offence.

He looked thoughtful for a moment, then shrugged

and moved to stand in front of her expectantly.

"Is there anything you want?" she said, confused.

He pointed to the door behind her. "Just to get into my house."

"Oh, right." Selvi blushed and moved aside.

Opening the door, Amir gave her a half-smile and went inside. Since it was safe to leave, Selvi went round to the front of the house and made her way back down the tiny mountain track. Trees of twisty branches lined one side, their trunks festooned with waterlogged mosses. The air smelled of clean mountain rain and freshly dug earth. A green lizard, its nose shaped like a leaf, looked up at her from a low branch.

Now to get home and to Mother without being seen by Jansz and his men, who were probably still lurking about somewhere. Selvi was thankful that Amir hadn't told on her. He'd seemed nicer without his friends around, but she still had the uneasy feeling she shouldn't have told him about the men and Lokka the leopard.