

THE BOY WHO SAVED a BEAR



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nosy crow



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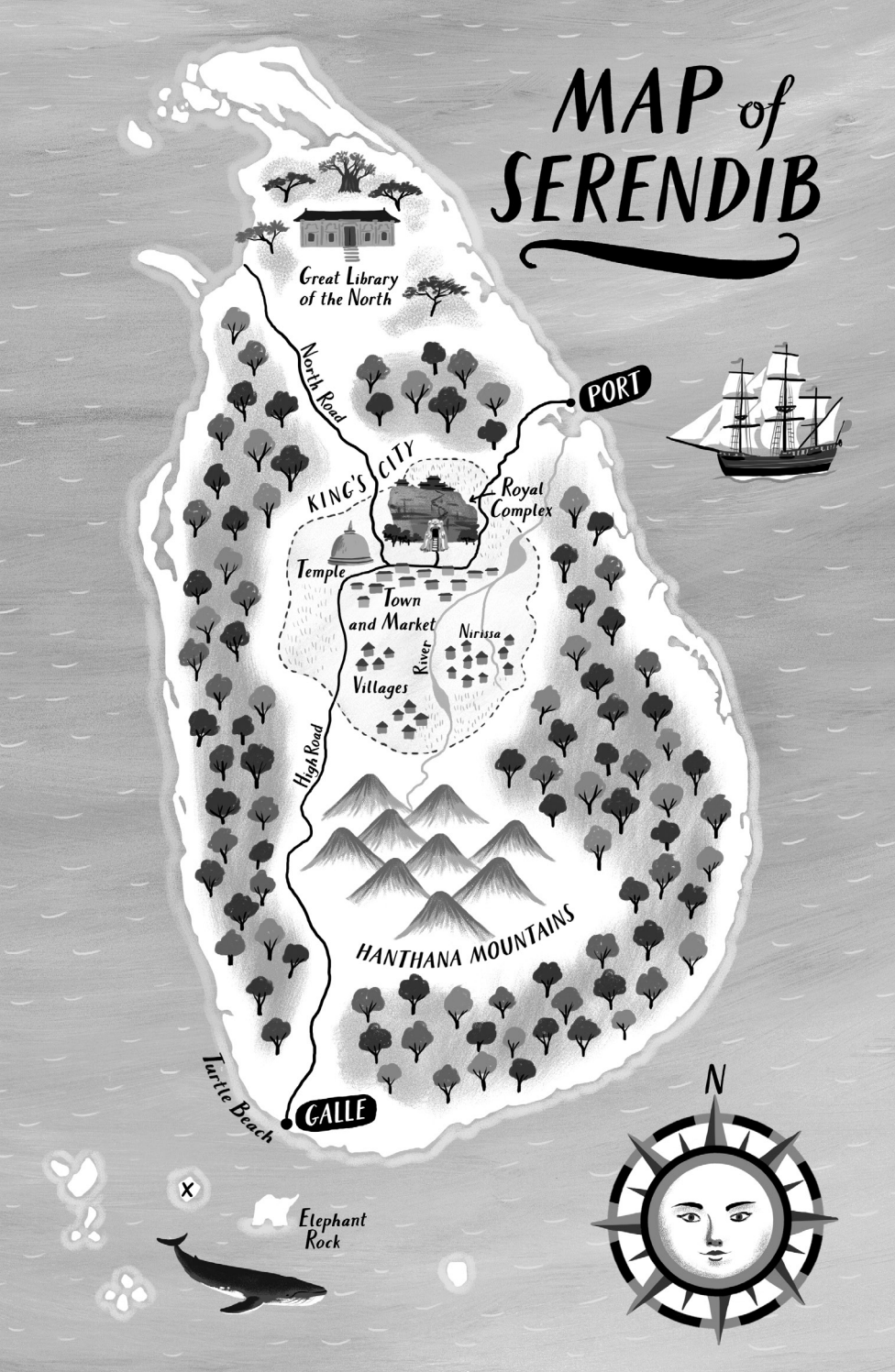
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To everyone who has been a part of this journey.

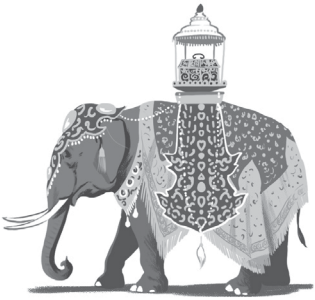
From the trumpeting of a loveable elephant
And the singing of a majestic whale,
To the roar of a noble leopard
And the paw-pad of an enchanting bear.

Thank you for coming along.




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

The grandest elephants in the country stood on the lawn of the Great Library of the North.

Nuwan skidded to a halt in the shadows of the palmyra trees, watching the hustle and bustle with excitement. Mahouts fussed over their elephants on the green in front of the triple-domed white brick library building. The elephants were all sizes – mostly huge but some smaller ones too – and there was even one tiny little elephant, standing there swaying softly as musicians tested their instruments. The

elephants were dressed in their finest garb, ready for the procession that was to come.

Nuwan looked around him. A crowd had gathered to watch and a thrilling expectation was in the air. Groups of people stood dotted about in the shade of the trees on the edge of the lawn.

"Hey, Nuwan!" said a voice from his left, and he turned to find one of his friends, Sani, standing with her family. She broke away and ran over to him, her two tight plaits jiggling on her shoulders. "Came to see the elephants too?"

"Yes!" he said. "Aren't they marvellous? The big one is the Queen's!"

Sani beamed. "I know! And my father said he's been entrusted to carry the Key of Nissanka. Apparently it's really valuable and all that. Imagine having such a huge job."

"Looks like he's up to all that pressure!" Nuwan grinned as he eyed the massive elephant and his powerful tusks. A mahout threw the animal a plantain, which he caught expertly in his trunk. The embellishments on his regalia winked in the blistering sunlight.

"What's going on?" Another of their friends, Chathura, came up to them under the palmyra trees,

munching on something. He had a paper cone of boiled cashew nuts, which he offered to them. "My father dragged me here but I'm not sure what's happening."

Nuwan laughed as he threw a handful of cashews into his mouth. "That's because you're napping most of the time."

Sani giggled and Chathura grinned sheepishly. The crowd pressed forwards and an official waved them back bossily.

"So, Chathura, you know there's this huge old statue in the King's City from the time of King Nissanka?" began Nuwan, but Sani jumped in.

"Legend says that the king didn't trust his successor, so he had the statue built with a cavity where he could hide his treasure and keep it safe for the future," she said. "You can sort of see hinges and a lock apparently, but no one knew if a key to the treasure trove actually existed."

"People have tried to break in over the years," said Nuwan, craning his neck over the elephants to see if there was any activity in the library building. "They never succeeded. But now they've found the key."

Chathura's eyes widened. "And it was *here* all along? Miles away from the King's City?"

Nuwan nodded and took another mouthful of the tender cashews. “One of the junior staff cleaning the archives found the key among a lot of junk. It was checked by experts and it’s genuine.”

“So what’s that got to do with all the elephants?”

“The Queen’s going to open the statue! The elephants are carrying the key to her in a procession that’ll take five days. They’re going to go slowly through towns along the way and rest at night. On Saturday evening there’s a ceremony where the key will be handed over to the Queen.”

Chathura started fanning himself with the now empty paper cone. The heat was intense and Nuwan welcomed the slight breeze from it.

“I wish I could see it,” said Sani wistfully. “The actual key, I mean. Rather than just the box it’ll be in, and from this distance too!”

All three of them stared across at the library building, where officials were going in and out as they got ready for the handover.

“That would be so amazing if we could.” Chathura turned to Nuwan. “Pity your brother, Krishnan, isn’t here. He works at the library, doesn’t he?”

“Oh yes!” said Sani. “If only he were here.”

“He doesn’t *work* at the library,” said Nuwan, a

little resentfully. Krish was a sore point with him. His brother was the golden child of the family and sometimes Nuwan wished everybody didn't *need* him quite so much. "He does a monthly delivery of library books to a monk at the King's City. I wouldn't call that working here."

"Still," said Sani. "If he were here he'd go in to see and tell us all about it."

"Well, he's not here," Nuwan said curtly, "even though he was supposed to do a delivery today. He's been ill for the last few days. So he's no good to us."

He paused. An idea glimmered in his mind. This was serendipitous timing. Krish wasn't here so he couldn't do his job. But Nuwan *was* here… He could do Krish's delivery! He would get to see the Key of Nissanka *and* prove to his parents, and everyone else, that he was as capable as his brother.

"You know what," he said to the others, "I think I'm going inside."



Chapter Two

"What?" said Sani to Nuwan. "You can't do that. They'll kick you out."

"No, they won't. I'm going to do Krish's job for him this one time because he's not well."

Chathura frowned. "They're not going to believe that you can do it."

"Why not?" said Nuwan. "It's just a matter of taking a few books to the King's City and giving them to the monk at a temple. My brother does it every month."

"It's a two-day journey to the King's City!" Sani sighed. "Krishnan is sixteen.

You're twelve. Your parents won't let you go."

"My brother's been doing it since he was my age. I don't see why I can't." Nuwan bristled inside at his friends' lack of confidence in him. They were just like his parents!

"Nuwan, wait!" Sani called after him as he made his way through the crowd towards the library. More people had gathered now. He ducked behind a man carrying a child on his shoulders so she could see better and went towards the sweeping drive.

"What are you doing?" An icy voice behind him made Nuwan jump out of his skin. He whipped round and found Mrs Weerasinghe, the head librarian, staring at him.

"I'm here to pick up some books that have been reserved for delivery to the King's City," he said, making his voice sound mature and responsible.

"Today's not the day for that sort of thing. Who are you?" she said again, in a tone somewhere between surprised and annoyed. Her grey-streaked hair was tied up in a tight bun and she wore a stiffly draped sari pinned down severely. "And why do you look like Krishnan, the usual delivery boy?" She looked him up and down unfavourably. "Except smaller and messier."

"Krish is my brother," said Nuwan, ignoring the sting. Krish had talked about Mrs Weerasinghe, and not in a complimentary way. She was new and secretly disliked by other library staff. "He's sick, so I'm delivering the books for him."

"This is highly irregular." She muttered something under her breath. "Not to mention bad timing. Come back tomorrow."

"B-but," stammered Nuwan. "My brother said it was really important. The monk, Mahanama, will be waiting for his book delivery. My brother always takes a new batch on the first of every month." The first part wasn't strictly true, but at least the second was.

Mrs Weerasinghe scowled at him. "How old are you?"

"Twelve. Apart from that, me and Krish are basically the same person. Although I *am* better looking."

She stared at him and he debated whether to let her know that he was joking. "Oh, all right then. But hurry up. Take it and go! As if I don't have enough things to worry about today."

Nuwan smiled in relief as she stalked away. This was going to be easier than he'd thought. He kept well behind her erect figure as she disappeared into the whitewashed building. Now, if anyone asked, he could

tell people he had Mrs Weerasinghe's permission!

He left behind the hustle and bustle of the lawn and stepped into the library. It was quiet and dark after the brightness of outside. Nuwan made sure to wipe his feet hard on the coir rug and went in. Some library staff hurried about, ignoring him. There was a large, U-shaped counter and beyond he could see shelves of books. Some of them looked old and leather-bound, while some were shelved horizontally with long, narrow palm-leaf pages. The building was old and cavernous and had a faint whiff of dust that made his nose tickle.

Where was the Key of Nissanka?

Someone jostled against him. "Out of the way!" said a man, hurrying past.

"Excuse *me*!" said Nuwan, stepping back behind the library counter. Mrs Weerasinghe was nowhere to be seen, thankfully. A man and a woman stood at the front of the counter, in a hushed discussion with someone official on the other side.

Nuwan's eyes fell to a small stack of books behind the counter. He tried to read the titles from where he was standing. A couple of the volumes were in another language but he noticed a science book among them. He remembered Krish mentioning that the monk

he delivered books to read works of science mostly. Maybe these were his?

"Hello?" said Nuwan. But either the adults didn't hear him or they were ignoring him. Nuwan looked around but everybody seemed incredibly busy and important. Was he supposed to just take the books and leave? Should he ask someone first? He went and picked up the books, and the three adults still didn't seem to notice him. He stood there for a moment, books in hand, hoping that someone would speak to him. But nobody did so he went round the counter, seeing if he could spot any sign of the key.

"Right, is everything ready then?" Mrs Weerasinghe suddenly strode up to the counter, arms swinging by her sides. Instinctively, Nuwan stepped back into the shadows. Mrs Weerasinghe's face was hard and angry, with deep lines all down it.

A few officials gathered around and one brought out a silver box. She opened the lid while Mrs Weerasinghe laid a thick pouch on the counter. Reaching inside, she carefully took out an old metal key. It was large and dark with age, with three decorative loops spiralling round the top. Everyone leaned in closer and seemed to hold their breath as Mrs Weerasinghe gently laid the key into the velvet-lined interior of the box.

Luckily for Nuwan, everyone's eyes were on the key so he could creep forward unnoticed and have a good look. The woman with the silver box then handed it to a man standing behind her. Nuwan recognised him as the chief of their town.

The people in front of Nuwan began to disperse so he stepped back into the shadows again quickly. There was a little alcove, barely big enough for a person, into which he pressed himself. The alcove smelled of nelli and sandalwood. Nuwan rearranged the stack of books more securely in his arms and peeped out. All the staff had moved to the entrance of the building. It must be time for the parade to leave.

Well, that was something! He couldn't wait to go and tell Sani and Chathura.

As Nuwan was about to leave the alcove, something caught his eye. It was a book wedged tightly in a space between wooden panels. Nuwan balanced his books on one arm and pulled it out carefully.

It was a volume of poetry. There was a sketch of flowers dropping down from a branch and a title in looping lettering. He didn't understand why it had been put there – maybe someone had forgotten it. He headed towards the counter and was about to leave it when he changed his mind.

The monk probably liked poetry too. And it would be something for Nuwan to read on the long journey to the King's City. He added the book to his stack and turned to leave.

"Who are you?" A woman was staring at him with concern in her eyes. She was still behind the counter even though everyone else had gone outside. "What were you doing over there?"

"Oh … just, um." Nuwan tried to think of something but his mind went blank. Eventually he stammered, "I-I was j-just collecting some books for a delivery." Then he hurried off before she could say anything else.

A great burst of music reached him when he got to the steps. The elephants were in a line now, smallest at the front and biggest at the back. The Queen's elephant had a silver cage-like object on his back. Music from the hewisi band floated around, giving the whole place a carnival atmosphere as drummers strutted and beat in time. The drumbeat grew faster and louder and Nuwan hurried closer to see what was going on.

The chief held the silver box, with the library staff standing in a line behind him. Nuwan could just about make out the red interior and caught a tiny

glimpse of the Key of Nissanka nestled inside. He felt thrilled that he'd seen it close up. The chief handed the box over to an official of the Queen. The official looked at it and nodded, before closing the box. As the music swelled, the Queen's elephant knelt down and the official placed the box in the cage on its back and locked it.

The crowd cheered. The key had been handed over and was on its way to the palace. The crowd of onlookers followed in delight as the elephants started walking away.

Nuwan stood on the lawn and watched as the crowd disappeared into the distance, following the procession, and the music faded away.

Sani or Chathura weren't anywhere in sight, but he didn't mind. He'd go and see them later and tell them all about what had happened!

Nuwan smiled in anticipation. Now he had a delivery to make. And finally he would get to prove himself. But as he made his way home, the strangest feeling came over him. The books in his arms felt heavier and heavier, as if he was carrying something terrible away with him.