

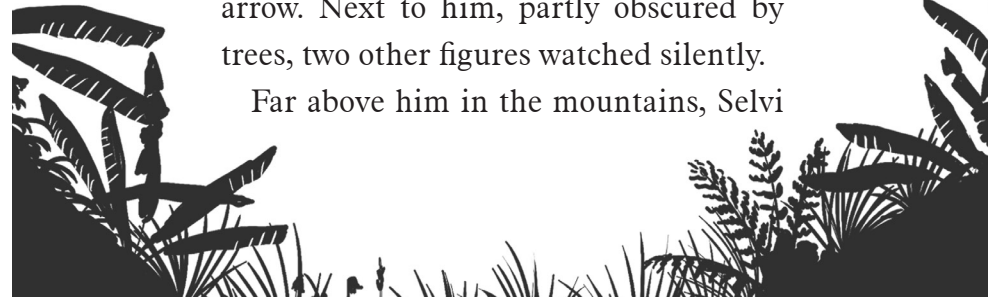


Chapter One

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!