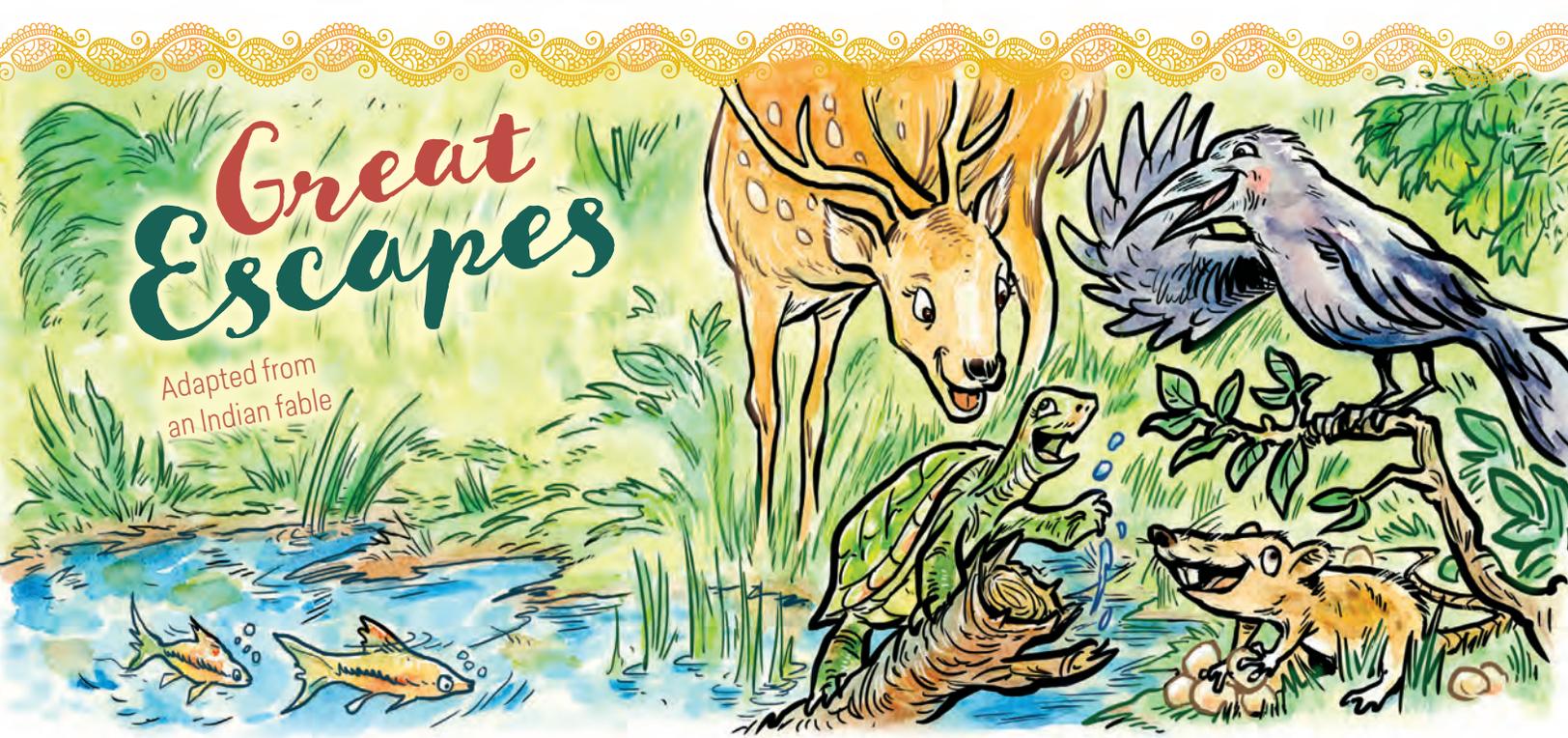


Great Escapes

Adapted from
an Indian fable



In the Himalaya mountains of India, four friends gathered along a river in the shade of the pines—Crow, Rat, Turtle, and Deer. On hot afternoons, they rested, drank the cool water, and told stories.

One day, Crow, Rat, and Turtle were waiting for Deer.

“What do you call a mountain who can tell the best jokes?” asked Turtle. “Hill-arious!”

The friends laughed. But time passed, with no Deer.

“I hope Deer isn’t in trouble,” Turtle said.

Rat gobbled a zunna berry. “He’s usually here by now.”

“I’ll look for him,” said Crow. She flew off to scan the forest with her sharp eyesight.

Soon she was back, cawing with fright. “Monkey said Deer is caught in a hunter’s net in the valley!”

“Oh, no! How can we rescue him?” cried Turtle.

Rat tapped his strong front teeth. “I’ll chew through the net. But we have to get to him in time.”

“I’ll take you,” said Crow. “Climb on my back.”

Rat held tight to Crow’s feathers. “We’ll be back with Deer in a jiffy,” he called to Turtle.

Crow circled high above the trees, searching.

“This is terrible. What if we’re too late?” said Rat.

“We’ll find him,” Crow said.

“Go lower. Maybe I can smell him.” Rat sniffed. Soon he said, “Fly over there—to the south.”

Crow followed his directions, trusting Rat’s keen nose.

“Go that way.” Rat shouted, pointing. “Now over there.”

“Look—there he is!” Rat cried.

When they reached him, Deer said, “Watch out! There are two hunters after me—Manav and Arman.”

Rat started chewing frantically on the net.

“I was running from one,” Deer said, “but the other caught me in this net. Hurry, they’ll be back soon.”

Rat chewed faster. Finally Deer squeezed out. “How can I ever thank you, friends?” he exclaimed.

Just then, they heard rustling nearby. “It’s the hunters!” said Deer, trembling. “Run!”

Then Turtle appeared.

“Turtle, what are you doing here?” asked Crow.

Though tired from the journey, Turtle smiled at Deer. “I can’t rest while you’re in danger. I’m glad you’re free.”

Deer nudged Turtle affectionately with his nose. “You’re such a good friend. But you’d better get back before the hunters come. I can run, and Rat can hide, and Crow can fly away, but you won’t be safe.”

“I’ll see you back at the river,” Turtle agreed.

But before they were out of the clearing, Manav crashed through the woods, muttering angrily, “That fool, Arman, left the deer alone!”

At the sound of the hunter’s thundering voice, Crow shot upward. Rat dove into a pile of leaves, and Deer dashed through the trees. Only Turtle was left.

Manav grabbed what was left of the empty net and shook it in disgust. “Argghhh!”

He spotted Turtle. “Hmmm, what’s this? You’re no deer, but you’re better than nothing. Turtle soup for me tonight. None for Arman—he lost the deer.”

He seized Turtle and stuffed her into his sack. Then he pulled the string tight and marched off.

Crow, Deer, and Rat peered into the clearing. Deer said, “We have to save Turtle.”

Crow said, “If we get the sack away from the hunter, Rat can gnaw the string.”

“But how do we get the sack?” asked Rat.

Deer said, “I can distract him. Maybe he’ll let go of Turtle to run after me.”

“That’s risky,” said Crow.

“I don’t mind,” said Deer. “Turtle only left the river because she was worried about *me*.”

Rat squinted through the trees. “But he’s long gone.”

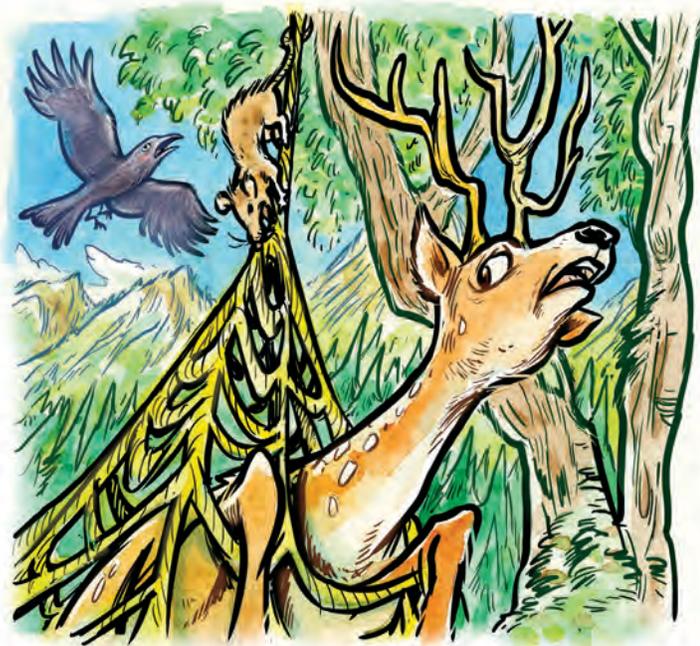
“I’ll find him,” said Crow. She soared upward and soon spotted Manav.

“Just go north through these trees,” she said.

Deer ran off, with Rat scampering behind him. Crow soared above, watching for Arman.

Deer came up behind Manav, and the hunter spun around. “Ah, you’re back. I’ll get you this time!”

Manav dropped the sack with Turtle inside. Deer scurried away. Manav chased him, panting with effort.



Rat gnawed the string that tied the sack, and Turtle climbed out. “Thank you for saving me!” she cried.

Deer lured Manav far away, until the hunter could no longer run. Then Deer dashed back to his friends.

Angrier than ever, Manav trudged back to get his sack. “Stupid deer. Now where did I leave that turtle?”

He spotted the sack and snatched it up—but it was empty. He stomped his feet, yelling, “Nooo!”

Arman rushed up to him. “Manav, I heard you yell. Did you find the deer?”

Manav sputtered, “I found it—lost it—found a turtle—lost that, too. Arggh, worst hunting ever! Why did you leave the deer? I told you to stay with it.”

Arman held up his full sack. “I found us some fruit. How did we lose the deer? It was wrapped up tight.”

“It—it escaped—somehow.” Manav looked over his shoulder. “Maybe someone is playing tricks on us.”

Arman chuckled. “Or maybe the animals are smarter than we thought.” He reached into his sack and held out a pear. “Here. At least the fruit can’t run away.”

As Manav bit into the juicy pear, he remembered how he had planned to hide Turtle from his friend. “Thank you for sharing,” he said.

Later, Crow, Rat, Turtle, and Deer laughed, remembering Manav’s face when he found the empty sack.

“Wow, we had two great escapes today,” sighed Rat. “How about tomorrow, we just go swimming?”

“It warms my shell to know that you risked your lives to help me,” said Turtle.

“Of course we did,” said Deer, taking a drink from the river. “True friends always save the day.”