



## Chapter Four

**O**ver the noise of the shouts and the struggle there came a sound like a mighty trumpet, and everyone fell still in fear. Chulak was frightened as well, though he knew what it was; for when Hamlet trumpeted, it meant he had nearly lost his temper.

But before anyone could move, the Goddess herself spoke. Her voice was soft and low, like the murmur of waves on a beach at night.

‘What is the cause of all this commotion? Stop fighting at once. It is good of you to

protect me from embarrassment, High Priest, but I should like to hear from this young man, and to see his friend the elephant. Come down to the water, both of you.'

Chulak looked at Hamlet, and saw that the great beast was embarrassed as well. Hamlet stepped through the crowd, being very careful not to tread on any toes, and knelt down next to Chulak on the sand. The slogans daubed on him were very clear in the moonlight. The Goddess read them, and asked Hamlet to turn around and show his other side.

'“Eat at Rambashi's Jungle Grill” ...  
“Chang loves Lotus Blossom” ...'

'I thought I'd washed that one off,'  
Chulak said.

'I think it's charming,' said the Goddess.  
'But you mustn't do it any more. Your friend is too wise and noble to be written on, and

if he could speak I'm sure you'd realize that yourself.'

And she looked at Chulak in such a way that he knew exactly what she meant, and felt ashamed.

'However,' she went on, 'I can see that your request is not a frivolous one. Tell me what you seek.'

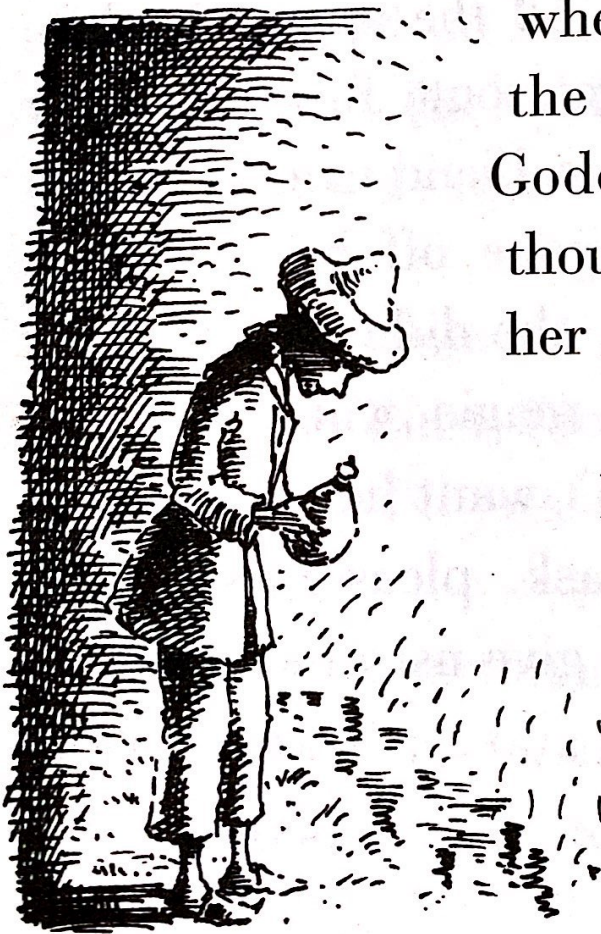
'We've got a friend,' Chulak said eagerly, 'and she wants to be a Firework-Maker, you see. And she's done all the apprenticeship, but she wants to get some Royal Sulphur from Razvani the Fire-Fiend so as to qualify properly. So she's gone off by herself to Mount Merapi, only she didn't know about getting a flask of magic water for protection, and we don't want her to get hurt, so we've come to ask, please, as a great favour, if you could give us some, and then we'll chase after her and see if we can catch her up.'

The Goddess nodded. 'Your friend has good friends,' she said. 'But Mount Merapi is far away, and the journey is dangerous. You had better set off at once. And take great care!'

And as if she had known what they wanted all the time, she held out a little gourd fastened with a silver clasp. Chulak took it and bowed again, and the orchestra began to play and the dancers to dance, and

when people looked at the lake again the Goddess was gone, though no-one had seen her vanish.

Before they left, Chulak washed Hamlet clean in the lake. Some of the



village children helped, but they didn't help for long, because soon there was something else for them to see: a great cloud of smoke and flames coming from the Jungle Grill.

'Oh dear, oh dear,' said Chulak, 'There goes Uncle Rambashi's latest plan, Hamlet. I could tell that cook was having trouble. I hope he's all right.'

'They're all safe,' said Hamlet. 'And the children are enjoying the fire.'

Squeals of delight and excitement were coming from the crowd as the roof fell in with a shower of sparks. Buckets of water were being passed from the lake, and Chulak could hear Rambashi saying, 'What a spectacle! What a splendid sight! D'you know, my boys, that give me my best idea yet. All we have to do—'

'We haven't even had our meal!' cried one of the waiters.

'Time to go, Hamlet,' said Chulak, and

they set off along the lakeshore towards the mountains in the distance.

By this time, Lila had come to the end of the jungle. Climbing all the time, she moved on and on, as the trees thinned out and the path became a mere track and then vanished altogether. All the jungle sounds, the clicking and buzzing of the insects, the cries of the birds and monkeys, the drip of water off the leaves, the croaking of the little frogs, were behind her now. When she had heard them she had enjoyed their company, but now there was nothing except the sound of her foot on the path and the occasional rumble from the mountain, which was so deep that she felt it through her feet as much as she heard it through her ears.

When night fell she lay down on the stony

ground beside a rock and wrapped herself in her one blanket. The full moon shone right in her face and kept her awake, and she couldn't get comfortable because of the stones on the ground. Finally she sat up in annoyance.

But there was no-one to share her annoyance with. She'd never felt so lonely.

'I wonder . . . ' she began to say, but shook her head. She hadn't come on this journey in order to wonder how things were at home. It was the way things were at home that had made her come on the journey, after all.

'Well, if I can't sleep, I might as well keep walking,' she said to herself.

She folded her blanket away, and re-tied her sarong and tightened her sandals, and set off again.

The ground became steeper and steeper.

Soon she could no longer see the top of Mount Merapi, so she knew she must be climbing the side of it. There were no plants at all here, not even shrubs or grass: just bare rock and loose stones. And the ground was warm.

‘I’m close,’ she said to herself. ‘It can’t be far now—’

But as she said that, she set her foot on a stone and it rolled under her weight and she fell, and a dozen other rocks rolled down with her.

All the breath was knocked out of her, and she had none left to cry out with as the rocks pummelled and battered her.

The rocks bounded on down the mountain until finally they came to rest a long way below. Lila sat up gingerly.

‘Ow,’ she said. ‘That was silly. I wasn’t looking where I was putting my feet. I must be more careful.’





She got up, and found that one of her sandals had come off, and had tumbled down the mountain with the stones. It was nowhere to be seen. Very delicately she put her naked foot down, and found the ground hot beneath it.

Well, there was nothing she could do about that; and hadn't she come seeking fire? And hadn't she burned herself time and again as an apprentice? And what did she need delicate feet for anyway?

On she climbed, higher and higher. Before long she came to a part of the slope where all the stones were loose, and where she slid back two steps for every three she took upwards. Her feet and legs were bruised and battered, and then she lost her other sandal; and she nearly cried out in despair, because there was no sign of the Grotto – just an endless slope of hot rough stones that tumbled and rolled underfoot.

And her throat was parched and her lungs were panting in the hot thin air, and she fell to her knees and clung with trembling fingers as the stones began to roll under her again. She let go her little bag of food and her blanket; they didn't matter any more; the only thing that mattered was climbing on. She dragged herself on bleeding knees up and up, until every muscle hurt, until she had no breath left in her lungs, until she thought she was going to die; and still she went on.

Then one stone bigger than the rest began to shift above her as the little stones beneath it tumbled down. It slid and rolled towards her and she had no strength to move; but at the last second it bounded over her and rolled on down the mountainside in a cloud of dust and pebbles.

Where it had been, there was a great hole as tall as a house. The moonlight shone into

it a little way, but the hole went deeper still, right into the heart of the mountain. A gust of sulphur-laden smoke came billowing out, and Lila knew she had found her goal: it was the Grotto of the Fire-Fiend.

