



Chapter Five

She pulled herself up with shaking arms, and stepped inside. The floor was baking hot and the air was hardly breathable. She walked on, deeper into the earth, deeper than the moonlight went, and heard nothing but silence, and saw nothing but dark rock.

Harsh barren walls rose to left and right; she felt them with her bleeding hands. Then the tunnel opened out into a great cavern. She had never seen anything so gloomy and empty of life, and her heart sank, because she had come all this way and there was

nothing here.

She sank to the floor.

And as if that were a signal, a little flame licked out of the rocky wall for an instant, and went out.

Then another, in a different place.

Then another.

Then the earth shook and groaned, and with a harsh grating sound the rocky wall tore itself open, and suddenly the cavern was full of light.

Lila sat up, astonished, as red fire and flame licked and crackled at the rocky roof. All of a sudden the Grotto was alive with movement, as a thousand fire-imps swarmed upwards to dash themselves against the rock and smash into a thousand more, as a wide carpet of boiling lava spread from side to side, as the clang and clash of mighty hammers and anvils rang with the rhythm of a great fire-dance.



The cavern was full of light and noise. Thousands upon thousands of little fire-spirits toiled and blazed and swung hammers, and ran to and fro with handfuls of sparks, and swarmed against the rocky wall till it melted and slid downwards like soft wax. Then the greedy creatures plunged their red hands into it and lifted up the

bubbling sulphur to their tiny mouths and ate and ate until another mass of rock slid down and smothered them.

And then into the heart of the light, and the fire and the noise leapt Razvani himself, the great Fire-Fiend, whose body was a mass of flame and whose face a mask of scorching light.

Thousands of fire-imps scattered as he landed, and even the blazing flames bowed down to him. And so did Lila.

In a voice like the roar of a forest fire, Razvani spoke.

‘By what right have you come to my Grotto?’

She swallowed hard. It was difficult to breathe, because she seemed to be taking fire into her lungs as well as air.

‘I want to be a Firework-Maker,’ she managed to say.

He laughed a great laugh.

'You? Never! and what do you want from me?'

'Royal Sulphur,' she gasped.

At that he slapped his sides and laughed even harder, and a chorus of jeers and shrieks of merriment burst from all the fire-imps.

'Royal Sulphur? Did you hear that? Oh, that's good! That's funny! Well, speak, girl: have you the Three Gifts?'

Lila could only shrug and shake her head. She could hardly speak.

'I don't know what they are,' she said.

'So what were you going to exchange for the Royal Sulphur?' he roared.

'I don't know!'

'You were going to give *nothing* in exchange?'

She had nothing to say. She bowed her head.

'Well, you've come this far,' said the Fire-

Fiend, 'and there's no going back. Now you're here you must walk in the flames, like every other Firework-Maker. I expect you've brought some magic water from my cousin the Goddess of the Lake? You've brought nothing for me, but I don't suppose you've forgotten to take care of yourself. Better drink it quickly!'

'I've got nothing!' Lila gasped. 'I didn't know about magic water or the Three Gifts – I just wanted to be a Firework-Maker! and I'll be a good one, Razvani! I invented self-igniting Crackle-Dragons and Shimmering Coins! I've learned everything my father could teach me! It's all I want – to be a Firework-Maker like him!'

But Razvani merely laughed.

'Show her the ghosts!' he cried, and clapped his blazing hands.

Instantly a crack shivered its way down the rock wall, and out of the opening came



a procession of ghosts, each attended by fire-demons. The ghosts were so pale and transparent that Lila could hardly see them, but she heard them wailing.

‘Beware! Look at me! I came without the Three Gifts!’

‘Alas! Take warning from me! I hadn’t worked at the craft and I wasn’t ready!’

‘Maiden, turn back! I was arrogant and headstrong! I didn’t seek the water from the Goddess, and I perished in the flames!’

Wailing and weeping, the ghosts passed across the lake of fire, and vanished into a crack in the opposite wall.

‘That’s what happens to those who don’t come prepared!’ said Razvani. ‘But now you must submit yourself as they did. Walk into my flames, Lila! You have come for the Royal Sulphur – receive it from my hands!’

And he laughed louder, and spun in a rapid dance, stamping his feet in a wide circle and causing a ring of fire to blaze up around him. Through the lashing red and yellow and orange, his face seemed to waver and flicker, but his voice rang out clearly

over the roar and crackle:

‘You want to be a Firework-Maker? Walk into my flames! Your father did in his time, and so did every artist in fire. This is what you’ve come for! Why are you waiting?’

She was terribly afraid. But she knew that she must do it; she would rather be a ghost than go back empty-handed and fail at the one thing she had ever wanted.

So she took one step forward, and then another, and her poor feet burned and blistered so that she cried out loud. Then she took another step, and when she knew she could bear it no longer she heard a great sound behind her, like a mighty trumpet. And through the blaze a voice was shouting:

‘Lila! The water! Take it, take it!’



And there was a small figure beside her, thrusting something into her hands: a gourd! A drinking gourd with a clasp that she tore off, before lifting it to her parched lips and drinking, drinking, drinking deep.

All at once a marvellous coolness spread through her body and down to the tips of her toes. The pain vanished and the dryness in her throat and lungs was soothed and moistened. At the entrance to the cave behind her she could see Chulak, shrinking back and covering his face from the heat; and she could see Hamlet fanning him with his ears.

But she was in the heart of the fire, facing Razvani once again, and the flames were harmless now. They played like fountains of light; they rushed up her legs and arms and across her face like darting birds and she felt light and joyful as if she were a flame herself, dancing with pure energy and joy.

‘So you have done it!’ Razvani said to her.
‘Welcome to the flames, Lila.’

‘And . . . the Royal Sulphur?’ she said.
‘Ah, when you reach the heart of the fire,
all your illusions vanish. Didn’t your father
tell you that?’

‘Illusions? I don’t understand!’
‘The Royal Sulphur doesn’t exist, Lila.
There is no such thing!’

‘Then . . . how can I be a Firework-
Maker? I thought every Firework-Maker
needed some Royal Sulphur to become a
true artist!’

‘Illusions, Lila. Fire burns away all our
illusions. The world itself is all illusion.
Everything that exists flickers like a flame
for a moment, and then vanishes. The only
thing that lasts is change itself. There is no
Royal Sulphur. An illusion . . . Everything
outside the fire is illusion!’

‘But the Three Gifts – I don’t understand!’

What are the Three Gifts, Razvani?’

‘Whatever they are, you must have brought them to me,’ he said.

And that was the last thing she heard from him, for as he said that he dwindled away, and the lake of fire darkened and became red rock, and then just rock, and all the myriad fire-imps became little feeble sparks that floated aimlessly for a second, and sank, and went out at once.

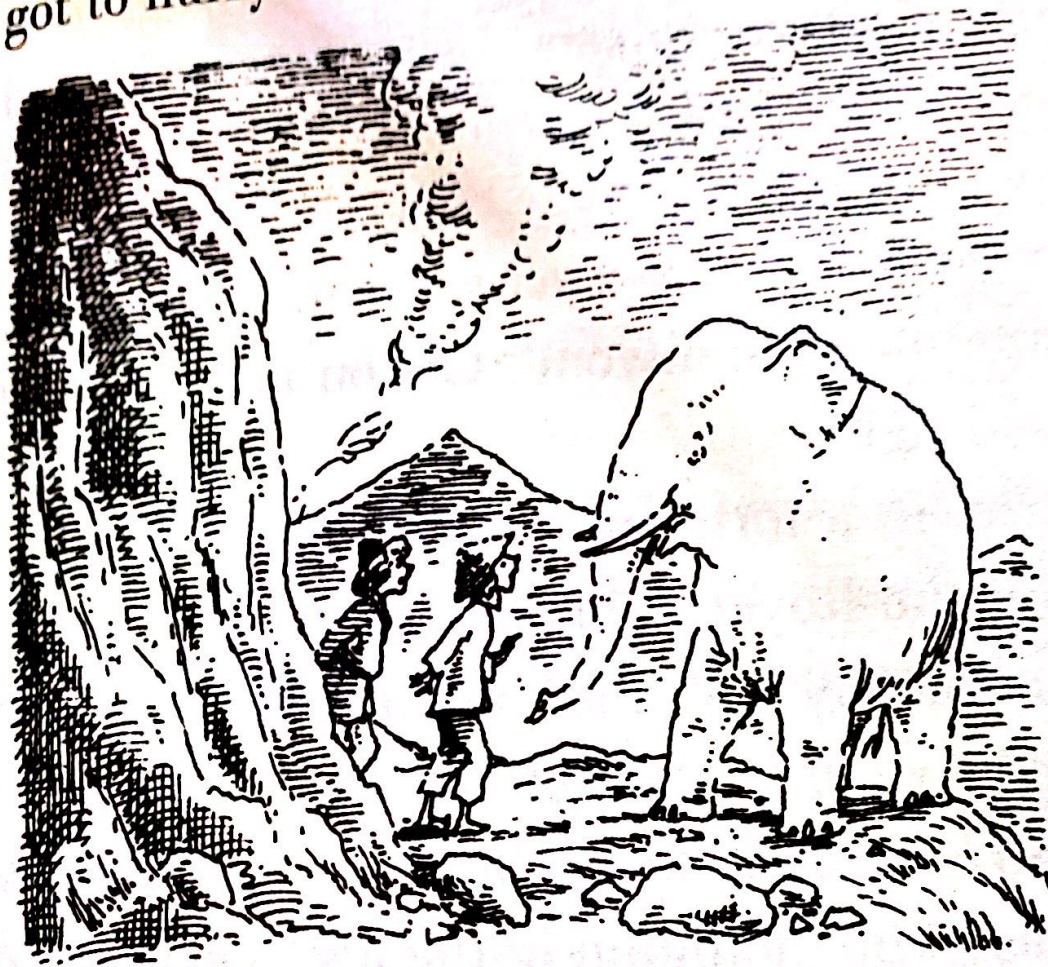
The grotto was bare again.

Lila turned away from where the fire had been. She was dazed and disappointed, calm and curious, pleased and puzzled; in fact she didn’t know what she felt or who she was, for a moment. But then she saw Chulak and ran to him.

‘Chulak, you saved my life! And you’re hurt – you’re burned – let me help you!’

He was shaking his head and tugging at her hand.

‘Don’t waste any time,’ he said. ‘We’ve got to hurry. Tell her as we go, Hamlet!’



They stumbled out of the grotto into the pale light of dawn, and Hamlet said:

‘I’m sorry, Lila. I heard the birds talking at the foot of the mountain, and they said “Look! The White Elephant! That’s the very one who escaped from the city!” And I asked the bird what he knew, and he said

“The Firework-Maker helped you to escape. Someone saw and told the King, and now Lalchand has been arrested, and he’s going to be executed!” Then he flew away to tell the other birds. Lila, we’ve got to go back as fast as we can. Don’t waste time blaming anyone! Get on my back and hold tight.’

So, in a torment of fear that put Razvani and the Royal Sulphur and the Three Gifts completely out of her mind, Lila clambered up next to Chulak on the Elephant’s back, and held on tight as Hamlet began to slither down the mountain in the light of dawn.