

The Firework-Maker's Daughter Chapter 6

How they did it Lila never knew – they stopped only for Hamlet to drink deeply from the river while Lila and Chulak snatched some fruit from the trees overhanging the bank – but after hours and hours of pounding and trudging and half-running on blistered feet, they came to the outskirts of the city. The sun was setting.

Of course, Hamlet attracted a lot of attention as soon as he was seen, because everyone knew that the white elephant had escaped. Soon they were surrounded by a curious crowd, all trying to touch Hamlet for luck, and before they'd got anywhere near the palace, they could move no further. Lila was nearly weeping with fear and impatience.

'Have they killed my father yet?' is Lalchand still alive?' she asked, but no one knew.

'Move out of the way!' Chulak shouted. 'Clear a space there! Make room!'

But they could only move forwards an inch at a time. Chulak could feel Hamlet getting angry, and he feared he wouldn't be able to control him. He stroked the elephant's trunk to try and keep him calm. Then they heard shouts and the clash of swords from somewhere ahead, and the crowd parted at once. Word had reached the palace and the king had sent his special and particular bodyguard to escort Hamlet back to his royal home.

'About time too!' said Chulak to the general in charge. 'Come on, we're in a hurry. Clear the streets and stand aside.'

So the three of them, burnt and blistered and dusty and exhausted, were escorted into the palace by the splendidly uniformed bodyguard, who tried to look as if they'd found Hamlet all by themselves. Poor Lila's heart was beating like a bird caught in a net.

'Prostrate yourselves!' said the special and particular general. 'Grovel! Faces to the ground! Especially yours, boy.'

They knelt on the stones of the courtyard in the light of flaming torches, and the special and particular guard lined up to present arms as the king came in.

His majesty stood in front of them. Lila could see his golden sandals, and then her anxiety got too much for her, and she knelt up and said in anguish, 'Please, your majesty – my father Lalchand – you haven't- he isn't- is he still alive?'

The king looked down sternly. 'He will die tomorrow morning,' he said. 'There is only one penalty for what he has done.' 'Oh, please! Please spare his life! It was my fault, not his at all! I ran away without telling him and –'

'Enough,' said the king, and he was so frightening that she stopped, just like that. Then he turned to Chulak.

'Who are you?' he said.

Chulak got up at once, but before he could begin to speak, a special and particular guard forced him down again.

'I'm Chulak, your majesty,' he said. 'Can I look up? It's not easy to speak with a foot on my neck.'

The king nodded, and the guard stood back. Chulak knelt up beside Lila and said:

'That's better. You see, your majesty, I'm the elephant's special and particular groom, in a manner of speaking. He's a delicate beast, and if he's handled wrong there's no end of trouble. And as soon as I found out he'd escaped I set off at once, your majesty. I swam across the river and I climbed mountains and fought my way through the jungle and –'

Suddenly all the breath was knocked from Chulak's body and he sprawled on the ground again.

Something soft had knocked him in the middle of the back, and he knew it was Hamlet's trunk.

Hamlet had never done that to him before, and he rolled over in surprise to see the elephant giving him a special and particular look, and then he realized what he must do.

He struggled up again and faced the king.

'Your majesty, the elephant has just made a request. He and I have got this unusual way of communicating, you see. He is asking for an audience alone with your majesty.'

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Even the special and particular general could hardly restrain a snigger at the idea of an animal asking to speak to the king, but he changed it into a cough when the king glared at him.

'Alone?' the king said to Chulak.

'Yes, your majesty.'

'The white elephant is a rare and wondrous beast,' the king said. 'For his sake I shall grant his request. And if it turns out that you are playing a joke on me, you may be certain that tomorrow morning you will have very little to laugh about. General, take these two outside and leave me alone with the elephant.'

The guards hauled Lila and Chulak out of the courtyard and into the kitchen compound where the smell of grilling meat and spices reminded them both that they hadn't eaten for twenty four hours.

'Don't worry,' said Chulak. 'Hamlet will explain everything.'

'Is he going to talk to the king, then? I thought his talking was a great secret!'

'These are special and particular circumstances. Oh, that rice! Oh, that plum sauce! Oh, the smell of those spices!'

And even Lila's fear couldn't prevent her mouth from watering, she was so hungry. And then they waited. Minutes went by, and more minutes, and poor Lila was so stiff and tired she nearly fell asleep standing up, as worried as she was. But finally there was a stir of movement by the door.

'Prisoners!' barked the general. 'Fall in and follow me!'

Two lines of guardsmen all stamping proudly, with Chulak and Lila between them followed the general back to the courtyard.

When they had bowed properly the king said, 'Firstly, as for you, Chulak, I am suspending my judgement. I have it on good authority that you have never sought to harm the elephant, but I am not convinced that you are the best person to look after him. You are dismissed.'

Chulak swallowed hard, and looked at Hamlet.

Then the king turned to Lila and said, 'I have considered your case very carefully. It is highly unusual, and this is my decision. I shall spare the life of Lalchand the firework maker, but only on one condition. Next week, as the whole city knows, we celebrate the festival of the New Year, and I have invited the greatest artists in fireworks form all over the world to contribute to a display.

'Now here is my plan: I shall announce a competition for the final night of the festival. A firework display will be put on by each of my invited artists, and Lalchand and Lila will take part as well. The prize of a golden cup will be awarded to the artist whose display receives the longest applause. That is all that the other competitors will know.

'But you and Lalchand will know something else as well. If you display wins, Lalchand will receive the prize and go free; but if you lost the competition, he loses his life too.

'That is my decision, and there will be no appeal. You have a week to save your father's life, Lila.

'Guards, see them out, and release Lalchand the firework maker into the care of his daughter.'

And Lila barely had time to think before she found herself at a little side door of the palace, where a servant held up a flickering torch for her to wait by. But she didn't have to wait long; from behind a door came the sound of a chain falling to the ground, and then the door opened and there was Lalchand.

Neither of them could speak, but they hugged each other so tightly that they could barely breathe.

When they'd had enough, they realized how hungry they were, and hurried home.

'We'll get some fried prawns from the stall in the alley, and eat them as we work,' said Lalchand.

'Have they told you what the king decided?' Lila asked.

'Yes. But I'm not worried. We'll have to work as we've never worked before, but we can do it...'

And Lila forgot all about the royal sulphur and the three gifts. There was no time to wonder about them now. She hurried into the workshop with some dishes of rice and prawns and fried vegetables, and they scooped them up absent-mindedly as they worked.

'Father,' said Lila. 'I've got an idea. Supposing...'

She took a stick of charcoal from the bench and drew some quick sketches. Lalchand's eyes lit up.

'Aha! But begin slowly. Build up to it.'

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'And on the way back from Mount Merapi,' she said, 'when we stopped by the river, I saw how some vines had twisted around each other, and I thought of a way of delaying the fuses. Making them burn at different rates.'

'Impossible!'

'It isn't. Look, I'll show you...'

And so they set to work.