

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.



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-

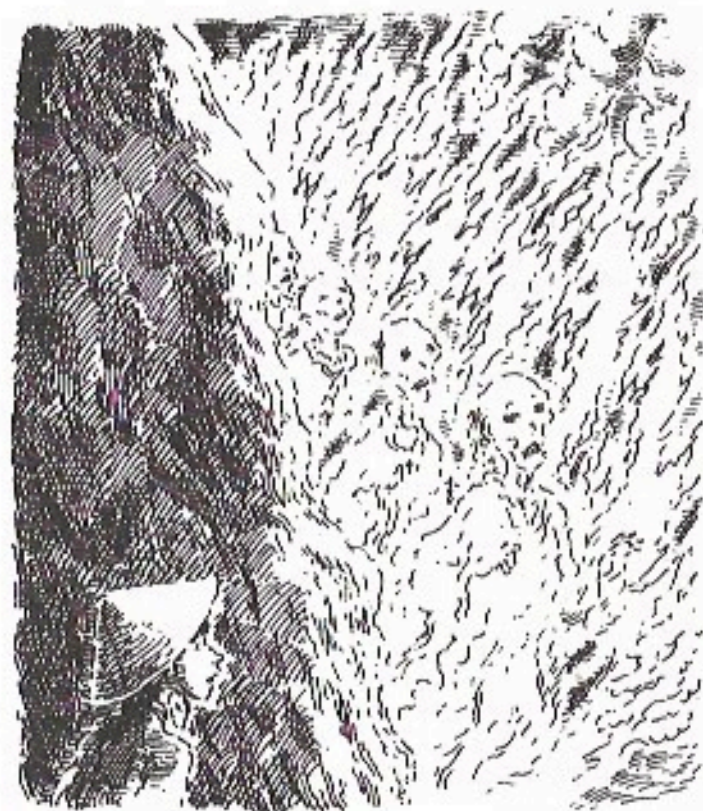
Fiend, 'and there's no going back. Now you're here you must walk in the flames, like every other Firework-Maker. I expect you've brought some magic water from my cousin the Goddess of the Lake? You've brought nothing for me, but I don't suppose you've forgotten to take care of yourself. Better drink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