

LUCY and DEE

THE SILK ROAD



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— THE SILK ROAD —



Kirsten Marion



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For my parents





CHAPTER ONE



An explosion shattered the morning air, startling Lucy Banks so she made a mess of the big red X she was putting on the Yangtze River. She glared at it. The only wall space she had left for her map of China was above her headboard. The rest of the walls were thickly plastered with brightly colored maps liberally covered with red Xs and blue arrows marking the spots where Lucy planned to travel.

She capped her marker and jumped down from her bed to investigate. The open window was only a few steps away, and a moment later, leaning out precariously, she saw what had caused the commotion.

Pink smoke billowed from the windows atop the tower jutting up from the old mansion at the end of the street. Dee was experimenting again, and it looked like this one had “not gone according to plan,” as he would say.

She wanted to make sure he was okay, even though he’d escaped any harm so far and she didn’t expect this time to be any different, and to help him with the inevitable cleanup. But there were a few things she had to do before she could safely escape the house.

Lucy headed for her bedroom door. On the way, she kicked two T-shirts, a pair of shorts, and one sandal under the bed and pulled the duvet up over a messy sheet. She picked up three issues of *National Geographic* and tried to squeeze them into her bookcase alongside the previous five years of issues. Giving up, she put them on top, underneath her grandfather’s globe. It was one of her most-prized possessions, with its countries all different colors that blurred together when

she gave it a twirl. She longed to visit every country—at least she could dream about the travel adventures she would have some day. Although, it was annoying that so many names and borders had changed since her grandfather was a young man.

She hummed a little tune to herself. Next year at school she would start taking a proper geography class.

Her glance around the room fell on the diorama of a strange and exotic country, the product of her vivid imagination. She had spent the spring building it on an old card table wedged into the corner between the foot of her bed and the wall. It was her pride and joy, but it did seem to collect dust and cat hair. She pulled one of the T-shirts out from under the bed. She used it to give the three-dimensional model a quick flick and called it dusting.

Lucy looked back at the room from the doorway and nodded to herself. Now she could say that she had tidied her room.

Clattering down the stairs, she hit the bottom step with a thump. To her right, the TV in the family room blared the football game.

“Where are you off to, pet?” her father called over the ruckus of a crowd gone wild over a goal.

Lucy crossed the hall. Her dad was in his customary Saturday afternoon position, slouching in his cracked leather armchair, his stockinged feet on the coffee table. His big toe poked out of a hole in his left sock and a large bowl of chips rested on his tummy. Lucy’s cat, Peebles, nestled into what was left of his lap.

Lucy sighed as she looked around the shabby room. There wouldn’t be any trips to new places any time soon.

“I’m off to see Dee, Dad.” He clearly hadn’t heard the explosion over the roar of the television so there was no point in mentioning it.

Lucy’s mother came out of the kitchen. “You need to clean up your room before you go out.”

Parents were so totally predictable. Lucy rolled her eyes and then, catching her mother’s stern gaze, said, “I’ve already done it.”

She had her hand on the doorknob and was almost out the front door when her mother said, “Stop right there, missy, the laundry needs to be hung on the line. The dryer is on the blink again.”

Lucy huffed a heavy sigh. The dryer had been on the blink since, like, 2013. “Why?” she moaned. “That’s such a drag. Didn’t you hear that explosion? There was pink smoke, Mom.”

“I did.” Her mother’s mouth set in a thin line. “I suppose that boy is up to his silly experiments again.”

It drove Lucy crazy that her mother refused to call Dee by his name. He’d moved in with his aunt four years ago, and ever since, her mom had only ever called him “that boy.” But Lucy didn’t care what her mom thought. She and Dee had been best friends ever since the first day Dee was in her class. Lucy had flubbed a science experiment spectacularly and Dee stayed to help her clean up the mess so she wouldn’t get a detention.

“I have to go and see if Dee needs some help.” Lucy made sure she put some extra emphasis on Dee’s name. “And find out what this latest excitement is all about.”

“I’ll give you plenty of excitement if you don’t do as your mother asked right this minute,” her father barked from the doorway of the family room.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m going.” Lucy’s shoulders slumped as she followed the jagged crack in the linoleum that snaked toward the dim corner of the kitchen where the washer and dryer lurked. The faint smell of mildew assailed her nostrils as she pried open the door to the washing machine.

“Ugh,” she groaned, wrinkling her nose as she pulled out a wad of soggy clothes. Why couldn’t her parents get their act together and get the dryer fixed? She loved them, at least she was pretty sure she did, but there were times, like right now, when she wished she’d drawn a better set of parents—one where at least one of them could hold down a job. She would do pretty much anything to live in a nice house where everything worked.

Resentment filled her chest as she pegged out the clothes as quickly as she could. Her parents never even tried to make things any better. They just sailed along, telling each other stories about how the next job would be the one to make them all rich. All the while their house quietly collapsed around them.

At least it wasn't a big load of washing today, and she soon had everything on the line and snapping in a fresh breeze. But doing laundry was hardly the adventure that she craved. She made her escape, grabbing a chocolate bar from her mother's not-so-secret stash at the back of a kitchen drawer, before she was given another dreary chore.

As she walked down the street peeling the wrapper off the chocolate, Lucy heard another blast, and this time, purple smoke billowed from the tower windows. "Oh man," she murmured, "What is it this time?" She finished the chocolate bar and broke into a sprint.

Gravel crunched under the soles of her sneakers as Lucy rushed up the circular driveway to the old mansion. She loved this house. She knew that Dee often had to go home to an empty house because his Aunt Delia was an emergency room physician, but Lucy didn't see that as necessarily a bad thing. She wished that sometimes she could do the same. It would be lovely to have a house to herself, especially a house like this. The flower beds were mounded with early summer flowers and lined with pretty stones. The smell of fresh earth rose around her. In the distance, coming from behind the mansion, she could hear a power mower.

She bounded up the three freshly painted steps to the porch and approached the double front doors of the mansion. They were bracketed with yellowing marble columns on either side supporting the roof above the wide veranda. A bird's nest perched on the ledge that ran above the front doors.

She had to use both hands to lift the brass door knocker in the shape of a lion's head. When she dropped it back against the wood, a boom sounded behind the door followed shortly by the click of high heels on a hard surface. The door slowly swung open to reveal a tall, slim woman wearing a slightly harassed expression. Her hair was swept up in a messy bun that released strands of hair around her face, and there was a smudge of what looked like cocoa powder on her left cheek. Warm baking smells wafted toward Lucy, and she inhaled appreciatively.

"Hi, Aunt Delia." Lucy loved Aunt Delia. Dee's aunt had never

seemed the least bit fazed that Lucy lived in the most ramshackle house on the street.

Delia Ringrose smiled as she wiped her hands on the apron covering her black skirt and pretty blouse and pushed her wire-rimmed glasses up to the bridge of her nose. “Come on in, Lucy,” she said as she swung the door wide. She opened her arms wide and Lucy stepped into the hug, delighting in the softness and warmth of the embrace, and the faint scent of Aunt Delia’s delicate perfume.

“Dee’s in his tower,” said Aunt Delia as she released Lucy. “But I’m sure you’ve already figured that out. He’s fine—I went and checked—but he’s made another unholy mess.”

“Well, I’m here to help.” Lucy smiled as she scooted past the older woman. Lucy stepped into a broad foyer with dark wood paneling and a diamond pattern of white and black marble tiles on the floor. A sparkly chandelier swinging gently overhead scattered prisms of light across the walls and floor.

“I’m not sure what experiment ‘has not gone according to plan’ today, but can you go up and take it from here? I have something in the oven . . .” Her voice trailed off and she looked anxiously back down the hall toward the kitchen. A faint smell of a cake scorching drifted toward them. “Hopefully, Dee’s already started cleaning up,” Aunt Delia said. “And there will be a piece of chocolate cake ready for you when you’re done.”

“Sure . . . and great!” said Lucy. There was no such thing as too much chocolate. She paused, one hand on the banister. “Are we celebrating something?”

Aunt Delia nodded. “It’s Litha, the summer solstice.”

“What’s so special about that?” Lucy wondered.

“According to my Irish grandmother, the summer solstice was one of the three Spirit Nights of the year,” Aunt Delia said, “the other two being Beltane and Samhain. It’s when the veil between the worlds appears exceptionally thin.” She turned and rushed back down the hallway toward the kitchen. “It’s also one of the eight Sabbats, according to the Pagans.”

“Cool,” said Lucy as she mounted the main staircase up to the

first landing. She loved it when Aunt Delia, normally a no-nonsense doctor, got all mystical. Lucy thought the world needed more magic and mystery. She turned left, walked to the end of the hall and then up the spiral staircase that went to the tower room.

The spiral staircase was steep, and Lucy's knees began to shake from climbing. Soon she was outside a half-open door on the landing at the top of the tower. The first thing she saw was the lab bench covered in a complicated arrangement of glass containers and tubes and jars of all kinds of strange-looking ingredients. A burner, still lit, was surrounded by shards of broken beaker, and a thick wet paste dripped onto the floor. Beside the lab bench stood Dee. His back was to her and he stared out the window, his clenched fists digging into his hips.



CHAPTER TWO



She pushed the door fully open.

It creaked and Dee spun around, his white lab coat swinging open with a rattle. Curiously, the inside was lined with loops holding vials of chemical powders in jewel tones like yellow, crimson, blue, and white and some other substances in liquid form. Lucy always thought the coat was to protect against the same powders and liquids, but Dee assured her he knew what he was doing. Three small instruments and an omnipresent notebook poked out of the pockets on the outside of the coat. The black leather-bound notebook was identical to the ones he had already filled that were now lined up on the windowsill, each carefully dated.

Dee sighed with relief. “Hey, Lucy. Glad you’re here.”

“Another fine mess, Dee,” she observed as she crossed the room to a small bureau and pulled a cleaning cloth and a pair of rubber gloves from the top drawer. She wrinkled her nose as she snapped on the gloves. The room smelled of rotten eggs. The open window would sort that out soon enough.

He nodded, and his clenched fists slowly unfurled.

“What is going on up here? Your aunt said you were working on an experiment, and I heard the bangs and saw the smoke.”

Dee pushed his hand through his hair until it looked like a hedgehog sitting on his head. “I got some new equipment today.” He gestured toward a lab bench. A copper pot sat on a gas ring. In it a

thick yellow substance blurped. A tangle of glass tubing and copper rings captured the rising steam. Lucy joined him to watch the steam progress until it coalesced into a green liquid that dripped into a beaker.

“I’m working on a very important old alchemical experiment, the green lion. It promises to change lead into gold.” He pointed to a pile of rocks. Some were a silvery blue while others were a dull gray. “So I tried it.”

“Does alchemy actually work? I heard it was just what people practicing magic said they were doing, centuries ago, to avoid being tried for witchcraft.”

“Alchemy was the way early scientists described their work. It showed the early development of the experimental method. There was certainly no magic in it,” Dee said a little stiffly. “I don’t know how many times I have to tell you there is no such thing as magic.”

Lucy decided to move on. Dee could lecture on science and scientists until she was bored to sobs. “What made the smoke?” She fingered one of the cool lumps of stone.

“I’m using this”—he pointed to the green liquid—“to liquify the lead. From that, I could’ve extracted the gold. But something seems to have gone wrong.” He looked out the window again before picking up a cloth and crouching to wipe up the spilled matter.

“No kidding.” She began wiping up the splashes of Dee’s failed experiment from the work surface.

“Who’s this lady?” Lucy pointed to the statue of a head and shoulders at the end of Dee’s lab bench.

Dee looked up, saw where she was pointing, and looked horrified. “That’s no lady! That’s Sir Isaac Newton! Really, Lucy. Don’t you recognize him?” He stood up abruptly.

“Sure, I do.” Lucy took a step back from the statue, giving it a sideways look as she did so. “It was the long hair that fooled me . . .” Her voice trailed off. She knew that was a weak excuse—plenty of boys had long hair—but it was the best she could come up with to save face. “I know Sir Isaac was the scientist who invented gravity.”

“Discovered gravity!”

“Okay, discovered gravity,” Lucy repeated. “When an apple bopped him on the head.”

Dee smacked his forehead. “That old apple thing again. That’s a—what-do-you-call-it? When something is a figure of speech?” He snapped his fingers as if that would produce the word.

“A metaphor?” Lucy supplied helpfully.

“That’s it! The apple falling on his head is a metaphor for being struck by inspiration. What are they teaching in schools these days?” He cast his eyes skyward.

“Enough that I knew the word ‘metaphor’ when you didn’t,” Lucy retorted. “So, what else was so fabulous about Newton?”

“He was only the greatest scientist, the greatest genius, who ever lived.” Dee waved his hands around energetically.

“Fascinating,” Lucy said.

Dee had what Lucy privately called his Hero of the Month, a scientist from history he’d focus all his attention on for a period of time. Lucy had been trying to steer him toward some influential women in science, like the alchemist Mary the Jewess or the chemist Alice August Ball, but so far she’d had no luck. Still, she lived in hope. Dee always moved on to a new hero and surely he would pick a woman eventually. Though it looked like Sir Isaac might last longer than his past obsessions. Lucy wondered where he’d found a bust.

“He founded modern science and revolutionized the world! I want to be just like him,” Dee said.

“And we both know that I’m going to be a great explorer and world traveler, like Nellie Bly,” Lucy replied. “That’s where all the excitement is.”

“Science rules,” Dee insisted.

“You’re such a nerd.” Lucy flashed him a generous smile to take any sting out of her words.

“Yep, true fact,” he grinned back. “Hey, do you want to hear a fun fact?” Without waiting for her response, he rushed on. “It was Dr. Seuss who made up the word ‘nerd.’”

“Even more fascinating,” said Lucy as she examined a series of items on a table.

“And,” said Dee, a little louder, refusing to let the conversation move on, “Isaac Newton was working on a formula to turn lead into gold. He started with sophic mercury.”

“What’s that?” Lucy cocked an eyebrow.

“I’m not sure,” Dee admitted. “His notes said to combine one-part fiery dragon, some doves of Diana, and at least seven eagles of mercury . . . but I think those names have to be code words. They had some strange words for things in the seventeenth century.”

Lucy nodded. “So you’re not giving up on your search for your parents?”

“No.” Dee frowned. “That’s why I need gold. You know I need money to go and find them.”

Lucy nodded. Dee had been waiting for his parents to return for as long as she had known him. Both archaeologists, they had left on an important dig when he was nine. According to Dee, they were super excited. He said they had stumbled across a new and amazing place that they couldn’t wait to investigate.

“Have you found out where they went yet?”

Dee shook his head. “It’s still all very hush hush, and the foundation they were working for doesn’t seem to know—or want to tell. But I’m sure I could find them, if only I had the money.” He stooped again to continue cleaning up the mess on the floor but not before Lucy saw his lower lip wobble. “I just wish they’d send me a postcard or something.”

“I know you don’t want to think about this, but could they have had an accident . . . or something?” Lucy swiped at a few more blobs with her cloth. *Man, this stuff went everywhere.*

Dee turned on her fiercely. “Of course not, I’d know if they had.”

Lucy took a step back before asking as gently as possible, “How, Dee? How would you know?”

“I’d know.” He thumped his chest with his fist. “I’d feel it here.”

Dee was steadfast in his belief his parents were still alive, and there was nothing to prove they weren’t. Except this continued silence. But would she burst his bubble? No, she would stand by him in his quest to find them. Lucy decided to retreat to safer ground and

eyed the rocks again. "So, how much gold will you be able to extract from this piece of lead?"

"Not much," Dee admitted in a muffled voice. "Just a few flakes, in fact. That's progress but it's not nearly enough. What I really need is to discover the formula to transmute all the lead into gold."

Lucy continued cleaning and examined some of the strange and interesting objects on the lab bench for damage from the splattered liquid. There were glass cucurbits—round containers Dee used to hold the substances he was distilling from one thing into another, and there were several beak-shaped alembics used to catch the condensation from the distillation process. But one device looked new and different. She didn't remember seeing it before.

"Hey!" Dee's head appeared over the other side of the lab bench again when Lucy picked up the triangular device and turned it over in her hands.

"Don't touch that. It's an old and delicate instrument!" Dee scrambled to his feet with his hand out to reclaim the device, but Lucy hastened to the window without acknowledging him.

The big oak tree sitting squarely in the middle of the forest glowed with an eerie light as if something illuminated it from within. Her heart lifted. Could this be part of the magical nature of the summer solstice? Aunt Delia thought it was a very special day, but Dee wouldn't think it was different from any other. He'd just laugh at her if she mentioned it, so instead all she said was "Look, over there."

She pointed into the forest behind the house. "Is that tree on fire?"

"We'd better check." Dee grabbed a small fire extinguisher from under his lab bench and ran toward the door. "Come on, then! It hasn't rained in weeks. The whole forest could go up in flames."

They took the stairs two at a time and bolted through the hallway, the kitchen, and finally the back door, which slammed behind them. Brambles caught at Lucy's legs as they ran through the underbrush. She almost ran into Dee's back when he stopped without warning. "That's no fire, Lucy. Look!" His voice cracked with excitement as he pointed to the middle branch of the tree.

On it perched a red bird, its head cocked as it gazed down at the children. Flames encased the creature but didn't seem to be burning either the bird or the tree.

"Wow, that's bigger than a wandering albatross," Dee breathed.

"That's all you get from a bird that's totally on fire but not on fire?" Lucy stood on tiptoe to examine it more closely. "This isn't another one of your experiments, is it Dee?" she craned her neck to look up into the golden eyes of the creature. They were the most intelligent she had ever seen in an animal.

Dee shook his head and, holding his finger to his lips, motioned to her to walk forward. They were only a few feet away when the bird spread its wings and swooped.

"Did you see that?" Dee turned to Lucy. The bird had disappeared into a rock under the tree. "I wonder where it went. And how ..."

They looked on all sides of the boulder, which stood as high as Lucy.

"Shh," Lucy said. "It sounds like music and it's coming from ... here." She put her ear to the rock. "Can you hear it?"

"Music." Dee agreed, his ear pressed to the rock. "Sounds like my woodwind class."

"Why would there be woodwinds playing inside a boulder?"

"There has to be someone behind this lump of rock." Dee leaned his shoulder against it. "Or something," he added cheerfully. He put his shoulder to the stone and started to push. "Come on, if you give it a good shove too, then maybe we can move it."

Lucy shoved until she thought her eyes were going to pop. Gasping, she finally stepped back and said, "It's no good, we can't budge it."

Dee, red-faced, nodded his agreement. "There must be a better way." He thought for a moment. "Do you want to hear another fun fact about Sir Isaac?"

Lucy wasn't sure that she did right now, but before she could voice her opinion, Dee continued.

"His second law of motion states that acceleration is produced

when a force acts on a mass. The bigger the mass, the more force is needed. We don't have enough force . . ."

"No kidding!" Lucy massaged her shoulder.

"Yet . . ." continued Dee as he turned to Lucy. He had a gleam in his eye. "I'll be right back."

Lucy sat with her back to the boulder listening to the music within it while she waited. The sun was warm on her skin, and she was just thinking that this had turned into a pretty interesting day when she saw Dee racing back carrying a large and shiny container.

"Duck behind that tree." He put the container in front of the rock, joined Lucy behind the tree, and handed her a pair of goggles. "Here, put these on. Safety first."

She secured the elastic strap over her curls and settled the goggles on her nose as Dee pressed a small device in his hand. There was a violent flash of light, a boom, and shards of boulder whizzed by the two of them.

"I've always wanted to do that." Dee wore a pleased smile. He tore off his goggles and stuffed them in the pocket of his lab coat. He held out his hand and Lucy handed him hers.

"Was that a pressure cooker?" Lucy said in amazement, watching the cloud of dust now hanging in the air.

"Used to be, yep," agreed Dee.

"Your aunt is going to be wild." Lucy surveyed the few remaining shiny shards.

A shadow crossed Dee's face. "Well, yes. There's that," he agreed and then he stopped, his mouth hanging slightly open.

The dust cleared, revealing the mouth of a cave.



CHAPTER THREE

Dee's excitement over the pressure cooker explosion faded as he peered at the entrance of the cave. He was sure he could see more cracks spreading outward from the opening. It didn't look safe at all.

"Oh, wow! Let's check it out!" Lucy ran toward the mouth of the cave. "Come on!" She motioned to Dee, who hung back still clutching the tree.

He shook his head. "It's dark and there are probably spiders. Besides, we don't know if the blast created any more damage. We shouldn't go in until we can be sure there won't be a cave-in."

Lucy poked the edges of the opening with her forefinger. "Seems sturdy enough to me. Let's go ... just a little way. Come on, what could go wrong?" Lucy ran back, grabbed his hand, and pulled him toward the cave.

Plenty could go wrong. A rock fall for starters, Dee thought. Lucy was enthusiastic and brave but also impulsive. She'd gotten into scrapes because of it before.

There was a little rodent-like squeak and a scampering of feet as they entered the cave. Dee shuddered and stepped back, but Lucy strode deeper into the grotto. "It's bigger than it looks on the outside and it ends at the back with a ledge," she reported back a minute later. "Oh, come on." She gave him a sly look out of the corner of her eye. "Trust me. Who knows? This might turn out to be an abandoned

gold mine! That would solve all our problems. You could find your parents and I could see the world!”

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to take a look,” Dee murmured, intrigued despite his initial doubts.

He shuffled onto the ledge and peered over the edge. Stone steps, covered with pebbles and, oddly, dried leaves, led down to a large tunnel.

“There seems to be some sort of light at the bottom. The tunnel must come out into the woods again on the other side. I want to know who is making the music.” Lucy was soon in the mineral-smelling depths.

She cocked her head and called up. “The music sounds agitated and it’s going further away.”

Dee wrinkled his nose, sneezed, and came down the middle of the staircase, careful not to brush against the rough stones on either side.

He reached the bottom and paused. Lucy grabbed his sleeve and pulled him forward into the tunnel. A moment later, she stopped. “Oh wow!”

The tunnel opened into a cavern through which rippled a broad rainbow-colored road that lit the way. Lucy crouched to finger the material of the road.

“It’s silk, Dee. Ha ha, it’s the Silk Road! I’ve wanted to travel the Silk Road ever since I read about it in one of my *National Geographic*.” Lucy’s voice rose with excitement as she trotted along the glowing silk. “That one didn’t look like this though.”

“The Silk Road? What was that?” Dee prodded the shimmering fabric with his toe. How could a road be made of fabric and not be shredded to bits by traffic?

“The historic Silk Road was the great trade route connecting Europe with the Far East. And it traded new ideas as much as precious things. The travelers along that road changed the world! Come along.” She slowed to a walk to let Dee catch up with her. “We’re going to have an adventure, so the Silk Road is a great name for this one too!”

Dee wondered if any of the great scientific ideas had traveled the Silk Road.

They hadn't walked more than a few minutes when a long rumble and a crash came from behind them.

They looked at each other. Dee chewed his lip and Lucy gulped. After a moment's silence, Lucy cleared her throat and said, "If we are going to travel the Silk Road, I'll need my maps."

"We should tell Aunt Delia what we're doing, and I'll need my navigating devices," said Dee.

They turned to run back up the stairs and stopped. The glow had left the part of the road they had traveled, leaving the return journey in utter darkness.

"We haven't gone that far," Lucy said. "I'll see if I can find our way to the entrance and then come back and get you." Lucy plunged into the darkness. A few minutes later there was a yelp. "Ow!"

"What happened?" Dee shouted.

"I ran into a wall."

"There has to be a better way," Dee muttered. He stepped off the road and put his hand on the tunnel wall. Stepping cautiously into the darkness, he advanced toward Lucy. "If we hold on to the wall and keep the Silk Road on our right, we should come to the staircase in a few minutes. Wait for me. I'll put my hand on your shoulder and then we won't get separated."

"Good plan," Lucy agreed.

"Did you hear that?" Dee's voice wavered a few moments later as his fingers tightened convulsively on Lucy's shoulder. "Something scuttled in the dark." If only he could see.

"As long as it ran away from us, there's nothing to worry about," Lucy said cheerfully. A few moments later she said, "I've found the bottom step."

"Why is it still so dark?" Dee complained, his heart pounding as he stumbled up the stairs.

There was a grunt as Lucy pushed against the fallen rock at the top of the staircase. A few minutes later, she said, "It's no use, it's completely blocked."

“What could go wrong?’ you said. ‘Trust me,’ you said.” Dee shook his head and tried to ignore his rising anxiety. “Now what?”

With a shuffling noise, Lucy turned away from the fallen rock and Dee heard her take a deep steadying breath. She always said that was good for anxiety. He tried it too. The fear abated and curiosity rose in its place.

Dee yelped in protest as Lucy turned him around and prodded him back down the staircase until they stepped back onto the Silk Road, now brightly lit again. “If we can’t go back, we must go forward.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Come on. I’ll kill the spiders for you.”

Lucy had only taken two steps when the rock face beside her glowed. Then it shimmered and rippled. A stone nose emerged followed by a hooked chin, beady eyes, and large bat-like ears. An enormous mouth opened displaying large stone teeth. The face was almost the height of the tunnel.

“Who goes there?”

Dee leaped back and pressed against the far wall. Then he jumped forward again with a strangled sound. Who knew what was going to come out of *that* wall? “How did you do that—come out of the rock like that?” *Nothing should be able to do that*, he thought. *How can the laws of science be different down here? We’re only a short distance from my back yard.*

Bushy stone eyebrows formed and waggled above the eyes, now the deep blue of sapphires. The eyes swiveled to regard Lucy and Dee. “Why did you hurt me?”

“Hurt you?” Dee fought to press down rising panic. He couldn’t think for the life of him how they could have hurt this monster.

The terrifying face grimaced in a menacing manner.

“Yesssssssss,” it hissed. “I am Lord Petram. I am lord of the rock in this tunnel and all the other tunnels and caves in this world. You destroyed living rock. That hurts!” His eyes pivoted, and his gaze fixed on Dee. “You!” A clawed hand emerged from the rock and a long finger jabbed Dee in the shoulder. Dee jumped back with a squeak like a startled puppy.

“I take a dim view of children attacking me.”

“What?” Dee’s mouth fell open as he massaged his shoulder with the other hand.

Lucy nudged him. “You blew up the boulder, remember?”

“Oh . . . ah . . . yes.” Dee’s shoulders slumped.

“And?” Lucy prodded him again.

Dee looked everywhere except at Lord Petram. “I’m very sorry,” he finally said, staring hard at the Silk Road.

“What”—Lord Petram’s voice sounded like wet cement now, low, and dangerous—“shall I do with you?”

Dee grabbed Lucy, his fingers digging into the flesh of her upper arm. She flinched and tried to pull away.

He hesitated. “One moment.” Still grasping Lucy by her upper arm, he pulled her aside.

“Let go of my arm. That hurts,” she protested. Lucy rubbed the spot where he’d grabbed her.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

She glowered at him for a moment, then her expression cleared. “Go on,” she said.

“Lucy,” he hissed. “If this Lord Whatsit controls all the stone in this tunnel, maybe he can roll away the rocks blocking our entrance. Then we can go home.”

“We’ve come all this way and you want to turn back? Don’t you want an adventure?” Lucy looked at him in amazement.

“Wasn’t Newton fascinated with the unknown and trying to discover its secrets?” She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t you want to be a great scientist like him?”

Dee stared at his shoes as he scuffed them on the Silk Road. “Maybe. But let’s face it. I’m not a great scientist yet. No, I want to go home.” This place and Lord Petram were giving him the creeps. Best to get out of here—at least until they had time to figure things out a little more carefully.

“Please, sir,” Dee looked at Lord Petram. “I really am very sorry about your boulder.” A lump seemed to fill his throat. “Please open the entrance and let us go home,” he added desperately. An idea

popped into his head. "I could try to put the boulder back together again!"

Lucy looked at him with astonishment. "You what?"

"Why do you wish to go home?" rumbled Lord Petram.

"Because I'm in the middle of an important experiment," Dee whispered. "A very important experiment. If it works, I can search for my parents."

"Harumph," snorted Lord Petram. "A noble ambition but it doesn't excuse the thoughtless attack. You must prove to me why I should let you out."

"How do I do that?" Dee said.

"You must correctly answer one question." Lord Petram's thick brows drew together.

"What if he doesn't get the right answer?" Lucy butted in.

"Why then, you will be staying here. Or following the tunnel to see where it goes." The walls rippled as though somewhere behind them Lord Petram had shrugged a set of massive shoulders.

Dee was thoroughly alarmed now, and his stomach roiled. "Okay, I'll try to answer the question."

"What is the quest of the alchemists?"

Thank goodness, Dee thought. An easy one. I've got this.

"They sought the Philosopher's Stone, the key to transmuting lead into gold," Dee answered promptly. His shoulders went back, and his stomach unclenched.

A grinding roar came from behind them, and a few chinks of light bled into the tunnel. Lord Petram had moved the blockage.

Dee turned to make his escape.

"Wait! Why did you blow up my boulder?" said Lord Petram.

Dee stopped and was about to respond, but Lucy beat him to it.

"We thought there was a fire in the woods, so we went to check it out. But it wasn't a fire at all," Lucy explained. "It was this amazing bird, all red and gold. It looked like it was in flames, but it wasn't. And we heard music coming from behind the boulder. We just wanted to see what it was . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Lord Petram's eyebrows shot up and his eyes changed from

sapphire to emerald to ruby and back to sapphire. He hissed, “What are your names?”

Lucy and Dee took two steps back before answering.

A loud rumble came from Lord Petram’s thick stone lips. “It is you. You are the children we have been waiting for. There is an important mission . . .”

“Well, aren’t we lucky,” Dee said, moving to stand by Lucy’s side.

“Indeed, you are,” Lord Petram’s mouth cracked into the semblance of a smile. “You can go back if you choose, but you may wish to go forward.”

“Why would we do that?” Dee’s eyes widened.

“Dee.” Lucy pulled on his sleeve. “Lord Petram controls *all* the rock.”

“Yes, he said that,” muttered Dee, edging back toward the entrance.

“*Controls* it, you dummy.” She gave him a meaningful look. “If we agree to complete this task, then perhaps Lord Petram will grant you something. It might help you to find your parents! Your experiments all involve rocks!”

“Oh,” Dee said slowly. “Right.” He nodded. “Well sir, if we choose to go forward, what will you grant us?”

“If you go forward and complete this task, I will give you the key to transmutation.”

“Oh wow! Really?” Dee was stunned.

Rock ground on rock as Lord Petram nodded.

“Okay!” Dee nodded in relief. “Let’s go!” Then he stopped. “Wait, don’t you think we should know what this job is first? And just how dangerous is it?” he asked.

“Sensible lad,” agreed Lord Petram. He sighed and the ground shook. “We believe the emperor is in grave danger, but the source of the danger is unclear.”

Dee thought about that for a moment. “What emperor?” Dee’s brow furrowed. He knew they didn’t have an emperor at home.

“The Emperor of Sericea.” Lord Petram replied.

Lucy’s eyes gleamed. “Sericea? Is that where this tunnel leads?”

When Lord Petram nodded, she turned to Dee. “A new country,

Dee. I've never heard of Sericea. This is turning out to be a real adventure."

"Attend, Lucy," Lord Petram said. "The matter at hand is that the Emperor of Sericea is too young to rule on his own, so the queen is regent until he comes of age. We believe he is in grave danger and might not survive to take the throne."

"What are we supposed to do about it?" Dee said. "We're just kids, after all. Shouldn't you be looking for adults?"

"The emperor is about your age," Lord Petram replied. "We believe it is young people his own age who can help him."

"Doesn't the emperor have friends of his own?" Lucy asked.

"No. He still has a few guards and servants handpicked by his father, but that could change at any moment."

Dee wondered why the emperor didn't have any friends. *Although it must be hard to be friends with an emperor, he mused. You'd never be equals.*

"So, are we supposed to rescue him or what?" Lucy demanded.

"Absolutely not," said Lord Petram, "It's not your job to rescue him or anybody else. It's up to him to rescue himself. What he needs now are friends of his own who can help him stay safe until he comes of age."

Before either Lucy or Dee could ask another question, Lord Petram added, "Will you go forward?"

Lucy looked at Dee. Her face glowed with the excitement of an adventure. But Dee wasn't so confident. A question tugged at the back of his mind but faded as his parents' faces shone in his memory. Dee longed to see his mother again, her green eyes—so like his—were always filled with laughter. And he would do almost anything to once more hear her stories about ancient people and how they lived. She could take a shard of pottery and imagine a whole family from it.

He saw his resemblance to his father every time he tried to control his shock of unruly red hair. His father was more interested in the engineering and technology of old civilizations. Dee would love to build something with his father again, like the trireme ship they

made out of balsam wood with scraps of linen material for sails and teeny tiny oars when he was six. He still had it in his bedroom.

The key to transmutation could get his parents back, and he wanted that so badly that he was willing to give this strange quest a try.

“Yes, sir.” Dee nodded.

“Most admirable! We will help you as best we can.” With that there was a dull roar and Lord Petram receded back into the tunnel wall.

“Well, that’s that then,” Dee said with resignation.

“Oh, cheer up,” said Lucy. “It’s simple really, we find the emperor, help him stay alive until he’s ready to take the throne, get the key for changing lead into gold, and then it’s off to find your parents. What could go wrong?”

“Well for one thing, I noticed that this rock dude didn’t say what the grave danger was.” Dee grumbled.

“Maybe he didn’t know. Maybe part of our mission is to find out what it is.” Lucy offered.

“And who is this ‘we’ Lord Petram kept referring to? Or was that just the royal ‘we’?” There were too many unanswered questions for Dee’s comfort.

The road of rainbow silk vibrated slightly under their feet and the light brightened.

“Where do you think the tunnel ends?” Dee said.

“No idea,” Lucy said. “But obviously, our mission lies at the end. In Sericea.” She savored the word and then said, “I hear the music again. It’s beautiful. We have to find out what it is.”

Dee stopped. “But how are we going to find our way home after without a navigating device?”

“How far can it be?” Lucy scoffed and promptly stumbled over a rock and fell. “Ow!”

Dee helped her up. “Did you hurt yourself?”

“I don’t think so. Just stabbed myself with this.” Lucy pulled the triangular object out of the pocket of her shorts. “Uh-oh. I must have picked this up from your lab bench.” She turned it over in her hands.

“That’s my octant! My uncle gave it to me. He was a great scientist. I told you not to touch my things!” Dee grabbed the device and then calmed down a bit. “In this case, it wasn’t a bad thing that you took it. It will help us to navigate home using the stars.”

“Not much use in a tunnel then, is it?” muttered Lucy before forging ahead into the unknown.



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