

LUCY & DEE

» THE CAVES OF WONDER «



LUCY & DEE

THE CAVES OF WONDER



Kirsten Marion



Common Deer Press

Published by Common Deer Press Incorporated.

Copyright © 2023 Kirsten Marion

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

Published in 2023 by Common Deer Press
1745 Rockland Ave.
Victoria, BC
V8S 1W6

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: The caves of wonder / Kirsten Marion.

Names: Marion, Kirsten, author.

Description: Series statement: Lucy & Dee

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230153208

| Canadiana (ebook) 20230153143 | ISBN 9781988761800 (softcover)

| ISBN 9781988761824 (EPUB)

Classification: LCC PS8626.A75358 C38 2023 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Cover Image: Shannon O'Toole

Book Design: David Moratto

Printed in Canada

www.commondeerpress.com

For my children





CHAPTER ONE

Jhe crowds swirled around Lucy as she stood on the cobbles of the main square of the village of Yangxi. The square was thronged with market stalls and tents and the crowd flowed between and around them, buying, selling, and catching up on the local news. Great waves of sound washed over her.

Lucy's stomach fluttered. Finally, she was out and with other people again! She, Dee, and Yidi had been lying low at Zixing's farm for over a month expecting Queen Xixi and her imperial guard to descend on them at any moment as Zixing and his granddaughter Mai prepared to leave their farm and accompany Lucy and her friends to Rephar and the Caves of Wonder.

All had been quiet for so long, Zixing had told Lucy, that it should be safe for her and her friends to come to the market today as he and Mai bought the last supplies needed for their journey.

The square was a shifting kaleidoscope of noise, color, and smells. On one side was a temple to the goddess of the harvest. The heavy scent of incense drifted from it to mingle with the smells of the market stalls and overexcited animals in a complex quilt of aromas. Carts, now emptied of the goods and food they'd carried in, lined the other three sides.

There were stalls filled with enticing curiosities that Lucy longed to investigate. But she was mindful that she couldn't draw any attention to herself, and Zixing had made a point of telling her and the others to stay close to him. She pulled the hood of her cloak farther forward to ensure her blonde hair was completely covered.

↳ Lucy scanned the crowd. Ah, there he was, Lucy thought as she moved to a stall three over on her right where the old man was purchasing paper and ink. Dee stood just behind him shifting nervously as he was jostled by the crowd. Yidi examined a stand laden with breads and pastries.

“I think Mai is almost finished making her purchases and we can leave soon,” Dee said, coming to her side. “I’ll be glad when we’re finally on our way to find the White Tiger!”

Bertie crawled out of Dee’s pocket and squeaked as Zixing approached. Dee smiled and held the little hedgehog-like creature on the palm of his hand. Bertie crawled from Dee’s hand onto Zixing’s open palm. Zixing fished in a pocket with his other hand and pulled out a treat. The little creature sat on his haunches, his belly hanging over his hind paws. Holding the tidbit in his front paws, he nibbled at it furiously.

“I don’t think Bertie needs quite so many treats,” Dee said, poking him softly in the tummy.

Zixing just smiled as he ran a forefinger gently down Bertie’s back.

Lucy nodded, distracted by a sudden commotion on the far side of the square. She inhaled sharply.

A large group of imperial guards moved purposefully into the crowd. Lucy went cold as she slipped closer to Zixing. The guards fanned out, showing posters and questioning people. Lucy saw each person shake their head and pull out a small booklet. The guards examined each booklet closely and returned it before moving on to the next person to repeat the process.

“What are they doing?” Lucy whispered to Zixing as Mai joined them. Mai already had a small booklet in her hand.

“Checking identity papers,” he said shortly. “Stay close together and stay behind me. And for goodness’ sake, pull your hood up.” This last remark was snapped at Yidi who sheepishly complied. Absent-mindedly, Zixing put Bertie in his pocket and the little creature hurriedly burrowed down.

Identity papers! Lucy looked at Dee wildly. They didn’t have any

and she'd bet Yidi didn't have any either. Zixing knew who the three of them were, and he would know they wouldn't have any papers, but Mai didn't.

Beside her, Dee stood frozen with his fists clenched so tightly the skin across his knuckles was a shiny white.

One of the guards was upon them now. Lucy felt her face go rigid with terror as the crowd pressed in around her. *What are we going to do? There's nowhere to run! This is it. We'll be arrested for sure.*

The guard spoke to Mai first. She held out her booklet and the guard examined it before handing it back and asking, "Have you seen these three escaped outlaws?" He shoved a poster at Mai. She glanced down at it before wrinkling her forehead in honest confusion.

Lucy held her breath. She didn't know how good the likenesses were, but she knew the queen was saying that she, Dee, and Yidi were escaped outlaws and had to be recaptured at all costs.

In her head, Lucy quickly ran through what they'd told Mai. She and Dee had claimed they were travelers looking for Dee's missing parents with Yidi as their guide. She knew that Lucy had begun to show magical talents and needed training—that was why they were looking for the White Tiger. Mai *didn't* know that Yidi was the young emperor, and that Lucy and Dee came through a portal from another world. This was to keep Mai safe if she was questioned. It made sense. Especially after what she'd just seen.

"No, I haven't. Why? Do you think they're here? Are we quite safe?" Mai's voice quavered.

Lucy let out her breath.

"They're outlaws, miss. Not nice people. I doubt they'd stop at anything. Keep your doors and windows locked."

Mai nodded fervently.

Lucy kept her head down as the guard addressed Zixing next. "Papers, please."

"How dare you ask me for papers," Zixing exploded, clapping his hands behind his back. "Don't you know who I am? You can't just come muscling in here asking honest citizens to show their papers."

"I believe I can, sir." The guard was adamant. "Your papers, please."

Lucy saw Zixing motioning behind his back for her, Dee, and Yidi to move away.

“I will not!” Zixing shouted and Mai pulled at his sleeve trying urgently to reason with him. He shoved her away.

“Oe Ve! How can you behave in such a barbarous fashion?” he screamed at the guard. “Mai, remember the temple!” Lucy could barely hear him hiss the last sentence. Zixing then struck the guard and ran.

Several more guards came running. They grasped Zixing and hauled him away as Zixing kept screaming “Oe Ve” repeatedly until a guard backhanded him across the mouth and Zixing subsided in a gurgle.

“The man’s crazy!” someone in the crowd shouted, and people moved away as if his craziness and detainment were contagious.

Yidi took Mai by the arm and started to pull her away.

Mai, white-faced with shock, dug her heels in. “Wait!” she called after the guards and tried to run after them, but Yidi held her fast. “I have to go,” she shouted at him, pummeling him on the arm. “I have to help Grandfather.”

Shaking his head, Yidi gently guided her away from the crowd.

Lucy bit her lip. Now the crowd was looking at Yidi. Someone shouted, “Let her go!” and rushed toward him.

Yidi ducked under the man’s outstretched arm, his own arm encircling Mai’s waist now as he continued to hustle her away. “It’s okay! She’s just had a shock. I’m taking her to a place where she can recover.”

Lucy and Dee followed. When they reached Mai’s cart, Yidi stepped away from Mai who now looked blank. He looked at Lucy and Dee and shrugged. “Now what?” he mouthed.

“Give her something to do?” Dee suggested.

“Mai, can you hitch up the pony?” Yidi said as he took her purchases from her unresisting fingers and heaved them into the back of the cart to join the other bags. “Mai!”

Mai just stood there.

“Here, let me,” Lucy took Mai by the shoulders and gently shook her. “Mai, snap out of it. It’s dangerous to stay here. We have to go now.”

Mai gave a shuddering sigh and then visibly pulled herself

together. “Right,” she said. She took the hobble off the pony standing patiently nearby and hitched it to the cart.

“I don’t know what got into him,” Mai shook her head in confusion. “I’ve never seen Grandfather like that. He never shouts. Not at anyone.”

They piled in. Mai sat on the driver’s bench and the rest of them made themselves as comfortable as possible among the bags, dust, and wisps of straw.

“Oe Ve?” Dee said once they were out of the village and on the road back to the farm.

“That’s the monastery of the fighting monks by the Caves of Wonder,” Yidi said. “That’s where Zixing said we needed to go so we could free the White Tiger.”

Mai turned to look at them and nodded. “I think he was trying to tell me that we’re supposed to go there without him.” Her voice caught. “But how can I do that? How can I leave him in the hands of the guards? What’s going to happen to him?” Tears hovered on her lower lashes.

“He probably feels he can take care of himself,” Lucy said. “He must feel it’s more important that you—that we all—leave.”

But how? She wondered. *We can’t be seen along the roads with the cart and horse.*

The Xami, thought Lucy with relief. Two of those mythical horse-like creatures with their glittery horns and shimmering scales, Ai and Zi, had come to help them on the Silk Road.

“Dee, do you think the Xami would help us like they did before?”

Dee shrugged. “I can try. But they didn’t come the last time we called.” He sang the song of the Xami, the same notes the Xami were singing when they found Lucy and Dee on the Silk Road.

Mai looked at him in disbelief. “What are you doing? And more importantly, how have you met the Xami?” Her eyes narrowed. “I thought you were tourists.”

“I am—We are,” Lucy and Dee said together.

“It’s a long story,” said Lucy. “Right now, we have to do as your grandfather said. We will get back to the farm, pack up, and leave.”

➤ Once at the farmhouse, Mai took the pony to her neighbor's farm. The farmer had promised to look after all their animals while they were away. Lucy and Dee walked around the house putting heavy outdoor shutters up on all the windows as Mai had instructed. Yidi disappeared into the house.

"Lucy," Dee wheezed as he lifted a heavy shutter into position. "What if they interrogate Zixing? What if he tells them who we are?"

Lucy huffed with the effort of bolting the shutters at the adjoining window. When she was finished, she stepped back and dusted her hands as she admired the job she'd done. "He won't do that," she said confidently.

Dee chewed his lower lip and didn't look convinced.

They unloaded the cart and dragged it into the barn before locking the barn door.

By this time, Mai had returned. She stood and upended the bags of supplies on the kitchen table. "Lucy, help me sort these. Dee, there are four packs in the hallway. Thank goodness I bought those first. Yidi—Where did he go!" She put her hands on her hips.

Dee brought the four packs in and then started banging around in the kitchen cupboards.

Lucy and Mai began sorting supplies into four more-or-less equal piles.

"What on earth . . ." Lucy said as Dee emerged clutching a handful of bottles, which he crammed into his assigned pack.

"I have a feeling we're going to need these," he said, slipping on the remains of his lab coat. He'd ripped off the arms to bind Lucy's wounds when she'd been attacked by some river eels. "This has far too many valuable chemicals and tools in it to leave behind and the cloak will hide it."

Lucy hastily assessed the supplies. Mai had done a good job with her purchases. There were bedrolls, water skins for each of them, and food parcels. Lucy wondered what the best order was to pack her share and then she started to just shove them in. She could organize it later.

Yidi reappeared with an armful of books and scrolls just as Lucy

was fastening her pack. His ornamental sword lay on top of the pile. It was looking a little shabby now as he'd already had to gouge out several of the precious jewels in the hilt to fund their travels.

"We'll need these. Don't worry," he said to Mai who had opened her mouth to protest about the reading materials. "I'll make sure your grandfather gets them back. Is my pack ready?" He strapped the sword around his waist.

"Is your pack ready?" Lucy stared at him open-mouthed and then just shook her head. "Unbelievable. We're not your servants. Pack it yourself."

Mai stopped what she was doing, planted both palms on the table, and let her head sink between her shoulders. "I can't do this. I can't go and leave Grandfather." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "He's all I have left. And what will he do if he comes back here and I'm gone?"

"Mai"—Lucy put a gentle arm around Mai's shoulder while casting a worried look at Dee—"he expects you to be gone. He's told you to go. What if he's planning to go to Oe Ve when he's released?" *If he's released.* "He'd be very upset if he got to the temple and you weren't there." Her head whipped around. "*What* are you doing Dee?"

Dee was turning out all his pockets and becoming more and more frantic. "Bertie! I didn't get Bertie back from Zixing."

"Well, that's alright then," Lucy said in a hearty voice that didn't quite dispel the worry twisting her insides. "Zixing can use Bertie to call a dragon and join us at any time! He can certainly use a dragon to find us in Rephar. I'm sure of it."

Mai bit her lip, hiccupped, and said in a small voice, "Makes sense." Her eyes widened. "Oh, I didn't see you put your identity papers in your packs. Are you carrying them? We're almost certain to be stopped along the way. They're stopping everyone."

"Papers?" Dee choked out the word.

"Yes!" Mai said impatiently. "You do have identity papers, don't you? You must have! Everyone has them."

How will we get them? Lucy wondered. Her pulse quickened. If they were stopped by imperial guards, they'd be toast.

Yidi stepped in. "Uh, Mai, there is a problem. When we were

traveling, we lost a few things in . . . in a storm. Our identity papers were among them. I'd forgotten about them until we were in the market and the guards were asking to see them. We'll have to get some new ones. Any ideas?"

"What?" Mai passed a distracted hand over her forehead. "Oh, yes, there are many good-sized towns on our way to Rephar."

"Are there people who can, you know, do them quickly and quietly?" Yidi said.

Mai gave Yidi a suspicious look. "I suppose, but why?"

He waved an airy hand. "Oh, I just thought it would be the most inconspicuous way to go about it. If we go to the mayor's office to get them, it might just slow us down. We're in a hurry, yes?" He gave her a disarming smile.

"You know"—Mai narrowed her eyes at him—"if Grandfather didn't trust you so much, I might be tempted to think you were the outlaws."

She looked him up and down.

"But if you are the outlaws, the pictures on the posters don't look like you at all. Anyhow, you seem pretty harmless, so I really don't know what the fuss is all about," she added severely.

Lucy held back a gurgle of laughter at the affronted look on Yidi's face.

Dee had everything carefully packed. "I'll keep my penknife handy," he said, sliding it into the pocket of his pants.

"Dee, any sign of the Xami?" Lucy asked urgently.

Dee went to the back door. "Nope. But there's a cloud of dust in the distance and it's heading this way."

It was the guards. They knew they were here! The thoughts screamed in Lucy's head.

"Could be trouble," Yidi agreed, joining Dee at the door.

"What's the best way out of here, Mai?" Dee turned to her. "Do we have any chance of not being seen?"

Mai drew her brows together. "We'll have to go through the fallow field, it'll be pretty mucky after that last big rain, but at least it's not flooded like it would be if there was a crop in it."

Lucy sighed and looked down at her shiny new boots. Mai had outfitted them all in nondescript clothing—pants and tunics—that would wear well on their journey.

“Once we get to the other side there’s a forest that will provide good cover.” Mai went on. “From there we can figure out where to go next.”

“We will have to stay off the road,” Yidi said. “Until we get new papers, we can’t risk being stopped.”

He was still struggling with his straps, so Lucy untangled them before fastening them so Yidi could slip the pack over his shoulders. “I’m only doing this because we have the need for speed,” she warned him. “Now move it.”



CHAPTER TWO

Jhey slipped out the back door and into the large field. Mud squelched around Dee's boots, sucking him down and slowing his progress. Each step felt like he was trying to move a ton. A quick glance over his shoulder showed the cloud of approaching dust getting closer. It looked like many riders now.

He struggled on, his heart thumping in his chest. The sun beat down on him and every breath seared his lungs. It felt like the field was going on forever and he wasn't making any progress. "I have a plan. I can handle this," he muttered, but still felt prickles of sweat.

The group of riders was clearer now. Cloaks flew behind them as they galloped down the road to Mai's house.

"What are they doing here?" Yidi yelled.

Mai turned slightly to look over her shoulder, but she kept running. "Could be guards. It happens when they arrest someone," she panted. "They come to search the person's house. And sometimes to steal what they can—if they think the person won't be coming back."

Yidi had his head down and was pumping his arms to help him run, but he was already lagging, unable to keep up with the rest. Lucy dropped back and grabbed him by the arm to drag him along beside her.

Dee's lungs felt like they were on fire, as if he'd been running for hours. It was like one of his nightmares where he ran and ran and didn't get anywhere.

He couldn't run any farther, he knew it. He'd have to slow down. Stop.

There was a distant shout, and when Dee looked back, one of the riders stood in his stirrups and pointed at them.

"I think they've seen us," Lucy said. Yidi stumbled and they fell to their knees in the mud. Lucy scrambled up, dragging Yidi behind her.

The riders were gaining. They'd reached the house now and were urging their horses onto the muddy field. They couldn't be more than ten minutes behind now—even if the mud and uneven ground slowed the horses down.

Now hounds bayed. It sounded like they were keeping pace with the riders.

Whoever they were, they were using tracking dogs, Dee thought. Not good. That was enough to give him a burst of speed to propel him the rest of the way and into the woods.

Mai was hard on his heels and Lucy and Yidi crashed in behind her.

It was time to use his plan.

"Form a single line and keep going," Dee instructed. He pulled the bottles he had grabbed in the kitchen from his pack. Walking backward, he sprayed the contents of one bottle after another in a wider arc across the trail until he ran out. In the end, he'd covered about fifty feet. Then he turned and ran after the rest.

The baying of the dogs got closer, then fell silent.

"Keep running," he hissed at Yidi who had stopped and was bent over holding his side. His face was bright red.

"I think we might have put them off our trail," Lucy said, coming back and joining Dee and Yidi. "It's gone very quiet."

Mai joined them.

They crouched in the bushes, listening intently, poised to resume running. The sounds of pursuit had died away.

"What did you do back there, Dee?" Mai said as she picked brambles from her tunic.

"Scent bomb. I grabbed some oregano oil, rosemary oil, and anise oil from your kitchen. The combination should shut down a dog's

nose for some time. But we can't hang around. If they're determined, they'll find another way. We need to keep moving as long as it's light."

They took a moment to catch their breath and then trotted on in silence for what seemed like ages.

↳ The sun had dropped significantly lower in the sky when Dee said, "We need a proper plan." He pushed a thorny branch out of the way. "What do we do now?"

"Let's stop for a minute," panted Yidi. He leaned forward, his hands braced on his thighs as he fought to get his breath back before adding, "They don't seem to be following us any farther."

Dee paused and listened. No sounds but birdsong and their ragged breathing. Yidi was right. Maybe the pursuers didn't know who they were and just chased them because they ran. Dee mentally shrugged. He didn't care why they had stopped; he was just happy they had.

The group soon found a small clearing and hunkered down in a rough circle. Yidi slipped his pack from his back and fumbled with the straps. When he finally got it open, he pulled out a thick roll of parchment. He unrolled it, revealing a large map of Sericea and the surrounding area.

"You came well prepared," Dee said to Yidi. "Good thinking bringing maps."

"Thanks." Yidi flashed a brief smile. "Now, the Temple of Oe Ve and the Caves of Wonder are in Rephar." Yidi pointed to a faraway dot on the west coast. "Before Zixing was taken by the guards, our plan was to join a caravan traveling there. We should stick with that plan. We're too noticeable as a small group and that makes us vulnerable. But we need to get on the Imperial Way and find a town large enough for a caravanserai and to make us new identity papers."

"Makes sense," Lucy nodded.

"A what?" said Dee.

"A caravanserai. It's a big place where people can get food and rooms to sleep in. It's where the caravans stop," Yidi said. "I suggest skipping the first two obvious places. Anything easy distance from Mai's farm. So that means making it to Anxi. That's here," he pointed

on the map. “If Xixi and her troops ask at the first two caravanserais and the people there haven’t seen any sign of us, that might be enough to convince her we aren’t going that way. And if we delay even farther by hiding out for a bit first, all the better. What do you think?”

“Sounds good,” said Lucy, nodding. “It’s more likely the guards—if that was them following us—would think that we would stop at a nearer town first.”

Dee glanced at Mai who nodded. Mai knew they’d already had an unpleasant experience with the queen and her guards.

“Right. I think we need to be prepared for the worst-case situation—they are going to continue to chase us. Anxi is a fairly big place, so we should be able to get our new papers and pick up a caravan there,” Yidi said. “One that will get us to the Temple of Oe Ve as Zixing instructed.”

He smoothed a corner of the map that kept trying to roll itself up again. “Once we’re there, we can figure out how to free the White Tiger of the West.”

Dee frowned. “Why do we have to free him?” He saw the looks on the other’s faces and raised his hands, palms out. “Oh, I know he’s been imprisoned, but what for? I mean, did he do something so awful that we shouldn’t be freeing him?”

Mai looked at the darkening sky. “I don’t know. I’m sure we can find out along the way or from the monks at Oe Ve. Let’s keep moving, we need to find a place farther away where we can camp tonight.”

Dee sighed as he clambered to his feet. Camping rough. So not his favorite thing. He swatted a biting insect away irritably. He considered their plan as he picked his way along the path. *We’re going in the direction we thought my parents headed. And we’re getting farther away from Xixi and the Celestial City.* He nodded to himself. *Yes, this plan is the best option we have.*

Dee turned to Yidi who puffed along beside him. “Tell me a bit about Rephar.”

“It’s a large city-state between Sericea and the coast of the Southern Sea. Once we’re through the mountain pass and down on the Plains of Satisa, we are within Rephar’s territory,” Yidi said as he pushed aside an overhanging branch.

The path rose here and the incline was making it more difficult to walk.

“The city has a big port. The best thing about Rephar,” Yidi continued, “it’s independent, not part of the empire. Xixi has no influence there. Run by a man called Commander Sena and a council.” He stopped to catch his breath before continuing. “He calls himself the first among equals. Because Rephar is independent, if Xixi makes attempts on us while we are there, Commander Sena won’t take it kindly. She’d be up against him too, and he’s a force to be reckoned with.”

↳ Lucy fell back so she was walking by Dee’s side and motioned they should let Yidi and Mai get ahead of them.

“Dee,” she said in a low voice, “should we even be going to Rephar, or should we be spending our time looking for another portal home? We could still take Yidi with us and keep him safe until he comes of age like Lord Petram asked us to when he gave us our quest.” She turned a worried face to Dee. “The situation is getting so bad here I don’t know if it’s even possible to keep him safe in Sericea. Might be better to take him home with us, don’t you think?”

“But what about Mai?” Dee asked. “We can’t just leave her to fend for herself. And we did agree before that taking Yidi home could cause a world of complications.” He hitched his pack up into a more comfortable position. “And there is a slight problem with your suggestion.” He flashed her a brief smile. “How can we take him home when we don’t even know how to get there?”

The queen had destroyed the entrance to the Silk Road and injured Lord Petram in the process. So that choice has been taken away from them. “Besides, I thought you wanted an adventure. That’s why you got me into this in the first place, you know.”

“Adventure is one thing; reckless adventure is another,” Lucy muttered. She pushed aside some bushes crowding the path before continuing. “I’m not sure what we’d do about Mai. I was just trying to think of the easiest way for you to get the key to transmutation.”

“Thank you,” Dee smiled at her. “I appreciate that. But I honestly

think continuing in Sericea is my best chance to find my parents. There have been definite signs they might have passed this way. Remember back in the Imperial Palace Yidi told us they had been visited by two ‘barbarians?’”

Lucy nodded. “And Mai said she’d met two strangers going west. She said they didn’t speak Sericean so I guess they might have been your parents.” She patted Dee on his shoulder. “It would be amazing if they were.”

Dee nodded. “Besides, we might never find another portal. We don’t know when the next solstice will be.” Lord Petram had told them portals only opened during solstices. “Maybe I could learn some of the astronomy of Sericea when we get to Rephar,” Dee mused. “Then I might be able to work out when the next one is.”

Yidi, who had somehow dropped back beside them, said, “There is another way. Lord Petram said we had to stop the queen. We could think about that.”

Dee looked to see that Mai was well ahead. She couldn’t hear their conversation, which was a good thing. Dee knew that Yidi really didn’t want her to know who he was. “But how?” asked Dee. “She’s got a huge army and we have”—he waved his arms around—“a whole lot of nothing.”

“Dee’s right. It would be crazy for us to try to take her on.” Lucy shook her head.

“We will focus on what we promised Lord Petram. Keep you safe until you come of age,” Lucy said to Yidi. “Then Lord Petram will give Dee the key to transmutation and we’ll be able to afford to continue searching for his parents on our own, and you—” she poked Yidi in the chest “—you get to stay alive and do some good for Sericea.”

➤ Dee stretched and winced. After an uncomfortable night sleeping on the ground, every muscle hurt. He groaned. It was going to be another long day of hiking. Yidi was adamant that they stay off the road until they were on the outskirts of Anxi.

“Even if the guards are there too,” Yidi had said, “they will be looking for three outlaws, not four travelers.”

The sun was high in the sky when hoofbeats sounded behind them on the path.

“Cover!” hissed Dee. Could the guards be back on their trail?

They all scrambled off the path and into the bushes. Dee grimaced as he banged his shin and then tucked his legs under himself to make himself as small as possible.

The hoofbeats stopped. There was some heavy breathing but no sounds of alarm.

“Dee? Come out from those bushes. You called us.” A familiar voice that resonated like an oboe rang out.

“Zi!” Dee pushed back onto the path. Four Xami, the size of enormous horses, stood saddled and wearing headgear. Their scaled bodies, flanks heaving with exertion, rippled with jewel tones in the sunlight.

Mai now stood on the other side of the path, her eyes wide and her mouth hanging slightly open. “Oh my, they’re beautiful,” she breathed. “I never thought I’d be privileged enough to see one.”

“Am I ever glad to see you.” Dee rushed toward Zi, the Xamu who had carried him along the Silk Road to the Imperial Palace, and flung his arms around his neck. “And hello, Ai,” he greeted the Xamu who had carried Lucy.

Lucy was already running toward Ai.

“And who are the other Xami? Why didn’t you come the last time I tried to call you? You said you would. What took you so long?” Dee said.

Zi’s furry eyebrows lowered. “We didn’t take long.”

Dee sighed, trying not to be irritated with a creature who was so long-lived that anything less than a decade wasn’t worth mentioning.

“We couldn’t come the last time you called because one of the six remaining Xami had just been killed by the queen’s elite archers.” Zi’s voice shook. “Now we are only five, and the fifth one is injured. So, we four”—he nodded to the rest of the small group—“have responded to your call.”

“What!” said Yidi, sharply. “That’s so wrong. It is terribly bad luck to harm a Xamu.”

“Particularly for the Xamu,” muttered one of the new Xami.

“How could she?” Lucy’s voice wobbled. She seemed on the verge of tears as she burrowed her fingers into Ai’s thick ruff. “Who could harm such magnificent creatures?”

Ai shrugged. “It’s not the first time,” he said. He sounded weary and grief stricken.

“Our deepest condolences,” Mai said quietly.

“Yes,” added Yidi. “And we will try to right this wrong,” he promised.

Zi nodded his head. “Thank you. Now,” he went on in a businesslike tone of voice, “let me introduce you to the other Xami. Ai you already know. The others will tell you their names.”

“I am Fu.” Yellow antlers sprinkled with purple stars bobbed as the largest Xamu extended his right foreleg and bowed his head. Fu said, “Why have you called us?”

Dee quickly filled the Xami in on the recent events.

“Yes, we understand,” Zi said. “We will help you get to Anxi.”

“This one’s mine.” Yidi grinned as he strode forward and fastened his pack to Fu’s saddle. Once mounted, he ran his fingers through the Xamu’s thick yellow ruff tipped with purple. “Hello, Fu. I like your colors.”

“Yellow is the color of royalty and purple is the color of love, strength, and spiritual awareness,” Fu said in his deep rumbly voice. He turned his great head and gazed at Yidi with eyes the color of old gold. Dee thought he looked ancient and wise.

Another Xamu with orange antlers dotted with black stars stepped forward. “I am Mu, I will carry this young woman.” His long eyelashes fluttered at Mai who had been still standing in amazement. She pulled herself together to rush toward the Xamu with a look of glee on her face. She lifted herself into the saddle and stroked the side of his neck. “I can’t believe this,” she said over and over as the Xami set off at a brisk trot.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



My greatest debt is to the family and friends who have supported my writing journey. My deepest thanks go to my parents who provided me with a childhood rich in books and a resulting lifelong love of reading. The power of the local library to shape a child's life cannot be overestimated!

Many thanks to Andrea, Cathy, Marie, Monica, Norah, Victoria, and Vicky for providing encouragement and thoughtful feedback along the way. Special thanks to my son Sean who provided satisfying solutions when I painted myself into plot corners.

I'm especially appreciative of the team at Common Deer Press. My editor, Emily Stewart, is every author's dream: someone who not only appreciates what is already on the page but can see the story's potential if the plot was tweaked and the words polished just so. Thank you also to Shannon O'Toole for your marvelous cover illustrations and to David Moratto for the book's design.

Thank you to my children who provided boundless inspiration and to my husband who continues to be my biggest cheerleader. I couldn't do it without you, Rene.