

Zealot Script

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The Lunar Moth – Matias Travieso-Diaz

“What color moth do you want?”

The old man and his visitor sat on hassocks covered with a leather that was dark and cracked with age, in the spare mountain hut. They sipped autumn flush tea, savoring the amber liquid’s musky flavor, while the old man readied himself to deliver his lecture for the thousandth time.

“I don’t understand” replied the visitor, confused. “I want the best quality moth that you can sell me so my son will be a worthy successor. As I told you already, I am prepared to pay your price.” He was attired in the costume of a Mongol fighting man: a heavy fur-lined green coat fastened at the waist by a leather belt encrusted with jewels, from which hung his sword and a dagger. The man was young, but projected power and ferocity.

“It is not a question of price, and all my moths are of the highest quality. The color of the moth signifies the virtues that it will confer on a newborn. There are four moth types. The red moth is called Fafnir. The gold moth is Smaug. Nithogg is the name of the black moth, and the jade one answers to Hydra.”

“But what are their virtues? I want moths with the best virtues.” The visitor was visibly impatient.

“Let me explain, your Grace.” The old man got to his feet with some difficulty and poured some more tea into the visitor’s cup. “Each moth can confer an excellent virtue on the boy or girl to whom it is offered. A red Fafnir provides courage and strength. A gold Smaug bestows the gifts of concentration, persistence and devotion to one’s goal. A black Nithogg grants self-assurance and steadiness. The jade color in Hydra is the symbol of purity and restraint. So it is a matter of what virtues you would rather have your heir possess.”

“I want them all!” cried the visitor. “Give me all four!”

A smile grew on the old man’s face. “You don’t understand. Each of these moths is a powerful entity that must be mastered if it is going to be useful. Failure to subdue a moth causes you to become its thrall and its virtues become vices. For example, a controlling Fafnir will turn those he inhabits into reckless and prideful beings. So, you must consider what virtue is most important to you and, having obtained the right moth, must be careful to nurture your child so that the moth does not become dominant over him.”

“Does that mean that if I don’t buy a red moth from you my child will be a coward?”

“No. Each child is born with his own set of inner moths. Even if you do not get a Fafnir from me your child may turn out courageous and noble. But buying my Fafnir moth guarantees that the virtues associated with it will be greatly enhanced.”

The visitor’s irritation grew. “I have traveled across barren steppes and endless deserts, I and searched for this valley for months, and all you offer me is something I already have? I should slay you for wasting my time!”

The old man shrugged, unfazed by the threat. “Tell me, was your wife pregnant when you left her?”

The visitor was taken aback by the question. “Of course not. I want to have a moth or two with me before my bride and I seek to make a baby.”

“All is well, then. You can take a moth egg with you and deliver it before you make a child with her.”

Curiosity got the better of the visitor’s anger. He asked: “How will that work?”

The old man went to a cupboard behind a hanging bear skin, rummaged through shelves, and returned holding a bright red object the size of a tiny quail egg. “My moths are very small, as this egg demonstrates. All you have to do is bring the egg back home and have your wife swallow it whole, washing it down with salted milk tea or airag. The egg remains unfertilized within her until you have coupled and a new life has been produced. At that point, the egg will enter through the baby’s mouth just in time to hatch when the baby is born. It will then reside beneath the skin, on the base of the child’s skull for the rest of his or her life.”

“Will it become large, like a growth?”

“No. The moth will never be bigger than a baby’s little finger, and his presence will be undetected by all, specially its host.”

“If I take more than one egg, will the process be the same for each egg?”

“Yes, but do not to tempt fate by giving more than one egg to your wife. If you take two moths and they remain untamed, their character flaws will feed on each other. In addition, having two moths sitting next to each other in one’s skull will cause headaches and other discomforts.”

The visitor continued to be unhappy by these restrictions, but finally shook his head resignedly. “My father traveled to see you many years ago. He was the one who urged me to seek you out. He claims that I have a red moth in my head, and thanks to his oversight during my early years I have grown as fearless and proud as he is. I will follow your advice and take only one egg.”

“Wise move” agreed the old man. “What color moth do you want?”

“Ours is a nation of warriors, and is always in need of heroes. I shall take a red.”

Without further ado, the old man deposited the small red egg on the visitor’s hand. “Beware. These eggs are very sturdy and are protected by magic, but still can break. Carry it in your undergarments, close to the warmth of your body, and make sure you do not take a fall or

otherwise drop it. Now, for my payment....” The old man extended a hand and the visitor extracted a vial from his silk undershirt, replacing it with the egg he had just purchased.

The old man took the vial and asked with a mixture of greed and suspicion: “Is this fresh?” The visitor pursed his lips with disgust and replied: “Yes. I drew it this morning. Do you want to see the arm from which I took it?”

“That will not be necessary. Thanks. Your offering will sustain me for many months.” Then he gave a formal bow to his customer. “Happy roads and good luck to you and your family.” The visitor returned a curt bow, turned, and whisked away into the darkening afternoon.

Over the course of generations, the moth merchant exchanged thus his wares for blood with those who risked the perilous trip to his abode. Most of his customers bought Fafnirs or Smaugs, a few chose Nithoggs, almost none fancied Hydras. The results of their selections were for the most part predictable. Seldom did the Fafnir buyers succeed in imposing discipline on their offspring, so the ruling classes continued to be full of prideful men who led their subjects into bloody wars. Those Smaug children that were properly reared became renowned scientists, prolific artists or prudent and crafty rulers. Less fortunate Smaug children became misers, unrestrained collectors of trinkets, alchemists in endless search for the philosopher’s stone. Well-raised Nithoggs grew to be diplomats, compelling figures on the stage, magnetic preachers. Unrestrained Nithoggs were melancholic souls, often led to suicide or destructive behaviors such as addiction. Successful Hydras becoming revered religious leaders, even saints. Failed hydras reveled in sex, food, drugs, gaming, and dissolution.

The moth merchant seldom followed the trajectories of those receiving his wares. The only cases that attracted his interest were those in which a buyer had insisted on getting pairs of moths, because those instances always resulted in noteworthy calamities. Children with Fafnir and Smaug moths invariably became ferocious, greedy rulers bent on conquest and pillage. He could recall three of those, and each had brought about the end of a period of civilization. Fafnir and Nithogg combinations led to people who were anti-social, disdainful of others, and heartless; the recipe for a criminal, and the merchant could trace two of the worst among these monsters to his clients. Fafnir and Hydra combinations led to overbearing pleasure seekers; Smaug and Hydra produced notorious libertines; and so on.

But business is business and the merchant pursued his trade without considering the consequences of the sales he made. “There will always be misery and sorrow, yet the world endures, and so do I.”

Yet there came a time when heroes and sages were no longer valued. The number of visitors to the secluded hut decreased, and ultimately stopped altogether. Deprived of sustenance, the merchant felt himself growing older and weaker, and began to experience fear. What was he to do? He experimented drinking blood from goats and sheep, but animal blood barely nurtured him and did not stop the ravages of aging. He prepared himself to die.

He was lying on his cot one night, half dreaming of flying astride an eagle that was carrying his body through a cloudless sky towards Heaven, when a noise shattered his stupor. Someone had entered his hut.

With difficulty, the old man forced his rheumy eyes to focus on the newcomer. It was a woman, veiled and dressed in a white robe adorned with delicate pink trimming, wearing a formal white headdress with a pink peony in the middle: the funeral garments of a Chinese dowager.

“Are you coming to claim me?” he asked, trying to steady his voice.

“Your fate is unimportant. What matters is the business that brings me to you.”

“What is that?”

“I come to offer you a bargain that you may not refuse.”

After a silence, she continued: “I will extend your life for a thousand years in exchange for a service.”

“What kind of service?”

“I want you to breed a new kind of moth.”

“A new kind? There are only the four kinds I sell.”

“You are a powerful wizard. You must use your magic to create Pai Lung, the lunar white moth of death.”

“What sort of moth is this, and how do I create it?”

“You have to combine the properties of your moths in such a way as to make the resulting moth make his host wish to terminate all human life and be powerful enough to accomplish it.”

“Terminate all human life?”

“All.”

“Will this moth kill me as well?”

“You will survive for the period I offer you. Perhaps you will be the last man left alive.”

“But why would I agree to something so terrible?”

“Because if you don’t, you will die this very night. So, choose: instant death or a thousand-year reprieve.”

It was a dilemma. The old man loved life, and had clung to it for centuries by drinking man’s blood. What if the world was destroyed?

But he did care. His Fafnirs and Smaugs and Nithoggs caused pain, misery and carnage, but their effects were transitory. Pai Lung’s effects would be drastic, and much as he disdained mankind, he hated the idea of bringing death to everyone on earth. He queried:

“Why do you want to extinguish all human life? Isn’t it enough for you to take us one at a time?”

“My motives are not your concern. Maybe I am just tired of my job.”

The old man then tried to play for time:

“How long do I have to decide on your offer?”

“When the first light of the new day seeps under the door of your hut, you shall die unless you have agreed to my proposal.” With that, she vanished.

It was the longest night of the old man’s life. Conflicting memories struggled for his attention. The women who had spurned him. Serving a cruel master who rained blows and lashes on him, not caring for his suffering. His humiliating banishment from society for practicing his art. The kindness of a beggar who had shared a bun with him, when he was an abandoned orphan. A wedding ceremony in which the couple’s love for each other shone with a light brighter than a thousand torches. A man, during an earthquake, running into a collapsing building to rescue a child and tossing her into the safety of her parents’ arms as he was buried under a torrent of brick and mortar. After the same earthquake, the looters that ransacked the ruins and robbed and slayed the survivors. On and on: glory and shame, good and evil.

Finally, the decision was made for him through his overwhelming tiredness. As the first light of the morning seeped under the skin that served as door to his hut, he faced the reappearing figure in the white shroud and declared in a weak voice: “I will do it.”

He spent many months applying his magic to the task of transforming one of his eggs into that of a lunar white moth. At the end, he succeeded in turning a Nithogg egg into the pale white moth egg with the properties he sought. He was pondering how to let Death know of his accomplishment when the skin at the entrance to the hut was drawn aside and a young woman walked in.

She was beautiful, with milky white skin and glossy raven hair that cascaded down her neck. She wore a yellow gown of the purest silk and, except for a gold pendant with a large inlaid pearl, wore no jewelry or other adornment. Even though it was a cool spring day, she wore no outer garments. The old man wondered how she had managed to make it across the mountains.

“I have come for the Pai Lung egg” she declared, without preamble. The old man nodded, silently greeting Death’s emissary. He ambled to his cupboard and returned with a round egg, white as snow except for a few dark speckles like pinpricks. “Here it is.”

“It is imperfect” declared the girl, eyeing the speckles warily.

“I am sorry, it is the best I was able to do. If your mistress wishes to wait, I can spend more time trying to come up with a more perfect specimen. But be assured it works.”

After a long pause, the girl held out a small hand. “I accept it. It will be my companion until my nuptials, and then we shall become one with each other. I will raise my child with this egg in him, all its powers unchecked.”

“And when will I get the promised compensation for my efforts?” asked the old man testily.

“Here” said the girl, handing him a flask full of an amber liquid. “Drink this. You will never experience hunger and will never need to feed again.”

The old man seized the flask, tossed away the stopper, and drained the liquid in three long gulps. “It does not taste all that ...” He never finished the sentence, and dropped in a heap to the hut’s floor.

“Nobody said Death plays fair,” said the girl and disappeared.

Folk tales from that period tell of a beautiful princess who had a most wonderful child, a son who was pale as the moon and handsome and strong and clever, and grew to be the ruler of his country. As the prince came of age, however, he became heartless, tyrannical and obsessed with power, and soon proclaimed his intent to dominate the entire world and bend it to his will at whatever cost. He launched one war of conquest after another, until the remaining nations banded together and raised the most powerful army ever to be gathered under one flag. There was a titanic battle between the prince’s forces and those of his opponents. The battle lasted for weeks, and took the lives of thousands. At the end, though, the prince was defeated and had to seek refuge in his underground stronghold, with the enemy in hot pursuit.

He was prepared for the possibility of this final encounter. Together with his wizards and scientists, he had developed a weapon of unimaginable power. Once unleashed, this weapon would extinguish all life for many leagues and its vapors would rise in a mighty column that would pollute the air as it traveled around the globe, poisoning all lands which it touched. “If the world is not mine, it will belong to nobody,” he declared.

As the enemy’s charge broke through the barricades that protected the stronghold, the prince sat alone in his command room and grasped the lever that would ignite the weapon and destroy the world. The Fafnir in his soul growled with rage. Smaug pressed him on towards the culmination of his plans, and Nithogg shouted with dark despair his hatred for mankind. Yet a small voice in his heart pleaded for the preservation of all that was beautiful and good and deserving to live. It was a tiny bit of Hydra that the old man had smuggled into the egg, causing the speckles shown on the its surface – a Hydra that, unlooked for, had escaped the warping of the prince’s soul and now sowed doubt into his plan.

The prince debated with himself only for a few seconds, before the other moths drowned the pleas of the Hydra. But these seconds were enough: before he could press the lever and activate the weapon, an enemy soldier broke into the room and thrust a lance into the prince’s heart.

No human ears could perceive the keening screams of the dowager, nor could mortal eyes see her figure as she bent over the fallen prince to claim him. And it would have taken superhuman discernment to understand Death’s reproach: “That old merchant did not play fair, either.”



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