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Watersnake, Firesnake

by Jason Erik Lundberg

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There was a boy named Chan who loved his parents, though they did not love him back; he was not even given a first name. He had been born in the wrong month, during the wrong phase of the moon, his parents told him, and had brought them nothing but bad luck. The promotion at the factory promised to his father was taken away at the last moment. The garden his mother worked in nearly every day never produced anything more than the most meager of weeds since Chan's birth. It was often sunny in the little Chinese village, but there was an almost constant gloom over their house, as if a rogue cloud were blocking the sun only over their property. And his parents, of course, blamed Chan for everything.

He was small for his age, and usually quiet. He liked to listen to people instead of talking, filling himself with stories. He was a good boy and always did as he was told, and could see the good in his parents, even if others couldn't. Every so often, his mother would allow him a sweet, or his father would bring home an origami folding kit. They didn't like to show it to others, but his parents could be kind. Chan was patient and knew they would love him eventually.

He was digging one day between the fence and the west side of the house for grubs to feed to his pet chameleon, Rainbow. It was a warm July day not long after his tenth birthday. He often went there because it was cool and damp from the shade of the trees, and the worms seemed to like it there. He never took more than he needed, then he thanked the grubs for sacrificing their lives so that Rainbow could remain living and being his pet. Chan was very kind-hearted when it came to grubs.

As Chan was digging with his stick, he hit something hard and it made a loud clang. He brought the stick down again and heard the same metal noise. Chan thought it might be treasure, since his aunt had found a

jewelry box filled with pearls in her garden last year. He scrabbled and dug for ten more minutes before uncovering the egg. It was heavier than it looked.

The egg was the size of a goose egg, but black with flecks of silver and red running across its surface. When he held it, a warmth spread throughout his body, and he had the momentary impression of flying. It seemed to be unbreakable as well, since it remained whole after Chan tripped over his own shoes and dropped it on the ground.

He snuck back to his room and set the egg on a small pillow, then surrounded it with old shirts and socks so that it would be warm. Then he placed the pillow in the top drawer of his dresser. He would peek at the egg every chance he got, which wasn't much because of all his chores. But on those occasions, he would look at the egg, and stroke it with a finger, and all the hairs on the back of his neck would stand on end.

After three weeks of having the egg, strangers came to call. Chan's mother was ripping out the weeds in the back garden and didn't hear the knock, so Chan answered the door. Before him stood a dark man with a bald head and a serious look on his face, and a beautiful woman with brown hair and a brilliant smile. The woman looked slightly Asian, but her skin was paler, nearly translucent in places, revealing strong blue veins underneath. Her grey eyes were round instead of almond, and she wore deep blue robes. The man had skin the color of burnt umber, and was dressed in a white shirt and dark green slacks; Chan guessed he came from Hong Kong, since most Westerners in the area lived or visited there.

"Greetings, Master Chan," the woman said in perfect Mandarin. "I understand you have just unearthed something rather valuable."

The man next to her smiled briefly, then placed his hands in his pockets.

"I'm sorry?" Chan said. His voice shook slightly.

"I believe you have found a rare egg that we have been searching for," the woman said. "It is a very precious item, that egg. May we see it?"

"I . . . I don't know," said Chan. He was always told never to talk to strangers, let alone bring them into the house. He had already broken the first rule, and his mother would be upset enough about that . . . "No, I'm sorry."

The woman's smile dropped slightly. "But Master Chan, we could compensate you for it. Our Master is very wealthy and would like to reward you. We have a mirror edged with the finest gold scripting that was given to the Emperor as a gift from the Czar of Russia."

"No, thank you."

"We have a maple seedling that will grow and spread and will never die. It will be the envy of the entire neighborhood."

"No."

"We have gold, enough gold that your family will never be hungry."

Just then, Chan's mother, having heard the voices from the back yard, appeared in the doorway behind Chan, looming over him.

"Can I help you?" she said in a voice that indicated how much she disliked strangers who came to call

unannounced.

"Yes, my lady," the woman with blue robes said. "I believe your son has discovered something of great worth to myself and my brother." She indicated the dark man next to her with her head. Chan found it difficult to believe they were related. "An egg, quite a rare one."

"My son has found no such egg," Chan's mother said. "Have you, boy?"

Chan shook his head. He had not told his parents about the egg, and he was sure to be punished if they found out. They might even take the egg away from him.

"There, you see?" his mother said. "Now if you have no further business here, I will bid you a good day."

The woman's smile disappeared and she turned to her brother, who was clenching his fists. "Very well," she said. "We will be on our way. Thank you for your time, my lady." The man and woman turned and walked past the gate to the street, and then were gone from view.

Chan's mother stepped back inside the house and said, "Get back to your chores," before disappearing into the back garden again. Chan picked up the small broom he had left against the wall and began sweeping the front room again. He thought about the strangers, about the beautiful smile on the woman, about the big strong hands of the dark man, and started to shiver. How had they known about his egg?

A week later, Chan had just blown out the candle and was preparing to sleep when he heard a small scrabbling sound from the corner of his room. He looked up, but his eyes had not yet adjusted to the dark. The sound from the corner came again, and he leapt out of bed to push the window up and out on its hinge. Moonlight flooded into the room and lit upon a large figure clothed entirely in black, peering into the bottom drawer of his dresser. Chan let out a loud yelp and backed against the wall. The robber turned quickly at the sound, then burst into a brilliant green flame and disappeared. A scorched outline of the intruder stained the wall next to the dresser, then faded away in a wisp of smoke.

Chan's mother and father entered the room a moment later, put out and sleepy.

"What's the matter?" his father said in a thick voice.

"A man!" Chan shouted. "A man was in my room!"

Chan's father looked in every corner of the room, underneath things and behind things, then said. "There's no one here."

"No, he's not here anymore," Chan said. "He caught on fire and went away."

Chan's father looked at his mother, who gave an exasperated sigh. "You were having a nightmare," she said.

"No, I wasn't! There really was a man in here!"

Chan's father made for the door with his mother behind him. "It was a bad dream, boy. Go back to sleep." And then, Chan was alone again.

He couldn't sleep for the rest of the night, jerking upright at every little sound. He dozed off just as the faint glow of daylight seeped through the cracks in the window. In the morning, his mother came in two hours after he was supposed to wake, and chided him for staying in bed, for wasting the day away. She pulled him out of bed, spanked him twice for his laziness, then told him to get dressed.

Before he went out to cook breakfast, he opened the top drawer of his dresser and looked inside. The egg still lay bundled in the nest of shirts and socks, but a small crack had appeared lengthwise on the surface. Chan frowned. The robber must have jostled the dresser and knocked the egg against the walls of the drawer. But then Chan remembered how the egg didn't break when he accidentally dropped it. If the robber hadn't cracked the egg, then it must be starting to hatch.

After he was done with his chores, Chan went into his room for Rainbow, so that he could take the lizard outside to run around and get some fresh air. Rainbow curled up in Chan's front pocket, then ran in great circles once released into the back yard. Chan laughed as he scurried up and down trees and over every bit of land in the yard. Rainbow was the most curious lizard Chan had ever seen.

Chan stopped laughing when he saw Rainbow at the edge of the small pond in the back corner. It was Rainbow's favorite place to go, where he could swim around, or sun himself on a large flat rock, or munch leaves. But he wasn't going in. He stared at the water and bobbed his head up and down a few times. Then with a furious rush, he leapt into the water and bit at its surface.

The pond exploded in a geyser of water, leaves, twigs, and rocks. Chan heard something like a burbling scream as the rush of solid water streamed at him, then turned away at the last second. The living water twisted and writhed and rose into the sky, higher and higher until it was nothing but a dot, then nothing at all.

Chan found Rainbow by the side of the ruined pond, weak and breathing quickly, but otherwise all right. The pond itself was a mess. Mud and rocks had been thrown everywhere. Chan held Rainbow and stroked his head and told him what a good chameleon he was. Then Chan's mother surged out of the back door, and Chan knew he was in for the worst spanking of his life. Even if the garden had never been successful, Chan's mother still took pride in the work she did. And as Chan guessed, she was furious about the state it was in now.

Chan was sent to bed early, with only a bit of rice and some water for his dinner. He curled up on his bed and listened to his parents arguing down the hall in the kitchen, and tried to sleep. Eventually, he got up and went to his dresser drawer. The crack in the black egg had lengthened, and produced many other cracks that splintered off in all directions. He touched a finger to the main crack, and instead of the warmth he normally felt, it was as if his insides had caught fire. He no longer felt like Chan, but like a magnificent bird, soaring high above the earth and trailing fire behind him in the sky. Wind rippled through his hair and feathers, and the sweet smell of burning leaves filled his nostrils. He was free from responsibilities, from chores, from his parents. Free.

He came back to his body as his finger left the crack in the egg, and he breathed hard. He walked over to his homemade wooden and glass terrarium and lifted up the lid, but Rainbow shrank from his touch. Chan closed the lid and looked inside. Rainbow shook like a leaf in the wind. Chan sighed, then crawled back into bed. By the time his head touched the pillow, he was asleep.

The next day, he was put to cleaning the mess left behind at the pond. There was no water left, except for that which had turned the ground to mud, so Chan straightened up the area as best he could. After four hours, the dent in the ground had come to somewhat resemble a pond again, and his mother let him inside for lunch.

After eating, he stole to his bedroom to check on the egg. The crack was much larger, and chips of eggshell lay on the shirts surrounding the egg. As Chan watched, the egg moved slightly. It was time.

Chan crept out to the kitchen, but his mother was no longer there. He could hear faint snores coming from his parents' bedroom, and guessed she had gone in to take a nap. He went back to his room, scooped up the egg in its shirt nest, and took it outside.

He watched it for hours. The sun slowly made its way downward, and by evening, the egg still had not finished hatching. The entire surface was now covered with tiny cracks. It was extremely hot to the touch, and the heat radiated outward. Chan could feel it from where he was sitting, three feet away. He hoped that what hatched would be interesting; a tortoise maybe, or another chameleon as a playmate for Rainbow.

Footsteps landed behind him, and Chan expected to see his parents. He flinched, knowing that they would be upset. He turned around and prepared to face his punishment.

It wasn't his parents. Instead, the strange man and woman from a week ago stood there. The woman's blue robes dripped water in a constant dribble, as if the water was coming from within her. And the man's skin seemed to glow with a green light, which flickered and wavered, giving the impression of a low fire.

Chan stood up and backed away.

"So, Master Chan," the woman said in a burbling voice, taking a step toward him. "It appears you lied to us."

"No . . ."

"Give us the egg, or we will kill your parents," the man said, the first words Chan had ever heard him say. "We have them bound to their bed, and will slit their throats. We have killed before, and will have no trouble doing it again."

A shiver traveled the length of Chan's body and settled at the base of his neck. He could just imagine his parents tied up and helpless, and he almost started crying.

"You must give us ownership of the egg willingly," the dark man said, his voice deep and rumbling. "We will have the phoenix bird, and control the fate of the world. It is the key to releasing our Master. Give it to us, now!"

Chan shook his head, wishing his parents were there. The strange man and woman advanced on him, and Chan took another step back, not paying attention to where he was going. He stepped on the egg, which gave slightly with a crunching sound, then, overbalanced, Chan toppled onto his back. He looked up in time to see the man and woman stop, their faces frozen in surprise.

And in that moment, the egg hatched.

A burst of flame erupted from the egg, and shot into the sky. It circled the house three times, taking the form of a great bird, then descended toward Chan. Chan screamed and threw his arms in front of his face, ready to be burned alive. But all he felt was a slight thump as a very large bird landed on his shoulder. Chan opened his eyes. The bird's feathers were the bright reds, oranges, and yellows of flame. As it gripped his shoulder, Chan realized it was talking to him, a birdlike voice in his head.

"What do you wish of me, my master?" it trilled.

Chan looked over as the man and woman shimmered. A bright light seemed to unfurl from the both of them, lengthening and growing until they were twenty feet in length. They hovered over the ground, and as their faces resolved, and whiskers sprouted from their elongated muzzles, Chan understood that they were dragons, but not the kind he was used to hearing about. Chinese dragons were usually benevolent, and protected mankind, while these two definitely wanted to hurt him. Maybe foreign dragons were not supposed to be good. The woman had transformed into a snake-like dragon made entirely of water, and the man a dragon of green fire. They snapped their jaws open and shut several times, then flew like loose ribbons toward the house. Chan saw where they were headed and yelled to the phoenix bird on his shoulder.

"Save my parents!" he commanded, and the phoenix lifted off, igniting in mid-air. It streaked toward the two dragons, and rained fire upon them. The water dragon hissed and spat as its form sizzled, and the green fire dragon howled as the phoenix fire burned through its own flames. The phoenix pecked and dove, and lured the dragons away from the house. The three creatures lifted high into the sky, and disappeared into the clouds. Chan could see bursts of flame like lightning within the clouds, and the air filled with electricity. The fine hairs on his arms and the back of his neck stood on end. The battle seemed to go on for hours, then things went quiet, and Chan could sense no activity above him. A solitary speck drifted down from the clouds, gliding down and down and then crashing to the ground at Chan's feet. It was the phoenix. It had won.

Chan picked the phoenix up and cradled it in his arms. Its feathers had been singed badly, and large gashes appeared on its chest and head. Its breath rattled in its throat.

"Thank you, phoenix," Chan said, carrying it across the yard.

"They will not be back," the phoenix warbled in Chan's head. "It is time for me to die, but do not fear. You will need me again, and when the time is right, I will return to you." It exhaled one more time, then was still. Chan placed it on the ground and watched as it burst into flame one final time, reducing its body to ashes. After the flames had died down, Chan saw that an egg peeked through the ashes on the ground, identical to the last egg. A small sprout of green stuck out of the ashes as well, no longer than the length of his thumb; a single spark of plant life in his mother's fallow garden. He picked the egg up and held it to his chest. A pleasant warmth wiggled from the tips of his fingers to the tips of his toes. He took the egg inside, and placed it back in his dresser drawer.

Chan closed the drawer, and walked across the hall to his parents' bedroom. They lay on the bed with their arms behind their backs and their feet bound together. Dirty rags had been stuffed in their mouths. And instead of looking happy to see Chan, their eyes blazed with anger. If he freed them, he would still be punished; they had not seen that he had saved their lives with the phoenix. He would show the small sprout to his mother later, and hope that she would believe that her luck in the garden had changed. Chan briefly wondered how much better his life would be if he left his parents like this. A smile crept across his face, then he sighed, and began loosening the nearest rope.

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