

## *Moths of Hades*

By Hannu Hirvonen

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For rights inquiries, please contact:

Elina Ahlbäck  
Literary Agent , CEO  
Tel. + 358 400 548 402 | [elina@ahlbackagency.com](mailto:elina@ahlbackagency.com)

Elina Ahlbäck Literary Agency Ltd.  
Korkeavuorenkatu 37  
FI-00130 HELSINKI  
FINLAND  
Website: [www.ahlbackagency.com](http://www.ahlbackagency.com)

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## **The End of Summer**

Mii sat behind Dad and sulked. It felt like Mom had read Mii's mind.

“You'll make new friends there sure enough.”

“I don't want new friends. The old ones were just fine.”

“Hmmm,” mom started, but thought better of continuing the conversation. After all they had been through it many times already.

“We should be able to see it behind that hill,” Dad said. “Golden Bay.”

Dad continued, “Golden Bay is a famous place. We've been lucky with the weather. It'll be a great end to our vacation. There, I can see it!”

Dad was getting really excited. A familiar song happened to come on the radio. “It's Now or Never” by Elvis.

“Hey! The King is speaking. A voice from behind the grave,” dad exclaimed exuberantly.

“Wasn't Olavi Virta the King? ‘Remember the Silver Moon...’”

The view made mom stop mid-sentence:

“Oh!”

Mii did not want to get excited, but as the evening sun glistened ahead, even she leaned forward and said almost involuntarily, “Lovely.”

“Isn't it! We'll just head down through here for about 15 minutes,” Dad said.

“Was this already in the bling-bling period?” Mom asked.

“What?” Dad said, confused.

“This song. By Elvis.”

“Oh no, absolutely not. This is from the 60's.” Golden Bay appeared in all its glory under the evening sun, worthy of its name. Dark mountain slopes bordered it on both sides. You could see the open sea far out on the horizon.

The whole bay was glistening gold. There was a little glow of red forming, like glinting copper or bronze. Soon only the steep rocky hill at the bottom of the bay would be lit by the sun. The sun would set beyond the horizon and the glow of Golden Bay would be snuffed out. But now the bay was glowing and glistening like a fairytale treasure.

“Bling bling,” Dad said.

Mii kept looking around in all directions. On the left was just the side of a mountain. On Mom’s side the mountain dipped steeply down to the shore. Mii noticed something odd on the shore. She unbuckled her seatbelt and pushed over to the right side to see.

“Milla!” Dad shouted. “What are you doing back there? Seatbelt on right now!”

Mii fumbled for her seatbelt but was too impatient to click it on properly.

“What on earth is that there?” she asked.

“Where?” Mom replied.

“Down there on the beach. What is that?”

“Oh that. Those are those caterpillars.”

“Silk worms?”

“Spinner moths.” “Those trees over there are bird cherry trees,” mom explained, continuing, “Spinner moth caterpillars eat their leaves and make that, well, that. Uh. Gauze.”

“No, what are those houses? And those people?”

“At the end of the summer caterpillars wouldn’t,” Dad started.

Mom talked over him, “What houses? What people? I can’t see any people down there.”

“I thought spinners were a type of bird,” Dad tried to interrupt.

“Those people right there! Are you blind or something?” Mii was almost shouting and turned to look out the back window, accidentally kicking her dad’s seat.

“Buckle up right now!” Dad shouted.

Just then the road turned directly towards the setting sun, as if out of pure malice. The car’s scratched windshield turned into a glowing wall.

The oncoming trucker only had time to sound his horn as he made his way uphill around the bend. Nothing else could be done. It all happened so fast.

## Lord of the Moths

Thousands of caterpillars were busy at work. The lord of the spinner moths strode along in the silence of the trees inspecting his troops. He reached towards a web-covered branch and felt the fine fabric between his fingers.

“As it should be,” a quiet voice said from beneath the hood of the walker. “Make it beautiful.”

Then he wheeled around. He just barely managed to step out of the way of the strange procession.

“We are, we are,” mumbled the gnarled group as they slowly shuffled forward.

One stumbled on the exposed roots that crisscrossed the path, and now and then the whole procession pressed together as the first one stopped to think about where they were headed.

“We are, we are.”

The first one in the group had a stethoscope dangling around his neck, a doctor’s hearing aid. The next was carrying an old and beat-up briefcase in a hand on an arm that looked like it had stretched longer from the weight. The third had a measuring tape around his neck, and the fourth, the only woman in the group, had seemingly spent a long career in dusty archives. She had her hair in such a tight bun that it pulled on the paper-thin parchment-yellow skin of her face.

“We are, we are,” they all muttered in unison. Then the first stopped in his tracks. He looked around seeming somehow perplexed.

“Who were we again?”

They all just stood there pressed together in a pile-up. They were looking at each other with obvious confusion. The doctor’s thin fingers fiddled with his stethoscope, and he repeated again, “Who were we again?”

Then the fifth, the last in the procession, turned and took a step in the direction they had just come from. He had a toolbox in his hand and a knife-sharpened carpenter’s pencil in the breast pocket of his blue vest. The archivist followed the carpenter and soon the others did as well. The same mumbling started all over again.

“We are, we are.”

The Lord of the Moths watched after the group. He let out a dry chuckle, “Who were we again? Hmm. At least you were a little early.”

The spinner moth caterpillars continued their quiet work.

“Keep it up. Make it beautiful,” the Lord of the Moths said quietly. “The other travelers will arrive soon as well I believe.”

Then he heard a loud noise from above.

## **Elvis has Left the Building**

Everything happened very slowly.

The truck's horn blasted a hollow, long sound. Breaks screeched. The passenger car hit the rear wheel of the trailer. The front of the car crumpled like a paper cup under a heavy weight. The airbags filled the front of the car. Mii's parents were flung into the airbags simultaneously as if they had practiced it dozens of times before. Mii flew past her mother's left shoulder toward the windshield. The trailer's back door opened ponderously like an automatic garage door, and red apples began to fall out. It was as if they had realized that their chance for escape had finally presented itself.

Mii flew in an arc over the road and a low yellow safety rail. The escaped apples rolled down the rocky hill hopping and jumping like dolphins playing around a sailboat. Mii hit the ground on the hillside and rolled a good distance downhill until friction and gravity and probably a few other physical laws stopped her almost at the base of the bird cherry trees. Mii whimpered quietly. Red apples rolled around here and there; one came to rest right in Mii's hand. The girl looked at the apple without understanding what had just happened. Then she lost the last shreds of consciousness.

Up the hill the truck driver got out of his cab with trembling legs. He barely managed to dial the emergency number. The operator answered. The driver slumped down on the road and gasped the necessary information in a machine-like voice to the operator. Mii's family's car had turned on its side in the crash and slid a few dozen meters to the edge of the hill. There it thumped back onto its wheels and was now gasping for air with the hood rolled up like a can of sardines.

## A Meeting

“This is not how it was supposed to go,” the Lord of the Moths whispered quietly to himself.

“We are, we are,” came the muttering behind him.

“Get on out of here. The sun will set soon.” Mii moved. The Lord of the Moths knelt next to her. Then Mii woke up. Well, actually Mii did not wake up, at least not completely. Her body was still lying sprawled in exactly the same place, but a sort of transparent figure made of something like mist rose from it. It had exactly the same features as Mii.

“Oh,” the Lord of the Moths said. Mii’s figure sat up. The legs were still joined as the same girl, but her upper body was now divided in two—7 the body lying on the ground and the ghost slowly waking from its dozing. Something like that can surely be called a ghost.

Mii’s ghost opened its eyes. She was surprised to see the Lord of the Moths in front of her.

“Who are you? Were you the one just now down on the shore of Golden Bay?”

The Lord of the Moths sneered, “I was. And I still am. Were you just up there?”

Mii looked up. The whole hill was full of apples. She did not understand in the least what had happened.

“I am Alfred, Lord of the Moths. Promise me you won’t get scared if I tell you something?”

“What?”

“First the promise. We don’t have much time.”

“How can I know I won’t get scared? If I don’t know what it is.”

The Lord of the Moths furrowed his brow. He had forgotten a long time ago what it was like to talk to children. Or teenagers.

“Hmph. Never mind. The sun is about to set. I’m just saying that you don’t need to be afraid of anything.”

“What anything?”

The Lord of the Moths placed his hand on Mii’s ghost’s shoulder. He remembered that among the living this was the appropriate thing to do in situations like this.

“Dear girl. I believe that you have died.”

## Sunset

The truck driver was still sitting on the road with the cell phone in his hand. He was shaking and swallowing and trying to figure out what had just happened. A Citroën hit him. It wasn't his fault. You can tell them immediately by the headlights. Nobody could blame him. A Big Cat DS, that's what it was. Soon he would get up and help the passengers out of the car. No, have to wait for the ambulance. It'll be here soon. Very soon.

The truck driver glanced carefully at the car lying at the side of the road. At that moment the glow coming from the bay faded. Not suddenly like flicking an electric switch, but slower. As if someone had turned a gas lamp carefully down to a smaller flame. The truck driver remembered a song from way back when, probably from his childhood. He started carefully, "Every night when the lights go out."

The truck driver swallowed again. Golden Bay had turned dark gray, and only the top of the hill by the bay was still bathed in the last rays of the sun.

"And the night closes in..."

At that point the sun disappeared behind a tall island. All of Golden Bay fell into darkness.

## The City Awakens

Mii no longer asked questions. She just followed the strange figure, the Lord of the Moths. He reminded Mii of their old, long since dead, summertime neighbor. The neighbor had been thin and bony, terribly old and stiff, but still always on the same wavelength with Mii. Once he even hid Mii in his sauna when Mii's family was supposed to be heading home from the cottage. Just for a moment though. Just long enough for her to eat the ice-creamsicle the neighbor had given her. Mii must have only been about four years old. So it happened sometime long, long ago.

“Why are you called the Lord of the Moths?” Mii asked.

“You shall soon see.”

“I thought they were silk worms,” Mii said, “the caterpillars. Dad was saying that spinners are birds.”

The Lord of the Moths stopped and recited formally, “*Surely joy the hours will hold, Lying on thy cot of gold, Hearing the spinner bird singing.* Aleksis Kivi, ‘The Song of my Heart.’ Wonderful poem.”

Then he continued in a more normal voice. “These, however, are caterpillars. Bird cherry spinner moth caterpillars. Look! Now it begins”.

As if by common accord, the bird cherry trees laced with moth gauze began to change shape. They woke up to life and movement. Their branches groping in all directions formed straight horizontal and vertical lines. As the gauze fabric stretched into wall-like surfaces, they became colorful like rice paper lantern shades. Smaller branches tore rectangular holes into the walls as windows; there were a few round holes, too. The larger trees stretched themselves into another layer and the highest even with towers and bay windows adorning them.

Every building had a few lanterns and a wing or two. Roofs took form as a rhythmic progression of dark waves. Roots turned into stairways in front of the doors, and young trees bent into handrails. Soon the pest-infested bird cherry grove had transformed into a small, but to tell the truth, strangely beautiful city. Just like old wooden seaside towns often are. Only a gray stone church in the town center was missing from the picture. Perhaps the rocky hill could fill in for it.

Mii was speechless. She just stood there looking at the miracle before her.

“MAKE WAY! MAKE WAY!” came a loud shout just behind Mii. She only just managed to jump out of the way.

While there was something familiar to Mii in the Lord of the Moths, this newcomer was far stranger. The creature was about two meters tall, black and shiny from head to toe. Even its small button-like eyes were a glistening black like the tips of patent leather shoes. From its head rose a handsome, stout horn. The creature walked swaying jerkily on its back feet and waving in all directions with its other legs. It held a long staff in one of its limbs. At the head of the staff was a horn identical to that on the creature’s head.

“MAKE WAY!”

Mii thought the creature looked like a bad guy in a space adventure. Darth Vader meets a beetle.

“He is a European rhinoceros beetle, the Lord of the Moths explained. He continued, “A master craftsman from Germany. Working for the roads department.”

Mii heard rattling coming it seemed from every direction.

“Here they come. I like this,” the Lord of the Moths said, almost seeming excited.

Small black beetles appeared from every crack and hole between the hill and the shore. Beetles and cockroaches of every description. All kinds of dark, hard creatures. Every place swarmed with them, and more kept pouring out from underground. Centipedes and millipedes and woodlice. It was as if lumpy, shiny oil or tar were pouring out of the ground. The beetles formed small streams, and the streams grew in size becoming a wide river. The river branched out in tongues and swirls into the yard of every house. It felt as if every beetle knew its place and found the exact spot it needed to be down to the millimeter. An intermittent, lighter center line formed in the middle of the main stream, probably made by silverfish or some other bug and in a few places on that rustling road even appeared some dimly glowing crosswalk lines.

The rhino beetle had stopped in place and was examining the situation. It had raised its staff high into the air. The stream ran between buildings, branching all the way to the shore and purposefully forming a black rustling layer in front of even the outermost buildings.

“ROOOOOAD!” the rhino beetle shouted again with a loud voice. Then it struck its horned staff on the ground, “STOP!”

The rustling that had filled the air suddenly stopped. Every single one of the millions of beetles, centipedes, and cockroaches stopped in its tracks. It was as if none of them had ever been a living thing, but were rather the creation of a ceramic artist trained in the occult sciences. Between the houses there was now a shiny-surfaced, black road. It was just as smooth as a brand new road in any city. In a real city.

“That can’t be real,” Mii sighed. The Lord of the Moths sneered, “There is real, and then there is real. Reality can be cut with a knife like fog.”

“You can’t cut fog with a knife,” Mii tried to protest.

The Lord of the Moths ignored her. “Now we have to go meet the old lady. She can decide what we shall do with you.”

## **The Twins**

A pack of very large rats had appeared on the streets and at the corners of the houses from somewhere. They scampered around on their back feet looking extremely important and rushed. On each one's shoulder hung a bag of the same type carried by postmen. One of them stopped to stare at Mii with his dark eyes. Its snout twitched a bit. Its front legs were jerking around idly like the paws of a dog begging for a food. The yellowish brown teeth protruding from its mouth made the rat look a little pitiful and perhaps a little cute as well. It reminded Mii of her cousins' pet rats, although it was a lot bigger.

The rat stopped staring, squeaked quietly, and dug some seeds out of its bag. The rat threw them in a wide arc across the road, somewhat in the same manner as a farmer spreading seeds on a field in olden days. Dozens of small lights began to glow on the side of the road.

"Glow worms," the Lord of the Moths explained, and then strode on without giving Mii a chance to stop and admire the glow. Not that there was any need to admire them in that specific spot. The glow worms were everywhere. They found their places with the same determination as the beetles that had formed the road, forming garlands around trees and lamps on door frames.

"Bioluminescence. They could stand to try that on the other side as well," the Lord of the Moths said.

"Where?" Mii asked.

"Where you... Argh. Nevermind."

Mii saw a strange pair or siblings on the porch of one of the houses. They sat in a small two person swing holding each other by the hand. The girls lacked all facial expression. They just stared with their eyes fixed directly on Mii. When they pumped their swing, their feet rose up in the air in perfect time. The hair on the forehead of the one on the right was pinned to the right and that of the one sitting on the left to the left. They were like mirror images of each other. The swing creaked with every motion. Its back or front legs left the ground with each swing. Mii thought the swing looked like a weird animal jumping in place holding these two pale girls in its lap.

“Be careful,” the Lord of the Moths yelled at the girls. After a short pause he continued, “Speed kills.”

Mii thought she saw something resembling laughter in the girls’ eyes. Their faces, however, stayed exactly as they were before, pale and expressionless, but their eyes showed something else. Laughter.

“It’s a little inside joke,” the Lord of the Moths explained.

“There can never be too much laughter in the world. Especially here.”

Mii understood. If that was laughter, there definitely was not too much of it here.

## **In the Car**

Mii's mom opened her eyes. For some reason she was staring at a large white pillow in front of her. She tried to touch it. Her hand would not rise. The hand was under the pillow. It was probably asleep. She could hear quiet hissing and sizzling from in front of her. A quiet humming came from somewhere.

“And he has a blue car. And the car makes a sound like this. Whir-whir.”

But their car wasn't blue, Mii's mom thought. She looked to her side. Pauli was sleeping there with his cheek resting on his right shoulder like that one time in the theater. At least this time he wasn't snoring. He also had a large pillow in front of him. Mii's mom tried to look to the back seat, but her neck wouldn't turn that far. It seemed to move to the other direction. Then she noticed<sup>15</sup> something strange. A small village had appeared on the shore at the bottom of the hill. Cute, old houses and small streets. They'd probably have a nice little café down there. Let's have a coffee and continue our drive.

The humming continued, “Towards the blue world of dreams.”

Mii's mom fell asleep again.

## **A Cat of Two Worlds**

A very small old lady was sitting at the back of the room in a rocking chair. In her lap was a cat. While the old lady was small and wizened, the cat seemed livelier. Mii recognized it as a Norwegian forest cat. The cat looked at Mii with fiery eyes and waved its tail as if dusting the old lady. Maybe she needed it. She was so very old.

“You seem to like cats?” the old lady asked with a worn, quiet voice.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You recognized it straight away, is that so?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a cat?”

“No, I don’t. We live in the city.”

Mii paused and corrected herself, “Or we lived in the city.”

“Hmm. Well this one is not mine either. He lives here. Moves around day and night. Cats can do that. Live in two worlds.”

The old lady let out a dry chuckle, “I guess they sleep enough.”

The house looked exactly as a withered old lady’s house should . Old, dusty furniture. Paintings from which stared out the stern faces of centuries past. Back then there certainly was no cosmetic surgery. An emerald green glass vase in the corner was filled with dry flowers. And another held cattails. Glass cases were full of delicate porcelain and leather-bound books that nobody had even opened in at least two hundred years. They probably had dead butterflies inside them.

“What do you think?” the old lady asked. Mii had no time to respond.

“This is what it is like here. Everything is old. Except for this cat.”

The cat didn’t look like a kitten anymore either, Mii thought. She did not say anything though. For some reason Mii felt it was better to keep quiet in that house.

“Although he is no kitten anymore either,” the old lady said.

The cat glanced at the old lady as if offended. Then it jumped on the floor and stretched for a moment. The cat started to walk towards Mii taking swaying, narrow steps.

The old lady was surprised, “Would you look at that! This does not happen very often. You seem to be a special case. What brought you here?”

“She,” the Lord of the Moths began, but the old lady interrupted straight away.

“No! Let the girl tell it herself. Come here.”

Mii talked with the old lady for a long time. She told the lady about herself and how she had ended up there. Only as she was telling her story did Mii realize what had happened. She had been in an accident and was now a ghost, and because of that she had ended up in this strange town. It did not actually even feel that bad. The only thing Mii was worried about was her parents’ fate. What happened to them? Would they be coming here as well? The old lady had no answer to that.

“Well there’s one good thing about all this,” Mii said to the old lady.

“What is that?”

“Now I don’t have to go to that new school.”

The warmth and understanding disappeared from the old lady’s face as if they had been wiped off with a wet towel. She snapped, “Stupid girl! You’d rather be here than go to a new school!”

Mii’s face went red.

The old lady now addressed the Lord of the Moths, “Alfred! Take the girl away. She is definitely not ready yet. Everyone who blushes is still at least a little bit alive.”

Then she was talking more to herself—at least she was talking very quietly—“And if she is talking that stupidly, she is definitely alive.”

The old lady rocked in her chair as if she were calming herself down. Mii thought it best to be quiet.

The ticking of a clock would have been a perfect addition to that silence. Something to listen to. There was only silence in this house. And the creaking of the old lady’s rocking chair.

After a while the old lady spoke to Mii again. She did not seem angry anymore.

“Well that is good. At least when you think about what the alternative is. Maybe you still have hope. Delicate strands... The old lady sighed. “Of course we cannot get involved in any way. The dark ones would not like that.”

The old lady paused to think for a moment.

“I guess that is why the cat... Well. Get on out of here. Perhaps we shall meet again

The old lady rocked in her chair. Mii was already at the door when she heard a quiet chuckle, “A cat of two worlds.”