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Opening extract from

Pathfinder: A Todhunter Moon Adventure

Written by

Angie Sage

Published by

Bloomsbury Publishing PLC

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PathFinder

The Magykal World of TodHunter Moon

ANGIE SAGE



BLOOMSBURY

LONDON NEW DELHI NEW YORK SYDNEY

Part I

On the Beach

A distant bell tolled. On an ancient beach Dan Moon watched a line of flickering lights appear and disappear as they wound through sand dunes, heading towards him. It was three o'clock in the morning on MidSummer's Day. Holding his own lantern high, Dan stood in the middle of a circle of rugs on the sand, watching the lights move closer. Dan's bare feet were cold, and despite his heavy black cloak, he shivered in the pre-dawn chill.

Dan saw the first of the lights – a flickering candle encased in a glass lantern – emerge from the dunes. It was carried by a dark-cloaked figure, who was quickly followed by others. They walked slowly across the sand, heading towards what they called the MidSummer Circle. Silently, one by one they sat down on the rugs, making a circle around Dan.

The dark-cloaked group were not the only ones making their way towards the beach. In the shadows of the dunes the square figure of a woman moved hurriedly along a path she had marked out earlier that day. The woman, Mitza Draddenmora Draa, was late. She had intended to be in her hiding place before everyone began to arrive, but she had been delayed by having to help Dan Moon pull out a pile of moth-eaten rugs from under her bed in the spare room. And, what was worse, she had to smile while she was doing it because Mitza had to

be a good houseguest, and more importantly, be above suspicion. Consequently she was not in a good mood. She didn't like being late, she didn't like sand, she didn't like walking and she certainly didn't like what she called "dratted kids". Still, it would all be worth it – she hoped.

Covered in sand after losing her footing down a dune, Mitza found her hiding place behind a small hillock of sand. It was near enough to hear what was being said and yet far enough away to make a quick exit without being seen. She settled down among the spiky dune grass and tried not to think about sand snakes.

Dan Moon, whip-thin, tall and dark, fiddled with the lapis lazuli stone that hung from a string around his neck. He had performed the MidSummer Circle more times than he liked to remember, but that night Dan was nervous – because for the first time his only child, Alice TodHunter Moon, twelve years old (and so now considered to have come of age) was old enough to hear it. Alice, who insisted on being known as Tod, was sitting at Dan's feet, regarding him with an unflinching gaze. Her dark eyes were glowing with excitement as she twisted her long, thin plait – the traditional PathFinder elflock – that hung down from her mass of short dark hair. Just in time, she remembered not to chew the end of it.

Dan watched the last latecomer take his place. He did a headcount and saw that all those from the village, aged twelve to fifteen, were indeed present. He checked his timepiece. It was important to Dan that he timed his talk to the very second. His father had never bothered, but Dan loved the sense of wonder that timing it just right always produced. It still gave even him goosebumps. He looked around the circle at the

solemn audience, sitting cross-legged, muffled in their black cloaks. The younger ones had their hoods up against the chilly offshore breeze, but the older ones – too cool to cover up – were toughing it out, and their faces and hair showed the typical PathFinder sheen that only became apparent in the dark.

Dan held his lantern high and saw the completed Circle of flickering points of flame. Silence had descended and with it an air of expectation. This was going to be a good night, Dan thought. The atmosphere was right. He was pleased for Tod's sake – everyone remembered their first Circle. Dan glanced at his timepiece once more, took a deep breath and, speaking slowly but loudly enough for all to hear – including Mitza Draddenmora Draa – Dan Moon began.

"Good morning, PathFinders. Welcome to our new people." Dan smiled down at Tod and two other twelve-year-olds, who were sitting in the space reserved for first-timers. Tod smiled shyly back. It was strange seeing her father in a new role – no longer a fisherman but someone who everyone was, literally, looking up to.

Dan continued. "Every year we meet in the early hours of MidSummer Morning to hear our history and to understand the secrets that made us PathFinders who we are, and why we are a little different from others. These secrets are kept among us, and when we leave the Circle we do not speak of them to anyone else. Does everyone here understand?" Dan did a 360-degree turn, looking at each person and getting a solemn "I understand" in return. Dan turned his gaze to the three sitting at his feet. "To begin, I will ask our first-timers to promise to keep our secrets from all who are not PathFinders, and more importantly, from all PathFinders who have yet to come of age

and join our MidSummer Circle. You may have brothers and sisters or close friends who are only a little younger and you may feel there is no harm in telling them. But harm there is."

Tod blushed. She knew Dan was thinking of her best friends, twins Oskar and Ferdie Sarn. But there was no way she was ever going to break the Circle promise.

One by one, Dan asked each first-timer to say the promise. Tod was last and felt very nervous by the time it was her turn. "Alice TodHunter Moon," Dan said in a most un-Dad-like voice. "Do you promise to faithfully keep the secrets of our PathFinder Circle? For all time and in all ways?"

Tod spoke as loudly as she could manage. "I do promise to keep the secrets of the Circle."

Dan smiled. "Well said all." Then he addressed the rest in the Circle. "Let us welcome our new brother and sisters."

"Welcome, brother and sisters, to the MidSummer Circle," came the response.

Tod smiled. She belonged. It was a good feeling.

Dan relaxed. The serious part of the evening was done; now he could begin to do what he liked best – tell a story. He began to move around within the Circle, pacing slowly, speaking in his low, resonant voice while Tod listened, entranced.

"In the Days of Beyond, those distant days in the past, our ancestors went to the stars. Here on Earth they had great skills navigating what were called the Ancient Ways, and for this they were revered and called PathFinders. We no longer know what these Ancient Ways were, but we do know that because of their PathFinding skills, our forebears were chosen to leave this beautiful planet and find paths through the stars. They left willingly and went into a great closed metal container, a ship named

PathFinder, which they knew they would never leave. An explosion sent the *PathFinder* up into the sky, away from our planet, past the moon, and set her on a path to the stars."

Tod suppressed a gasp and exchanged glances of amazement with the other first-timers. She could hardly believe that Dan, such a great teller of stories, had managed to keep the most amazing story of all secret. She stared up at the dusting of stars above, trying to imagine what it would be like to walk into a huge metal tube, knowing that you would never see the sky or the sea again. Tod pushed her bare feet into the cold sand, as if to reassure herself that she was still firmly on Earth, and listened to the comforting sound of her father's voice continuing his story.

"These people were different from those they left behind. Because in order for the *PathFinder* ship to travel fast enough to reach the stars, at first the people had to live in fluid to protect them from the terrible forces of acceleration. This is where our beautiful sign language comes from, for it is not possible to speak in fluid. And neither is it possible to breathe. So in here –" Dan placed his fingers on either side of the bridge of his nose – "they had the things that fishes have. Gills. This was a deliberate change to the very essence of a human being, something that would be passed on to the next generation. This is why even now, many thousands of years away from our ancestors, some of us still have these gills."

Tod stared up at her father in astonishment – so *many* secrets. She tried to imagine what it would be like to immerse herself in fluid, what the first gulp would feel like. Even if she had gills, would she choke? Would she feel as though she were drowning? Tod told herself she was never going to find out. Because her

mother had not been a PathFinder, she was very unlikely to have gills. But even so, Tod had to fight hard to suppress a shudder. Like many fishermen's children, she had a horror of drowning.

Looking down directly at the first-timers, Dan said, "This is a dangerous secret that we keep from the younger ones for their own safety. As part of the Circle, you, too, will now keep the secret."

Tod and her two companions nodded solemnly.

"I know," Dan said, looking around the Circle, "that some of you will want to find out for yourselves whether you have these gills. And I know it is no good, my telling you not to do something, so I won't. But I will tell you that the only way to find out if you possess gills is –" Dan paused not only for dramatic effect, but also to make sure they remembered – *"to be prepared to drown!"*

A gratifying gasp came from the first-timers.

Well on form now, Dan continued. "And I will tell you why you must be prepared to drown. Because human gills do not activate until you breathe in a full, deep draught of water through your nose. If you do this and you are without gills, there is no way back. *You will drown*. And your chances of drowning are extremely high. We do not think that more than one in ten of us have gills now."

Dan looked around the group. He smiled. As usual, the first-timers were surreptitiously sniffing, wondering if they could tell. "And before you ask, no, I do not know if I possess human gills or not. And I do not want to have to find out."

Dan sneaked a quick look at his timepiece. He was going to have to speed up. "Our ancestors found the hidden Ways to the stars. For generations they travelled through distant galaxies,

looking for worlds like ours. They danced with moons and flew with comets. They visited countless planets. On one they found an ancient civilisation long dead; on another they found the stirrings of intelligent life but never, ever, did they find any creatures like us."

Dan surveyed his audience, who were gazing at him in rapt attention, the first-timers open-mouthed with amazement. "At last their expedition drew to a close and the *PathFinder* returned home. She landed on the very spot from which she had left, now marked by our PathFinder bell."

Dan paused, and right on cue the sound of the bell drifted over the dunes. Tod felt a swathe of goosebumps run over her.

Dan waited until the last echoes of the bell had faded. "When the crew emerged, they found nothing but windswept dunes and a hostile crowd from the Trading Post who had seen a ball of fire drop from the sky and had come to investigate. Thousands of years on Earth had passed, compared with a few hundred on board the ship – the *PathFinder* and her crew had been forgotten. The Trading Post people thought they were strange alien creatures and imprisoned them in a fortress in the Far." Dan waved his hand in the direction of the forest that bordered the village. "This is why we do not venture deep into the Far. It is not a good place for PathFinders.

"After many long years, the Trading Post jailers lost interest and they at last set our people free. The PathFinders returned here, built our village and lived peacefully. But the old mistrust between us remains to this day. They are a hostile people, quick to anger, and neither the Trading Post nor the OutPost is a safe place for a PathFinder to be.

"But enough of that!" Dan broke the sober atmosphere with

a sudden smile. "Now, it is story time. The PathFinders brought back many tales of the unbelievable places they had seen. At each Circle I tell a different one using our own sign language, which they passed down to us, their children's children. And tonight, Circle, I am going to tell you about the planet of the giant trees."

Dan placed the tip of his left index finger on the tip of his left thumb to make an O: the PathFinder sign for "OK" when used as a question. In reply, all in the Circle made the same sign with their right hands: *OK*, used to show agreement or that all is well. And so Dan began.

Tod sat entranced as her father wove his story with fluid hand movements, dancing around the circle on his long legs, taking them with him to the stars. She wished it would go on for ever, but when his hands began to slow and his elegant fingers fluttered less fast, Tod knew he was drawing to a close.

Now Dan began to speak as well as sign, slow and low. "And so, we PathFinders have travelled to the Great Beyond. We have seen many worlds, but we have seen none as beautiful as ours; we have seen many suns, but we have seen none as perfect as …" Dan turned around and pointed out to the sea. Exactly on schedule, a fingernail tip of orange broke the horizon, pushing its way up from the sea. "This! This is *our* sun. This is our Earth. This is where we belong."

A shiver ran around the MidSummer Circle. Dan Moon grinned. He had done it.

Enjoying their sense of being special, of belonging, the Circle watched in awe as the brilliant ball of light rose from the water; they saw the sky grow bright and the morning star fade away. It was, as Dan Moon had said, perfect.

Suddenly, Tod spotted a flash of gold in the sky. She looked up, shielding her eyes. There was another flash, green this time, and Tod's heart jumped in recognition. This was something she had seen long ago. Something she had dreamed about for many years, and something that no one, not even her father, believed she had seen.

"It's the Dragon Boat!" Tod shouted, leaping to her feet. "The Dragon Boat!" Everyone looked at her disapprovingly, particularly Dan. This was not how you behaved in the Circle. But now everyone was looking at the sky, and some were standing up to get a better view. The MidSummer Circle was broken.

The flash of gold and green moved ever nearer, and now they began to see what Tod already knew it to be – a beautiful green dragon that was also a golden boat. Or was it a beautiful golden boat that was also a green dragon?

The Dragon Boat approached steadily, her huge wings beating *up-and-down, up-and-down*, and soon she was near enough for everyone to see the dragon's neck stretched forward, her iridescent scales shining in the sunlight. They saw her tail arched high, the golden barb on the end glinting. And then her sleek golden hull was overhead; everyone was waving madly – and two figures at the helm, one in purple, one in red, returning their waves.

Dan Moon knew he had been upstaged, but he didn't mind. He was as excited as anyone to have seen such an amazing sight. He swept his daughter up into a hug and said, "So, Alice TodHunter Moon, you really *did* see that Dragon Boat."

"Put me down, Dad," Tod muttered. "Everyone's looking."

The Dragon Boat

The pilot of the Dragon Boat – a young man with curly straw-coloured hair and green eyes so bright that you might expect them to shine in the dark – looked down at the first landfall since they had left their island.

"Hey, Jen," he said, pointing down to the beach. "There's that circle of lights again. That's another MidSummer tradition going on down there, I suppose."

Jenna Heap, a young woman wearing a fine cloak of red silk lined with white fur, her long dark hair kept in place by a circlet of gold, peered over the side of the Dragon Boat. "They've seen us," she said, returning the waves of the excited onlookers below. "It's already light. We must be later than usual."

The young man, Septimus Heap – Jenna Heap's adoptive brother – smiled. "I seem to remember someone was fussing about whether we had enough food." He pointed at two large picnic baskets strapped to the deck.

Jenna resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at Septimus. She was twenty-one now, she told herself sternly, she was the Castle Queen and it *would not do*. Particularly now, she thought, as she looked at Septimus's purple wool cloak lined with indigo fur and the thick gold-and-platinum belt he wore around his

purple tunic, that he was the Castle's ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Which Jenna – and even Septimus himself – still found hard to believe.

Like those in the Circle on the beach below, Jenna was performing a MidSummer tradition. Every MidSummer Day for many thousands of years, Castle Queens had visited the Dragon Boat where she had lain in an ancient temple beneath the ground, hidden there by the Castle's first ever ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Hotep-Ra. And now that Jenna was herself Queen, every MidSummer Day she and Septimus took the Dragon Boat to see her old master, Hotep-Ra, in the House of Foryx. It was a time both Jenna and Septimus looked forward to, a precious space where they could be themselves once more – just brother and sister, plain Jenna and Septimus Heap.

This year was even more precious. Because Septimus was now ExtraOrdinary Wizard, he had been reluctant to go. But now, as the orange ball of the sun turned the sky a luminous pink and a flight of ducks flew quacking across their path, Septimus laughed out loud. He was *so* pleased that Jenna had insisted.

Discovered

Later, as Tod and Dan were wandering home along the beach, watching the early morning sparkle of sunlight glancing off the MidSummer waves, Tod said, "Dad, why do you suppose Aunt Mitza was hiding in the dunes while we had our Circle?"

"Was she?" Dan Moon looked at Tod uneasily.

Tod nodded. "Yes. When everyone was waving at the Dragon Boat, I saw her get up and scurry away. And I know it was her, because she waddles like a duck. Like this." Tod did an accurate impression of Aunt Mitza's flat-footed walk, but Dan Moon was not amused.

"You must respect your elders, Tod."

"But I don't like her, Dad. And neither do you."

Dan Moon did not deny it. "Even so, Tod, you must give your mother's stepsister respect. We must both show her hospitality."

Tod fell quiet. Her mother had died when she was only five and Tod knew that anything relating to her mother was precious to Dan – as it was to her, too. She knew that was the only reason that Dan had made Aunt Mitza welcome when she had turned up on the doorstep the previous week, expressing a wish to meet "her darling little step-niece" after all these years. But Aunt Mitza's sharp-eyed looks when Dan was not around

had not endeared her to Tod. Unlike Dan, she drew the line at Aunt Mitza. Tod could not believe her mother had ever liked her stepsister, and she was sure that her mother would not have tolerated Aunt Mitza eavesdropping on their secrets.

"But Aunt Mitza was listening in on our Circle, Dad," said Tod. "She heard our secret – the one we all promised never to tell. That's not respecting *us*, is it? Or our hospitality. Or Mum."

Dan Moon frowned. "What's heard is heard. It can't be undone. But you are right, Tod. She has not respected your mother. Tomorrow I will ask her to leave."

But it wasn't Mitza who left the next day. It was Dan.

Part II

The House of Foryx

The Dragon Boat flew steadily eastwards. She knew the way perfectly, and all Jenna and Septimus needed to do was to watch the world going by and eat their way through the first picnic basket. It was late morning when they saw the grim fortress where Hotep-Ra lived. The octagonal granite towers of the House of Foryx, dark against the perpetual snow that surrounded them, reared up from a pillar of rock surrounded by an abyss. Both Jenna and Septimus shivered – it was an eerie place.

The Dragon Boat flew lower. She circled the House of Foryx once, then her long neck dipped down and she went in to land. Jenna shut her eyes – this part always scared her. The Dragon Boat was heading for a wide, white terrace of marble, and even though Jenna knew it would be all right, it felt as if they were about to crash into solid stone. But as the Dragon Boat's keel touched down, the marble changed into a milky liquid and they landed softly with a long, low *shishhhh*.

Septimus brushed down his purple robes and tightened his gold-and-platinum ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt. This was the first time he had met Hotep-Ra in his role as ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and he wanted to look his best.

Jenna put the landing ladder over the side and gave Septimus

a hug. "You've got the **Questing Stone**?" she asked – as she always did.

"Jen, don't fuss. Of course I do."

"Show me," Jenna insisted, remembering the one terrifying day that Septimus had left the **Questing Stone** in the boat. She had gone racing after him with it and had only just reached him in time.

Septimus put his hand in his pocket and held out an iridescent black stone, round and smooth, with a gold "Q" set into it. This was Septimus's key to freedom; it allowed him to come out of the House of Foryx safely back into his own Time.

"Good," said Jenna. "Nervous?"

Septimus gave Jenna a strained smile. "A bit," he admitted. He swung himself on to the ladder and a few moments later was hurrying off across the marble terrace towards the forbidding grey fortress.

Jenna watched him stride up to a towering door made from great planks of ebony held together with iron bars and rivets. It looked, she thought, like the door to a prison – and it was, in a way. The House of Foryx, built by Hotep-Ra, was the place where All Times Do Meet. Here in the house, Time stood still, like a hub at the centre of a spinning wheel. And although those in the House of Foryx were free to leave whenever they chose, they could not choose the Time which they would step into. Only a person in possession of a completed **Questing Stone** could do this – and Septimus had the only one.

A flurry of snow swept across the terrace, and through it Jenna saw Septimus reach up and tug the bellpull. She saw the door open and the little bat-like doorman step aside to let him pass. Then the door closed and Septimus was gone.

Jenna hated this part of their visit; she was always afraid she would never see Septimus again. To take her mind off things, she set about rigging up a red-and-gold awning over the Dragon Boat. Then when Septimus came out, however hard the snow might fall, however chill the wind might blow, they would sit with Hotep-Ra under the awning and have the lunch that she had brought. This was how it always went, and this, she told herself, was how it would be today.

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney

First published in Great Britain in October 2014 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP

First published in the USA in October 2014 by HarperCollins Children's Books,
a division of HarperCollins Publishers, 195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007

www.bloomsbury.com

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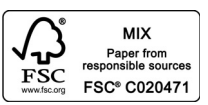
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 4088 5815 8

Export ISBN 978 1 4088 5818 9



Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2