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Moon Child

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Simone Maroney

Draumr Publishing, LLC
Maryland

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to two men. The first, my uncle Michael Davidson, encouraged me to read the unusual and write the extraordinary. I am infinitely grateful for his non-judgemental insights. As for the second man, I have had no contact with him since I was sixteen years old. His name was Mr. Strebig and he was my Grade 13 English teacher. He warned us that one day, we would find the stories we had written in his class and marvel that we had let such talent go to waste.

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Prologue

The last light was blotted out as a heavy rain cloud scuttled over the moon. The man picked up his robes and continued unerringly toward his destination. With his neck bent, his hood and robes would have made him appear as the Angel of Death had the light been better—or if anyone had been out on this brisk and cold night. The man snorted derisively. “Probably would run screaming to one of their Priests if they saw me,” he muttered to no one in particular. Somehow, hearing his own voice helped to ease the knots that were assailing his stomach.

He looked up suddenly, his hood falling back onto his shoulders and uncovering his head. He had arrived.

Standing in front of the entrance, he inhaled short, shallow breaths until he noticed the gasping sounds coming from his mouth. He took a long inhalation of the crisp air in a vain effort to settle his nerves. A faint pang of cedar smoke wafted by his nose. “Good,” he congratulated himself. “I have arrived on time.”

One more step would bring him to the cave’s boundary. He steeled himself, straightening his back and filling his lungs with air. As soon as his foot touched beyond the boundary, two Priestesses materialized. Where they had been hiding, he did not know. As a child, he had once entertained a powerful notion to test the Priestesses’ mettle and had run through the boundary and back repeatedly. That particular endeavour had earned him a sound

beating and a renewed respect for the female order.

On this night, there was no need to state his business. The Priestesses nodded at him and parted to let him through. The younger one, less schooled at hiding emotions, eyed him thoughtfully. He frowned but proceeded through. So they were letting him enter the Sacred Cave. Why?

At the cave entrance, he took one last look at the sky over the markers. The clouds slid away, allowing Venus to come into view. He drew his breath in sharply then looked into the cave. So much depended on one little matter.

Making the proper gesture of respect, he proceeded backward on all fours, re-entering the womb symbolically. When he reached the chamber, he sensed a presence.

“You were meant to wait at the entrance,” came a stern reproach. “You violate the sanctity of this place with your presence.”

He bent his head in submission until it touched the dirt bound path. “My apologies, Priestess,” he said. In the human silence that ensued, the echoing noise of raindrops was deafening.

“Very well,” she said. “You shall have your penance.” The voice grew harsher. “Sit up and stop grovelling.”

He complied, closing his eyes as he did so. Though he may be grown now, the fear of that long ago beating still stung.

“Here.” A bundle was thrust into his arms. “You have a son. He belongs to your order now.”

“A son!” he cried, dismayed. “It cannot be! How could the skies have been so wrong?” he asked, bewildered.

“And who is to say what the Goddess can and cannot do, Hiam?” A sweet, low voice he knew well laughed.

Risking the displeasure of the Priestess, he turned to glance at her, the woman who had given him her heart. His breath stopped. Janna’s body lay on a litter, covered in blood. The body of the woman he had given his soul and heart to was curled up onto it in the foetal position of death, head pointing toward the entrance.

Slowly, Hiam’s head swivelled back to look at the boy Janna had given her life to birth. The baby’s eyes, dark and ageless in an overlarge face gazed at him and beyond, a plump fist shoved into its mouth. He had to be sure. He unravelled the cloth, stared uncomprehendingly at the child and turned once more to the

Priestess.

“She wanted you to have the raising of the child,” the Priestess growled. At once he thought he understood the provenance of her harshness. Janna’s death was a blow to her and the death wish, that her daughter should be given to Priests for the raising, cut an even deeper wound.

He shook his head and his shoulders dropped in helplessness. “I am no wet nurse,” he said in a low voice. “And less than adept at the Priestesses’ arts.”

“Then you will learn,” the Priestess said in a tone that signalled the end of their discussion. “Back. Back with the child. Wash the infant’s body with the tears of the Goddess then take your girl-child to the village. Once you have found a nurse for the baby, prepare yourself. You have until the next moon to join us with the baby and the nurse.”

This time, his own shoulders tensed in anger. “I cannot leave my order, Priestess.”

She sighed. “Only for the blessing will you be with us. If the child is still alive.”

Hiam’s body sagged suddenly. These were indeed dark times. Infants were more likely to die than survive, their mothers frequently dying either from the birthing or from the exhaustion of too many children. “I don’t understand,” he whispered so low that the Priestess had to kneel down to hear his words. “Am I to raise the child as a girl or as a boy?”

“That is as you wish and as the Head of your order decrees,” she said. She too spoke in hushed tones and now that she was closer to his ears, Hiam could hear that the hoarseness in her voice was not natural but born of tears. Priestesses did weep their losses after all. “I can only tell you that the Goddess has decreed the child must be raised by you. Whether you choose to announce her gender to the rest of the order and where you raise the child were not details I was privy to.”

“I have so many questions...” Hiam’s voice trailed off. The child had dozed off but he knew that to be a minor reprieve. Soon hunger would waken the infant and there would be no soothing it then.

“I will grant you one more question,” the Priestess murmured.

Her voice hardened. “But only one. Then you must leave. It is only through the grace of the Goddess that you have been allowed this far, this long.”

Hiam nodded his understanding and suppressed the grin that threatened. “Why?” he asked.

He felt the frown he could not see but the Priestess had given her word. It was a measure of her exhaustion that she would have made such a bargain—or perhaps it was something more.

Sighing, the Priestess intoned, “The Goddess spoke through Janna, as she often does through the dying. I would not have you repeat this to anyone, will you promise?”

Startled, Hiam glanced sideways at the woman kneeling. Was he to promise not to repeat what the Priestess had just said or what he would hear shortly?

“Oh, stop it, Hiam!” Janna’s voice echoed in his head. “Promise not to repeat what she will say.”

Hiam bowed his head and made the sign. “I promise,” he said fervently.

“Your order will be destroyed, dispersed and utterly vanquished. Only the female line can promise that the Memories will be kept alive and only the Meeting of the Two can predict their remembrance.”

The air Hiam sucked in clawed at his chest as though it were diseased. He knew the Priestess’s words to be Truth. They had suffered so much and had done so much to re-establish order. Must they suffer yet again? If they were destroyed, the world would linger in spiritual and intellectual darkness. He wished fervently it were not so but Prophecy was not to be doubted lest it double the pain it brought.

“Now leave, Priest,” the Priestess said. She had regained her footing and her voice echoed through the chamber - and probably through the countryside, Hiam thought nervously. Nevertheless, he contrived to hold the baby with one arm and crawl out of the tunnel on his other three limbs.

“How can I leave without you, Janna?” he whispered as he neared the exit. Once out of the cave, he would not hear that treasured voice again. It was little enough but it was all he had left of her.

“I will return to your life,” her voice said. Her spirit would remain here until her body was buried but it was the privilege of the Priestesses to enjoy Janna’s presence, no matter how devoted he had been to her. He had a sudden vision. “I will be old when you return,” he blurted out, nearly dropping the baby who squawked in her slumber.

“But I will know you,” Janna promised. “And you shall be my teacher yet again.”

He might have imagined the back of her hand caressing his cheek but he would hold on to that memory much as he held on to the child. The child may have been born of Janna and Hiam but she would follow her own path that was neither of her father or mother. He stepped out of the cave, blessed himself and the child just as another downpour began. The heat of the cave evaporated with the first drop and the child began howling in earnest. Remembering his promise, he hurried to the circle of stones and stood where the Goddess would shine, were it not for the cloud cover. He unwrapped the child, though she was already soaked, and held her up so the tears of the Goddess could cleanse her. Surprisingly, the child stopped crying. Hiam peered at her and saw that she had her mouth wide open, receiving the raindrops as the gift they were.

The little body started shivering. Hiam hurriedly wrapped the cloth around the girl. One of the Priestesses who guarded the entrance brought him a precious impermeable cloth, warmed with a stone that had been pulled out of the fire. He thrust the bundled child inside the cloth then, hunching his body protectively over the baby, he trudged in the direction of the village. Laughing grimly, he wondered if perhaps the Goddess would be good enough to leave a wet nurse out in plain sight.

One

The tightly woven ball of grass whistled through the air. Hanna's head slumped forward sharply when the projectile slammed into the back of her skull. Her lips thinned as she brought her hand to the spot at the base of her skull that had suffered the attack. Her hair, like everyone else's here, was tied into a tail with twine. The ball had smacked into the very spot where the tail was tied, buffering her head against injury.

She stood up, the ball in her hand. Turning slowly, she scanned the tall grasses that grew around the perimeter of the stone circle for movement. There! She whipped the ball and was rewarded by a resounding *thunk!* as well as congratulatory laughter. A crowd of boys stood up, revealing their hidden position within the grasses to be limited to a vaguely triangular shape. The triangle defined itself further as two of the boys hoisted a third to standing.

"That'll teach you to stuff a rock inside the ball, Raer!" Hanna hollered across the field. Raer was faring less well than his intended victim. The grass ball had failed to cushion the impact of the rock it sheltered and a welt was rapidly forming on the boy's forehead. He opened his mouth to speak but was merely able to vomit his morning's meal.

"Blessed Mother!" cursed Hanna under her breath, running headlong toward Raer. She was not so distracted that she failed to cast a furtive look around her. If anyone had heard her curse

like that, she might be in worse trouble than she had been before. It was sure damnation to use the Mother's name in a curse but Hanna could not help herself. Damnation sounded frightening but the thrill of disobeying was more fun and immediate than any eventual "damnation"—so long as she didn't get caught here and now.

Raer's eyes were rolling shut when Hanna, scarcely out of breath, reached his side. The two boys whose charge was to hold him up where shaking Raer and poking him, laughing at their companion.

Hanna touched Raer's face and opened her mouth to tell the boys to stop tossing him about but a shadow fell across them all. Sensing more than seeing, she squeezed her eyes and mouth shut, offering a silent belated prayer for everything to be all right. When she slid one eye open gingerly, she knew at once that her prayer had gone utterly and completely unheeded. Eliey, assistant to the Head Priest and Chief Disciplinarian of all children in the village, was staring her in the eye. To do so, the tree high man had crouched down in front of Hanna.

"What happened, Hanna?" he asked. His voice was not unkind but his eyes bore into Hanna's very soul. She was sorrowfully reminded that she had been in the field to meditate on her latest misdeed: repeatedly asking her tutor how they had lost the valuable skill of moving the giant stones. As often as not, when there was trouble, she was in the middle of it. That's what you got for being the only girl in a school of boys, was what her father told her. Great! The "how", was explained. That didn't make getting in trouble on an almost daily basis any easier to stomach.

It wasn't as though she could pass unnoticed in this field of boys either. It seemed that the greater the size and bulk the boys reached, the smaller Hanna grew. She wasn't actually growing smaller but she *was* very light in build. Perhaps her mother had been small. Father wouldn't say, but Hanna suspected she looked very much like her because once in a while, she would catch father's eyes filling with tears as he looked onto his daughter. Her hair colouring came from her father, she knew that much. They had identical shades of brown that would become red when exposed to the summer sun. Where Hanna's was curly though, father's was

as straight as the straw collected for fodder every autumn. And in spite of her small size and generally indistinct hair colour, Hanna had never taken the art of camouflage to heart.

Hanna swallowed, painfully aware that her throat was constricted with anxiety. She went down on one knee, turning her back to Raer and Eliey.

Hanna sensed that Eliey was standing again. His voice, booming from the towering height of his head (he was twice as tall as Hanna and then half again) confirmed her suspicion: it felt like thunder breaking out of the sky. "I suppose that explains who is responsible," the Disciplinarian growled.

Had this been the first instance of Hanna's troubles, she might have shed a few tears. Unfortunately, she was well beyond "the first"—and thus had not a single emotion in her heart save weariness.

"Hanna, child of Hiam, did not start this, Great One," a voice piped up behind Hanna. She almost forgot herself and raised her head, such was her surprise. Eliey was only the assistant. Straining her ears, she tried to place the voice. It certainly wasn't Raer nor was it one of his two cohorts trying to protect her. They had grown up together, like puppies of the same litter, and they were as likely to find themselves in trouble as Hanna was. She bit her lip. At least they got into trouble because they *chose* trouble in the first place. She had been trying, to no avail, to stay out of trouble since the seasons had turned and back again!

"Tael," Eliey's voice rumbled. "I am not 'Great One'"

The voice squeaked, "Aren't you?" Some embarrassed coughing ensued. "No, no. You're not, of course." Then it piped up, brighter than before. "But you will be!"

Hanna groaned inwardly. Now she recognised the voice. Tael had been a very quiet boy until he had begun the change. He was as heavy as Hanna but much taller, and his hair was as black as the darkest night when the moon hid from view and the clouds covered the stars. There were rumours that one of his parents had come from a land very far away, a Healer. That had been confirmed when he'd begun having visions. Such a gift should have been fine in their community. In fact, it *was* fine. Tael was receiving privileged training. The problem was that the boy could not tell

between today, tomorrow and yesterday. And to hear his voice break over every other word was simply painful.

Hanna's breath came in easier now as Eliey's voice moved away toward Tael. "Tael, what happened here?"

"Well, Great—I mean, Sir," Tael's staccato corrected itself. "Raer wanted Hanna to join us for the apple picking and he reasoned that if he got her out of her meditation, she would be so upset that she'd know she couldn't meditate and so she would come with us."

Hanna suppressed a smile. Not that Eliey was watching her right now. She was annoyed that Raer had known her well enough to predict her reaction.

"Tael," Eliey warned. "I fail to see how this relates to Raer having..." There was some fumbling as Eliey checked the wounded boy. "...a head injury. Bring him to the infirmary," he instructed Raer's two bearers who sobered up at the thought of perhaps meeting the Head of the infirmary, unlikely though that may have been.

"Umm, Sir," Tael insisted. "Well, we tried throwing grass balls at Hanna but either they landed nowhere near her or they missed their mark entirely. So Raer thought of putting a rock inside the ball."

Eliey raised a brow, a sardonic expression creeping over his features. "We, Tael?"

"Well," Tael said, licking his lips nervously. "Some of us did throw something and some of us didn't throw anything. But only one of us threw the ball with the rock in it."

"Oh?" Eliey inquired encouragingly, raising his eyebrow even more so it appeared to touch his hairline.

"Yes, Sir," Tael continued enthusiastically. "And now he's gone to the infirmary as you instructed."

"Are you attempting to tell me, Son, that Raer, fiendish as he is, threw a ball of grass with a rock in it at his own forehead, in an effort to tempt Hanna to go pick apples with the rest of you?" Eliey inquired.

Hanna was a little late in stifling a giggle. Fortunately, it was drowned out by the hearty laughter of the ten to fifteen other boys remaining in the field.

“All of you must head back to the dormitory,” Eliey’s voice resonated with Power. “Except for you, Tael. And you, Hanna,” he added hurriedly, forestalling Hanna’s aborted attempt at escape.

The ground shook with the noise of departing feet. “Light on your feet while you run,” Eliey admonished. “You are one with the ground.” The shaking lessened though Hanna would have still felt it resonating through the ground—had it not been for the tingling in her feet and lower legs due to her prolonged kneeling position.

“Now, Tael,” Eliey said, “tell me the story from beginning to end.”

“Eliey,” Tael’s voice was suddenly loud. Hanna shuddered. It was both Tael’s voice and it wasn’t. “You must hurry back. An illness has befallen the Head. He will not last longer than two SunBirths and many will die from the illness after him. Our time is limited. Attend to him.”

Eliey turned to Hanna. “It seems graver matters are upon us, Hanna. Go back and prepare to tend the sick along with Tael. That will be your punishment for this escapade.” Eliey lifted the hem of his robe to allow him to run then added, “Raer’s as well. You may inform him of this as soon as he recovers.”

Tael’s oddly inflected voice shot back, “He will not recover.”

Eliey’s own features stilled as he considered Tael. Then he bowed his head briefly, drawing the warding sign in mid-air, before hurrying away.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Hanna whirled on Tael. “How could you say that about Raer?” she asked angrily.

Tael’s body shook with tremors before he focused on her. When he did focus, his eyes had the haunted look of those who have seen too much. “Because it’s true,” he replied blandly. He shifted his attention to the grass at his feet, looking away from the tears streaming unbidden down Hanna’s cheeks. “I’m sorry,” he muttered.

Hanna reached the infirmary well before Tael. She was determined not to work by his side. Foretelling was interesting when the news was good but she had no intention of listening to any more of the boy’s dire predictions. She had enough to worry about from day to day without adding possible future horrible events to the lot.

A monk was waiting for her. Eliey must have spoken to him about Hanna because the man had beside him a basin, a jar of disinfectant that could also be used to deaden pain in patients, and gloves. Hanna had heard stories that once upon a time, there had been gloves made by the thousands and that you could throw a pair out even if it was not damaged. She could hardly imagine this. Gloves were very precious now. She was amazed that a pair would be spared for her use. She slipped the pair on, marvelling at how well they fit her hand, how smooth they were—certainly smoother than her own work-coarsened fingers.

“Hannon,” the monk spoke, interrupting her reverie.

Hanna looked up, startled. Some monks, actually very few of them, referred to her by the masculine version of her name. It had been some years since she had heard the name Hannon. Once her body started maturing out of childhood, she became Hanna in truth. Prior to that, some of the monks seemed to have entertained the notion that, like the God-Goddess Lu-Nui of long ago, she would be both, male and female.

She looked up briefly, meeting her interlocutor’s eye to show that she had heard, and then bowed her head, showing the appropriate submission of one who has been given a punishment.

“You are to report to Eliey in the Head Chamber,” the monk said tonelessly. By the time the children reached their adult size, the removal of emotional inflections in their speech had been effected. Emotions were to be brought out only at one’s command. Anger, sadness and even joy were to be kept closely under lock and key. It was, of course, expected that these emotions might surface during private moments but, while in the presence of others, all had to guard their words and actions. This would have been tiresome had everyone followed the letter of the law. Fortunately, many did not—though this monk made a passable impression of those automatons that, if legend were to be believed, had ruled their world once upon a time.

Hanna kept her surprise at being summoned to the Head Chamber as quiet as she could. What could they want from her? She suddenly wished her father were here to guide her through the myriad of courtesy rules she would be expected to exhibit at the bedside of the dying Head Priest. She did not pause to examine her

assumption that Tael's prediction had been true. To do so would be tantamount to admitting Tael had also been right about Raer. She shoved the thoughts mercilessly from her mind and again wished her father were here. Her father, unfortunately, was leagues away and not expected for at least a five-night stretch. That left her rooted to the spot she stood on by a very pressing problem: she did not know how to reach the Chamber, never having gone there before. Seconds stretched into minutes while the monk eyed her thoughtfully.

He coughed then, at last, said, "Please follow me."

Hanna sighed with relief and thought she saw a corner of the monk's mouth twitch up into a smile. The next few minutes were taken up by a harrowing effort to keep up with the monk's pace. His slow demeanour was deceiving: the man sped by at the speed of wild horses trampling through a field. They reached an entrance that was as dark as a cloud-covered midwinter night sky.

"Take off your shoes, *Hannon*," the monk said, placing special emphasis on the masculine name.

It was then that Hanna finally understood the monk's insistence on the male version of her name: no female, on penalty of death, was permitted within the hallowed walls of the Head Chamber.

"Yes, Sir," she said subserviently, trying to make her voice sound deeper than it was. The monk retreated, leaving Hanna alone at the entrance. Hearing his steps echo down the hall, Hanna wondered how she would find her way back. She'd spent all her energy on keeping up with the man and had failed to take note of the landmarks. When her father found out that she had made such a basic mistake, he would be very displeased. Father had spent years teaching her simple survival skills, deeming that she would need them in this world peopled by men, and she had failed him. Again.

"Come in, Child," a frail voice called out to her. "A monk will lead you back. You need not fret on the path you must take. Had you remembered it, we would have had to wipe it from your mind." A mutter ensued, one that Hanna could not decipher in spite of straining her sense of hearing. The cold of the stone floor seeped up through the soles of her bare feet. She did think that the Head had said something about the place being utterly destroyed

but that could not be right.

Hanna tried to get her bearings in the gloom but could not. She almost screeched, only managing a squeak, such was her terror, when a cold hand caught her wrist with surprising strength. She struggled also; something her panicked mind told her was unseemly when the aggressor was likely to be either Eliey or the Head Priest.

“Hush, child,” a frail voice said. The Head then was grabbing her wrist—not Eliey. “One step further and you will knock your head on the frame of my second to last resting place.” A dry chuckle followed this speech but Hanna could not understand the humour inherent in the old man’s words. Her heart was too busy hammering frantically for her to grasp anything subtle.

“The Head has been visited by visions,” Eliey’s voice rang out, causing Hanna to squeak again. She would probably have run from the room had the Head’s grip on her wrist loosened. It had not and she was effectively his prisoner. A hand descended on her shoulder but Hanna had no breath to spare to utter a sound. *How could they know where she was in this penumbra?* Then heat spread from the hand on her shoulder into her body and out through the hand that held her wrist. She was infused with peace and calm and the room was as brightly lit as if a noonday sun had somehow planted itself within the cave complex. Hanna squeezed her eyes shut, shook her head to dispel the vision but as soon as she opened her eyes, the brightness remained true—yet not a single candle was in sight.

Eliey’s left hand came up to his right, fingers pointing to the various joints between the palm and the tips of the fingers. They flew with certainty, dancing from one spot to the other. Hanna kept her eyes on Eliey’s face but, though she may have deceived the assistant, the Head was not fooled.

The old man sighed querulously, “It is as I thought. Hiam has taught the girl the secret language. Both of them must leave.”

“Hiam is not in the compound, Master,” Eliey pointed out.

“Then the child will wait for her father’s return.” The Master folded his hands across his chest, finally releasing his hold on Hanna, and shut his eyes, bringing an end to the discussion.

“They will be allowed to live?” Eliey persisted.

Hanna gasped. She knew that the Disciplinarian was not a bloodthirsty man - no one with a taste for physical war remained with the order for long. It was simply that there were rules. By transgressing the basic sanctity of their secret language, her father had earned exile. No, Hanna corrected herself. She had betrayed him, with her unschooled expressions. In extreme cases, the penalty would be death. Hanna began to wonder if bringing her into the chamber was not a trick that would eventually cause the order to rule in favour of her death. Who would believe her if she claimed to have been brought here? What was her word against that of the Head, Eliey and that unknown monk? She took a step back and away from Eliey's hand so she could be closer to the door, only to be plunged into utter darkness again.

"Do not run," the voice echoed through her very spine and Hanna halted, heart thundering against her chest. "Your life is not forfeit. There is a chance, a slim one, that you will be our sole opportunity of perpetuating a remnant of our teachings. It will depend on you and on one of your children."

Hanna's chin retreated into her shoulder as she considered the ludicrous prospect of having children.

"You must leave or else the people you have known here will all be killed," the voice continued. "You would survive but it would be a life of servitude and the chances of keeping the teachings of the Ancients alive would very much diminish. We are sending you out for your own good as well as ours, Hanna," the voice dropped and it was once again the feeble voice of a dying man. "If our attackers cannot find you, some of the others may survive, for I know most of them will not run." He sighed again. "But if they stay, as I fear they will, this plague may well kill them anyhow." He smiled wryly. "With any Luck, the plague will also decimate the enemy's ranks."

"Go now, Hanna," Eliey took over. "Seek your father out to the north. He will know to look for you."

"But the plague..." Hanna said, reaching out beseechingly in the vain hope that she would be needed here.

"The plague will decimate our order and the enemy will finish what nature started. We have also charted a large boulder travelling the night sky. It crossed the path of the Goddess and we believe it

is headed for our land. If you leave now..." Eliey's voice trailed off and stopped. "Go now, Hanna."

As much as she had wanted to run a few moments ago, much as she had dreamed of living somewhere else, now Hanna was desperate to stay. This was her world, the only world she had ever known. How could they cast her out of it? She opened her mouth to protest and darkness, deeper than the one surrounding her, enveloped her from within. The last thing she was conscious of was that her knees were buckling.