

CATHERINL



To Stephen Herrington For the idea

A Red Fox Book

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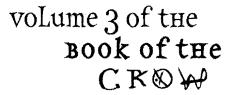
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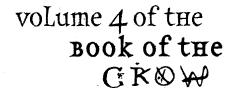
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Every Nightmare Raffi's ever had is coming true. He's too scared for the Deep Journey, Carys has been captured, and worst of all, Galen has sworn a terrible oath to destroy the deadly creature called the Margrave, even if the quest takes them all into the Pit of Maar itself. And far down there — below the surface of the world, in the deepest darkness — what evil thing is waiting for them to come?

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The Box of Flames

The world is not dead. The world is alive and breathes. The world is the whim of God, and her journey is forever.

Litany of the Makers

The seven moons were all in the sky at once. Tonight they made the formation that Galen called the web: one in the centre – Pyra, the small red one – and the others in a circle round her. They glimmered over the tree-tops; it was a good omen, the sisters' most perfect dance.

Raffi stared up at them with his arms full of wood. As an experiment he let his third eye open and made tiny purple filaments of light spray from the central moon to all the others, linking them in a flaring pattern. After a while he changed the colour to blue, managing to hold it for a few minutes, and even when it faded a faint echo still lingered. He watched it till his arms were tired, then humped the wood more carefully and turned away.

That had been better than last time. He was getting quite good at it – he ought to tell Galen.

Or maybe not.

Gathering up more of the crumbling twigs, he moved through the dark trees resentfully. It was no use talking to Galen. The keeper was in one of his bitter moods; he'd only laugh, that short, harsh laugh of contempt.

The wood was very dry, rotting on the forest floor. Huge ants scurried out of it, and the

armoured wood-grubs that chewed slowly. He flicked a shower of them from his clothes.

The forest was quiet. Two nights ago a pack of woses had raged through here, tearing great holes in the leaf-canopy; the wreckage still lay under the oaks. In the green gloom of the night insects hummed; something whistled behind him in the wood. It was time he was getting back.

He pushed through hanging ivies and across a clearing deep in bracken, alert for snakes and the venomous blue spiders, but only shadows shifted and blurred among the trees, too far off to see or sense. He'd come further than he'd thought and in the shafts of moonlight, red and pale and rose, the path looked unfamiliar, until the trees ended in a bank of dead leaves. He waded through them to the hillside, seeing the vast black hump of the cromlech and Galen's fire like a spark in its shadow.

Then he stopped.

Somewhere behind him, far behind, something had tripped one of the sense-lines. The warning tweaked a tiny pain over one eye; he recognised it at once. The lines were well above ground; whatever it was was big, and coming this way. He listened, intent, but only the night sounds came to him, the insect buzz and the flittermice, the crackle of the fire.

Scattering wood, he ran down quickly.

'What's the matter?' Galen sat carelessly against the slabs of the tomb, his coat tugged tight around him. 'Scared of moths now?'

Raffi dumped the wood in a heap; dust rose from it. 'One of the sense-lines just snapped!'

The keeper stared at him for a moment. Then he turned to the fire and began piling the wood on to the flames. 'Did it now.'

'Don't do that! Someone might be coming!' Galen shrugged. 'Let them.'

'It could be anyone!' Raffi dropped to a crouch, almost sick with worry, the strings of purple and blue stones he wore round his neck swinging. He caught hold of them. 'It could be the Watch! Put the fire out at least!'

Galen paused. When he looked up, his face was a mask of flamelight and haggard shadows, his deep eyes barely gleaming, his hook nose exaggerated like a hawk's. 'No,' he said harshly. 'If they want me let them come. I've had enough of skulking in the dark.' He eased his left leg with both hands. 'What direction?'

'West.'

'From the mountains.' He mused. 'Could just be a traveller.'

'Maybe.' Raffi was preoccupied. Another line had twanged in his skull, closer now.

Galen watched him. 'So. Let's put my pupil through his paces.'

'What, now!'

'No better time.' He turned his lean face to the fire. 'If it is an enemy, what might we put on the flames?'

Raffi, appalled, rubbed his hair. He was scared now; he hated Galen in this mood. 'Bitterwort. Scumweed, if we had any. Goldenrod to make him sleepy. Shall I do that?'

'Do nothing, unless I tell you. Say nothing.' Sharply, Galen raised his head, his profile dark against the smallest moon. 'Have you got the blue box?'

Raffi nodded; he clutched it in his pocket.

'Use it only if the danger is extreme.'

'I know, I know. But - '

A twig snapped. Somewhere near by a were-

bird shrieked and flew off through the branches. Behind it, Raffi caught the snuffle of a horse.

He stood up, heart thumping. Behind him the cromlech was black and solid, the rock-face gnarled under his palms, hollowed by a thousand years of frost and rain. Lichen grew on it, a green powder over the faint carved spirals. It felt like a great beast, fossilized and hunched.

Galen pulled himself up too, without his stick. His long hair swung forward, the tangled strings of black jet-stones and green crystal catching the light, the heavy cowl of his coat high around his neck.

'Ready?' he breathed.

'I think so.'

The keeper gave him a scornful glance. 'Don't worry. I won't risk your life.'

'It's not mine I'm worried about.' But Raffi muttered it sullenly under his breath, feeling for the powders and the blue box.

A horse came abruptly out of the wood.

It was tall, one of the thin, red-painted ones they bred beyond the mountains, and the sweat on its long, skeletal neck made it ghostly in the sisters' light. It walked forward and stopped just beyond the flicker of the fire. Staring into the dark, Raffi could just make out the rider: a dim, bulky figure muffled against the cold.

No one spoke.

Raffi glanced into the trees. He couldn't sense anyone else. He tried to look into the wood with his third eye but he was too nervous; only shadows moved. The rider stirred.

'A fine evening, friends.' His voice was deep; a big man.

Galen nodded, his long dark hair swinging. 'So it is. You've come far?'

'Far enough.'

The horse shifted, its harness clinking softly. The rider urged it a few steps forward, perhaps to see them better.

'Come to the fire,' Galen said, dangerously.

The horse's fear was tangible, a smell on the air. It was terrified of the cromlech, or perhaps the invisible web of earth-lines that ran out from it. The man, too, sounded tense when he spoke again. 'I don't think so, keepers.'

Galen's voice was quiet as he answered. 'That's an unlucky title. Why should we be keepers?'

'This is an unlucky place. Who else would be living here?' The rider hesitated, then swung himself down from the saddle and came forward a few steps, unwinding a filmy, knitted wrapping from his face.

They saw a powerful, thick-set man, black-bearded. A crossbow of some sort was slung on his shoulder. He wore a metal breast-plate too; it gleamed in the light of the moons. Dangerous, Raffi thought. But nothing they couldn't handle.

The stranger must have thought the same. 'I bring no threat here,' he went on quickly. 'How could I? There's no doubt an armoury of sorcery aimed at me as I stand.' He held up both hands, empty; a jewel gleamed on the left gauntlet. 'I'm looking for a man named Galen Harn, a Relic Master.' He glanced at Raffi, expressionless. 'And for his scholar, Raffael Morel.'

'Are you now.' Galen said bleakly. He shifted; Raffi knew that his leg would be aching, but the keeper's face was hard. 'And what do you want with them?'

'To pass on a message. West of here, about twenty leagues, in the foothills where the rivers

meet, there's a settlement. The people there need him.'

'Why?'

The rider smiled, wryly, but he answered. 'They found a relic, as they were ploughing. A tube. When you touch it, it hums. Small green lights move inside it.'

Galen didn't flicker but Raffi knew he was instantly alert. The horseman knew too. 'It seems to me,' he said, ironically, 'that if you should see this Galen, you might tell him. The people are desperate that he come and deal with the thing. None of them dares go near it.'

Galen nodded. 'I'm sure. But the Order of keepers is outlawed. They're all either dead or in hiding from the Watch. If they're caught they face torture. This man might suspect a trap.'

'He'd be safe enough.' The rider scratched his beard and tried a step forward. 'We need him. We wouldn't betray him. We're loyal to the old Order. That's all I can say, master. He'd just have to trust us.'

Take one more step, Raffi thought. In his pocket his fingers trembled on the blue crystal box. He'd never used it on a man. Not yet.

The rider was still, as if he felt the tension.

Suddenly Galen moved, limping forward out of the tomb's shadow into the red and gold of the firelight. He stood tall, his face dark. 'Tell them we'll come. Bury the device in the earth till we get there. Set a guard and let no one come near it. It may be dangerous.'

The rider smiled. 'Thank you. I'll see that it's done.' He turned and climbed heavily up on to the horse; the red beast circled, warily. 'When can we expect you?'

'When we get there.' Galen stared at him levelly.

'I'd ask you to stay the night, but outlaws have little to share.'

'Nor would I, keeper. Not under those stones.' He turned away, then paused, glancing back. 'The people will be glad to hear this. Depend upon it, you'll be safe with us. Ask for Alberic.'

Then the horse stalked, cautiously, into the wood.

They both stood silent a long time, listening to the faint crackle and rustle, the distant churring of disturbed birds. The sense-lines snagged, one by one, in Raffi's head.

Finally, Galen moved. He sat down, hissing through his teeth with the stiffness of his leg. 'Well. What do you think of that?'

Raffi took his hand off the blue box and collapsed beside him. Suddenly he felt unbearably tired. 'That he's got guts, coming out here.'

'And his story?'

'I don't know.' He shrugged. 'It sounds true. But...'

'But. Exactly.' The keeper sat back, his face in shadow.

'It could be a trap,' Raffi ventured.

'So it could.'

'But you're going, anyway.'

Galen laughed, sourly. A sudden spark lit his face, twisted with pain. 'I used to know when people lied to me, Raffi. If only they knew!' He glanced across. 'We both go. Someone has to deal with this relic.'

Uneasy, Raffi shook his head. 'There may be no relic.'

Galen spat into the fire. 'What do I care,' he said softly.