

The cover art features a dark, starry night sky. A large, bright red full moon is the central focus. A vertical red line descends from the top of the page, passing through the center of the moon. In the foreground, a dark, jagged mountain peak is visible, with several black birds perched on its ridges. A white, flowing banner or ribbon is draped across the scene, partially obscuring the moon. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and ominous.

# THE CYCLE OF THE RED MOON

BOOK ONE

# THE HARVEST OF SAMHEIN

JOSÉ ANTONIO COTRINA



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## Chapter 10: The First Night

Outside, the flaming bats continued to write characters in fire against the night sky. Their flight was even more erratic than before, as if the tremendous gusts of wind that cut through Rocavarancolia made it difficult to stay aloft. The sparse brightness that lit up the tower came from the bats whose frantic fluttering swerved near the building's facade. One of them came so close that it burst in through an embrasure, causing Adrian to panic. The bat left immediately through another opening, but this didn't stop Adrian from fleeing the room in terror, shouting and waving his arms in desperation. Ricardo chased after him and it took him quite a while to bring him back. For once, Alexander didn't reprimand him for breaking his promise to control his anxiety. Hector guessed that the redhead had discovered that Adrian had a phobia when it came to fire. And that was a fear that had nothing to do with Rocavarancolia.

"I'm hungry," Alex mumbled. "I'm starving. I'll eat the first one of you who goes to sleep, I swear it. Go to sleep, Fatty, hurry up."

Alex lay with his arms crossed to Hector's right; to his left was Natalia, almost entirely covered up with a blanket. The girl had propped her stick against the wall, still within reach, and she kept her knife in the rolled-up shirt that she was using as a pillow.

Hector's stomach, echoing Alex's words, complained with a long growl. They ate the last of the pears before they went to bed, but it wasn't enough to assuage their hunger. It was evidently going to be a long night.

Once again, they heard howls in the distance, mixed with the bellowing of the wind. Hector shook beneath the covers. Natalia's head, a shadow among shadows, turned toward an embrasure. The sounds that came from outside were enough to unsettle the bravest of them. No one said a word for a long time. It was Lizbeth who broke the silence, speaking so fast that, as usual, it was hard to understand her.

"I'd say this is a good time to think about what we're going to do tomorrow, don't you?"

"Tomorrow," Madeleine whispered. The word sounded as horrible on her lips as the howls coming from outside.

"We're not doing anything," Ricardo announced. "We're staying here, that's it. This place seems safe and we've seen that wandering around the city isn't a good idea."

"We have to be careful," Marco continued, "we can't just act without a plan. Tomorrow we'll wait for the bathtubs to come out, we'll divide into three groups to go after them, and we'll gather provisions, but only if we're sure it's safe. Then we'll come straight back to the tower."

"We're not going to explore the city?" asked Alexander.

"No!" Ricardo and Marco exclaimed in unison. Hector was amazed by how well the two teenagers worked together.

"I don't want to go out," whispered Adrian. His voice trembled. He still hadn't recovered from the panic attack caused by the bat invasion. "I'm never going out."

"I'm afraid my opinion may differ," Bruno declared. His manner of speaking, pompous and monotonous at the same time, blended perfectly with the dark environment. "I myself wish to explore the tower with the strange symbol in the square. That symbol holds meaning, and I suspect it might be worth investigating."

Hector sighed as he remembered the black mist that surrounded the structure. While he searched for something to say to dissuade Bruno, Ricardo jumped in:

"No exploring," he insisted harshly. "We will stay in the tower and only leave to gather provisions. At least for now, okay?"

"Remember what Lady Scar told us about sudden and fatal curses? And about the monsters that live among the ruins?" Marco asked. Hector heard Adrian stifle a cry under the blankets. "No. Our curiosity might be killing us, but we can't take stupid risks."



“The library,” Bruno said. “You said you found a library. And we know for certain that the place is safe, since you already explored it and nothing occurred. Could I go there at least?”

“You won’t understand a single word in those books,” Hector said hurriedly. “They’re not written in the language of the fountain.” He was convinced that Bruno’s real intention was to return to the square to enter the brick tower.

“But books don’t only contain words,” the other pointed out.

“I can take him if he insists on going,” Natalia said. Hector looked at her, frowning, but said nothing. “And the square isn’t far. It shouldn’t be dangerous. We’ve gone there and back a couple of times already.”

“I’d like to return to the square, too,” announced Madeleine. “We left our wet clothes there, and I want to get them back. It’s not a big deal, but at least I’ll have something to wear besides these rags.”

“If it’s okay with you guys, let’s leave this discussion for tomorrow,” said Ricardo. “The first thing we have to do is find food. When our stomachs are full, we can think about whether we want to go to the damned library or not.”

“We are completely ignorant regarding everything about this city.” Bruno seemed unable to let the subject go. “If we want to survive, we need information; that is something that should be obvious to all of us.”

“Tomorrow,” Ricardo repeated, even more harshly.

“And the missing kid?” Natalia sat up on the mountain of clothing, causing a small landslide of blankets and covers.

“If he’s alive, we’ll find him.”

“And how are we going to do that if we’re not even looking?”

“He can come look for us too, right?”

“I don’t think he’s alive,” Marina said. She was lying between Madeleine and Rachel. Hector couldn’t see her face in the darkness, and, paradoxically, it was a relief.



“I don’t know if he’s alive or not,” Ricardo replied. “I have no way of knowing. What I don’t want is for something to happen to us while we’re out looking for him.”

“Maybe he prefers to go it alone,” Lizbeth offered. “Maybe he thought he’d have a better chance at survival that way.”

“Well, if that’s what he thinks, he’s wrong,” Alexander was quick to point out. “The best option is to stay together. So we can protect one another.” He stretched out toward Adrian and extended a hand in his direction. “Right, squirt?”

“Right,” Adrian said, without much conviction.

“What I don’t understand is what we’re supposed to do here,” Lizbeth said. “Why do you think they brought us?”

“To rebuild the kingdom, at least to the best of our abilities,” answered Marco. “That’s what it said in the contract we signed.”

“So, what then?” Alexander sat on top of the pile of clothing. “We grab shovels, pails, and brooms, and start sweeping? We start building houses? Is that what they want? Street cleaners and carpenters?”

“They didn’t give us any instructions,” Ricardo pointed out. “Neither Denestor nor that scary lady told us anything about what we have to do.”

“You’re wrong,” Natalia said. “They did tell us what we have to do: stay alive as long as we can.”

“Did he talk to you about potential?” Marina asked next. “About the magic that we all have inside?”

There was a general murmur of agreement.

“He told me that I was special,” Adrian whispered.

“At least in terms of pajamas, of course you are,” commented Alexander.

“Special,” Ricardo murmured. “But why? What makes us special?”



After talking for a while, the only thing they could establish was how little they had in common. They all came from different parts of the world, although most of them were European. Bruno thought that could just be a coincidence, or perhaps during the time the door between Rocavarancolia and Earth was open, it was easier for Denestor and his minions to reach Europe. The only kids from other continents were Hector, Rachel, and the twins, who came from a remote village in Australia.

“As in, there aren’t even kangaroos there. It’s probably the most boring place on the planet,” Alex added.

They were also of different ages. They ranged from Adrian, the youngest, at thirteen years old, to Ricardo at sixteen. What surprised Hector most of all was finding out that Marco, tall and mature Marco, was only fourteen, the same age as Marina and Lizbeth and one year younger than most of the others.

Hector turned to Natalia. If there was someone special there it was her: she saw shadows that nobody else could see. She’d seen them on Earth and now she saw them in Rocavarancolia. The young girl tensed up when she realized he was looking at her.

“Don’t say a word,” she whispered, guessing his thoughts, and gave him a kick under the blankets.

“There has to be something that sets us apart from the rest,” Ricardo continued. “Some reason that they brought us here. In my case I don’t know what it could be . . . The only thing that makes me stand out is my skill with languages. I’m good at them. My dad’s a translator, and ever since I was little, he encouraged me to learn other languages. But I don’t think that makes me special.”

“You’re a born leader,” Lizbeth pointed out. “You’ve taken charge of us. And although we hardly know each other, nobody argues with what you decide. Well, at least not much,” she said, launching a rolled-up shirt at Alexander.



“I never argue,” the redhead protested. “And I’m fine with him and Marco deciding what to do. It’s always good to have someone to blame if things go wrong.” He shrugged. “But I don’t know . . . Is having a knack for leadership enough to get you into this mess? ’Cause I don’t see Amanda Carter, my class president, here, and she, my friends, is a force to be reckoned with.”

“Why do you think they brought you and your sister?” Lizbeth asked.

“For our beauty, wit, and charm—was there ever any doubt?” There was a loud guffaw in the darkness. Hector couldn’t tell where it came from. Marco, perhaps. “No, seriously though. I don’t have the faintest idea why Denestor chose me. I’m nothing special. But Maddie is; although she doesn’t look like it, she’s a real artist. She’s a painter. She paints strange stuff, but she paints very well.”

“Please!” she exclaimed. “Don’t pay attention to him, he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. A few months ago I started taking a painting class,” she explained. “From the first class I was using warm tones in my pictures: reds, browns, ochers, colors like that . . . I mix them almost at random and then I draw a bunch of lines on top so that it seems like you’re looking at the canvas through a spiderweb or cracked glass. My teacher says they’re powerful pictures, but I’m not sure myself if they’re any good.”

“They sound good,” Marina offered.

Hector pulled the blanket up to his neck and changed position to avoid an uncomfortable lump in the clothing. Rachel was lying in front of him; fiery wings beat furiously outside the embrasure and he caught a brief glimpse of her face in their light. Hector wondered what was going through her head. Injured, far away from everything she knew, and surrounded by strangers she couldn’t understand. Another bat flew close to the facade and by its light Hector could now see that she was sleeping soundly. The expression on her face was so tranquil that he envied her. He wasn’t the only one who noticed.



“Okay,” Ricardo said, “so we know what makes Rachel special: she’s capable of sleeping anywhere, in any situation.”

“Is she really asleep?” asked Adrian, surprised, as he peered out from among the blankets.

“Well, that’s a talent,” Alex commented. “Anyone have anything else to tell us?” he asked. “Anything you think makes you special? Singing, dancing, ventriloquism? We can use all of it! With a little luck we can start a circus!”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Lizbeth scolded, between giggles.

“Marco is strong and fast,” Adrian said. It seemed like the conversation was starting to cheer him up. “He beat up the monsters that were stealing our food. Seeing him in action was incredible. It was like a movie.”

“I’m going to teach you all to do that,” said Marco. “Not a single creature will dare come near us, you’ll see.”

“That’s right! He’s going to teach us!”

The conversation lightened the mood. That and the fact that the howling had stopped. Now they only heard the wind, lurching and moaning; it sounded like there were giants battling outside.

“I’m special too,” said Hector. “You’ve seen it: I spend more time rolling on the ground than standing up. My gym teacher says that he’s never known anyone so clumsy in his entire life. In fact, he can’t understand how I’ve survived these fifteen years . . .”

“You’re exaggerating. You don’t fall that much,” Lizbeth pointed out.

“Last year the gym teacher had the bright idea to keep track of all of the accidents I had during his class. You heard me: he counted the number of times I tripped or ran into gym equipment, doors, walls, and classmates.”

“No!”



“He did. I’m not lying,” he lied.

“I’m afraid to ask . . .” said Alexander. “But I will. How many was it?”

“One thousand two hundred and twenty-eight,” he answered. “During that class I destroyed two doors and a mat, I knocked a window out of its frame, and I put an exchange student into a coma, although, frankly, no one liked him much. I think he approved of that one.”

The kids’ laughter was so loud that several bats moved away from the embrasures, frightened by the sudden noise. Even the wind seemed to pause momentarily in its attack. Rachel half opened her eyes, mumbled something unintelligible, and then closed them again.

“I . . . I don’t know if I should say this . . .” said Adrian, after a moment. His tone of voice was so cheerful that Hector almost laughed just to hear him talk. “I have a secret power. A special ability . . .”

He brought one hand to his armpit and flapped his arm up and down, producing a very unpleasant squelching sound.

“That’s disgusting!” he heard Maddie say over the others’ laughter. “Quit it!”

“I can’t help it. I got bitten by a radioactive fart when I was little,” Adrian said, very seriously, as he kept showing off his power. Hector laughed so hard that tears ran down his cheeks.

“Well, you know what they say,” Alexander said. “With great power comes great—”

“That’s enough! Stop it!” yelled Natalia. She sat atop the mountain of clothing and moved her arms excitedly. “This is not a joke! Can’t you see how serious it is? When are you going to stop acting like children?!”

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, they heard Adrian say:

“But we are children.”

“Speak for yourself!”



“Can you stop being so worried, please?” Alexander asked. “You can’t be so tense all the time, you’ll end up snapping! Just let go for a bit, come on, it’s not a sin!”

“Could you please lower your voice and stop yelling?” Madeleine pleaded. “You’ll make me go deaf.”

“Are we really discussing whether or not we can make jokes?” Ricardo asked. “How ridiculous.”

Alexander climbed over Hector so that he could talk to Natalia in a low voice. For a second, Hector felt like he couldn’t breathe under the redhead’s weight, smothering in the confusion of clothing and blankets.

“Relax, worrywart.” Alex put his hand on Natalia’s. “The little guy finally settled down and you had to start up again. We are in a jam here, but you don’t need to keep bringing it up over and over. That doesn’t make anything better.”

“I’m sorry,” whispered Natalia, embarrassed.

Alex went back to his place, to Hector’s relief. But the good mood that had prevailed till then dissipated. Once again, the threat of Rocavarancolia weighed upon them. And the sound of the wind became unbearable.

“Does anyone have anything else to say?” Ricardo asked.

Hector watched as Bruno sat up on the clothing. He thought that he was preparing to speak, but another voice spoke up first, and the Italian lay back down.

“Well . . .” Marina cleared her throat. “I don’t think that what I do makes me special, but . . . I think there’s something strange about it, especially considering what’s been happening.” She propped herself up in the darkness. “Here it is: I like to write. I’ve done it since I was little . . . stories and poems . . . nothing too long because I get bored too quickly. I’m not very disciplined. The thing is, a little while ago I started writing a kind of . . . saga? No, I wouldn’t call it that . . . They’re stories that all take place in the same city, you know what I mean? In a magical city.”



“Oh!” Madeleine exclaimed. “Is it called Rocavarancolia?”

“No, no. It’s called Delirium. Well . . . in my imagination it’s very similar to Rocavarancolia, although it’s not in ruins, of course. Thousands of strange creatures live there, some of them evil, but others peaceful and benevolent. It’s, I don’t know . . . the city where I’d like to live. Full of magic and fantasy and adventures and . . .” She sighed. “This could be my city, you know? And it makes me dizzy to think about it. Because I’m dying to get out of here.”

“What type of stories did you write?” Marco asked.

“I didn’t write that many,” she answered. “I finished two stories, had another halfway completed, and I had the beginning of a notion for a new one. All fantasy. Just to give you an idea, in the one I haven’t finished yet there’s a cemetery where the dead are always talking to each other and to anyone who happens by.”

“Can you tell us one?” Maddie asked.

“A story?” she said, surprised. “You want me to tell you a story?”

“Please,” Lizbeth encouraged. “A bedtime story.”

“Well, if nobody minds, I can try,” she said, shyly. “Although I should warn you that I’m better at writing them than telling them.”

“But not the one about the cemetery with the talking dead people,” Adrian begged. “Please, not that one.”

“Okay. I’ll tell you another one then,” she said. “It’s the second story that I wrote about Delirium. Yes, that’ll be good; besides, it’s not too long.” She made herself comfortable on the blankets and clothing, and after a moment of silence, she began the story. “It’s called ‘For Love,’ and it’s the story of the king and queen of Delirium,” she explained. “They’d known each other since they were kids, and the moment they first saw each other they knew they were destined to be together. The first thing he said to her was ‘When I grow up I’m going to marry you,’ and she simply answered, ‘I know.’ They were seven years old.”

“A love story!” Alex exclaimed, horrified. “No, for goodness’ sake! I’ll have nightmares if you tell us a love story now, my blood sugar will go up and I won’t be able to—”

“Shut up!” Lizbeth, Madeleine, Natalia, and Marco cried at the same time. Adrian broke out in laughter at the coordinated response.

“I’ll shut up,” Alexander announced theatrically. “I know when I’m outnumbered. You may continue, charming duck murderer.”

Marina continued the story:

“From the first moment, as I said, it was clear that the children were made for each other. Everyone insisted that it was practically as if they’d been born married. They were the perfect couple. Years later they became king and queen of Delirium and they both remained as in love as when they first met. Under their reign, the kingdom prospered like never before. They were magnificent years, splendid; everything was happy and joyful. Until an assassin came to court, an assassin from a neighboring country with orders to kill the king. But he made a mistake: instead of pouring the deadly poison into the king’s cup, he poured it into the queen’s.”

Hector listened with rapt attention to Marina’s story. The girl’s voice had him as bewitched in that moment as her eyes had throughout the day.

“The queen fell deathly ill. As she lay dying, the king, who was out of his mind with grief, swore that not even death could separate them. He went to the tower of the most powerful wizard in the kingdom to ask for his help.” She remained silent for an instant before continuing. “The wizard told him that he couldn’t do anything to save her; the assassin’s poison was so potent that there was no magic in Delirium or in any other world that could help her. But there was something he could do: an extremely dangerous spell, dangerous because it destabilized the very essence of magic. He would keep vigil over the dying woman, he explained, and at the exact moment of her death, when the woman’s soul left her body, he would use all of his power to transform her into a ghost.”



“That would happen anyway when she died, right?” Adrian asked. “The queen would become a ghost herself.”

“No,” Marina answered. “At least it doesn’t work that way in the magical world that I invented. Very few of those who die are transformed into spirits. And that wasn’t the queen’s destiny; her soul would simply disappear forever. And since the king couldn’t accept that, he asked the wizard to perform the spell, even though the wizard warned him about how complicated and dangerous it was. The king swore to give the wizard half of the kingdom if he was able to return his wife to him, even though she would be a ghost.”

“How beautiful,” Madeleine said. “That’s true love.”

“The wizard waited in the queen’s chambers until the second she took her last breath. Then, when the woman’s soul abandoned her body, he carried her to the tower and performed the spell that transformed her into a ghost. But something happened that no one could have expected: the transformation made the queen go insane! She couldn’t understand why, even if it was for love, the king had condemned her to be a ghost forever. ‘I couldn’t live without you,’ he tried to explain. ‘Don’t you understand? Life without you wasn’t worth living.’ She didn’t listen. Rage consumed her. And blinded by it, she mortally wounded him. ‘Send someone to find the wizard,’ the king of Delirium begged as he lay dying at her feet. But she only watched him as he died. ‘You’ve condemned me, fool,’ she said. ‘For love, you’ve condemned me to a life that’s not life; for love, you’ve hurled me into a perpetual eternity of misery. I curse your love. Bring that with you to the darkness, bring it with you into oblivion. I will remain here forever, cursing your name and cursing the day I met you.’

“The assassin knew that was going to happen,” Ricardo said. “Surely he didn’t make a mistake in poisoning the queen instead of the king. Sometimes the easiest way of doing away with someone is destroying what they love.”

“And that’s it?” Adrian asked. He looked disappointed. “That’s the end of the story?”



“Yes,” Marina answered. “It ends with him dead and her condemned to be a spirit for all eternity.”

“What a sad story,” Lizbeth murmured.

“All stories are sad,” Bruno pointed out, and his dispassionate voice made his claim all the more emphatic.

“All of them? What do you mean?!” Lizbeth exclaimed. “No! There are happy stories! And lots of them have happy endings.”

“No,” he replied. “No, there aren’t. There are no happy stories. Happy endings don’t exist. It’s a lie. They’re illusions. Those stories you’re talking about aren’t finished. They never tell you the last part. They never tell you that every single time, in the end, everyone dies.”