

Fleabag

the
Fire Cat

written and illustrated by
Beth Webb
part two of the Fleabag Trilogy

Illustrations by
Mark Hamilton
www.markhamilton.com

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Blue Lightning

Purple clouds shrouded the sky. Urgent flashes of blue lit the towering billows. The hot air clung heavy and still...

Waiting for the thunder.

Which never came.

In the palace gardens, Fleabag wriggled from under the lavender bushes and swivelled his ears, listening for the kittens playing nearby.

Silence.

Yawning, he mewed their names. He'd have to get them in – their mother would have his fur if they got wet or frightened.

Still nothing.

Rascals! They're playing tricks on their uncle Fleabag are they? I'll show them how to play hide-and-seek!

Fleabag's idea of kitten-sitting meant finding a warm patch of earth and

dozing for an hour or three. He might open half an eye to check on the little ones, or lick their fur if they needed a cuddle. He'd even tolerate being bounced on – as long as they didn't pull his whiskers or expect him to actually *do* anything.

The early morning had been pleasant, the three kittens had played tag in the lavender walk while Fleabag snoozed, dreaming about his heroic adventures on the quest to find the Queen's Ring, two years before. He purred, remembering his brave and selfless deeds.

But then the sun went in.

Fleabag sat up, scratched at a passing flea, then slunk deeper between the lavender bushes. He didn't like the look of the bruised, towering clouds. They felt very... wrong. They reminded him of the dangerous magic that he and his companions had faced on their adventures. Swashbuckling tales were all very well, but what had *really* happened in Porthwain and Beulothin was deadly enough to make the bravest cat's fur bristle.

Fleabag could smell rain in the air. He'd have to get the kittens inside, but where *were* they? He trotted along the path, scaring away a pigeon and a red squirrel. But there were no scruffy little balls of ginger and black fur anywhere.

Where are those wretched children? Fleabag grumbled as he prowled through a wilder part of the garden. Turning left, he braved the bracken and brambles behind the potting shed where the gardener's dog sometimes snored.

But he found only green darkness, broken flowerpots – and a grass snake.

Fleabag stopped to scratch a couple more annoying fleas, then, balancing on his three legs he yowled, 'Kittens! Children! You have to come in now...'

There were no replies. Just garden-silence. He marched between the vegetable beds, calling as he went.

More brilliant forks of blue lit the lowering clouds and a sweet, heavy smell of ash hung in the air.

But still no thunder.

'Meoooooww!' Fleabag called, then he stared... For darting between the purple billows were what looked like... Tiny dragons!

Fleabag's heart pounded. '*Kittens!*' he mewed nervously. 'Come here, *now!*'

A large raindrop splashed in his eye. Then another, and another. Soon it was raining hard. He lifted his nose and let the water trickle down his neck. Secretly, Fleabag quite liked a shower; his fur was always itchy and, after the day's oppressive heat, the coolness felt wonderful.

But his relief was short-lived. A howling blast of wind almost bowled him off his paws. The next blast whipped his whiskers and flattened his ears. Fleabag slunk to his belly and crawled through the mud. 'Kittens! Kittens, come here, *now!*' he yowled.

He could hardly stand. The rain became torrential. His sodden fur hung in points. Streams washed across the paths, the carrot patch became a lake.

Fleabag shook himself miserably. 'I should have stayed awake. I should have made the children play close by. They could be anywhere!' he moaned, flicking water from his whiskers as he leaped the herb bed.

The rain and wind battered even harder. Fleabag took refuge under a wheelbarrow, but the wind flipped it over. Leaping clear, Fleabag jumped onto a sundial, gripping the stone with his claws.

'*Kittens!*' he howled through the sheets of pounding rain. 'Poor little mites, they'll be drowned before I get to them. *Furbags!* Where are you?'

The rain turned to hail. Then, somewhere high in the palace wall behind him, the frantic wind tugged and clattered at a window.

A hand reached out to pull it shut.

Fleabag was about to call his nephews and nieces again, but what he saw made his voice stick in his throat...

How the Ring Fire Died



Her Eminence, the Lady Gemma of the Sacred Flames, Fire Wielder to the King, had spent the morning in her book-lined study, huddled miserably in her too-big leather chair. The highly polished desk had been pulled right up to the window so she could look out over the garden while she tried to work.

Gemma was supposed to be answering pompous formal letters. In reality, she was watching Fleabag searching for the palace kittens. Their games made her laugh. She longed to join them. When she was little, she'd been homeless and had spent her days hiding or stealing to survive. Now she had everything she could wish for, but had to work every minute of every day.

She'd never had much time for fun.

Pushing her boring letters to the back of the desk, Gemma knelt on the blotter and leaned on the windowsill. She could just make out Fleabag's scruffy tail twitching under the lavender bushes, like a sweep's brush. She guessed he was dreaming of their adventures.

Gemma sighed. Those days had been dangerous, but filled with love and laughter. Her memories usually cheered her up – but today, she felt as if the

heavy air was squashing her spirit. Gemma watched the clouds piling into dark, menacing towers. They looked too like the battlements of Porthwain and the air smelled of burning, as it had that night.

These weren't good memories.

She shuddered. 'I must stop day-dreaming and do some work,' she told herself firmly, sliding back on her chair and picking a letter from a pile on her desk. But the words danced and made no sense. Gemma rubbed her eyes. 'I'm getting a headache. I wish the storm would break. I can't work like this.'

Without reading the letter, she folded it into a dart and threw. It glided like a white bird into a dark corner.

Gemma wished she could fly away too. But she couldn't. Her desk was her prison, and the walls were stacked with difficult books about how, and why, the Ring Fire worked. She opened one at random, sneezing as she turned the dusty pages. She squinted at the elegantly written words, then flung the book after the dart.

'I hate you! You're boring, stuffy, and I don't care! Nothing you say makes any sense!'

With a defiant glint in her eye, she folded the next letter into another dart and shot it through the window. A sudden gust of wind tossed it back inside, sending it into mad loops.

Gemma ducked as the missile came for her, missed, then span back, lodging itself in her hair. '*Ouch!*' she squealed, screwing it up and shoving it in the bin.

Flopping back in her chair, she buried her head in her hands. She didn't notice the letter bounce out of the bin and land on her desk.

She had her mind on other things. 'It's no good,' she groaned. 'I hate being the Fire Wielder. The Ring Fire doesn't flare up when it's supposed to, then roars to life spectacularly at the most embarrassing moments.'

Then an awful thought struck her: *Perhaps it's telling me I ought to get someone else to do the job? Someone who knows what they're doing?*

Her heart sank, then slowly, an idea began to form. One that felt – good.

From where she sat, Gemma could just see beyond the palace walls. Out there was the market, and ordinary people with real lives. *That's where I belong*, she thought. *That's where I want to be. If only I had the courage to leave. I'll get a job or set up a stall selling, oh, I don't know... Pots and pans for all I care! I'll get a room of my own and just be plain Gemma Streetchild again. No one'll expect me to be something I'm*

not. I wish my head didn't hurt so.

Then the lightning began. Blue, jagged and brilliant. She jumped and shivered. 'One, two three...' she counted, but no thunder. The storm bothered her. The colour reminded her of something she'd known. Something from not so long ago.

Something she'd hoped never to meet again.

Absently, Gemma scratched the itching in her palms. She squealed and jumped as the Ring Fire flared up between her fingers. It didn't burn. It wasn't that sort of a fire. She held her hands out towards the window.

Gold and scarlet flames leapt as the blue lightning flashed again and again, as if the Ring Fire and the blueness were fighting. Her heart pounded.

The she saw shapes darting through the clouds. Was that...? No it couldn't be... Were there tiny *dragons* driving the storm and sparking the eerie flashes?

The lightning was getting closer. It seemed to be searching for *her*. She felt sick.

A fork of blinding light filled the window.

Dazed, and reeling, unable to breathe for the stink of smoke, Gemma flung up her hands. 'Stop!' she squealed. 'Go *away!*'

Then a sudden roll of thunder shook the palace, making clocks chime and doors slam. The booming rolled around the walls until the stones shook. More brilliant flashes skimmed the slate-black clouds.

A cold blue face peered in through the window. A face she remembered from the imitation Hall of Light at Porthwain.

'But you're... *dead!*' Gemma gasped.

The face shimmered and grew. It was scarcely held back by the wall of Ring Fire.

Gemma shivered, despite the muggy heat. 'He's back, and he's watching me,' she whispered. Closing her eyes, she relived the roaring inferno where the Chancellor and his son Sethan had died.

She tried to shake the memory of Blue Magic out of her head. 'No! Stop it! Go *away!*' she yelled, but more light flooded the room.

Thunder raged. The air stank of sulphur.

Gemma covered her ears and crawled behind a chair. 'Go away, go away, go *away!*' she screamed.



In a tumbledown city beyond many miles of towns and farms, a young man sat high in a stone tower. His room was filled with all the paraphernalia of magic: tall glass flasks bubbling with coloured liquids and hissing noxious steam, stuffed creatures, charts and diagrams with arcane symbols.

With one finger, he stirred the water in his scrying bowl. *'More! Closer!'* He demanded. *'Let me see just how much power she has.'*

And his storm-dragons obeyed.



Blood pounded in Gemma's ears as she squatted very still, her breathing shallow and fast. She opened her eyes carefully. The Ring Fire was burning in a soft glow all around her.

But why was her head filled with a muddle of remembered images from Porthwain? Scorching fires, the howl of wolves, the stench of the dragon's breath as it opened its jaws to swallow Phelan...

What was the Ring Fire trying to tell her?

She knew the answer. She wished she didn't.

There'd be another battle. Very soon. And it was something to do with the wizards and Blue Magic.

She was scared. Gingerly, Gemma folded back her sleeves, raised her hands and let the Ring Fire blaze out properly.

'Please, please,' she begged the flames, *'I don't know what to do.'* Then she added, *'Phelan, Fleabag, please come, I need help.'* Gemma watched in awe as the golden flames rose between her fingers.

They were beautiful. They warmed her heart.

But no one came.

Then with a deafening clatter, the rain and hail began.

Something had to be done. *Now.*

Standing tall, Gemma stretched out her hands towards the storm.

A screeching wind flung itself at the palace walls, wrenching her window off its catch and swinging it wide open. Like a funeral pall, the blue-black clouds swooped down, and swallowed up the palace, leaving it in near-darkness.

Desperate to keep the magic out, Gemma reached out to pull the window closed.

More thunder rolled, crashing and raging.

A brilliant fork of lightning jabbed at Gemma's face. Throwing up her hands, she stumbled back.

And the Ring Fire went out.

Gemma held her breath. Her heart pounded. How could this be? The Ring Fire couldn't be dead.

Could it?

'Burn!' 'Burn!' she begged, rubbing her hands until they were sore. 'Please, *burn!*'

But nothing happened. The unquenchable Flame that gave life and meaning to everything had died – while *she* had been holding it!

Gemma fled blindly from her room, along the dark corridor and up a narrow spiral stair. She did not stop until she reached the safety of a cupboard at the very top. She slipped into the tiny space and squeezed between the brushes, boxes, and jars of polish. In the semi-dark, Gemma's heart pounded as she gasped and sobbed.

Outside, the wind buffeted the palace like a petulant giant. A draught caught the cupboard door and slammed it. Curling up under a pile of rags and dusters, she hid from the jagged light that stabbed the darkness through the tiny window.

She imagined huge storm dragons swooping around the palace, battering at roofs and turrets with their wings. Vomit rose in Gemma's throat. This was much, much worse than the magical Blue Flames the Chancellor of Porthwain wielded. That had been annoying rather than terrifying, and she hadn't been alone. Fleabag and Phelan had been there too.

More importantly, on that day, the Ring Fire had flared high and wide from her fingers. It had been glorious, defeating and swallowing the Chancellor's evil with a triumphant burst of golden light.

It had been exhilarating and exciting! It had *worked!*

But today, the Ring Fire had died. In *her* hands.

She had allowed the awful storm to quench the flames. *She* had weakened it by her stupidity. Perhaps the storm was her fault? She'd let down her guard and allowed this hideous, deadly magic too close to the palace.

She, who was supposed to *protect* the kingdom... What had she done wrong? Had she missed a ritual or read a scripture wrongly? She was scarcely thirteen, she needed to learn; she was bound to make mistakes. Surely the Ring Fire understood that?

Gemma thought of the letters she'd folded into darts. She knew what they were about, but wished she didn't. Tomorrow she had to face one of the most

important meetings of her life. How could she? What would she say? The man would see right through her and know she was a fraud. What was worse, he was from the University at Porthwain. Was he secretly a wizard? What if he didn't come in peace as he said? What if he had sent this storm?

What if this was a trap?

Without the Fire in her hands, she'd have no power to fight him. None at all.

Leaning her aching head against the cool wall, Gemma tried to calm down.



Far away, the young man in his turret room laughed as his scrying bowl showed Gemma huddled up and quaking in terror.

'So, little Fire Wielder, my Blue Magic frightens you? Your Ring Fire failed to drive back my fearsome dragons? Tut tut! They're only little, scarcely hatchlings, but I've made them look bigger with a glamour.'

He sneered. 'I've enjoyed our little game today; now I'm certain you have almost no power at all. This is going to be fun!'

He stretched out his slim hand and calmed the water in his bowl. 'Enough,' he said quietly, a cruel smile on his lips. 'She will be ready for me tomorrow. She is so terrified she'll do exactly as I tell her. This will be easy.'

The man went to the window, opened it, and whistled. Three tiny dragons darted out of the clouds, circled the turret, and leaped in through the window. The man grabbed their leg straps and shoved them into a cage in the corner. He tossed in a few dead mice and locked their door.

Turning back to his scrying bowl, he smiled as he watched Gemma, still huddled in a broom cupboard like a terrified rabbit. Then, ignoring the hungry dragons meeping for more food, the wizard went downstairs to his own excellent supper.



In the palace kitchen, a sodden Fleabag lined up three bedraggled kittens to dry in front of the fire. He was worried. He'd only glimpsed Gemma grabbing for the window, but the Ring Fire had been there as she reached out. Then it was gone. And now Gemma was gone too, leaving the window clattering in the wind.

Fleabag held his breath. Things couldn't be that bad – could they?

Fleabag's Worries



As soon as the kittens were steaming nicely and lapping a bowl of warm fish, Fleabag ran upstairs to find Gemma.

He searched her study and bedroom, then the library, but there was no sign of her. Sniffing hard, he smelled her footsteps on a tiny back staircase and followed it to the top, but it was so draughty the scent had gone.

Fleabag's paws tapped lightly along the corridor. 'Mew?' he called softly.

Gemma heard, but only buried her head between her knees and held her breath. She longed more than anything to rub her face into her friend's knotted fur and feel his thunderous purring against her cheek. She ached for him to crack an awful joke. She needed to laugh with him. If he were here, he'd comfort her and say something wise and reassuring. He'd make everything all right. He always did.

But she didn't call out. Her beloved friend couldn't help this time. It was too late for help. She had to face the truth alone.

She was no good as Fire Wielder.

Rain from the blue clouds had quenched the Ring Fire. It meant that this evil menace was stronger than she could handle. She had to find another Fire Wielder urgently, someone who'd know what to do. Until then, no one must know. The whole land was at the mercy of the Blue Magic, especially now there were dragons here again.

Tentatively she lifted her head and listened. Had Fleabag gone? Was it safe to cry again?

Her throat felt like barbed wire. She knew the Ring Fire could never die completely, it must be alive somewhere, but a *real* Fire Wielder would stand with Fire blazing before any and every danger. They'd drive back any storm with a single, triumphant word of command.

She was uselessly quivering in a cupboard. 'Please let me go,' she whispered to the Fire that she'd once held and loved. 'Let me be plain Gemma Streetchild again!'

As if in answer, more thunder crashed. On and on the peal echoed, cracked and growled. The palace shook worse than before. Windows smashed. Voices screamed.

Huddled in her cupboard, Gemma covered her aching ears and wept.

For in the thunder, there was laughter.



Fleabag knew something was very wrong with Gemma. But then, she hadn't been herself for a long time. If only she'd sit down and talk to him... More importantly, he needed the knots and fleas sorting in his fur. No one could do it like Gemma, not even his wife Tabitha. Fleabag paced the corridor one last time, mewing at the top of his voice, but there was no reply. 'I'm being silly,' he told himself. 'It's only cupboards and junk up here.' He'd have a word with Phelan. He might know what to do.

Sighing, Fleabag ran back down to the kitchen. He had to make the kittens presentable for when their mother came back from rat hunting. Finding the little rascals in a sleepy heap on the hearthrug, Fleabag chose a miniature copy of himself, and licked her midnight fur until it gleamed.



Lying in his cat basket that night, Fleabag couldn't sleep. His whiskers twitched as something kept brushing past his face. Stretching out a claw, he took a sleepy swipe. He missed, but who cared? Let the mice get bold. The more careless they were, the easier they'd be to catch. He turned over and put a loving paw around Tabitha, then went back to sleep. He was exhausted. Yesterday's strange storm had left everyone feeling drained.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright. There *was* something in the room, and it wasn't a mouse! The bedroom was pitch black apart from a faint light from the corridor. Fleabag got up, balanced on his three legs, and spread his whiskers. The fur rose

along his back. *Why?* He couldn't smell or hear anything, but he had such a peculiar *feeling*... What was it?

His tattered ears searched the night for sounds. The royal palace was silent except for the usual pacing of the guards outside and the sniffings and scratchings of the guard dogs. In the next room, King Phelan was snoring loudly. He was only eighteen, but if he'd had curry for supper he could make enough noise to shake the windowpanes.

But the 'something' was not Phelan.

Tabitha turned over sleepily. 'What's the matter, dear?' she mewed.

'Nothing, Sweetpaws. I'm just going to stretch my legs for a while. Go back to sleep.'

'I can't,' she mewed. 'Something keeps brushing past my whiskers and disturbing me.'

Fleabag didn't want Tabitha to be worried. She was pregnant with her second litter of kittens. She needed her sleep.

'I felt it too,' he said. 'I think there's a mouse that needs teaching some manners. I'll catch it,' he promised. 'Get some rest, dear.' Tabitha rolled over and stretched the length of the velvet-lined cat basket. She was glad to have the extra space to herself, and went back to sleep.

Fleabag did not like the tingling that ran up and down his spine. It was not good. He drank some water and slipped out into the passage. The torches were burning low, making his shadow dance up the walls as he sniffed all along the bottom of Phelan's door. No one except the butler had come in or out since the King had gone to bed. Yet something... *something*... was...

Behind him!

He leaped in the air, landing with a thump! Nothing. Only more shadows – shapes he'd known since he was a kitten. Nothing strange... Yet there it was again! He jumped higher this time, clawing halfway up the wall as... *Something* went past.

'This is ridiculous!' he told himself. Again and again he *had* to leap and pounce, attacking somewhere above his head, behind him, then all around and just beyond the end of his own tail. He jumped and skidded along the corridor – yet there was absolutely nothing there! He had no idea what he was after; he just had to act like a demented kitten.

This was ridiculous – and so undignified!

At last, Tabitha crawled out of bed and came to the bedroom door. 'Either go out and play in the garden, or come back to bed,' she meowed crossly. 'Your daft games are keeping me awake.'

Fleabag turned and growled warningly at the something-that-was-nothing. 'I'll be back!' he warned.

Moments later, he was snuggled up next to his beloved, but sleep still eluded him.



The young wizard had sat up all night in his study, laughing. The scrying bowl gave him so much pleasure, allowing him to watch the tormenting spell drive every cat in the palace mad. That would keep the humans awake. No one would rest. Everyone had to be tired and on edge for the big meeting in the morning.

For this was the beginning of the rule of Blue Magic. By nightfall, he'd be the master of all he surveyed. Dawn was brightening the skies in the east. He was packed and ready.

Very ready.

Stepping onto a small balcony, the young man strapped himself into a basket chair. He cast a spell, making his small dragons much larger, then clicked his fingers. The creatures took up three long ropes tied to the chair's arms and back, flapped their brown wings and lifted their master high in the sky. Turning towards the sunrise, they flew southeast – straight for the royal city of Harflorum.



At breakfast time, Fleabag strolled down to the royal dining room and sat on the table, draping his tail in Phelan's porridge.

Tutting, the King shoved the cat aside, picking black hairs from his food. 'Do you have to sit just there?' he grumbled. 'It's most unhygienic. Hasn't cook ordered fresh fish for your royal breakfast or something? Complain to him, not me!'

Fleabag blinked and licked the oats from his tail. 'I have no idea what's for breakfast. I haven't asked. I just wanted to know if you slept well?'

Phelan gave up on his porridge and chose toast. He waved a marmalade-y knife in Fleabag's face. 'No, I did *not* sleep well, thanks to you. I was kept awake with your mousing in the middle of the night. Couldn't you let the poor little

things live until morning? Honestly, It sounded as if coal was being delivered, the way you were jumping around.'

Fleabag sighed. Perhaps the breakfast table wasn't the best time to discuss the matter of the strange 'somethings'. He selected a fat kipper from the butler's tray and took it out into the garden. There, he could spread the bits around properly without Phelan throwing a slipper at him for being disgusting.

There was only one way for an intellectual cat to think, and that was to enjoy a very substantial breakfast, follow it up with a mid-morning nap, then maybe nibble at a second breakfast or two...

While he devoured his food under the lavender hedge, Fleabag realised that he'd been woken by this strange 'something' before. He'd never had to chase it in that madcap fashion, but it had been there, in his room. In fact, several times in recent weeks he'd woken with his fur on end. Some of the palace kittens had been acting rather strangely too, jumping and chasing at shadows in a frenzied way, just as he had.

But since yesterday's storm, the feeling that hung in the air was definitely worse, and he did *not* like it. He was suspicious, but he had to be certain of what he was suspicious *of* before he spoke to Phelan.

Then there was Gemma. She had been so withdrawn and unhappy lately. She was no longer her old fun self, and she certainly didn't have time to see to really important Matters of State such as rubbing his tummy and picking out his fleas.

In fact... There it was again, an unpleasant tingle running from the tip of his scraggy tail right up to his whiskers. Fleabag shuddered, finished his kipper, then strolled over to a grassy patch to have a leisurely wash in the morning sun and think.

The more he thought, the more worried he became, for yesterday's storm had been uncomfortably familiar. He longed to get up and *do* something, to find an answer, to solve the mystery, but he knew that if he acted without the correct number of breakfasts, each followed by a proper beauty sleep and all-over washes, he might miss a vital clue.

Licking the last taste of kipper from his paws and whiskers, Fleabag curled up with the sun dappling through the trees, and fell asleep.

But he didn't get much rest, for the sound of voices woke him.