

The Relic Master Book of the Crow I

Catherine Fisher

Random House Children's Books

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

The Box of Flames

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

The Bee's Warning

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

The Watch, Unsleeping

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

The Wounded City

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

The House of Trees

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Also by Catherine Fisher
Copyright

CATHERINE FISHER

THE
RELIC
MASTER

RED FOX

To Stephen Herrington
For the idea

The Box of Flames

1

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.

2

This is how the world came to be. The Makers came from the sky, on stairways of ice. Flain opened his hands and the land and sea were there, the soil and salt. He set them one against the other, eroding, in conflict for ever. Out of stillness he brought movement, out of peace, war.

Soren called out the leaves and the trees. She walked the world and seeds fell from her sleeves and the hem of her dress. The Woman of Leaves clothed the world in a green brocade.

It was Tamar, the bearded one, who brought the beasts. Down the silver stairs he led them, the smallest a night-cub that struggled in his arms.

All the sons of God watched them scatter.

Book of the Seven Moons

THE JOURNEY TO the settlement took five days. On his own, Raffi could have got there in four, but Galen's limp slowed them down. The keeper's leg was long healed, but it was stiff, and he walked grim and silent with a tall black stick. Even when the pain must have been bad after a long day's tramp in the rain or cold, he never talked about it. Raffi was used to it all: the keeper's brooding, his sudden outbreaks of foul temper: at times like these he kept quiet and wary and out of reach of the black stick. Galen had been hurt too deeply. The explosion had damaged more than his leg - it had scarred his mind. Toiling up the steep rocky path, the pack heavy on his shoulders, Raffi watched

the Relicmaster scramble ahead of him, slithering on scree. Galen was almost as unstable. And now this message.

If it was a trap, Galen wouldn't care. Raffi knew that sometimes he wanted to get caught, that he took deliberate risks, carelessly, proudly; like in the summer when they'd walked out of the forest into a village and taken a room and stayed there for three days, sleeping on comfortable beds, eating outside in full view of everyone. Galen hadn't cared, but for Raffi it had been three days of terror. The villagers hadn't betrayed them. Most had looked the other way. They'd been so lucky, Raffi thought, stumbling over a stone. Everyone knew there was a reward for the capture of any keeper. Two thousand marks. They'd been incredibly lucky.

'Come on!' Galen was standing on the top of the ridge. His voice was a growl through his teeth. 'You can go faster than this. Don't think you need to slow down for me.'

Raffi stopped, wiping sweat from his hair. 'I'm not. The pack's heavy.'

Galen glared at him. 'Then give it to me.'

'You've had your turn.'

'Do you think I can't manage another?'

'I didn't say that!' Raffi spread his hands. 'I just -'

'Save it! And move. We want to get to this place before night.' He had turned and gone before Raffi could answer.

Looking at the empty sky, Raffi felt furious and hurt and reckless. For a cold moment he told himself he would leave tonight, just take his things and go home. There were no Relicmasters now, the Order was broken. And Galen could look after himself with his scornful, bitter jealousy. But even as he raged Raffi knew it all meant nothing, and he took the blue crystal box out and glared at it. Curiosity would keep him here. There was so much he had to learn. And he'd felt the power surge in him, and now he could never be without it.

That afternoon they sat on warm stones on a hillside, looking down, at last, on the settlement.

'Well,' Galen said acidly. 'Well, well.' He drank from the waterflask and passed it over; Raffi took a cold mouthful, thoughtfully. They had expected a village. And indeed there were houses, barns, outbuildings. But mostly, this was a fortress.

The central building was ancient; maybe even from the time of the Makers. The sides were strangely smooth and pale, the signs of old windows clear, now clumsily bricked up to slits. There were about six levels. On the higher ones tiny balconies hung out precariously; most were ruined but Raffi could see bowmen on one, tiny moving figures. The roof had partly collapsed, and been mended with hurdles and thatch.

'What do you think?' He passed the flask back and chewed the hard bread. 'Safe?'

'Not safe.' Galen stared down moodily. 'Those who have the nerve to live in a Maker-house are no ordinary villagers. Since the Emperor fell the land has gone wild. Robber-gangs, war-lords, each one fighting the others. I'm sure this is the castle of one such.'

'And we're going in, blindly.'

Galen gave a sour grin. 'Going in, yes. Blindly, no.'

The stones were warm in the autumn sun. Raffi leaned back, feeling better somehow. 'Sense-lines?'

'Around us both. Powders. And if all else fails, the box.'

Raffi shook his head. 'If there are too many of them that won't save us. It might be better not to go in at all.'

'Curiosity, Raffi. Always my downfall.' Galen was rummaging in the pack; now he brought out a small black tube and held it in both hands, lovingly. He spoke a prayer, and made the sign of humility. Then he put the tube to his eye and looked down.

Like the blue box, it was a relic, a holy thing the Makers had left. They had found it in a farm north of the forest two

years ago; the woman of the place had sent for them secretly, terrified the Watch would find out. Galen had blessed the farm, spoken prayers over the house, and taken the relic away. He had a secret place to keep them, a cave in the hills. Once, coming back there, they had found signs on the walls, as if some other member of the Order might have sheltered there. But the marks had been rain-washed, unclear. No one knew how many of the Order were even alive.

Galen gazed at the tower for a long time. Then he handed the tube to Raffi, who stared. 'Me?'

'Why not. It's time you did.'

Nervous, Raffi took it. It was warm and miraculously smooth, made of the Makers' strange material, not wood or stone or skin, the secret no one knew. He muttered a prayer over it, then raised it and looked in.

Despite himself he gasped.

The fortress was huge, close-up. He saw the weeds growing from it, the cracks in the walls. The door was bricked up, a small black slot where two men loitered, talking. He moved the tube carefully; noted the deep pits, the spiked ditch, the strong fence with the walkway behind it.

'Whoever they are they're well-defended.'

'Indeed.' Galen's voice sounded amused. 'Now touch the red button.'

He felt for it; instantly the tube stretched itself in his fingers, the focus blurring quickly to his eyesight. Houses and a row of stalls, their goods hanging in the wind, tawdry and cheap. Dogs in the mud. A crowd of women washing clothes in tubs. Smoke. He followed it up, high into the sky, until the small moon Agramon flashed briefly across the glass. For a moment even that looked close, the smooth faint surface, with tiny formations glinting.

'That's enough!' Galen's hand clasped around the tube; Raffi let go, reluctantly. The Relicmaster folded it into its

wrappings, pushed it deep in the sack and stood up.

Suddenly he looked dangerous, his gaunt face tense, his eyes dark under deep brows. 'Come on,' he said grimly. 'Let's go and ask for Alberic'

It was night when they reached the gates, and the buildings glimmered behind the palisade. The men stationed outside had a lantern; they were playing dice, but they stood up soon enough.

Galen ignored them. He strode past without a word, through the open gates, and no one challenged him. Hurrying behind, Raffi glanced back; the men were whispering. Planning to shut us in, he thought.

They walked together between the dark houses, through the mud, the soft pools of water and dung. The stench of the place was appalling. Filthy children watched them from doorways, silent and unsmiling. The buildings were squalid and patched, the wood rotten and green with age. As they squelched through the muck, Galen muttered, 'Anything?'

'People watching. Just curious.' The sense-lines moved about them, invisible, fluid. Raffi held them with some distant part of his mind, easily, from long practice. It had been the first thing Galen had taught him.

The fortress loomed up. Noise and smoke drifted out from it, laughter, the yells of an argument. In the ruined windows, faint lights glimmered; the strange smooth walls were dappled with moonlight.

At the doorway, the entrance Raffi had seen through the glass, three men waited. Their weapons were in their hands - long hooked knives. They watched Galen come with a mixture of fear and something else, something disturbing. Warnings rippled in Raffi's skull. 'Galen ...'

But Galen had walked right up to them.

'My name is Galen Harn. I'm looking for Alberic'

Whatever else, they weren't surprised. One grinned at the others. 'We've been expecting you, keeper. Come with

me.'

Inside was dark, a maze of rooms and passages. Voices echoed ahead, or from behind closed doors; smoky torches guttered on brackets. The air was fetid and smelt worse than outside. As they walked down a long corridor men squeezed past them, a few slaves, two girls giggling behind Raffi's back, sending the sense-lines rippling. Looking up, he saw something on a wall, marks under the dirt, a symbol he knew. Next to it was a grid of buttons and numbers by a door. Galen stopped too and made the humility-sign; Raffi knew he longed to touch it. 'This is a relic,' he said to their guide. 'It shouldn't be left here.'

The man shrugged easily. 'That's up to Alberic'

'Don't you fear it?'

'I stay away from it, keeper. The whole castle is old.'

'Where does this door lead?'

'Nowhere. There's a square shaft behind it, empty. Goes right down.' He leered. 'Alberic uses it as a burial pit. Knee-deep in skeletons.'

He wasn't joking. Raffi glanced at Galen, but the keeper's face was dark and grim. Putting his hand in his pocket, he let the touch of the blue box comfort him.

They came to some stairs leading up, wide but dingy. Raffi's eyes smarted from the smoke; he stumbled on greasy bones and other rubbish in the thick straw. Gnats whined round him; fleas too, he didn't doubt.

The stairs rose up. Ahead in the dark, Galen climbed them steadily, his black stick tapping. Something was cooking somewhere, a rich, meaty smell that tormented Raffi like a pain. He wondered if they'd get any of it. He couldn't remember when he'd last eaten meat.

Finally they came to the top, a long dim room, full of smoke. The floor was made of wooden planks, sanded smooth; it spread before them, an empty expanse.

Their guide stood still. 'Go on,' he said curtly.

Through the smoke they saw a group of four people waiting for them, sitting and standing round a fire at the far end of the room. Galen glanced across. 'Well?'

'It doesn't feel right.'

The keeper shrugged. 'Too late.' He stalked forward; Raffi followed him down the hall, his heart hammering with nerves.

Talk hushed. The men and woman waiting stood up, all but one, the man in the centre. As Raffi came closer he saw to his astonishment that the man was tiny, his feet resting on a box, his body far too small for the great cushioned chair in which he sat. His face was narrow and clever, his hair stubbly; he wore a gold collar and a green quilted jacket slashed with red.

Galen stood still, and looked down at him. 'I was told to ask for Alberic,' he said, gravely.

The dwarf nodded, his eyes sharp. 'You've found him,' he replied.