

# VOYAGER 15

## SNEAK PEEK

### Shattered City

by Tansy Rayner Roberts

1.

*The Day after the Nones of Felicitas (nefas)*

The silk was cool to the touch. It was a magnificent gown: flame-orange, trimmed with soft charcoal-black leaves of silk that tumbled from the Duchessa's shoulders to her knees. A perfect festival dress for the chief day of sacrifice, the centrepiece of the sacred games which would shortly be taking over the city.

It was the last fitting, and Velody was just managing to make the alterations — a stitch here, a stitch there - without her hand shaking on the needle.

There was no reason to be nervous. Sure, her entire professional career hung in the balance - a word from the Duchessa in the right circles could ruin her - and yet there were so many other things to worry about.

Velody could think of one person at least, if not an entire Court of them, who would laugh at her if they knew how anxious she was about this one every day event. The world was so much bigger and more dangerous than she had ever known, and here she was fretting about the effect of a dropped waistline.

The slender, nineteen-year-old demoiselle who ruled the City of Aufleur gazed at herself in the mirror, lifting the weight of her long blonde hair. 'Should I bob it?' she asked idly.

Velody's own hair was bundled back in the snood. She still refused to have what most demmes these days referred to as 'the chop'. The very thought of it made her neck cold.

'The city fathers would implode, my lady,' she said with a polite smile. 'But you would look exceptional.'

The Duchessa gave her an impish grin worthy of her age. 'I would, wouldn't I?'

The curtains in the room shifted as the door was opened abruptly. 'Ladies,' said the Ducomte Ashiol Xandelian d'Aufleur, striding through the room and hurling himself on the nearest

floral sofa. He was dark, dangerously handsome, and held himself as if the city revolved around him.

Velody would not look. He was playing games with her, and she refused to allow him to put her on edge.

The Duchessa sighed dramatically. 'You will have to forgive the rudeness of my cousin, Mistress Velody. He was raised in the wild.'

'He does not disturb me, high and brightness,' said Velody, plucking pins from her mouth and ignoring the deep shiver that went through her flesh at the man's presence.

'Really?' the Ducomte said in a disappointed voice, kicking off his boots and putting his bare feet up on the arm of the sofa. 'I'll have to try harder, Mistress Velody.' He lifted his tousled head briefly, to examine the dress. 'I have to say, this one is an improvement over the other frocks you've laid in for the festival, gosling. Do you want the city to remember you as a worshipper of limp cabbage?'

The Duchessa set her jaw, looking older than her nineteen years. 'Most of my gowns for the sacred games have to be green, Ashiol. It is the colour of growth and renewal at the height of summer.'

'It makes you look like a salad,' he observed.

Velody hid her expression among the folds of the festival gown. 'My lord Ducomte will not make the same comparisons when it comes to his matching tunics, I hope?' she suggested.

The Duchessa giggled. 'I wasn't going to mention that... yet.'

'Cruel demmes, the both of you,' said the Ducomte, letting his eyes fall closed. 'This is what comes of having a woman in charge.'

It was evening, but the summer light meant that Velody would not have to walk from the palazzo to her own shop in the Vittorine district in the darkness. The Duchessa's unfinished festival gown had been wrapped in brown paper so she could carry it more easily. She had walked only a few paces when she felt the presence of the Ducomte Ashiol behind her, and slowed to allow him to catch up.

'A well-mannered seigneur would walk you home,' he informed her gravely.

'Indeed,' said Velody, unimpressed. 'This may surprise you, *seigneur*, but I am well able to take care of myself.'

'The streets aren't as safe as they used to be,' he told her, eyes dark.

'The streets were never safe,' she replied, pulling her wrap around her.

He did not offer to carry the parcel. 'Something bad's coming.' It was a different voice; Ashiol was no longer playing that odd game where they pretended to be vague acquaintances, the

Duchessa's rude, flirtatious cousin and her humble dressmaker.

'From our enemies in the sky,' suggested Velody. She had felt it too, a dark shadow flickering at her throughout the day, the heavy weight of something to come, something more than the usual battles. 'Or your friends underground?'

'Both, I expect.'

They walked together in silence for some time, falling into step together. It was only a little over two months since they had met, and now he had become an essential part of her life. He had changed her world, quite literally, and Velody was still not sure how she felt about that.

The streets were clear of festival paraphernalia for once, though tomorrow was the beginning of the crazy season of sacred games - eight days altogether, then another seven of victory games later in the month. Victory games, in a city that thought it hadn't been at war in decades. It was really best not to think too hard about it. That temple there, she had seen it explode into pieces only a few noxes ago, shattered by a massive lashbolt from the sky, so fiercely bright that she had seen imprints of its shape on the inside of her eyes for hours. When dawn came, the temple had discreetly reassembled itself, stones and dust moving back into place until it was pristine.

Oh, yes. This city made her head spin.

Delphine had not expected this. It had been more than a year since Rhian set foot outside the bounds of their house. But here they were, at the temple on the Lucretine, waiting to sacrifice their honey cakes. Almost like the old days.

Not quite like the old days. Rhian had chosen today because the sacred games had not started yet and there would be hardly anyone at the temple. She had waited until almost dusk, and hid her face beneath her fleece garland as she walked along the streets.

That bastard Macready had not looked surprised when Rhian had suggested they come here today. Delphine hated him for being so confident. How had he with his lilting voice and easy ways talked Rhian into facing her crippling fear? Delphine and Velody had struggled for so long, trying to find the right thing to say to convince Rhian she could step into the world again. Glad though Delphine was (she wasn't that much of a sour bitch, surely?) that her friend was doing so well, it burned that a stranger had wrought such a change.

'Wait for us,' Delphine said abruptly to him now as the last penitent emerged from the temple, leaving it empty. Macready shrugged and went to sit on the grass outside the temple. Why did he never get angry with her? She conveniently pushed out of her mind the few times she had seen rage in his eyes, because then she would have to admit that a spark of attraction shot through her

whenever that happened.

'You are rude to him,' Rhian said as they stepped inside the cool temple. 'Why so harsh when he has been nothing but kindness?'

'I don't trust his kindness,' Delphine said. 'It leads to bad thoughts. Things! Bad things.' Rhian looked so tense - as if her tall body and broad shoulders were the wrong size for the world. 'Why are you doing this?' Delphine blurted. 'Why now?'

'Velody says my father was a shepherd,' said Rhian. 'I don't remember him, but I should sacrifice on his behalf for the Parilia.' She looked apologetic, ducking her head low and purposefully not adding what Delphine knew full well - the Parilia, festival of shepherds and fleece, was two days hence. But thanks to the Sacred Games, every temple in Aufleur would be full of people then, all jostling and elbowing. This was the most Rhian could manage, for now.

The Parilia meant nothing to Delphine. She didn't even have to make garlands for it, as that work was better suited to the fleecers and spinners. Of all the hundreds of festivals celebrated in Aufleur, this was one she could happily ignore. She had honey cakes at the ready, though. Anything to preserve the old ritual of coming to a temple to sacrifice with Rhian. They were going through the motions, but it was a start, and she was desperate not to spoil it.

Blurting the wrong thing was an old habit and a hard one to break. 'How do you know she told you the truth?'

Rhian looked at her in surprise. 'She's Velody.'

Ha, that was rich. Velody, who spent her noxs on the roofs of the city, flirting with strange and dangerous people. Velody, who drew danger down upon them every day. Velody who had sat Delphine and Rhian down and told them a fairytale about the city they were born in, how it had been destroyed in a battle so awful that no one remembered it had even existed.

Velody was not theirs any more, and Delphine did not believe a frigging word that came out of her mouth.

Rhian burned her offerings to the saint of shepherds and they emerged into the light of the early evening. 'I killed the ferax lord,' said Delphine, as if she was remarking on a new tisane she had learned about in the marketplace.

Rhian stared at her, and then tugged her away from the main portico of the temple, into the shade of nearby trees and well away from where Macready was waiting for them. 'The ferax lord,' she whispered urgently, two bright spots of colour on her cheek. 'The one who ...'

'The one who invaded our home and held you prisoner,' Delphine said evenly. 'Who threatened Velody, stabbed her, and had Macready almost beaten to death. That ferax lord, yes. I

killed him, and I'm not sorry.'

Rhian wore an expression that Delphine had not seen for a long time. The one where Rhian was the grown up, the smart one who always knew what to do, until that awful day when she was hurt so badly she was unable to be that Rhian any more. 'You don't mean you actually ... Delphine, you couldn't!'

'I didn't creep into his room and smother him while he was sleeping or spike his tonic if that's what you think,' said Delphine, and the laugh that came out (because it was meant to be funny, really) didn't sound like it belonged to her at all. 'I - he was trying to kill me, and I had a ... I had a sword.'

Should she be breathing this fast? It was loud in her ears. How had it happened? It was crazy. The ferax was one of them, so strong and powerful and Other, and she was just a person. One of the daylight folk, as Velody's Court friends always said with such patronising airs.

She was nothing.

'I don't know how I did it, but I was holding the sword and it just happened, and ...' and she was crying now, how stupid, she never cried, and certainly not in front of Rhian, who had lost so much more than Delphine ever could.

But now she could hardly speak, and Rhian was holding her while Delphine sobbed into her best festival dress.

A hand touched her hair and it didn't belong to Rhian. 'It is how it has always been,' Macready said in his low lilt of a voice. 'I knew, lass. Your potential. It's like a glow around you. It's the brightest, best thing it can be. When it takes you, there is no chance. No sense. It was the same for all of us.' Fury bubbled up in Delphine's stomach. 'No!' She was not going to accept it, not from him, not from any of them.

'What are you saying?' Rhian asked Macready.

'I'm saying that your lass here is a sentinel. Some are born to it, others are made. It happens more often when a new Power is called, like buds bursting all over the city.'

'So,' Delphine said, making her voice cold, 'this isn't something I did, this is something that was done to me. By Velody.'

'Aye, well, it's not as if she did it intentional,' said Macready, with that softness that came into his voice whenever he spoke about her high and mighty majesty, Velody the Prim and Proper. Was he even aware of it? 'Just by being, she's set the cards tumbling in a long chain. The city is calling new sentinels to honour her.'

'You talk about Aufleur like it is alive,' said Rhian, sounding entranced by the idea.

Delphine wanted to hit them both. Repeatedly. 'I haven't been called by anyone, much less a city. It's ridiculous. I won't accept.'

'Sword felt good in your hand, didn't it?' said Macready with a sly grin. 'Shut up.' Delphine had killed a person, and it made her feel awful, of course it did. She was not going to admit to that thrill of power, of how amazing it felt to have saved her own life and Macready's, to have done something so frigging *mighty* with her own hands. Never, never, never. Not to him, in any case. The last thing he needed was to get any more smug.

'Is Delphine going to get into trouble?' Rhian asked. 'For - what she did?' 'That's the thing,' said Macready, his eyes boring into Delphine's. 'If she's one of us, sworn as a sentinel, then she did no wrong. She did her sacred duty. If she's just some demme from the Daylight, every Lord and courteso will think it well within their rights to tear her into pieces.'

'Well now,' said Delphine, swallowing, 'isn't that a convenient stick to threaten me with?'

'What should we do?' Rhian asked.

Delphine was grateful for that 'we,' but only a little. 'We go home,' she said firmly. 'We stop listening to silly stories. Velody may choose to play Court with the animals, but the rest of us have ribbons to make and flowers to braid and — oh.'

She saw him before either of the others did. A penitent, standing in the shaded portico of the temple. Delphine shivered at his presence, and she felt Macready move behind her, just a little, so that he stood in front of Rhian, his hand ready to draw a sword if he had to.

Delphine wanted to be cross that he hadn't automatically moved to protect her — but she could not take her eyes off the man in the portico. He lifted his head up and smiled at her, and she felt her skin go creeping cold, all over. She knew him. He was the Orphan Princel, a theatre performer with a beautiful voice, who somehow glowed with beauty despite being on the skinny side, with an odd, knowing face and spectacles. There was nothing special about him ... except that he was not just a performer. He had once turned into white rats in front of her eyes. He was Lord Poet of Velody's wretched Creature Court.

Poet bowed his head gracefully to them, and walked away from the temple.

'You don't think he heard?' Rhian asked in a choked whisper.

'Oh aye,' Macready said, sounding grim. 'He heard, all right. We're in trouble, lass.'

Via Silviana was being set up for a street party as Ashiol and Velody approached. The various shopkeepers and families who were her neighbours were setting up a roast spit, and long tables for food and drink. A small gang of flute demmes were practicing badly on the street corner.

'Mistress Velody!' cried a friendly voice, and the red face of the local baker emerged from behind a lopsided festival drapery. 'We're celebrating this nox, will you join us?'

'I'd be honoured, when my day's work is done,' she said politely. 'What's the occasion?'

'My boy Giuno, takes his man's robe today,' said the baker with obvious pride. 'Glad to have you share meat and wine with us. And your man,' he added politely.

Velody felt a laugh stick in her throat at the thought that anyone might think Ashiol was her paramour, but she did not correct the baker. What other explanation was there for his regular visits? As long as no one in via Silviana knew enough to recognise him as the Duchessa's cousin, there would be few questions asked. 'I like meat and wine,' said Ashiol with a gleam in his eye as the baker ran off to shout at some boys about oiling the spit. 'Is that goat I smell?'

'You're not invited,' she said firmly, unlatching the front door. They were using it more now that Rhian was improving.

'The seigneur most definitely included me in the invitation.'

She hovered on the threshold, wanting to get rid of him rather than invite him in. 'Under false pretences. He thinks you're wooing me.'

Ashiol smiled, and oh dear, it did terrible things to her stomach when he smiled like that. 'I can woo.'

'I'd really rather you didn't.' Velody heard Delphine shouting from inside the house. 'Oh, hells.'

There was no getting rid of Ashiol now. He followed her to the kitchen, where Delphine was - surprise, surprise - having a shouting match with Macready.

'What's going on?' Velody demanded.

'Your lass is impossible,' Macready said, throwing up his hands in disgust.

'Of course she is, she's Delphine,' Velody said calmly. 'It's hardly worth shouting about.'

'Your little friend here,' said Delphine, deliberately stressing the word 'little', 'is trying to bully me into being one of his sword-swinging numbskulls, and I won't do it.'

'Poet knows who killed Lord Dhynar,' Macready said, addressing Ashiol and Velody more seriously.

Velody shivered. For a moment, dark shadows seemed to cover the world, shrouding all of them in blackness. She blinked rapidly, and the darkness receded. No one else seemed to have noticed anything odd about her. Ashiol was barking questions at Macready, who was getting defensive, and Delphine looked as if she was about to explode.

'Do we have to get Delphine out of the city?' she asked in a low voice.

That got a reaction at least. 'Is that your answer to everything?' Delphine hurled at her. 'No, Velody. First you want to run away from all this, then you want to stay, and you expect us to fall in with whatever you decide. I have a life here. I'm staying put. And that life has nothing whatever to do with swords and rodents!'

She stormed off towards the stairs. Rhian sighed, and followed her. 'I'll see if I can calm her down.'

Velody waited until Rhian was also upstairs and out of earshot. 'Is Poet a danger to us?'

'He's a danger to everyone,' Ashiol said darkly. 'You never know what's going on in his head. If he has this information on Delphine, rest assured, he will use it when it best suits him.'

Velody sighed, and looked at Macready. 'Would becoming a sentinel really make her safer?'

'Aye, well that does depend on your definition of the word "safe", so it does,' Macready admitted. 'But if she's one of us, then there are rules to protect her actions. If she's not ...'

'You wouldn't really leave?' Ashiol interrupted.

'No,' Velody sighed. She had tried to leave. Had tried to take Delphine and Rhian away from Aufleur, and put the world of the Creature Court behind her. But that was before she fought and won against the corrupted shade of Dhynar, Lord Ferax. Before she accepted her role as Power and Majesty of the Creature Court.

Accepting she belonged to them was one thing. Accepting that Delphine might be, was altogether different. 'I'll talk to her,' she offered. 'If she won't see sense, I'll talk to Poet.'

'You can't just negotiate with the Lords over tisane and finger sandwiches,' Ashiol warned. 'We're warriors. Animals. Offer the hand of friendship, and we bite.'

Velody gave him an impatient look. 'No one is getting *bitten*. Not today.'

Delphine was so angry she couldn't see straight. She pulled dress after dress out of her wardrobe, flinging them on the bed regardless of the fact that Rhian was sitting there. 'I am tired of you making all the decisions,' she snapped, not turning around as Velody joined them. 'First you want us to hide from this Court of yours, then you want to make friends with them, then we're running away and leaving our house, then we're staying here so you can do your duty by them. I'm done with it, Velody. This is my life, and you don't get to order me around.'

'How did you know I was here?' Velody asked quietly.

Delphine flung herself around, staring. That was a very good question. 'I heard you come in.'

'Among all that shouting and muttering and clothes throwing? You must have very good ears.'

'I'm not one of them,' Delphine said, disgust dripping from her voice. 'You may enjoy running around pretending to be little brown mice and fighting invisible things in the sky and jumping of roofs but some of us are normal!'

'I didn't like this any more than you did when I first came into my power,' said Velody, annoyingly patient. 'But you can't fight it, not without driving yourself crazy.'

'I stuck a sword into someone,' Delphine said, feeling the fight go out of her. 'Anyone could have done it.'

'I don't think I could,' said Velody. 'Not even to save a friend. Maybe you're special.'

Delphine screwed her face up. She wanted to lash out and hurt Velody. It was the best way to make her go away and shut up and stop being all saintly and helpful. 'Is that what you think you are? Special? They're just using you, all of them. Ashiol Xandelian threw you to the wolves so he didn't have to be their leader. The rest of them only pretend to worship you. It's the power they want. The minute you do something they don't like, they'll tear you to pieces, and what are we supposed to do then, me and Rhian?'

Delphine saw Velody's face crumple, and knew she had hit home.

'Some of us have hopes and dreams and a real life right here at ground level,' she added, grasping the nearest frock. It would do, for a local street party. 'You should try it some time.'

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