

CREATURE COURT  BOOK ONE

A young woman with long blonde hair, wearing a white dress adorned with pink roses and a matching floral headband, stands on a stone balcony. She is looking towards a large, dark castle with multiple towers and spires, set against a dramatic sunset sky with orange and yellow hues. The scene is framed by ornate, golden-brown scrollwork at the top and bottom.

Power and
Majesty

TANSY RAYNER
ROBERTS

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HARPER
Voyager

HarperVoyager

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*For the Friends of the John Elliott Classics Museum,
who were there at the beginning*

PART I

The Years of
Things Forgotten

One day before the Nones of Cerialis

Velody couldn't sleep in this city. The ancient, gothic weight of it pressed around her, through the walls of the rented room.

No one else had this problem. The other demmes were asleep on their makeshift cots, while the chaperones (including Velody's Aunt Agnet) snored lightly from the larger beds. Every room in Aufleur was packed like this, so their landlady claimed. The apprentice fair drew in crowds from every town and village from coast to country, the dust from the railways still clinging to their clothes.

Velody missed home. She missed the warmth of her room above her papa's bakery, and the familiar sleepy sounds of her sisters and brothers. Every street and canalway in Cheapside and the market district of Tierce was known and safe and hers. Aufleur was so much huger and darker and more foreign.

I can't live here, she thought desperately. Not for seven years. This city will eat me alive.

A mouse ran over her pillow.

Velody sat up in a rush, pushing off the thin blankets and scrambling out of her cot. One of the other demoiselles —

Rhian, she thought her name was — muttered and sighed at the noise, but quickly fell back to sleep.

There was no sign of the mouse, but Velody would now *rather die* than return to the cot. It was warm despite the darkness — Cerialis was the last month of summer. Wearing nothing but her cambric noxgown, Velody slipped to the window and let herself out onto the balcony.

The city was no less oppressive out here, but at least she could see the looming domes and towers instead of merely feeling them in her bones. Velody breathed in the calm air. Four hours until dawn? Six, at most. It wouldn't do to have shadows under her eyes in the morning — what kind of mistress would take an apprentice who looked ill and shaky? Perhaps if she calmed herself out here a little longer, she would be able to sleep.

There was a soft sound beside her, and Velody turned to see a little brown mouse creep across the balcony. She was prepared for it this time and managed not to behave like a damsel in a musette melodrama.

A second mouse emerged from the shadows, and then a third. Velody was beginning to feel somewhat outnumbered, and her eyes were so fixed to the rodents that she almost missed the sight of a naked youth falling out of the sky.

He crashed, shoulders first, into the roof of the house across the street, shattering slate tiles. He rolled and dropped onto the cobbles below, bare limbs splayed in all directions. Incredibly, he was laughing, his head thrown back in hysterical giggles. He was long and lean and muscled, almost a man. He was also completely off his face.

The sky came alive with colour — iridescent green with the occasional splash of pink and gold. Velody had heard of such strange light effects, but never over a city. Colours rolled off the skin of the naked, laughing youth. He was beautiful, if utterly shameless.

Velody pressed herself against the window of the boarding

house, hoping he would not see her. Then again, she doubted he could see his hand in front of his face, the state he was in.

The sky flashed brighter than before, in colours that Velody couldn't even name. Was this normal?

A second naked youth stepped out of the sky, and Velody lost her breath. Normal, it seemed, had been flung out with the scraps.

This young man was dark where the laughing boy was fair, and he walked down from the sky as if there were steps beneath his feet instead of empty air. He wore his nakedness like armour, and his skin had a lantern glow about it. And really, the fact that he could walk on air was far more important than the fact that he didn't have a stitch of clothing on, but Velody couldn't help blushing. When her mother had lectured her on the dangers a fourteen-year-old maiden might face in the big city, this wasn't quite what she'd had in mind.

'Garnet,' said the dark-haired youth, his bare feet brushing the cobbles as he stood over the other. 'Are you hurt?'

The fair boy, still sprawled in the street, whooped as if this were the funniest thing anyone had ever said to him.

'Are you drunk?' demanded his friend, crouching down to his level. 'Are you *high*?'

'I might — might, I say — have had a tiny pinch of surrender in my flame-and-gin,' said Garnet, enunciating carefully.

His friend smacked him. 'You went into the sky with that shit in your blood? What were you thinking?'

'Can't all be perfect little saints and soldiers, Ash-my-love.'

'Tasha's going to kill you,' Ash growled. 'She'll cut your friggung balls off.'

'A fine nox's work then.' Garnet tipped his head back and stared up at the blazing sky. 'Think the gin might be wearing off.' He shivered a little.

Ash glared at him. 'Where are your clothes?'

'One of the roofs around here.' Garnet waved an arm aimlessly, and stared at it as if it were fascinating. 'I was sort of looking for them when I got sideswiped by that ... that ... was it a lightweb or a cluster?'

'The things I do for you,' said his friend and — this was the bit that had Velody pressing a fist to her mouth to stifle her gasp — his body exploded into a cloud of black shapes.

Not shapes. Cats. The cats separated and swarmed up the walls on both sides of the street. One came up to Velody's balcony, and blinked with interest at the small horde of brown mice that had gathered there. She pressed herself further back against the wall, hoping not to be seen.

The cats returned to Garnet, several of them dragging items of clothing with them.

Garnet snatched the garments from them and pulled on a pair of trews. 'Claw marks. Lovely.'

The cats came together and glowed briefly before reshaping into the tall, muscled and still very much naked figure of Ash. 'Grateful as ever. Shoes?'

'Didn't bring any.'

'Fine. Just stay out of the sky for the rest of the nox. Crawl home if you can — sleep in the gutter if you can't, and I'll come drag you home after.'

'My motherfucking hero.' Garnet shrugged into the shirt, but didn't button it, staring instead at his hand. 'How many arms did I start with?'

Ash groaned. 'You're too smashed to make it down to the undercity without killing yourself.'

'S a warm nox, I'll manage.' Garnet slumped back against the nearest house, almost comfortable.

'Arse,' said Ash. 'Why do you do this to yourself?'

'Know you'll catch me when I fall,' said Garnet with a yawn and a smirk.

'Aye, and someday I won't.' Ash spun apart again into

his swarm of cats, and took off into the sky in a blur of paws and tails and raw power.

Velody breathed out and closed her eyes for a moment. Really, someone should have warned her that the city of Aulfleur was rife with flying naked men who transformed into cats.

When she opened her eyes, the street was empty and Garnet was gone.

Velody pushed herself up onto her feet, wanting to escape back to the safe confines of the dormitory. Something grabbed her wrist, dragging her back against the railings of the balcony.

‘Little mouse,’ hissed a voice in her ear. ‘Did you enjoy the show?’

Fingers dug into her wrist. Garnet’s fingers. She gazed up into the strange, beautiful face of the youth who now stood on the outside of the balcony railings, his eyes blazing at her. What did he do — fly up here? *Oh, saints, he probably did.*

‘I have to go inside,’ she said in a small voice.

‘Not yet, little mouse. I want to talk to you.’

He slid a slender leg over the railings, jumping properly onto the balcony. It occurred to Velody that she should be very grateful he had put his clothes on first. Then he was grasping her other arm as well, holding her fast.

‘If I scream,’ she said, ‘the whole boarding house will come awake.’

‘Good luck with that,’ he drawled. ‘Daylighters sleep deeply in this city.’ He squeezed her wrists cruelly.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Mostly? I’m wondering what a little mouse like you is doing out on a fine nox like this.’

Garnet’s eyes were a little crazy and Velody wondered what sort of potion surrender was. It sounded like the kind of thing Sage, her eldest brother, had been into that first year after the dock accident.

‘You see me, yes?’ Garnet asked.

‘Of course I see you.’ She pulled, but he wouldn’t release her wrists.

‘And you see the sky?’

‘Hard to miss.’

‘What colour is it?’

She looked blankly at him. ‘What?’

‘What colour is the sky, little mouse?’

Velody looked up, just as veins of rose and lilac threaded across the clouds. ‘Pink ... purple,’ she said. There were three flashes in quick succession, as bright emerald as the spun silk she had admired in a shop several days before she left Tierce. ‘Green.’

‘And my friend,’ Garnet said in a whisper, ‘what is his animal?’

‘Cat,’ she said.

He wetted his lips a little. ‘Poor mouse. Didn’t see this one coming, did you? You’re one of us. And it’s going to eat you alive.’

Velody was angry now. Close up, this boy wasn’t even as big as her brother Sage. Who did he think he was, trying to terrorise her like this? ‘And what are you?’ she flung at him. ‘Am I supposed to be afraid of you?’

Garnet laughed, and was lit up from behind by a sweep of bright white light in the sky. His hair was red-gold, not blond, and he had tiny freckles on his throat. ‘Small town demme,’ he said. ‘I know your type. Here for the apprentice fair, I suppose. You want to spend your days as a threadsmith, or a ribboner, or —’

‘A dressmaker,’ Velody said.

‘A dressmaker.’ His hands loosened their grip on her wrists, still encircling them lightly. ‘You can kiss that goodbye, my sweetling. You belong to the nox now. No apprenticeship for you, no shilleins to send home to your family, no warm husband and children in your future.’

To her horror, Velody saw her hands darken as soft brown fur tufted out from her fingers. Her ribs squeezed her, as if she was about to burst apart. ‘Stop it!’

‘That’s not me, little mouse,’ said Garnet. ‘It’s all you.’

She concentrated on her hands and the fur diminished until the skin was clear and moon-pale again. ‘Am I going to turn into ... cats?’ she asked.

‘Not cats,’ as if she was stupid for suggesting it. His eyes brightened. ‘I can take it away. Take the curse from you right this minute. Leave you to your little daylight life, just as you want. You’ll never see me or my kind again. Never see the sky light up with colours.’

Somewhere along the way, Garnet had let go of Velody’s wrists. She rubbed them now. ‘What’s in it for you?’

‘Sharp. I’ll admit, it will do me no harm to hold your power under my skin.’ He stared seriously at her. ‘You don’t want this, mouseling. You don’t want the nox in your blood and your life. I’ve seen too many children burned by it.’

‘I’m not a child.’

‘Are you not?’ He seemed amused. ‘Don’t think I was ever as young as you.’

Velody’s mind was racing. She was scared of this strange youth and the things she had seen. She didn’t want any part of it. *A dressmaking apprenticeship, shilleins to send home ...* that was what she wanted.

‘You’ll have to give it willingly,’ said Garnet. ‘There’s only one way I can take it by force, and I’m really not that much of a bastard.’ He eyed her body up and down, far too appreciatively.

‘What is it you are taking from me?’ Velody asked.

‘Animor,’ he said, and his mouth curved around the word like a lover’s lick. ‘You won’t feel its loss.’

She closed her eyes. ‘Take it then.’

Something warm brushed against her mouth and she realised too late that he was kissing her. She had never been kissed like this before. His mouth swamped her and his tongue flicked deep against hers.

For a moment, her chest felt itchy and strange, as if a creature was inside, scrabbling to get out. Every vein in her

body hummed. Something left her, and at the time it didn't feel particularly important.

It was the best kiss of her life, and within an hour of returning to her little cot in the dormitory, Velody had entirely forgotten it.

Nones of Cerialis

Velody was the last one to rouse. She was exhausted, as if she had been running races in her sleep, though she remembered none of her dreams. When she got out of her cot, her body felt strange, slower than usual, and the world a little less bright.

A blonde demoiselle, Delphine, who had a cut-glass accent and had brought a family servant along as her chaperone, was holding court in the midst of the other demmes. ‘Of course, Madame Mauris is the best dressmaker in Aufleur,’ she was saying loudly. ‘She only takes one apprentice every seven years. My mother expects me to catch her eye with my fine stitching.’

‘Not to mention her fine vowels,’ whispered a tall demme near Velody, whose dark red hair was pulled back in a tight braid.

Velody covered her laugh with a cough.

‘My father still thinks sending me here is some sort of punishment,’ Delphine went on, shaking her long golden curls. ‘Learning about the value of hard work, and all that. As if it’s going to stop me flirting with the gardener! My mother is in on the conspiracy, of course.’

‘Conspiracy?’ asked one of the demoiselles who had gathered around Delphine like beetles on a rose.

Delphine rolled her eyes dramatically. ‘To make me a world-famous dressmaker, of course. Weren’t you listening?’

The tall demme snorted at that.

Delphine glanced up, her eyes hardening. ‘Rhian, isn’t it? You’re the one who brought a boy as your chaperone.’ Her laughter had a cruel edge, and the demmes around her giggled dutifully.

Velody remembered Rhian’s brother — a gangly boy with spectacles and auburn hair like his sister. Their landlady had been flummoxed by his presence — chaperones were usually female and middle-aged — and had eventually sent him to sleep in the attic with her sons and nephews for the duration of the Fair. The chaperones would all be returning home after that, leaving their successful charges in the hands of the Apprentice House for the next seven years.

Rhian set her chin squarely. ‘My brother was the only one who could be spared to come all this way. We don’t all have family retainers. I can’t imagine someone like you lasting ten minutes as an apprentice. You won’t be allowed servants to bring you rose oil and sweetmeats, you know.’

‘And what are you going to be?’ Delphine sneered. ‘With shoulders like yours — a carpenter, perhaps?’

‘I would if they let women practise the hard crafts,’ Rhian said, which set the beetles giggling again. ‘I’m going to be a florister.’

‘How sweet, to care nothing of wealth and status,’ said Delphine, dismissing her. ‘I wish you well of it.’

The Aufleur Forum was a hive of activity. It was a huge area, more than six times the size of the piazza at the centre of Tierce. The council had set out trestle tables upon which the prospective apprentices could display samples of their work. The boys’ fair had been two weeks

earlier; today the Forum was awash with demoiselles and their handicrafts.

Rhian was chosen early, her floral arrangements catching the eye of several respectable floristers. She gave Velody a grin as she packed up her stall, and even her brother offered a smile as they left for the apprentice registry to announce which offer she had decided to accept.

There was far more competition for the needlecrafts, and Velody waited for most of the day. Her Aunt Agnet was supposed to stay at her side, but she kept darting off to peer at the other stalls, or to gape at the huge public buildings that surrounded the impressive Forum.

Delphine had the stall beside Velody. The two of them eyed each other discreetly for the first few hours, but finally cracked and examined each other's wares with every appearance of amity.

'This stitching is very fine,' said Delphine, fingering a soft noxgown. 'Did you knit the lace yourself?'

'Never again,' said Velody. 'Work like that would turn me blind in a year.'

'Lacemakers make great sacrifices for their craft,' Delphine agreed with a wicked smile.

Velody relaxed a little at this evidence that her ladyship had a sense of humour. 'The ribbons on that festival gown are marvellous,' she said.

Delphine shrugged. 'Ribbons are easy.'

Velody was dreadful at the finework required for ribbons, but did not say so. 'I've heard that Mistress Sincy the ribboner is looking for apprentices this year,' she said, then bit her lip. 'I didn't mean —'

'Well, yes,' said Delphine. 'Ribboning is hardly the most prestigious profession, is it? But I suppose it's better to be a first-class ribboner than a second-class *anything*.' She eyed Velody. 'You never said what kind of apprenticeship you were hoping for.'

Velody opened her mouth to say something like 'Anything with a needle, really,' which was half-true. But

why should she cower at the feet of this demoiselle just because she had pretty hair and spoke like a lady? ‘Dressmaking,’ she said. ‘I want to be a dressmaker.’

Delphine gave her an amused look. ‘Luckily for you, I thrive on competition.’

Rhian returned some time later sporting a scarlet band on her wrist. ‘I’m to report to the Apprentice House tomorrow morning,’ she told Velody with glee. ‘My new mistress seems nice enough — though she has a mouth on her. I hope she’s not the type to reach for the birch rods the first time you drop a plate.’

‘If she is, you’re doomed,’ said her brother. He came forward to shake Velody’s hand. ‘I’m Cyniver.’

‘Nice to meet you,’ said Velody. He seemed nice enough, and her palm was warm where he had touched it. ‘Not too bored?’

‘Not now I’ve got our Rhian off my hands,’ said Cyniver. ‘I can visit the librarian in peace tomorrow, before I return home.’

‘You and your books,’ Rhian scoffed. ‘Velody, can we fetch you some lunch? You must be starved by now.’

‘Anything, please,’ said Velody, not trusting her aunt to remember her.

Rhian hesitated, then glanced over at Delphine. ‘Shall I fetch you something while I’m at it?’

Velody waited for Delphine to say something cutting, but the other demoiselle surprised her. ‘That would be kind,’ she said.

After bringing pasties and cider to the others, Rhian insisted on dragging Cyniver the entire breadth of the Forum to look at all the stalls. Velody didn’t mind. All the apprentices would be living in the Apprentice House by the river for the next seven years, so, assuming she got a position, she would have time enough to get to know her new friend.

There were plenty of seamstresses and needleworkers

among the crowd during the afternoon, and Velody was delighted to receive three tokens. Delphine got four — one of them from the famed Mistress Sincy the ribboner.

‘Keep me in mind if nothing more prestigious comes your way,’ the dame said as Delphine hesitated over the indigo token.

The Forum took on something of a festival atmosphere as the afternoon lengthened, with more of the crowd there for sightseeing than official business. Velody sat with the remains of her pasty in her lap and her cider hidden beneath the trestle, watching the world go by.

She almost bit the neck off her bottle when she saw a tall young man with red-gold hair stroll through the Forum. He had one arm thrown carelessly around the shoulders of a muscular dark-haired youth, and he held hands with a demoiselle about Velody’s age whose face was painted — as Aunt Agnet would say — like a trollop. The three of them wore bright, dandy clothes like musette costumes. It was the redhead who had caught Velody’s eye though. He was strangely familiar.

How can that be? she chided herself. *You’ve never been to this city before yesterday. You have met no one except the demmes and their chaperones.*

So why did this pretty young man make her head hurt and her chest ache, as if he reminded her of some colossal embarrassment?

The redhead leaned down and kissed his painted demme — messily, with lips and tongue and teeth. Before Velody could even blush at the impropriety of it — kissing in the streets! — he turned his head and bestowed a similar kiss upon his male friend.

As the three of them passed Velody’s little stall, the redhead winked saucily at her and she quite forgot how to breathe. She looked over at Delphine to see the other demoiselle fanning herself with a handful of ribbons.

‘Things are quite different in the big city,’ said Velody.

‘You’re telling me,’ said Delphine, pretending to swoon. ‘I plan to enjoy every minute that I get here.’ She sat up straight all of a sudden. ‘There! In the mauve shawl. That’s Madame Mauris!’

‘How can you tell?’ Velody asked.

‘I sent Letty to her boutique this morning, of course,’ Delphine said, referring to her maid. ‘She reported back with a very detailed description. There can’t be two noses like that. Hush! She’s coming this way!’

Velody leaned back on her stool in something like shock. Madame Mauris had examined the work of every young seamstress and needleworker at the fair, and her bronze token had very purposely been placed on Velody’s table.

Once Velody recovered herself, she tore her eyes away from Madame Mauris’s departing back to look apologetically at Delphine. She was not there.

When Delphine returned from the registration table with the indigo band of Mistress Sincy the ribboner around her wrist, Velody congratulated her. From that day forward, Delphine pretended that she had intended to take the ribboning apprenticeship all along, and neither Velody nor Rhian ever challenged her on it.

That was what friends did.

Garnet

So what do you want to know? We have all the time in the world. Ask your questions. I imagine everything you've heard about me is bad.

Ashiol? Why am I not surprised? Of course your first question is about him. My friend. We were like brothers, you know. Long before we came to the Creature Court. Long before we fought the sky, side by side.

When his mother and stepfather sent Ashiol to the city, to play dutiful grandson and almost-heir to the old Duc, he begged them to let me join him. I was nothing to them, the son of two servants, with no purpose but to replace my father when he grew too infirm to tend the grounds of the estate.

I talk like a gentleman, don't I? You wouldn't be the first to be fooled about what I am.

They let me leave home, to walk a pace or two behind Ashiol, to pick up his clothes when he flung them on the floor, to (let me state this clearly) ensure he got into no trouble in the big city.

Are you laughing at that part? I can wait until you are finished.

It didn't matter what role I was supposed to play in the Duc's Palazzo. Ash and I found another world that wanted us. A secret war, being fought above the city in the nox sky. The Creature Court did not care whether we had been born on linen sheets or the kitchen table.

We were young, we were powerful, and we were equals.

I ran mad with it. For the first time in my life, I was somebody. Animor flowed hot in my veins. When the sky lit up with burning death, I was there to fight it back, to save the city, nox after nox. I took to drinking the fear away, and when the drink wasn't enough, I turned to potions and powders. The Creature Court was all about decadence, and I embraced that. Every time I fell down, Ashiol was there to catch me.

One kiss changed it all. The little brown mouse looked meek and young, but her animor was sweet. With that inside me, mingling with my own, I didn't need anyone's help. I didn't need my high-and-mighty beloved Ashiol picking me up out of the gutter, time and time again.

I was stronger than him. Better. He didn't realise at first, but when he did ... how could he not hate me for it?

We were Tasha's cubs, within the Creature Court. Five of us: Ashiol, me, Lysandor, Livilla, the boy. An unbreakable family. Tasha taught each of us the prime survival traits: selfishness, decadence, viciousness. We loved each other, but she made us hate too. Everything was a competition. When Ashiol was her darling, I was wounded. When she kissed Livilla, the rest of us felt the lack of that kiss on our own mouths.

Tasha taught us ambition. As a woman, she could never aspire to being a King, but she breathed power. She wanted to rule the Court through us. Once we were Lords, she expected we would let her keep pulling our tails. The hideous thing was, she was probably right. We adored her so very much.

It's for the best that I killed her.

When she fell, the animor rocked through me, transforming me. I glowed from within. It tasted better than that kiss I stole

from the little brown mouse — how could it not? I quenched her, drinking deep from the power she had wielded during her lifetime. I was not the only one. But I was the closest, and the best.

‘What have you done?’ Livilla screamed, when the others discovered us.

The boy stayed quiet, staring, like he always did then.

‘What do you think?’ Lysandor said in disgust, looking at our fallen Lord’s body. ‘He has done exactly as Tasha taught us all. Lived her lessons fully.’

I only had eyes for Ashiol. Part of me so desperately wanted him to be proud of me. The other part ... I let my face settle into a satisfied smirk. ‘I win.’

‘Congratulations,’ he said, dark eyes sweeping over her once, and then locking on mine. ‘Lord.’

Our true glory came after Tasha was gone. Ashiol became a Lord in his own right, and Lysandor not long after. We were friends, companions, brothers, everything. We fought the sky, defended the city, laughed, loved, danced, killed, frigged. We were untouchable.

When I was twenty-one, I quenched a fallen warrior in battle and my animor burst into new shapes, new powers. I became a King.

I had thought Ortheus — our Power and Majesty — would resent me, but he rather took me under his wing. Taught me what I needed to know. Our Court was to be rich in Kings, as it happened. Ashiol and Lysandor were raised up less than a year after I. The sky had no chance against us.

Then ... ah, Ortheus fell. It happens even to the greatest of us. Suddenly we had a Court in turmoil — three young, healthy Kings to choose from. Who would rule? Who would take care of us all?

I was the most powerful. They knew that. The most ruthless too. I proved that again and again. I won.

It should have made them love me more.

There had always been a coward's streak in Lysandor. He left the city soon after my rule began, declaring that he could not bear seeing what I had turned into, the lengths I was willing to go to in order to be Power and Majesty. A coward and a traitor, Lysandor. Waste of flesh.

Ashiol stayed. I saw the look in his eyes — that same look Lysandor had given me from time to time — but he stayed true. He stayed for me, as I always knew he would. My right hand. Most trusted, most beloved.

Chief Day of Sacrifice, Ludi Sacris;
four days before the Ides of Felicitas

Seven years ago, when Velody first came to Aufleur to become an apprentice, she had thought she would never get used to the place. Now she was twenty-one and this city was home. Aufleur was so much larger than Tierce, and grander. For every festival she thought she knew, there were dozens of extra traditions to learn. The month of Felicitas, for instance, in the middle of summer, had fifteen days entirely devoted to sacred games. Fifteen days! It seemed as though the city should screech to a halt with such frivolity, and yet everyone around her took it for granted.

It was a steaming hot morning when Velody climbed the Avleurine hill to the Temple of the Market Saints with her two friends, all of them wearing their apprentice collars.

‘Spare a cake for a poor penitent, demoiselles?’ begged a shabby man beside the path.

Delphine cradled her basket protectively. ‘Are you mad? I sold my body for these.’

Velody and Rhian laughed.

‘Really sold your body?’ asked Rhian.

‘I had to kiss Saul the baker’s assistant,’ said Delphine with a shudder. ‘I’m traumatised by the entire matter, and every day in the future when someone says “Oh, Delphine can get the honey cakes,” I will remind you of my pain.’

‘Believe me,’ said Velody. ‘Everyone from the Verticordia to the Aurian Gate knows of your pain.’

‘Are you implying that I complain a lot?’ asked Delphine. She shoved the basket at Rhian. ‘This is too heavy. You carry it.’

It had taken time for the three of them to become real friends. Delphine did not stop being a snooty cow overnight — if anything, she was unspeakably worse for the first few months in the Apprentice House, cutting down every friendly overture with an acidic remark.

Then the machine had arrived. All the demmes had gaped as it was delivered — a wrought-iron beauty with treadle and table, needles so sharp they hurt your heart. It was Delphine’s fifteenth birthday present from her parents.

She stared at it, stricken. Later, Velody found her kicking the thing, and they had to call in Rhian to make a cold poultice for her foot.

‘They don’t understand,’ Delphine muttered. ‘I can’t use it. Mistress Sincy makes sacred ribbons — for garlands and other state festivals. They have to be stitched by hand, that’s what she’s teaching me. It’s what I want her to teach me. I’m not wasting seven years just to run up hair ornaments for the factory girls.’

‘It’s a beautiful machine though,’ Velody said enviously.

‘You have it,’ said Delphine in one of a long line of impulsive gestures.

‘I couldn’t,’ said Velody, shocked at the thought. ‘It’s so valuable.’

‘What do I care about that? You must take it. I’ll only lose my temper and set fire to it, you know I will.’

Rhian spoke up, ‘You can’t burn metal.’

‘I can find a way,’ Delphine said grandly, and then the three of them had laughed.

It all seemed so long ago.

The Temple of the Market Saints was crowded. Every citizen sacrificed to their saint of choice on this day, but with the biggest market week of the year so close, every merchant and craftsman in the city was doing his or her duty by the Market Saints. It was nearly noon by the time Velody, Delphine and Rhian squeezed their way into a nook near one of the temple fires. Delphine shared out the honey cakes with due reverence, taking the best ones for herself.

Velody wrapped her cakes in a hemmed square of linen she had dyed a rich green. ‘Take this offering with my grateful thanks for the year past and ahead,’ she said to the saints. ‘Be kind to me, if it please you, and guide Madame Mauris’s hand to release me from my apprenticeship with full honours.’

Rhian put out three stems of bright carmentines and stacked her cakes beside them. ‘Keep my family well and safe back home, and may the year ahead be bright and fortunate,’ she said, bowing her head as she spoke.

Delphine placed her cakes on the stone shelf and laid a violet silk ribbon atop them. ‘I don’t want to go home to Tierce when my apprenticeship is up,’ she said firmly. ‘I don’t want to marry the fat old man my father has lined up for me, I don’t want to leave my friends, and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life sitting idle in a drawing room. I expect you to *fix* it for me.’ She gave the offerings a sharp push and they burned with a hiss.

Velody was quite proud of herself for not laughing. ‘We should be getting back to the Apprentice House,’ she said instead.

‘Well,’ said Rhian as the three of them emerged into the hot summer sunshine, ‘while Delphine was selling her body for honey cakes, I fetched our post from the Noces Gate — letters from Tierce.’ She delved into her satchel. ‘One from your family, Velody. And one for you from my brother,’ she added, wrinkling her nose.

‘Another letter from Cyniver,’ Delphine crowed, snatching it from Rhian. ‘I quite thought he’d forgotten about you this week. Of course, it must take him at least a week to produce the letter, what with the three rough drafts, and then the careful calligraphy, and the blotting, and the corrections, and the precise folding of the paper —’

Velody grabbed her letter and tucked it away to read later. ‘Trust me,’ she said. ‘There’s something to be said for a man who knows how to do a job thoroughly.’

‘Have mercy on a sister’s ears!’ wailed Rhian. ‘Honestly, why you had to take up with him!’

‘She’d already smooched every redhead in this city,’ said Delphine. ‘Obviously she had to write home for reinforcements.’

Velody elbowed her and Delphine shrieked. ‘Leave off, will you! I’m delicate. Anything for me?’

‘Three,’ said Rhian, handing them over.

Delphine stared at the seal of the first letter. ‘Father.’

Velody pulled her off the path to sit on the grass. ‘You told your family about our plans?’ she asked.

‘To work the markets until we’ve saved enough for our own premises?’ Delphine looked hollow. ‘Oh, yes.’

Rhian reached over. ‘Shall I read it for you?’

‘No! There’s no point. It will say exactly the same as the others.’ Delphine tore the envelope open and scanned the words on the thick, expensive paper. ‘Well then,’ she said and scrunched the letter in one hand.

‘Are you disowned?’ Velody couldn’t help asking.

‘Not yet. He’s giving me one last chance to change my mind. If I come home by the Ides, without completing my apprenticeship, all will be forgiven.’

Rhian rested her chin on Delphine’s shoulder. ‘And if not?’

‘He’s writing to Mistress Sincy to withdraw his financial support.’

‘That’s not a problem,’ said Velody, doing the sums in her head. ‘We’ve less than a month to go. Rhian and I have enough savings to cover your board until then.’

‘And what about the licence to trade, and the bond on the room we were to rent, and the silks I ordered from the Zafirán mercantile?’ Delphine demanded. ‘I’d pledged to cover all that with my inheritance from Grandmere, but Father won’t release the funds. He says he’ll have me declared incompetent if that’s what it takes. Every banker in Tierce is in his club. I have nothing!’

Velody sighed and put her feet in Delphine’s lap. ‘Thimblehead. You have us. We’ll sort something out.’

‘And there’s always the Market Saints,’ said Rhian, murmuring into Delphine’s hair. ‘I’m sure you’ve frightened them into submission and they’re working on the problem even now.’

‘Read us something from Cyniver,’ Delphine commanded, toying with her other letters. ‘Cheer me up.’

Velody blushed. ‘No. It’s private.’

Rhian rolled her eyes. ‘I’ll stick my fingers in my ears and sing if it’s dirty. No reason why Delphine should miss out on the good stuff.’

‘He wants to marry me.’

There was a long pause from the others. Then Rhian pounced, hugging Velody madly and squealing — Rhian, who had never squealed in her life.

Still a little stunned, Velody raised her eyes to meet Delphine’s cool blue gaze.

‘Well,’ said her friend, a few moments later. ‘That’s you settled then.’

The thing was, Velody thought, she wasn’t sure she wanted to be settled.