THE CLOUD HORSE CHRONICLES

Guardians of Magic

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For Stephen



Thrynne

Fairy tales don't behave in the land of Thrynne. Not any more.

Magic was once something precious for everyone. And the magic of nature and its source, the Forever Tree, was prized above all else, because that magic made people creative, sensitive and brave.

But three enemies are working together to destroy the power of the Forever Tree. If they succeed, soon its magic will be gone and so will the cloud horses that nestle in its branches.

Who are these enemies?

The King Rat and his followers from the city of Troutwine fear magic. It could return them to their forest roots, and now they crave only the pleasures the city has to offer.

The Clockmaker of the city of Nightingale wants to control magic, using his mechanical inventions to keep power for himself alone.



And the Professional Princess with her crew of giant-slayers from the town of Beam is happy to work with both of them, if it brings her the fame and fortune she craves.

But in the heart of the Forever Tree, magical gifts are being prepared for three children who don't yet know how powerful they are . . .

In the depths of the Great Wood stands the Forever Tree. It is huge. The bark on its trunk is gnarled and grooved with paw-holds. Dark-furred bears, known as the lumberers, carefully prune and bundle the smaller branches, then carry them on their backs down to the forest floor.

A light shines from a nook deep in the tangle of roots, and the lumberers step into a tree-root workshop, laying the bundles of Forever wood on a bench. An old lady with silvery hair sorts the branches carefully into shapes and sizes she can use.

Then she turns to the tools racked on the walls and selects the ones she needs for the job.

The lumberers turn and leave as the sounds of sawing, planing and sanding start. The sounds last far into the night; the workshop's lights glint in the dark.

As dawn rises, the old lady emerges. A wagon driven by lumberers pulls up. It is covered in oilcloth. The words 'The Ursine Ballet Troupe of the West' *are painted on its side. The old lady reaches into her apron pocket and takes out a glowing slotted spoon with a long handle, which she hands to one of the bears.*

'For Zam Zephyr at Bakery No. 9, Troutwine,' she says and returns to her workshop. Hanging from a hook are the front and back panels of a very special cello, destined for Phoebe Limetree, a young musician in the city of Nightingale. On the workbench, clamped in a vice, is the handle of a worpal sword for Bathsheba Greengrass, a giant-slayer's daughter from the town of Beam.

The old lady dims the lamp and turns to find a bear holding out a bowl of porridge. She takes it, then takes the bear's arm, and they leave the workshop. 'It starts tomorrow,' she says.



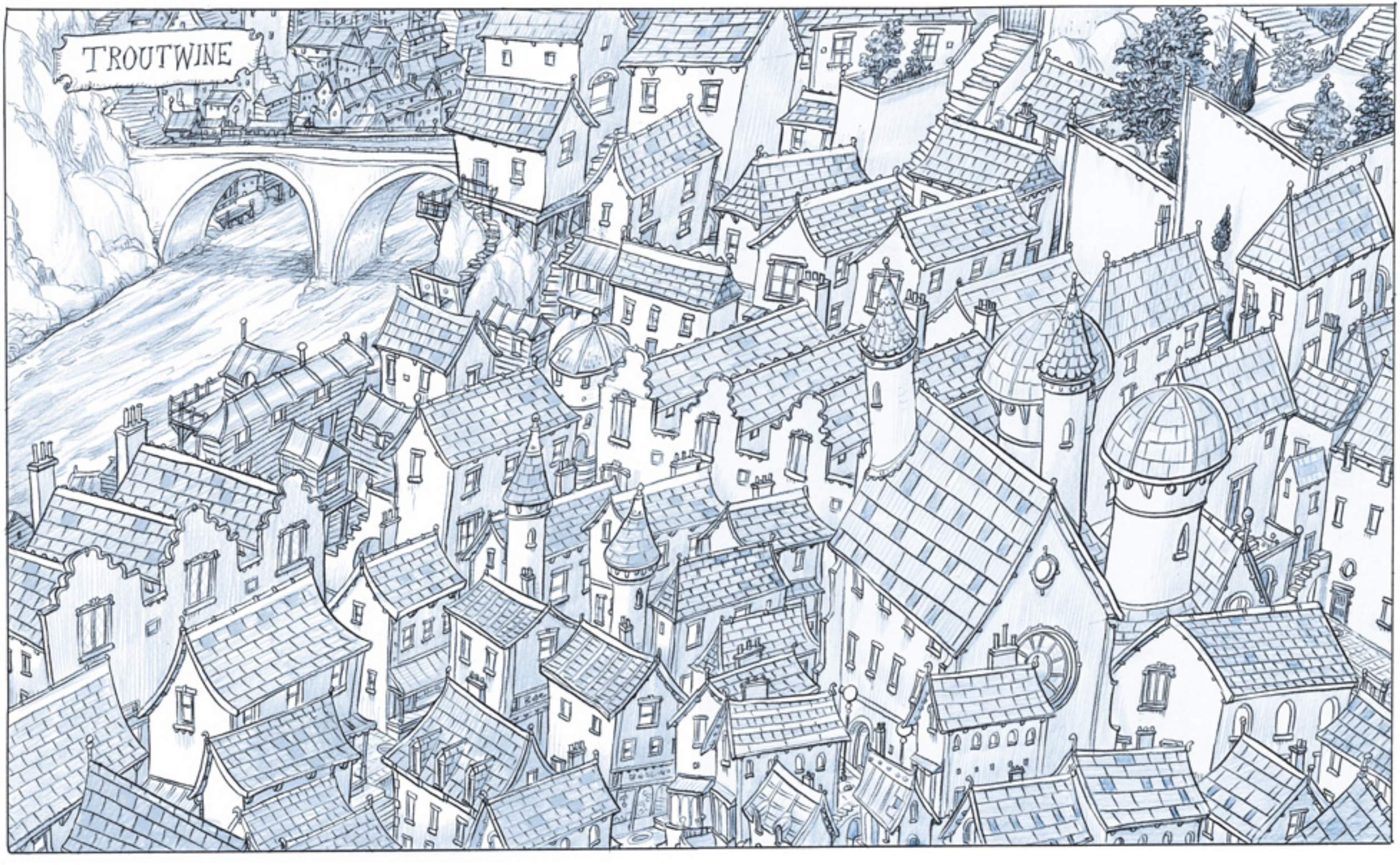


High above the workshop, in the uppermost branches of the Forever Tree, is a nest of glowing twigs, woven together and lined with glittering moss. In the nest are eggs as white as the whitest cloud, dotted with speckles of sky blue. The eggs are stirring, hatching. Tiny lines criss-cross their surfaces, growing wider with each tremor and twitch . . .

Before long, a shadow falls over the leaves, and another, and there is a whooshing sound as two flying horses swoop down from the sky. Beneath them, in the tree branches, nestled in the moss, are three newly hatched tiny winged foals.

For as long as anyone can remember, the children of Thrynne have looked at billowing clouds in the sky and wished on a cloud horse, always hoping, but never quite believing, that their wish will come true. No one has ever seen a cloud horse. But that is about to change . . .




TROUTWINE



1

The Runcible Spoon

Zam Zephyr woke early and climbed out of bed, careful not to disturb the other apprentice bakers of Bakery No. 9, who were still fast asleep around him.

It was the day before the Grand Duchess of Troutwine's Tea Ball and Zam was too excited and nervous to stay in bed. Today, they would bake for the tea ball tomorrow. All twelve bakeries in the city competed for the honour of making the most delicious treats for the ball. If anything went wrong again, after last year's disaster that put Bakery No. 9 at the bottom of the heap, Zam and his friends would be sent home in disgrace. The thought of his father's disappointed face was too much to bear. No, Zam thought. He would do anything he could to make sure that his baking was perfect.

In the corner of the attic dormitory, his best friend Langdale the goat boy was gently snoring. Beneath the flour-sack blanket, his hooves twitched as he dreamed of chasing blue butterflies through the summer pine forests of the Western Mountains. In the other corner, the two Shellac sisters clutched the comfort shawl they shared. In the cots in between, the gnome boys from the Grey Hills slept soundless and still, five to a blanket, their small grey-tufted heads just visible.

Looking out of the window, Zam could see the golden roofs of the palaces glittering in the early morning sunlight. He gazed up at a billowing cloud and made a wish: 'To bake the best gingerbread ever,' he whispered. 'Cloud horse, cloud horse, far from view, make this wish of mine come true.'

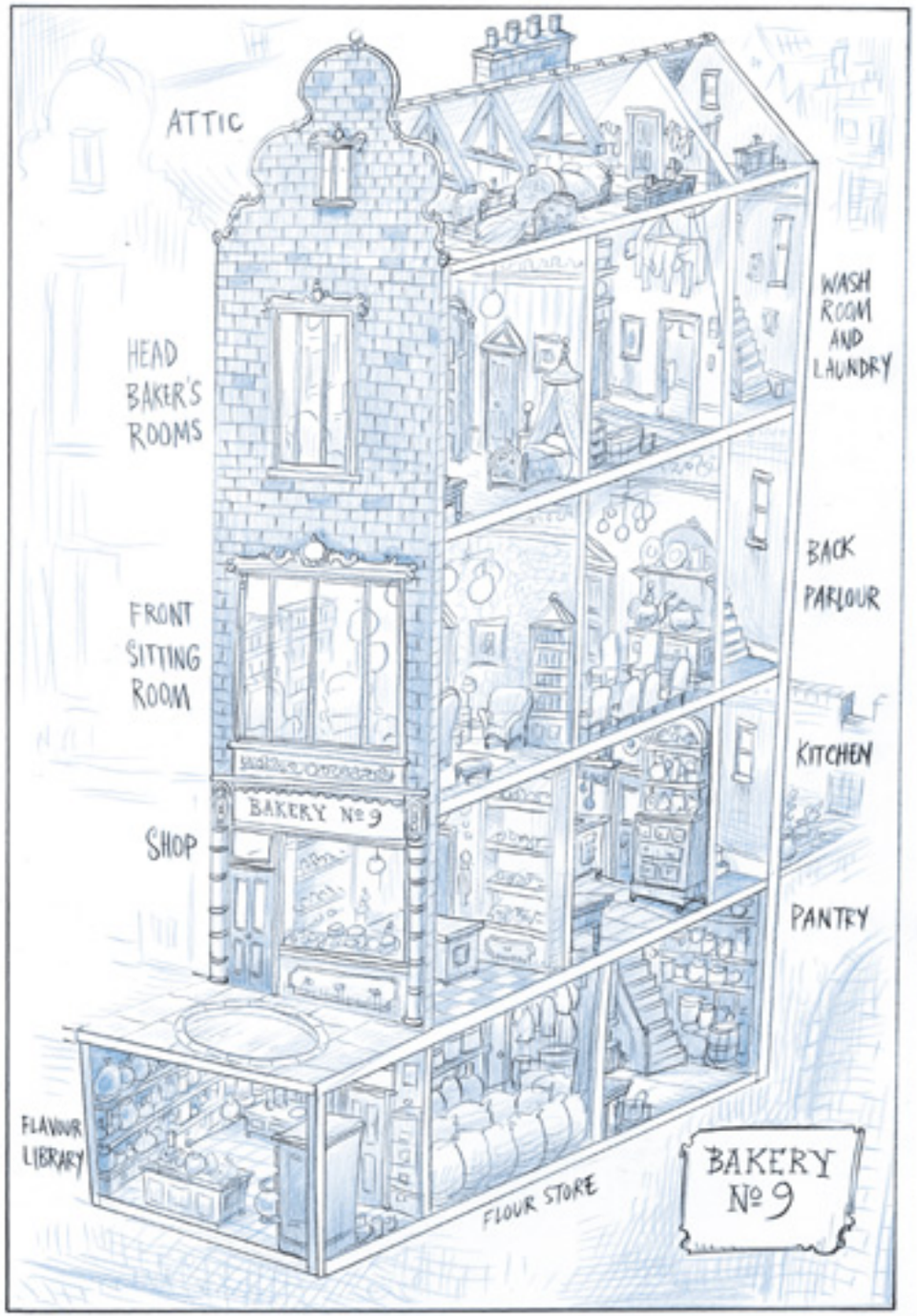
Zam took his apron and cap from the hook and crept out of the attic, leaving his friends to their dreams.

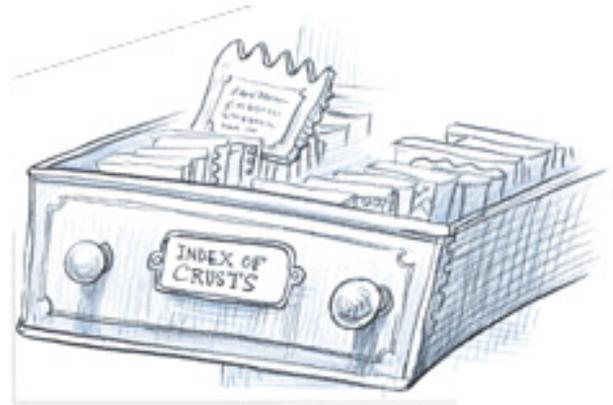
Zam ran all the way down the stairs to the basement, opened the door to the flavour library, and stepped inside. This was his favourite place. He loved how precise, tidy and ordered everything was here. He smiled to himself. With everyone asleep upstairs, it was the perfect time of day to practise without any interruptions.

Shelves lined the basement walls from floor to vaulted ceiling. Looking up through the glass paving stone, Zam could see the shadows of feet walking overhead as people passed the doors of Bakery No. 9.

The shelves around him were stacked with jars of all shapes and sizes, each clearly labelled.







Zam selected the jars he needed, opening each one in turn and taking pinches of the powders they contained. Carefully, he placed the spices on little squares of baking parchment, which he folded neatly and placed in different pockets of his apron. Satisfied with his choices, Zam crossed the stone floor to a large chest of drawers set in an alcove. He opened a drawer labelled 'Index of Crusts' and selected one with crinkle-cut edges and memorized the baking instructions written in small lettering on the underside.

'For a crumbly texture, short, intense mixing and slow bake in quiet oven . . .' Zam read. The memory of the calm, reassuring sound of the head baker's voice filled his head, as it always did when Zam read his recipes. *'For a more robust biscuit, easeful mixing with broad, generous spoon and a short, fierce bake in busy oven . . .'*

'Broad, generous spoon,' Zam repeated to himself, returning the crinkle-cut crust to the drawer and closing it. He looked up and was about to select one of the wooden spoons, which hung from the hooks in the ceiling, when he trod on something. It was a large spoon he hadn't noticed lying on the flagstone floor.



'That is so careless,' Zam muttered, picking it up. The spoon was broad and long handled, carved from a single piece of wood, by the look of it. Zam turned it over. It was a slotted spoon, full of small holes, with three large ones near the base of the handle.

'*Easeful mixing with broad, generous spoon,*' the head baker's voice sounded in Zam's head.

'Perfect,' he said, wiping the spoon

on his apron before slipping it into a pocket.

He selected a favourite battered old book from a shelf: *The Art of Baking*. 'There you are,' he said happily and climbed the back stairs to the kitchen.

An hour later, the other apprentice bakers had been woken by the six o'clock gong and were filing in, putting on their caps and rubbing the sleep from their eyes. Balthazar Boabab, the head baker of Bakery No. 9, followed them into the kitchen smiling.

'Good morning, apprentices!' he said cheerfully, peering over the top of his half-rim spectacles. 'As you know, the twelve bakeries of



Troutwine are baking for the Grand Duchess's Tea Ball tomorrow, and we all have our parts to play.'

The head baker smiled again, a little ruefully this time. 'Bakery No. 1 is doing the first tiers. Bakery No. 2 the second and third tiers. Fillings are being produced by bakeries No. 3, 4 and 5. While No. 6, 7 and 8 are baking pastry shells and meringues. Bakeries No. 10 and 11 are fruitcake and turnovers, and Bakery No. 12 is making floating islands . . .'



Balthazar Boabab took a deep breath. 'This means, once again, Bakery No. 9 is picking up the crumbs . . .'



The apprentice bakers began to mutter. It wasn't fair. They had tried so hard, but they weren't being given a chance.

'I know, I know . . .' said the head baker. 'It's not ideal, but after last year's cake collapse and exploding-eclair incident, Bakery No. 9 has a lot to prove . . .'

'But that wasn't our fault,' protested one of the gnomes.

'The last head baker didn't pay off the League of Rats,' said Langdale the goat boy, stamping his hooves, 'and they ruined everything . . .'



'Nothing was proved,' said Balthazar gently. 'I am head baker now, and things are different, aren't they?'

Zam and the other apprentices nodded. It was true. Bakery No. 9 had changed since Balthazar Boabab had taken over: no more bullying, tantrums or random punishments. The kitchen was a happy place, and everyone was respected and baking beautifully. It was just as well. A year ago, after the disaster of the last tea ball, Bakery No. 9 had almost been shut down and everyone sent home. If Balthazar hadn't joined them from the fashionable Bakery No. 12, the apprentices would have had no future. None of them wanted to let him down.

'But what about the rats?' asked Langdale anxiously.

'Let me worry about them,' said the head baker, doing his best to sound cheerful. 'After all, we have heard nothing from the rats since I arrived.

'Meanwhile, you have baking to do. We will be making the crusts as well as gingerbread and some spun-sugar decorations. And, at the tea ball itself –'

Balthazar cleared his throat; even he couldn't sound cheerful about the next bit – 'Bakery No. 9 will be doing the washing-up.'

The apprentice bakers groaned.

'Langdale and the Shellac sisters are on shortcrust pastry shells,' Balthazar instructed. 'Gnomes are on glazed piecrust. Zam, are you confident to bake the gingerbread and help me with the spun sugar?'

'Yes, head baker,' said Zam excitedly. 'I've already been down in the flavour library . . .'

'Baker's pet,' muttered Langdale.

Balthazar gave the goat boy a stern look. But before he could say anything, an unexpected sound silenced them all.

In the shop, the doorbell had rung, and now they could hear the scritch-scratch of claws on the floorboards.

'I smell a rat,' said Langdale.

