

Extract from *The Stresors' workshop*

A thick saffron cloud stretches over the roofs of Paris. Stresor leaves his palette. The light so long awaited after winter 1641 exhilarates him. It exquisitely penetrates each of his veins, as warm and fluid as honey flowing. It is about to splash the canvas on his easel. A taste of happiness he had forgotten. He can hear strains of graceful lute music somewhere in the house. Catherine, daughter of Louis Buart, singer at the chapel of the King's Queen Mother, plays the piece his father has taught her in the afternoon. A pavane by François Dufault. His lips closed, he finds himself humming, under the spell of the circles the melody inscribes around him, before reaching the depths of his heart. Like the caress of iridescent feathers, going only to return. They brush against him, sending shivers of pleasure through his body. A celebration touched with melancholy... A secret passion Stresor wishes he no longer doubted. For he is certain she is playing for him, he has become convinced of this.

It is bitterly cold on the Passion Sunday when Stresor moves to the rue de la Monnaye, not far from Israël Silvestre's, in the workshop of Louis Buart, also a master-painter by trade. Stresor met him at his friend's, in the rue de L'Arbre Sec. He has taken an immediate liking to the sanguine, jovial-looking man. Buart invites the young Prussian painter, eager to show him his paintings, his house. He introduces him to this wife and his daughter, as he would with an old acquaintance. Stresor marvels at the warmth radiating from Louis Buart. No wonder he must sing to release this overflow of liveliness and share it with the world around him. By the end of the week, he has offered to work with him. So the workshop will not remain empty, when he is called to sing at the Queen Mother's at the Louvre, two streets away from here.

Magdeleine Buart wraps her cape around her skinny shoulders before taking Stresor to the room her husband is giving him. Catherine, a young petite woman with long curly hair, is walking by her side. She is gazing at him intently. The paleness of her complexion brings out her velvety brown eyes. She hardly speaks to him in the days following his arrival under the attic. He imagines the fineness of her neck, when she calls her mother with her clear voice. In his mind's eye, he sees again the strange, cabled silver bracelet on her wrist when he knows she is busy in the kitchen. Two interlocked hands. The stinging pain of the idea that a suitor might have presented it to her as a gift...

They pass each other in the staircase on a rainy morning. She doesn't see him, loaded as she is with her basket and far too absorbed in her own thoughts. The fabric of her drenched skirt is twisted around her leg. The smell of wet wool around her fills his nose. She blushes ever so slightly and briefly greets him. Leaning over the guardrail, she looks at him. Her distant, almost curt manner irritates him. That afternoon, she picks up her lute. He cannot remember having heard her before. Or has she played already without his paying attention? She repeats her arpeggios even louder. As if she were telling him a story with a partition in an attempt to make up for her haughty demeanour. A story he is eager to know, as he thinks he is sitting beside Catherine Buart, whose slender fingers play silk notes.

June comes. She walks up to the workshop and sits down at the table where her father showed her how to paint miniatures, she explains to Stresor. Never before has he worked beside a woman. Only male artists were to be seen in the workshops he has been to before. He watches her, somewhat sceptically, as she takes her paper and prepares a black pencil. Indifferent to astonishment she has probably not failed to notice, she starts to sketch a figure. Would she be bold enough to draw his portrait here without further ado?

As if nothing were amiss, she starts talking to him about the weather, the country he comes from. Becomes silent when his face falls. Then she questions him about The Hague, his former master. She is quick-witted, cheerful and can keep the conversation going, as soon as he brightens up. She leaves him as the sky is ablaze with the setting sun. The leaves of the trees around the church of Saint-Germain-L'Auxerrois have unfolded and the petals of their flowers are scattered on the ground after the breeze.

One July afternoon, Louis Buart is sent for at the Queen Mother's. Magdeleine is at church. Catherine comes in with vellum paper. Stresor thinks her flesh has the same ivory paleness. She puts the sheet on her wooden board, folds its edges underneath and carefully sticks them. A few dark locks fall on her brow, as she cuts the corners. The small knife suddenly skids against her thumb. She takes her handkerchief to clean the wound that is abundantly bleeding. He comes up to her and swabs the scarlet liquid too. The crimson colour of her dress heightens the whiteness of her breast. Irresistibly dizzy, he embraces her, yielding to the softness of her mouth. His hands are enough to hold her waist closely fitted in the bodice. Their murmurs rise in the last hours of the day, mingling with the wind at the window... Catherine Buart's cheeks are bright red as she arranges her sleeves and prepares to leave him. He leans forward and kisses her, aroused by her burning lips.

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