

The Lady and the Unicorn



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HarperCollins E-Books

ISBN 978-0-00-732433-0

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AND
THE UNICORN

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PARIS

Lent-Eastertide 1490

NICOLAS DES INNOCENTS

The messenger said I was to come at once. That's how Jean Le Viste is — he expects everyone to do what he says immediately.

And I did. I followed the messenger, stopping just briefly to clean my brushes. Commissions from Jean Le Viste can mean food on the table for weeks. Only the King says no to Jean Le Viste, and I am certainly no king.

On the other hand, how many times have I rushed across the Seine to the rue du Four, only to come back again with no commission? It's not that Jean Le Viste is a fickle man — on the contrary, he is as sober and hard as his beloved Louis XI once was. Humourless too. I never jest with him. It's a relief to escape his house to the nearest tavern for a drink and a laugh and a grope to restore my spirits.

He knows what he wants. But sometimes when I come to discuss yet another coat of arms to decorate the chimney, or to paint on his wife's carriage door, or to work into a bit of stained glass for the chapel — people say the Le Viste arms are as common as horse dung — he'll stop suddenly, shake his head and say with a frown, 'This is not needed. I should not be thinking about such commonplace matters. Go.' And I do, feeling guilty, as if I am to blame for bringing a carriage's decoration to his attention, when it was he who called for me.

I'd been to the rue du Four house half a dozen times before. It is not a place that impresses. Even with all the fields around it, it is built as if it were in the middle of the city, with the rooms long and narrow, the walls too dark, the stables too close — the house always smells of horses. It is the sort of house a family that has bought its way into the Court would live in — grand enough but poorly placed. Jean Le Viste probably thinks he has done well to be given such a place to live, while the Court laughs behind his back. He should be living close to the King and Notre Dame, not outside the city walls in the swampy fields around Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

When I arrived the steward took me not to Jean Le Viste's private chamber, a map-lined room where he performs duties for Court and King alongside family matters, but to the Grande Salle, where the Le Vistes receive visitors and entertain. I had never been there. It was a long room with a large hearth at the opposite end from the door and an oak table down the centre. Apart from a stone coat of arms that hung on the chimneybreast and another painted over the door, it was unadorned — though the ceiling was panelled with handsome carved wood.

Not so grand, I thought as I looked around. Although shutters were open, the fire hadn't been lit and the room was chilly with its bare walls.

'Wait here for my master,' the steward said, glaring at me. In this house people either respected artists or showed their contempt.

I turned my back on him and gazed out of a narrow window where there was a clear view of the towers of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Some say Jean Le Viste took this house so that his pious wife could step across to the church easily and often.

The door opened behind me and I turned, prepared to bow. It was only a servant girl, who smirked as she caught me half-bent. I straightened and watched as she moved across the room, banging a pail against her leg. She knelt and began to clear the fireplace of ashes.

Was she the one? I tried to remember — it had been dark that night behind the stables. She was fatter than I recalled, and sullen with her heavy brow, but her face was sweet enough. It was worth a word.

‘Stay a moment,’ I said when she had pulled herself up clumsily and made her way to the door. ‘Sit and rest your feet. I’ll tell you a story.’

The girl stopped with a jolt. ‘You mean the story of the unicorn?’

She was the one. I opened my mouth to answer, but the girl jumped in before me. ‘Does the story go on to say that the woman grows big with child and may lose her place? Is that what happens?’

So that was why she was fat. I turned back to the window. ‘You should have taken more care.’

‘I shouldn’t have listened to you, is what I should have done. I should have shoved your tongue right up your arse.’

‘Out you go now, there’s a good girl. Here.’ I dug into my pocket, pulled out a few coins and threw them onto the table. ‘To help with the baby.’

The girl stepped across the room and spat in my face. By the time I’d wiped the spittle from my eyes she was gone. So were the coins.

Jean Le Viste came in soon after, followed by Léon Le Vieux. Most patrons use a merchant like Léon to act as middleman, haggling over terms, drawing up the contract, providing initial money and materials, making sure the work gets done. I’d already had dealings with the old merchant over coats of arms painted for a chimneybreast, an Annunciation for the chamber of Jean Le Viste’s wife, and some stained glass for the chapel in their château near Lyons.

Léon is much favoured by the Le Vistes. I have respect for him but I cannot like him. He is from a family that were once Jews. He makes no secret of it, but has used it to his advantage, for Jean Le Viste is also from a family much changed over time. That is why he prefers Léon — they are both outsiders who have made their way in. Of course Léon is careful to attend Mass two or three times a week at Notre Dame, where many will see him, just as Jean Le Viste takes care to act the true noble, commissioning works for his house, entertaining lavishly, bowing and scraping to his King.

Léon was looking at me, smiling through his beard as if he had spotted a monkey on my back. I turned to Jean Le Viste. ‘*Bonjour*, Monseigneur. You wished to see me.’ I bowed so low my head throbbed. It never hurt to bow low.

Jean Le Viste’s jaw is like a hatchet, his eyes like knife blades. They flicked around the

room now, then rested on the window over my shoulder. ‘I want to discuss a commission with you, Nicolas des Innocents,’ he said, pulling at the sleeves of his robe, which was trimmed with rabbit fur and dyed the deep red lawyers wear. ‘For this room.’

I glanced around the room, keeping my face clear of thoughts. It was best to be so with Jean Le Viste. ‘What did you have in mind, Monseigneur?’

‘Tapestries.’

I noted the plural. ‘Perhaps a set of your coat of arms to hang either side of the door?’

Jean Le Viste grimaced. I wished I hadn't spoken.

‘I want tapestries to cover all of the walls.’

‘All of them?’

‘Yes.’

I looked around the room once again, more carefully this time. The Grande Salle was at least ten paces long and five wide. Its walls were very thick, the local stone rough and grey. Three windows were cut into one of the long walls, and the hearth took up half of one of the end walls. Tapestries to line the room could take a weaver several years.

‘What would you have as the subject, Monseigneur?’ I had designed one tapestry for Jean Le Viste — a coat of arms, of course. It had been simple enough, scaling up the coat of arms to tapestry size and designing a bit of background greenery around it.

Jean Le Viste folded his arms over his chest. ‘Last year I was made President of the Cour des Aides.’

The position meant nothing to me but I knew what I should say. ‘Yes, Monseigneur. That is a great honour to you and your family.’

Léon rolled his eyes to the carved ceiling, while Jean Le Viste waved his hand as if he were ridding the room of smoke. Everything I said seemed to annoy him.

‘I want to celebrate the achievement with a set of tapestries. I've been saving this room for a special occasion.’

This time I waited.

‘Of course it is essential that the family coat of arms be displayed.’

‘Of course, Monseigneur.’

Then Jean Le Viste surprised me. ‘But not on its own. There are already many examples of the coat of arms alone, here as well as in the rest of the house.’ He gestured at the arms over the door and hearth, and to some carved in the ceiling beams that I hadn't noticed before. ‘No, I want it to be part of a larger scene, to reflect my place at the heart of the Court.’

‘A procession, perhaps?’

‘A battle.’

‘A battle?’

‘Yes. The Battle of Nancy.’

I kept my face thoughtful. I even smiled a little. But in truth I knew little of battles,

and nothing of this one at Nancy, of who had been there, who had been killed and who had won. I'd seen paintings of battles but never done one myself. Horses, I thought. I would need to paint at least twenty horses to cover these walls, tangled with men's arms and legs and armour. I wondered then what had made Jean Le Viste — or Léon, more likely — choose me for this work. My reputation at the Court is as a miniaturist, painter of tiny portraits of ladies that they give men to carry. Praised for their delicacy, the miniatures are much in demand. I paint shields and ladies' carriage doors for drink money, but my true skill is in making a face the size of my thumb, using a few boar bristles and colour mixed with egg white. It needs a steady hand, and that I have, even after a long night of drinking at Le Coq d'Or. But the thought of painting twenty huge horses — I began to sweat, though the room was chilly.

‘You are sure that you want the Battle of Nancy, Monseigneur,’ I said. It was not quite a question.

Jean Le Viste frowned. ‘Why would I not be sure?’

‘No reason, Monseigneur,’ I answered quickly. ‘But they will be important works and you must be sure you have chosen what you want.’ I cursed myself for my clumsy words.

Jean Le Viste snorted. ‘I always know what I want. I wonder at you, though — you don't seem so keen on this work. Perhaps I should find another artist who is happier to do it.’

I bowed low again. ‘Oh no, Monseigneur, of course I am most honoured and grateful to be asked to design such a glorious work. I am sure I am not worthy of your kindness in thinking of me. You may have no fear that I'll put my heart and blood into these tapestries.’

Jean Le Viste nodded, as if such grovelling were his due. ‘I'll leave you here with Léon to discuss details and to measure the walls,’ he said as he turned to go. ‘I will expect to see preliminary drawings just before Easter — by Maundy Thursday, with paintings by the Ascension.’

When we were alone Léon Le Vieux chuckled. ‘What a fool you are.’

With Léon it's best to come straight to the point and ignore his gibes. ‘My fee is ten *livres tournois* — four now, three when I finish the drawings, and three when the paintings are done.’

‘Four *livres paris*,’ he responded quickly. ‘Half when you finish the drawings, the rest when you deliver the paintings and they're to Monseigneur's satisfaction.’

‘Absolutely not. I can't work with no pay at the start. And my terms are in *livres tournois*.’ It was just like Léon to try to confuse me by using Paris *livres*.

Léon shrugged, his eyes merry. ‘We are in Paris, *n'est-ce pas*? Shouldn't we use *livres paris*? That is what I prefer.’

‘Eight *livres tournois*, with three now, then three and two.’

‘Seven. I will give you two tomorrow, then two and three at the end.’

I changed the subject — it is always best to let the merchant wait a little. ‘Where will the tapestries be made?’

‘North. Probably Brussels. They do the best work there.’

North? I shuddered. I once had business in Tournai and hated the flat light and suspicious people so much I vowed never to go north of Paris again. At least I wouldn't have to do more than paint designs, and that I could do in Paris. Once they were done I would have no more to do with the making of the tapestries.

‘So, what do you know about the battle at Nancy?’ Léon asked.

I shrugged. ‘What does it matter? All battles are the same, *non?*’

‘That's like saying that all women are the same.’

I smiled. ‘I repeat — all battles are the same.’

Léon shook his head. ‘I pity your wife one day. Now tell me, what will you have in your tapestries?’

‘Horses, men in armour, standards, pikes, swords, shields, blood.’

‘What will Louis XI be wearing?’

‘Armour, of course. Perhaps a special plume in his helmet. I don't know, in truth, but I know people who can tell me that sort of thing. Someone will carry the royal standard, I expect.’

‘I hope your friends are cleverer than you and will tell you that Louis XI was not at the Battle of Nancy.’

‘Oh.’ This was Léon Le Vieux's way — to make a fool of all around him, excepting his patron. You did not make a fool of Jean Le Viste.

‘*Bon.*’ Léon took out some papers from his pocket and laid them on the table. ‘I've already discussed the contents of the tapestries with Monseigneur and done some measuring. You'll need to do them more precisely, of course. Here.’ He pointed to six rectangles he had roughly sketched. ‘There's space for two long ones here and here, and four smaller. Here is the sequence of the battle.’ He explained the battle carefully, suggesting scenes for each of the tapestries — the grouping of the two camps, the initial strike, two scenes of battle chaos, then the death of Charles the Bold and the triumphant procession of the victors. Though I listened and made sketches of my own on the paper, part of me stood apart and wondered at what I was agreeing to do. There would be no women in these tapestries, nothing miniature and delicate, nothing that would be easy for me to paint. I would earn my fee with sweat and long hours.

‘Once you've made the paintings,’ Léon reminded me, ‘your work is done. I'll take them north to the weaver, and his cartoonist will enlarge them to use for the weaving.’

I should have been pleased that I wouldn't have to paint the horses large. Instead, however, I became protective of my work. ‘How do I know that this cartoonist is a proper artist? I don't want him making a mess of my designs.’

‘He won't change what Jean Le Viste has decided on — only changes that will help the design and making of the tapestries. You haven't done many tapestries, have you, Nicolas? Only a coat of arms, I believe.’

‘Which I scaled up myself — I had no need of a cartoonist. Surely I'm capable of doing

so on this commission.'

'These tapestries are a very different matter from a coat of arms. They will need a proper cartoonist. *Tiens*, there's one thing I forgot to mention. You'll need to be sure there are Le Viste coats of arms throughout the tapestries. Monseigneur will insist on that.'

'Did Monseigneur actually fight there?'

Léon laughed. 'Undoubtedly Jean Le Viste was on the other side of France during the Battle of Nancy, working for the King. That doesn't matter — just put his coat of arms on flags and shields that others carry. You may want to see some pictures of that battle and others. Go to Gérard the printer on the rue Vieille du Temple — he has a book he can show you of engravings of the Battle of Nancy. I'll tell him to expect you. Now, I'll leave you to your measurements. If you have problems, come and see me. And bring the drawings to me by Palm Sunday — if I want changes you'll need enough time to get them done before Monseigneur sees them.'

Clearly Léon Le Vieux was Jean Le Viste's eyes. I had to please him, and if he liked what he saw, Jean Le Viste would too.

I couldn't resist a last question. 'Why did you choose me for this commission?'

Léon gathered his plain brown robe about him — no fur trim for him. 'I didn't. If it were my choice I would have someone who has done more tapestries, or go direct to the weaver — they have designs in hand and can work from those. It's cheaper and they are good at the designs.' Léon was always frank.

'Why did Jean Le Viste choose me, then?'

'You'll find out soon enough. *Alors*, come to me tomorrow and I'll have the papers for you to sign, and the money.'

'I haven't agreed to the terms yet.'

'Oh, I think you have. There are some commissions an artist doesn't say no to. This is one of them, Nicolas des Innocents.' He gave me a look as he left.

He was right. I had been talking as if I were going to do them. Still, the terms were not bad. In fact, Léon had not haggled very hard. I wondered suddenly if his terms were still in Paris *livres* after all.

I turned my eyes to the walls I was to dress so sumptuously. Two months to draw and paint twenty horses and their riders! I stood at one end of the room and walked to the other, counting twelve paces, then walked across, counting six paces. Pulling a chair to one wall, I stood on it, but even reaching as high as I could, I was far from touching the ceiling. I pulled the chair back and, after hesitating a moment, stepped up onto the oak table. I reached up but was still at least my height again from the ceiling.

I was wondering where I could find a long pole to use for measuring when I heard humming behind me and turned around. A girl stood in the entrance watching me. A lovely girl — she had pale skin, a high forehead, a long nose, hair the colour of honey, clear eyes. I'd not seen such a girl before. For a moment I couldn't say anything.

'Hello, beauty,' I managed at last.

The girl laughed and hopped from one foot to the other. She was wearing a simple blue dress, with a tight bodice, a square neck and narrow sleeves. It was cut well and the wool was fine, but it was not ornate. She wore a plain scarf too, her long hair falling almost to her waist. Compared to the servant who had cleaned the fireplace, she was clearly too fine to be a maid. Perhaps a lady-in-waiting?

‘The mistress of the house wishes to see you,’ she said, then turned and ran away, still laughing.

I didn't move. I've learned from years of experience that dogs and falcons and ladies come back to you if you stay where you are. I could hear her feet slap across the floor of the next room, then stop. After a moment the steps began again and she reappeared at the door. ‘Are you coming?’ She was still smiling.

‘I will, beauty, if you will walk with me and not hurry ahead as if I were a dragon you had to flee.’

The girl laughed. ‘Come,’ she beckoned, and this time I hopped down from the table. I had to step quickly to keep up with her as she ran from room to room. Her skirt flapped, as if she were blown along by a secret wind. Up close she smelled of something sweet and spicy, underlined with sweat. Her mouth moved as if she were chewing something.

‘What do you have in your mouth, beauty?’

‘Toothache.’ The girl stuck out her tongue — on its pink tip lay a clove. The sight of her tongue made me hard. I wanted to plough her.

‘Ah, that must hurt.’ I will suck it better. ‘Now, why does your mistress want to see me?’

The girl looked at me, amused. ‘I expect she'll tell you herself.’

I slowed down. ‘Why rush? She won't mind, will she, if you and I have a little chat along the way?’

‘What do you want to talk about?’ The girl turned up a round staircase.

I leapt onto the stair in front of her to stop her from climbing. ‘What sorts of animals do you like?’

‘Animals?’

‘I don't want you to think of me as a dragon. I'd rather you thought of me as something else. Something you prefer.’

The girl thought. ‘A parakeet, perhaps. I do like parakeets. I have four. They eat from my hand.’ She ran around me to stand on the stairs above me. She didn't go higher. Yes, I thought. I've set out my wares and she's coming for a look. Come closer, my dear, and see my plums. Squeeze them.

‘Not a parakeet,’ I said. ‘Surely you don't think of me as a squawker and an imitator.’

‘My parakeets make no noise. But anyway, you are an artist, *non*? Isn't that what you do — imitate life?’

‘I make things more beautiful than they are — though there are some things, my girl, that cannot be improved upon with paint.’ I stepped around her and stood three steps

above. I wanted to see if she would come to me.

She did. Her eyes remained clear and wide, but her mouth was twisted into a knowing smile. With her tongue she moved the clove from one cheek to the other.

I will have you, I thought. I will.

‘Perhaps you’re a fox instead,’ she said. ‘Your hair has a little red in among the brown.’

I pouted. ‘How can you be so cruel? Do I look devious? Would I cheat a man? Do I run sideways and never straight? Rather I’m a dog who lays himself at his mistress’s feet and is loyal to her forever.’

‘Dogs want too much attention’, the girl said, ‘and they jump up and muddy my skirts with their paws.’ She stepped around me and did not stop this time. ‘Come — my mistress waits. We must not keep her.’

I would have to hurry — I’d wasted too much time on other animals. ‘I know which animal I want to be,’ I panted, running after her.

‘What’s that?’

‘A unicorn. Do you know of the unicorn?’

The girl snorted. She’d reached the top of the stairs and was opening the door to another room. ‘I know it likes to lay its head in maidens’ laps. Is that what you like to do?’

‘Ah, don’t think of me so coarsely. The unicorn does something far greater than that. His horn has a special power, you see. Did you know that?’

The girl slowed down to look at me. ‘What does it do?’

‘If a well is poisoned — ’

‘There’s a well!’ The girl stopped and pointed out of a window to the courtyard. A younger girl was leaning over the edge of a well and looking down into it, the sun bathing her hair in gold light.

‘Jeanne always does that,’ the girl said. ‘She likes to look at her reflection.’ As we watched the girl spat into the well.

‘If your well there was poisoned, beauty, or sullied such as Jeanne has just done, a unicorn could come along and dip his horn into it and it would become pure again. What do you think of that?’

The girl moved the clove around with her tongue. ‘What do you want me to think of it?’

‘I want you to think of me as your unicorn. There are times when you’re sullied, yes, even you, beauty. Every woman is. That is Eve’s punishment. But you can be made pure again, every month, if you will only let me tend to you.’ Plough you again and again until you laugh and cry. ‘Every month you will go back to Eden.’ It was that last line that never failed when I was hunting a woman — the idea of that simple paradise seemed to snare them. They always opened their legs to me in the hope that they would find it. Perhaps some of them did.

The girl laughed, raucously this time. She was ready. I reached out to squeeze her and

seal our exchange.

‘Claude? Is that you? What's taken you so long?’ A door across from us had opened and a woman stood staring at us, her arms folded across her chest. I dropped my hand.

‘*Pardon*, Maman. Here he is.’ Claude stepped back and gestured at me. I bowed.

‘What's in your mouth?’ the woman asked.

Claude swallowed. ‘Clove. For my tooth.’

‘You should be chewing mint — that's much better for toothache.’

‘Yes, Maman.’ Claude laughed again — probably at the look on my face. She turned and ran from the room, banging the door behind her. The room echoed with her steps.

I shuddered. I had just tried to seduce Jean Le Viste's daughter.

In the times I'd been to the house on the rue du Four I had only ever seen the three Le Viste girls from afar — running across the courtyard, leaving on horses, walking with a group of ladies to Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Of course the girl by the well was one of them too — if I'd been paying attention I would have understood when I saw her hair and how she held herself that she and Claude were sisters. Then I would have guessed who they were and never have told Claude the story of the unicorn. But I had not been thinking about who she was — I'd been thinking about how to bed her.

Claude had only to repeat to her father what I'd said and I would be thrown out, the commission taken from me. And I would never see Claude again.

I wanted her more than ever, and not just for bedding. I wanted to lie with her at my side and talk to her, touch that mouth and hair and make her laugh. I wondered where she had run to in the house. I would never be allowed in there — not a Paris artist with a nobleman's daughter.

I stood very still, thinking of these things. Perhaps I did so for a moment too long. The woman in the doorway moved so that the rosary hanging at her waist clicked against the buttons on her sleeve, and I stepped back from my thoughts. She was looking at me as if she'd guessed all that was going through my head. She said nothing, though, but pushed the door open and went back in. I followed.

I had painted miniatures in many ladies' chambers — this one was not so different. There was a bed made of chestnut and hung with curtains of blue and yellow silk. There were oak chairs in a semicircle, padded with embroidered cushions. There was a side table covered with bottles and a casket for jewels and several chests for dresses. An open window framed a view of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Gathered in the corner were her ladies-in-waiting, working on embroidery. They smiled at me as if they were one person rather than five, and I chided myself for ever thinking Claude could be one of them.

Geneviève de Nanterre — wife of Jean Le Viste and mistress of the house — sat down by the window. She had clearly once been as beautiful as her daughter. She was still a handsome woman, with a wide forehead and a delicate chin, but where Claude's face was heart-shaped, hers had become triangular. Fifteen years as Jean Le Viste's wife had straightened the curves, set the jaw, lined the brow. Her eyes were dark currants to Claude's clear quinces.

In one way, at least, she outshone her daughter. Her dress was richer — cream and green brocade, intricately patterned with flowers and leaves. She wore fine jewels at her throat and her hair was braided with silk and pearls. She would never be mistaken for a lady-in-waiting — she was clearly dressed to be attended to.

‘You have just been with my husband in the Grande Salle,’ she said. ‘Discussing tapestries.’

‘Yes, Madame.’

‘I suppose he wants a battle.’

‘Yes, Madame. The Battle of Nancy.’

‘And what scenes will the tapestries display?’

‘I am not sure, Madame. Monseigneur has only just told me of the tapestries. I need to sit down and sketch before I can say for certain.’

‘Will there be men?’

‘Certainly, Madame.’

‘Horses?’

‘Yes.’

‘Blood?’

‘*Pardon*, Madame?’

Geneviève de Nanterre waved her hand. ‘This is a battle. Will there be blood flowing from wounds?’

‘I expect so, Madame. Charles the Bold will be killed, of course.’

‘Have you ever been in a battle, Nicolas des Innocents?’

‘No, Madame.’

‘I want you to think for a moment that you are a soldier.’

‘But I am a miniaturist for the Court, Madame.’

‘I know that, but for a moment you are a soldier who has fought in the Battle of Nancy. You lost your arm in that battle. You are sitting in the Grande Salle as a guest of my husband and myself. Beside you is your wife, your pretty young wife who helps you with the little difficulties that arise from not having two hands — breaking bread, buckling on your sword, mounting your horse.’ Geneviève de Nanterre spoke rhythmically, as if she were singing a lullaby. I began to feel I was floating down a river with no idea where I was going.

Is she a little mad? I thought.

Geneviève de Nanterre crossed her arms and turned her head to one side. ‘As you eat you look at the tapestries of the battle that has cost you your arm. You recognize Charles the Bold being slaughtered, your wife sees the blood spurting from his wounds. Everywhere you see Le Viste banners. But where is Jean Le Viste?’

I tried to remember what Léon had said. ‘Monseigneur is at the King's side, Madame.’

‘Yes. During the battle my husband and the King were snug at Court in Paris, far from

Nancy. Now, as this soldier, how would you feel, knowing that Jean Le Viste was never at the Battle of Nancy, yet seeing his banners everywhere in the tapestries?’

‘I would think that Monseigneur is an important man to be at the King's side, Madame. His counsel is more important than his skills in battle.’

‘Ah, that is very diplomatic of you, Nicolas. You are far more of a diplomat than my husband. But I'm afraid that is not the right answer. I want you to think carefully and tell me in truth what such a soldier would think.’

I knew now where the river of words I floated on was heading. I didn't know what would happen once I moored.

‘He would be offended, Madame. And his wife.’

Geneviève de Nanterre nodded. ‘Yes. There it is.’

‘But that's no reason —’

‘*De plus*, I don't want my daughters to look at bloody carnage while entertaining at a feast. You've met Claude — would you want her to stare at some gash in a horse's side or a man with his head cut off while she's eating?’

‘No, Madame.’

‘She shall not.’

In their corner the ladies-in-waiting were smirking at me. Geneviève de Nanterre had led me to just where she'd wanted. She was cleverer than most of the noblewomen I'd painted. Because of that I found I wanted to please her. That could be dangerous.

‘I can't go against Monseigneur's wishes, Madame.’

Geneviève de Nanterre sat back in her chair. ‘Tell me, Nicolas — do you know who chose you to design these tapestries?’

‘No, Madame.’

‘I did.’

I stared at her. ‘Why, Madame?’

‘I've seen the miniatures you do of ladies in the Court. There is something about them that you capture which pleases me.’

‘What is that, Madame?’

‘Their spiritual nature.’

I bowed, surprised. ‘Thank you, Madame.’

‘Claude could do with more examples of that spiritual nature. I try, but she doesn't listen to her mother.’

There was a pause. I shifted from one foot to the other. ‘What — what would you have me paint instead of a battle, Madame?’

Geneviève de Nanterre's eyes gleamed. ‘A unicorn.’

I froze.

‘A lady and a unicorn,’ she added.

She must have heard me with Claude. She must have heard me or she wouldn't have suggested it. Had she heard me seducing her daughter? I tried to guess from her face. She seemed pleased with herself, mischievous even. If she did know, she could tell Jean Le Viste about my attempt to seduce their daughter — if Claude hadn't done so already — and the commission would be lost. Not only that — with a word Geneviève de Nanterre could ruin my reputation at Court and I would never paint another miniature.

I had no choice but to try to sweeten her. 'Are you fond of unicorns, Madame?'

One of the ladies-in-waiting giggled. Geneviève de Nan-terre frowned and the girl stopped. 'I've never seen one, so how would I know? No, it's Claude I am thinking of. She likes them, and it is she as the eldest child who will inherit the tapestries one day. She may as well have something she likes.'

I'd heard talk of the family *sans* heir, of how it must rankle Jean Le Viste not to have a son to pass on his beloved coat of arms to. The blame for having three daughters must lie heavily upon his wife. I looked at her a little more kindly.

'What would you have the unicorn do, Madame?'

Geneviève de Nanterre waved a hand. 'Suggest to me what he might do.'

'He could be hunted. Monseigneur might like that.'

She shook her head. 'I don't want horses and blood. And Claude wouldn't be pleased if the unicorn were killed.'

I couldn't risk suggesting the story of the unicorn's magic horn. I would have to repeat Claude's idea. 'The Lady might seduce the unicorn. Each tapestry could be a scene of her in the woods, tempting him with music and food and flowers, and at the end he lays his head in her lap. That is a popular story.'

'Perhaps. Of course Claude would like that. She is a girl at the beginning of her life. Yes, the virgin taming the unicorn might be the thing. Though it may pain me as much to sit among that as to be amidst a battle scene.' She said the last words almost to herself.

'Why, Madame?'

'I will be surrounded by seduction, youth, love. What is all that to me?' She tried to sound dismissive of these things, but she seemed wistful.

She doesn't share her husband's bed, I thought. She has had her daughters and has done her part. Not well, either — no sons. Now she is shut off from him and there is nothing left for her. I was not in the habit of pitying noblewomen, with their warm fires and full bellies and their ladies to attend them. But at that moment I felt sorry for Geneviève de Nanterre. For I had a sudden vision of myself in ten years' time — after long journeys, harsh winters, illnesses — alone in a cold bed, limbs aching, hands crabbed and unable to hold a paintbrush. At the end of my own usefulness, what would become of me? Death would be welcome then. I wondered if she thought that.

She was looking at me with her sad, clever eyes.

Something in these tapestries will be hers, I thought in a rush. They will not only be about a seduction in a forest, but about something else as well, not just a virgin but a woman who would be a virgin again, so that the tapestries are about the whole of a

woman's life, its beginning and its end. All of her choices, all in one, wound together. That was what I would do. I smiled at her.

A bell rang in the tower of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

‘Sext, ma Dame,’ said one of the ladies.

‘I will go to that,’ Geneviève de Nanterre said. ‘We've missed the other offices, and I can't go to Vespers this evening — I'm expected at Court with my lord.’ She rose from her chair as another lady brought over the casket. She reached up, undid the clasp of her necklace, and took it off, allowing the jewels to lie glistening in her hands for a moment before they tumbled into the casket to be locked away. Her lady held out a cross dotted with pearls on a long chain, and when Geneviève de Nanterre nodded she slipped it over her mistress's head. The other ladies began putting away their sewing and gathering their things. I knew I would be dismissed.

‘*Pardon*, Madame, but will Monseigneur agree to unicorns rather than battles?’

Geneviève de Nanterre was rearranging the corded belt at her waist while one of the ladies unpinned her dark red overskirt so that its folds fell to the floor and covered the green and white leaves and flowers. ‘You will have to convince him.’

‘But — surely you should tell him yourself, Madame. After all, you were able to get him to agree to have me do the designs.’

‘Ah, that was easy — he cares nothing about people. One artist or another means little to him, as long as they are accepted at Court. But the subject of the commission is between him and you — I am meant to have nothing to do with it. So it is best if he hears from you.’

‘Perhaps Léon Le Vieux should speak to him.’

Geneviève de Nanterre snorted. ‘Léon would not go against my husband's wishes. He protects himself. He is clever but not cunning — and what is needed to convince Jean is cunning.’

I frowned at the floor. The dazzle of the designs I would make had blinded me, but now the difficulty of my place was sinking in. I would prefer to design a lady and a unicorn over a battle with its many horses, but I did not like to go against Jean Le Viste's wishes either. Yet it seemed I had no choice. I'd been caught in a web woven between Jean Le Viste and his wife and daughter, and I didn't know how to escape. These tapestries will bring me to grief, I thought.

‘I have a cunning idea, Madame.’ The lady-in-waiting who spoke was the plainest but had lively eyes that moved back and forth as she thought. ‘In fact, it's a punning idea. You know how Monseigneur likes puns.’

‘So he does,’ Geneviève de Nanterre agreed.

‘*Visté* means speed. The unicorn is *visté*, *n'est-ce pas*? No animal runs faster. So when we see a unicorn we think of *Viste*.’

‘Béatrice, you're so clever — if your idea works with my husband you may marry this Nicolas des Innocents. I will give you my blessing.’

I jerked my head. Béatrice laughed, and all the women joined her. I smiled politely. I

had no idea if Geneviève de Nanterre was joking.

Still laughing, Geneviève de Nanterre led her ladies out, leaving me alone.

I stood still in the quiet room. I should find a long pole and go back to the Grande Salle to begin measuring again. But it was a pleasure to stay here, with no ladies smirking at me. I could think in this room.

I looked around. There were two tapestries hanging on the walls, with the Annunciation I had painted for the room next to them. I studied the tapestries. These were of grape harvesters, men cutting the vines while women stamped on the grapes, skirts tucked high to reveal their spattered calves. They were much bigger than the painting, and with less depth. The weave made them look rough, and less fleshy and immediate than the Virgin in my painting. But they kept the room warm, and filled more of it with their vivid reds and blues.

A whole room full of these — it would be like making a little world, and one full of women rather than the horses and men of a battle. I would much prefer that, no matter how hard it would be to convince Jean Le Viste.

I glanced out of the window. Geneviève de Nanterre and Claude Le Viste were walking with their ladies towards the church, their skirts blowing about them. The sun was so bright that my eyes watered and I had to blink. When I could see again they were gone, replaced by the servant girl who carried my child. She held a basket and was plodding in the other direction.

Why did that lady-in-waiting laugh so hard at the thought of marrying me? Though I had not yet given much thought to marrying, I'd assumed I would one day have a wife to look after me when I was old. I had a good standing in the Court, steady commissions, and now these tapestries to keep me and any wife. There was no grey in my hair, I had all but two of my teeth, and I could plough thrice a night when the need arose. It was true that I was an artist and not a squire or rich merchant. But I wasn't a blacksmith or cobbler or farmer. My hands were clean, my nails trim. Why should she laugh so?

I decided first to finish measuring the room, whatever I was to design for its walls. I needed a pole, and found the steward in the storerooms, counting out candles. He was as sour with me as before, but directed me to the stables. 'You watch out with that pole,' he ordered. 'Don't go doing any damage with it.'

I smirked. 'I didn't take you for a bawd,' I said.

The steward frowned. 'That's not what I meant. But I'm not surprised that's how you took it, you who can't control your own rod.'

'What do you mean?'

'You know what I mean. What you done to Marie-Céleste.'

Marie-Céleste — the name meant nothing.

When the steward saw my blank look he snarled, 'The maid you got with child, pisspot.'

'Ah, her. She should have been more careful.'

'So should you. She's a good girl — she deserves better than you.'

'It's a pity about Marie-Céleste, but I've given her money and she'll be all right. Now, I must get that pole.'

The steward grunted. As I turned to go, he muttered, 'You watch your back, pisspot.'

I found a pole in the stables and was carrying it across the courtyard when Jean Le Viste himself came striding out of the house. He swept by without even looking at me — he must have thought I was just another servant — and I called out, 'Monseigneur! A moment, please!' If I didn't say something now I might never get another chance alone with him.

Jean Le Viste turned to see who was calling, then grunted and kept walking. I ran to catch up with him. 'Please, Monseigneur, I would like to discuss the tapestries further.'

'You should talk to Léon, not me.'

'Yes, Monseigneur, but I felt that for something as important as these tapestries you should be consulted directly.' As I hurried after him, the end of the pole dipped and caught on a stone, tumbling from my hands and clattering to the ground. The whole courtyard rang with the sound. Jean Le Viste stopped and glared at me.

'I am concerned, Monseigneur,' I said hastily. 'Concerned that you should have hung on your walls what others would expect from such a prominent member of Court. From a President of the Cour des Aides, no less.' I was making up words as I went along.

'What's your point? I am busy here.'

'I have seen designs for a number of tapestries this past year commissioned by noble families from my fellow artists. All of these tapestries have one thing in common — a *millefleur* background.' This much was true — backgrounds of a dense pattern of flowers were popular now, particularly as weavers in the north perfected the technique.

'Flowers?' Jean Le Viste repeated, looking down at his feet as if he had just trampled upon some.

'Yes, Monseigneur.'

'There are no flowers in battles.'

'No, Monseigneur. They have not been weaving battles. Several of my colleagues have designed scenes with — with unicorns in them, Monseigneur.'

'Unicorns?'

'Yes, Monseigneur.'

Jean Le Viste looked so sceptical that I quickly added another lie that I could only hope he wouldn't discover. 'Several noble families are having them made — Jean d'Alençon, Charles de St Émilion, Philippe de Chartres.' I tried to name families Jean Le Viste was unlikely to visit — they either lived too far away, or were too noble for the Le Vistes, or not noble enough.

'They are not having battles made,' Jean Le Viste repeated.

'No, Monseigneur.'

'Unicorns.'

'Yes, Monseigneur. They are *à la mode* now. And it did occur to me that a unicorn

might be appropriate for your family.’ I described Béatrice's pun.

Jean Le Viste didn't change expression, but he nodded, and that was enough. ‘Do you know what to have this unicorn do?’

‘Yes, Monseigneur, I do.’

‘All right, then. Tell Léon. And bring me the drawings before Easter.’ Jean Le Viste turned to cross the courtyard. I bowed to his back.

It hadn't been so hard to convince him as I'd thought. I had been right that Jean Le Viste would want what he thought everyone else had. But then, that is nobility without the generations of blood behind it — they imitate rather than invent. It didn't occur to Jean Le Viste that he might gain more respect by commissioning battle tapestries when no one else had. As sure of himself as he seemed, he wouldn't strike out on his own. As long as he didn't find out that there were no other unicorn tapestries, I would be safe. Of course I would have to design the finest tapestries possible — tapestries that would make other families want their own, and make Jean Le Viste proud to have been the first to own such a thing.

It wasn't just him I wanted to please, though, but his wife and daughter too. I wasn't sure which mattered more to me — Claude's lovely face or Geneviève's sad one. Perhaps there was room for both in the unicorn's wood.

That night I drank at Le Coq d'Or to celebrate the commission, and afterwards slept poorly. I dreamt of unicorns and ladies surrounded by flowers, a girl chewing on a clove, another gazing at herself in a well, a lady holding jewels by a small casket, a girl feeding a falcon. It was all in a jumble that I could not set straight. It was not a nightmare, though, but a longing.

When I woke the next morning, my head was clear and I was ready to make the dreams real.

CLAUDE LE VISTE

Maman asked Papa about the tapestries after Mass on Easter Sunday, and that was when I heard the artist was coming back. We were all walking back to the rue du Four, and Jeanne and Petite Geneviève wanted me to run ahead with them and jump over puddles, but I stayed back to listen. I am good at listening when I'm not meant to.

Maman is always careful not to bother Papa, but he seemed to be in good spirits — probably glad like me to be out in the sun after such a long Mass! When she asked he said that he already had the drawings and that Nicolas des Innocents would be coming soon to discuss them. Until now he has said little about the tapestries. Even admitting that much seemed to irritate him. I think he regrets changing the battle into a unicorn — Papa loves his battles and his King. He left us abruptly then, saying he had to speak to the steward. I caught Béatrice's eye and we both giggled, making Maman frown at us.

Thank Heaven for Béatrice! She has told me everything — the switch from battle to unicorn, her own clever pun on *Viste*, and best of all, Nicolas' name. Maman would never tell me any of it, and the door of her room is too thick — I couldn't hear a thing when he was in with her, except for Béatrice's laugh. Luckily Béatrice tells me things — soon I will have her for my own lady-in-waiting. Maman can spare her, and she would much rather be with me — she will have much more fun.

Maman is so tedious these days — all she wants to do is to pray. She insists on going to Mass twice a day now. Sometimes I have dancing lessons during Terce or Sext, but she does take me to Vespers for the music, and I get so restless I want to scream. When I sit in Saint-Germain-des-Prés my foot starts to jiggle and the women on my pew can feel it but don't know where it's from — except for Béatrice, who places her hand on my leg to calm me. The first time she did that I jumped and shrieked, I was so surprised. Maman leaned over and glared at me, and the priest turned around too. I had to stuff my sleeve in my mouth to keep from laughing.

I seem to irritate Maman now, though I don't know what bothers her so. She irritates me too — she's always telling me I'm laughing too much or walking too fast, or that my dress is dusty or my head-dress is not straight. She treats me like a girl yet expects me to be a woman too. She won't let me go out when I want — she says I'm too old to play at the Fair at Saint-Germain-des-Prés during the day and too young for it at night. I'm not too young — other girls of fourteen go to the fair to see the *jongleurs* at night. Many are already betrothed. When I ask, Maman tells me I'm disrespectful and must wait for Papa to decide when and what man I shall marry. I grow so frustrated. If I am to be a woman, where is my man?

Yesterday I tried to listen to Maman's confession at Saint-Germain-des-Prés to find out if she felt bad about being so spiteful to me. I hid behind a pillar near the pew where she sat with the priest but her voice was so low that I had to creep quite close. All I heard

was ‘*Ça c'est mon seul désir*’ before one of the priests saw me and chased me away. ‘*Mon seul désir,*’ I murmured to myself. My one desire. The phrase is so bewitching that I repeat it to myself all day long.

Once I was sure that Nicolas would be coming I knew I had to see him. *C'est mon seul désir.* Hah! There is my man. I've thought about him every hour of every day since I met him. Of course I've said nothing to anyone, except for Béatrice, who to my surprise was not very kind about him. That is her one fault. I was describing his eyes — how they are brown as chestnuts and pinched at the corners so that he looks a little sad even when he clearly is not. ‘He's not worthy of you,’ Béatrice interrupted. ‘He's just an artist, and not trustworthy at that. You should be thinking of lords instead.’

‘If he were untrustworthy, my father would never have hired him,’ I retorted. ‘Oncle Léon wouldn't have allowed it.’ Léon is not really my uncle, but an old merchant who looks after my father's business. He treats me like a niece — until recently he chucked me under the chin and brought me sweetmeats, but now he tells me to stand straight and comb my hair. ‘Tell me what sort of husband you'd like and I'll see if there's one ripe at market,’ he likes to say. Wouldn't he be surprised if I described Nicolas! He doesn't think much of the artist, I'm sure — I overheard him with Papa, trying to undo Nicolas' unicorns, saying they wouldn't be right for the Grande Salle. Papa's door is not so thick, and if I put my ear right up to the keyhole I can hear him. Papa won't change his mind again, though. I could have told Léon that. To change once was bad enough, but to switch back now would be unthinkable.

Once I knew that Nicolas would be coming to the rue du Four, I went straight to the steward to find out exactly when. As usual, the steward was in the stores, counting things. He is always worried we are being robbed. He looked even more horrified than Béatrice when I said Nicolas' name. ‘You don't want anything to do with that lot, Mademoiselle,’ he said.

‘I'm simply asking when he is coming.’ I smiled sweetly. ‘If you don't tell me I shall just have to go to Papa and say that you have not been helpful to me.’

The steward grimaced. ‘Thursday at Sext,’ he muttered. ‘Him and Léon too.’

‘You see, that wasn't so bad. You should always tell me what I want to know, and I'll be happy.’

The steward bowed but kept looking at me as I turned to go. It seemed he was about to say something, but then he didn't. That struck me as comical and I laughed as I ran away.

Thursday I was meant to go with Maman and my sisters to grandmother's at Nanterre for the night, but I pretended to have a bellyache so that I could stay at home. When Jeanne heard I wasn't going she wanted to pretend along with me, even though she didn't know why I was really staying behind. I couldn't tell her about Nicolas — she is too young to understand. She hung about until I had to say nasty things to her, which made her cry and run off. Afterwards I felt awful — I shouldn't treat my sister so. She and I have been close all our lives. Until recently we shared the same bed, and Jeanne cried then too when I said I wanted to begin sleeping alone. But I am so restless at night now.

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