

The Unicorn Masque

by *Ellen Kushner*

I

At the age of thirty-two, the queen was a dried rose. Although in her day she had numbered among the most valuable princesses on the marriage market, she had also been the most educated and the least beautiful. Contract after contract was dissolved before it could be consummated. Her younger sisters were married away to foreign powers, while she stayed at home to see her brother ascend the throne on their father's death, and descend it off the back of a rearing horse. The first five years of her reign had been marked by academic policies in council and dionysian splendors at court. It was in the dances, the gallant offerings of verse and song, that she found the attention and admiration denied her as a princess by all the marriage tokens courtesy had demanded be returned: the betrothal rings taken from her young hands, the portraits of foreign princes packed away.

After five years, though, the queen had begun to reconsider her state. Might the brilliant, posing revelry she delighted in be, not splendor, but merest frivolity? Frivolity lead to weakness—indeed, the mirror of history held it up as an early symptom of decay. It was true that she was surrounded by able counselors, but their wisdom would not live forever. She suddenly saw that she had been wrong to rush headlong into pleasure, leading the whole court with her as it was prone to do. So she curtailed the late-night revels that she might rise each morning at dawn to complete nine lines of translation before breakfast. Her constant entourage of beautiful, perfumed young men gave way to the ancient learned.

The court was amazed to find its favorite pastimes prohibited, its chiefest virtues in disgrace overnight. Its senior members took it in stride; they had lived through the rapid succession of three very different monarchs, and knew how to adapt. The country kept running much as before; only the fashions of whom to have to dinner changed: musicians were out, scholars were in. Soon books were replacing trinkets in the soft jeweled hands of courtiers. When the queen put off the gaudy gowns that had always outshone her, her faithful court apparelled itself with like sobriety. On this summer's royal progress through the north counties, though, the atmosphere relaxed as many of the younger set succumbed to bright and fanciful dress once more: time enough for drabness, they said, when school was called again in the fall.

Now the queen sat in her blue silk pavilion, shielded from the rays of the summer sun by three billowing walls weighted with her arms embroidered in gold. The fourth side was looped back, open to what breezes stirred the air. It was the queen's pleasure to keep this August's court on the broad summer lawns of her great lords' houses; there her retinue of nobles disported themselves at country pastimes while she assessed her lands and displayed her traditional right to beggar whom she chose in entertaining her. Despite her recent strictures, she continued to permit her liege lords to pay lavish tribute; they called her Divine Virgin, the Queen of Field and Grove, and presented musical masques, harvest fruits and their well-groomed children to her. It was one of these she awaited now: childless Lord Andreas' chosen heir, a youth reared abroad and newly come home to his guardian's estates. He was bound to be green; she only hoped he would not stammer, or trip.

They knew that he would not. There was less of chance involved than anyone could imagine in the young gentleman about to be presented to Her Grace. His noble patron put a final fret in the sober white frills around his neck, and stepped back for a look at their creation.

"Perfect," he wheezed, staring frankly at the poised and slender figure gilded like a confection by the shaft of sun coming through the mullion panes of the manor house.

The young man returned the look with a smile intended to make the marrow of any one's bones run

quicksilver, and said, "Your servant, sir." If not the smile, then surely the voice; perfect, perfect, infinitely precious with the sense that either could be shattered with the proper blow—if one were wise enough to see past the sterling perfection, and fool enough to want to destroy it.

"It is time," said the tall lean man who had always been there, standing in his dark robes amongst the shadows by the window. "He doesn't need to be fussed over, I've promised you that. And you've had all summer to admire him; now let be."

"Yes," breathed the fleshy lord, squeezing his fat, ringed fingers together in such sinister anticipation that the fair young man threw back his head and laughed. The tall man's eyes slid to his employer's, meeting unquenchable satisfaction there. This arrogance suited him: nothing had been left to chance.

He walked across the green lawns past the clusters of nobles knowing all eyes were on him. The silk of the pavilion fluttered fitfully in the hot summer air. Inside it the Queen sat riffling in the hot summer air. Inside it the Queen sat riffling the pages of a book, formally oblivious to his approach until the bodyguard's pikes clashed together and apart to let the young man enter and kneel at her feet.

She was stunned at first by the blistering aureole over his bent head; then she realized that her eyes were only dazzled by the sun coming in the open tent-way, illuminating hair as light as mirrors.

He waited, head bowed before her, observing the court ways they had taught him with all their ancient formality, until he heard the queen say, "You are welcome." Then he raised his face to her.

The silk shaded her in a bath of color pure as cerulean moonlight. Slowly his eyes adjusted to distinguish her features. Her nose was sharp, her unpainted mouth small and pursed, like her father the king's. Narrow eyes of watery blue surveyed him under heavy half-moon lids. The jeweled clasps pinning her straight colorless hair flat on either side of her head only accentuated the harshness of her face. The only softness was in her cheeks, surprisingly full and round, and in the weakness of her chin. Against the sober, extravagant blue of her skirt, her pale hands, weighted with rings, restlessly toyed with a small book on her lap. Amber leather, stamped in gold. Quickly his eyes returned to his sovereign's face.

The queen caught her breath, then gave a small cough to cover *t. She extended her hand for him to take; his limber fingers were smooth, with bones so fine she felt they might be hollow, like a bird's. The sculpted ridges of his lips touched the back of her hand, and then his eyes were again full on her.

"Sir, you are welcome," she said again; "I pray you rise and be seated."

He was modestly dressed in sober black, with white linen shirt ruffles crisp at wrist and throat. She watched him seat himself on a low stool across from her; his movements were lithe, his body as slender and tempered as wire.

He bore the queen's scrutiny calmly, with pride. He understood her expression, the cool reserve sheltering almost awed approval; understood and sympathized. He was flawless. Lord Pudge-Rings and his lean friend would have nothing but praise for him tonight.

"I am told," she said with pedantic formality, "that you spent many years abroad."

"Too many, madam, to please me." He smiled easily at her.

"You wished, then, to return?"

"Lady, it has been my dearest wish." Her eyes veiled slightly with reservation: she had a court full of men to spin her compliments. "Of course—" he laughed, his eyes dropping ruefully to his clasped hands—"one's dearest wish is always to go against one's elders, isn't it? They kept telling me how good it

was for me to live abroad, so naturally I hated it." She nodded, thinking of all the hardships of duty. "My delicate health, they said, forbade travel, and my youth required stability." She could see them both, youth and recent illness, still in his face: the fine, girlish skin stretched over high-bred bones that had not yet hardened into maturity. "So I studied." He looked at her intently with eyes so blue that for a moment they were all she saw in the pale sculptured face that held them like jewels in a setting. "I resolved to do as much as I could with whatever they gave me, so that—" He stopped abruptly, eyes downcast, his skin colored a delicate rose. "Forgive me, Majesty. It cannot be of interest to Your Grace what—"

"Study, sir," she said softly, "is always of greatest interest to me. Pray go on."

"I read, then," he said, equally softly. "And played the lute. When they told me it might not be healthy for me to be so much indoors, I took up riding, and the bow, and spent hours at sword practice." He shifted in his seat, an unconsciously graceful movement. If he could move that way with a foil in his hands, he must be good.

"Do you plan to continue your studies now?"

"If I can get the books here. I have been through my lord's library, it is woefully out of date..."

She noticed his eyes fixed hungrily on her lap and started, clutching the forgotten volume as she did so. The queen smiled to realize what he had been staring at, and held up the leather-bound book for him to see. "You must look at this, then: my own presentation copy of Dunn's new work on the movement of the heavens. It is only just printed, few others will have it." She patted her skirt. "Come, sit beside me and we shall read it." He rose and settled again, like a dancer, at her feet. All she could see of him now was the light sweep of hair, the dent of a smile partly obscured by the arc of his cheek. "They are all coming to the city now," she said eagerly: "the men of science, the philosophers... I plan to lower the taxes on printing... Ah, the country is all very well for quiet and study, but you must come to my city for the books and the minds... Now, then; here is the Preface."

He fixed his eyes on the page, printed with great carved capitals and wood-cut illustrations, and tried not to stray to the marginalia of her rounded fingertips and chewed-looking thumb... He knew nothing about Dunn, or books on the heavens. He must study now to seem informed, and to remember it perfectly. He must be perfect. There was still so much to be learned.

Candlelight glowed late into the night in one room of Lord Andreas' manor. The queen's "simple country supper," with its eight simultaneous courses, five wines and attending jugglers and minstrels, had been cleared away hours ago from the great hall, and the court had gone to its well-deserved rest in the various chambers appointed. Only in this small room were tapers lit, their flames polishing the wood-paneled walls to an amber gloss. Despite the warmth of the night heavy curtains were drawn across the windows. It was unlikely that anyone would come wandering down this far corridor and see the light under the door.

The lord of the manor and his lean confederate sat at a round, taper-studded table as the delicate blond man rehearsed to them the story of his day. He struck pose after pose without being aware of it, concluding with one arm outstretched, each finger precisely curled as though to allure his audience; "And so tomorrow I bid you a sweet farewell, and join the royal progress on its way back to court!"

A poised stillness followed. It was broken by the rhythmic thud of flesh against flesh: the fat man was clapping. When echoes began to fill the room, he stopped.

"Excellent," he said. "She'll take you."

"Oh, yes." The melodious voice almost crowed its well-bred triumph. "We are not to be parted, Her

Grace and I."

"Perfect!" the lord wheezed. Infected by his enthusiasm, the young man flourished a royal obeisance. "My humble duty to your lordship. And now, pardon me, gentlemen." The bow extended itself to the black-robed one. "I fear I must retire; the court rides out early tomorrow."

But the fat lord's hand snaked out before he could turn away. Fleshy, surprisingly strong fingers gripped his chin. "No. We do not pardon you."

He knew better than to flinch. He forced himself to meet the glinting, tiny eyes and say politely, "How may I serve your lordship?"

The hand tightened on his jaw. He could smell the remnants of dinner on the man's breath. "You will obey me," Lord Andreas said. "You do not leave until I dismiss you."

"Of course, sir." He made sure the light, willing smile touched his eyes as well as his mouth. But the strong fingers flung his face aside.

"Don't try your tricks on me!" his patron growled. He raised his velvet-clad arm again. The young man spun away from the blow, his hand automatically reaching for a dagger at his hip.

"You are unarmed," the tall man observed placidly from his seat at the table. "Excellent reflexes." He continued amicably, overriding the threat of violence as though he had not seen it, "I was admiring the bow you just made. Would you mind telling me where you learned it?"

The young man lowered his empty hands. A test, he thought; it had only been another test. Lord Andreas, silent now, had subsided into a chair. He steadied his breathing, and prepared the familiar answer. "Abroad, sir, I had tutors—"

"No." The lines of the man's lean face shifted to condescending mockery. "You learned it here, remember?"

"Don't tell me," the fat lord chimed in with interest, "that you're beginning to believe your own stories?"

He held his temper tightly in his clenched hands, letting its heat keep him from the chill of fear. "Forgive me," he said with icy good manners. "I didn't know—"

Their laughter pierced him, striking like hammer-blows inside his head.

"No," the lean man said. "Of course you didn't. You don't really believe all those stories you told the queen?"

"Of course not," he snapped. "I know what's real and what isn't."

"Of course you do." The man's long hand reached out to a taper set on the table near him. For a moment his fingers hovered over the flame as if about to bestow a benediction; then he pinched out the candleflame between two bony fingertips. "So do I." Smoke trailed up from the black wick, dissolving into darkness. "Who are you—really?"

He felt the world lunge away from him in a belly-wrench of blackness—he flung his hands forward, and caught the smooth wood of the table's edge.

"Oh, dear lord!" Lord Andreas' voice echoed in his head. "He's not going to faint, is he?"

"No, of course not." The man stood up, his black robes falling about him in folds of deeper blackness.

The young man shrank from his approach. He did not want to be touched by anyone; he wanted only to be alone in perfect darkness, curled in upon himself like a seashell... But the other man was only holding out a chair to him. Mutely he sank into it.

"He's exhausted," the man said over his head to Andreas. "He wants to be alone."

"He'll be alone soon enough," Lord Andreas said. "Let him be quiet for once, and listen to me." He heaved his bulk up from the table, and stood before the younger man. "Give me your hand," Andreas told him. He held his right hand up and watched it tremble. "No," said his patron; "the other one." His left hand bore a gold signet ring. It seemed to sink into the flesh of Andreas' fingers as they handled it. The nobleman smiled grimly. "I had this made for you, the day you were born. Do you remember?"

He had to lick his lips before he could answer. "Yes."

"It is yours, and yours alone. Remember. Now," Lord Andreas said, settling back against the table. He kept the young man's hand in his. "I am going to give you the advice any patron would give his ward upon his departure for the royal court. But in your case, it is not mere words—it must be followed to the letter. Do you hear me?" He nodded. "First of all, you are not to touch wine or spirits on any account. It will be noted, but you ought to be enough of a practiced liar by now to be able to make up excuses to fit any occasion. You may gamble with dice or cards all you like—I don't care how much money your run through, but I expect you will win more than you lose. Dress well, but not above your station: you're not to compete with the great lords' sons. They will be impressed with your swordsmanship—they ought to be!" his patron snorted. "You're better than all of them. If one of them should pick a quarrel for the pleasure of dueling with you, for god's sake don't kill him. If you should be wounded, you know you don't have to worry; just keep it covered until people forget so they don't miss the scar." Andreas ran his thumb over the smooth skin of the narrow wrist, which last week had been torn by steel. "I think that's all... Oh, yes—the usual warning, lest the ward's head be turned to ingratitude by the vices and splendors of the court: *We made you, and we can unmake you.*" The heavy fingers met sharply around the young man's hand. "Only in this case, my dear, it is not an empty threat."

He pulled together his returning strength to smile coolly up at the nobleman. "A threat indeed. I don't even know how you made me; what precisely should I fear in being unmade? I'm a better swordsman than any of you could set against me, and soon I shall have the favor of the crown. If you d—"

The thin man interrupted the exchange with a mournful sigh. "Bravado," he said. "You must have your little gestures. Appropriate, but scarcely wise." He touched the candlewick with his bare finger, and the flame leapt again into being, illuminating the harsh face from below.

The room was still, even the candle flames rose without a flicker into the hot, dark air. The young man tasted sweat on his upper lip, but did not move to wipe it away. "Ask me," the lean man said. "Ask me again."

The silver-blue eyes fixed helpless on their creator. "Who am I?"

"Yes..." Lord Andreas hissed in triumph, unable to restrain himself from joining in. "Who are you? Where did you come from? How did you gain all that expertise—with the sword, the lute, your own smooth muscles? You have no memory of any life but this—you might not even be human." The fair head jerked upward, and Andreas laughed. "Does that worry you. Does it, my dear?"

The thin man's eyes burned like pale agates. "You must be one of those people who never remember their dreams. But that doesn't mean you never had them. Dream again, my lovely; dream again before you question the gift I gave you..."

The younger man wanted to profess his dislike of riddles, and his distrust of dreams. But the tall one rose, and his shadow rose with him, long and black climbing the wall, along with the candle-flame that became all he could see, a pillar of light. Out of it five fingers stretched, long and cool and dark, and touched his eyes, and he dreamed again—the old dream:

He was a woman, alone in a bare room weeping. It lasted only a moment, not enough time to know his name or face, or the cause of the tears; only the misery of being trapped by her own wishes, the four walls no refuge from what lay outside them when she herself was the room and the walls and the kernel of weakness and misery that refused to stop dreaming—

His hands were hot with tears. He opened his eyes to a world of indecipherable light; blinked, and sorted out the nimbus of each separate candle, and the white slashes of the two men's faces.

"It's all right now," the lean man said with alarming tenderness.

His eyes fell to his own hands, clasped on his lap. The gold ring on his forefinger glowed in a setting of tears like crystal. He turned his hand to see the light strike first from the tiny silver moon on one side, then from the ruby that was the sun... In the center between them an etched figure danced, alone, one arm flung up toward the sun.

"Lazarus Merridon." He looked up, not sure which of them had addressed him. "Lazarus the Beggar," said the lean man. "Lazarus the New-Risen. A bit of local mythology. *Sol Merid-ionale*: brought forth at noon. If you're ever knighted you can use it as your motto."

"You see," said the nobleman; "you cannot fail us."

Lazarus rose to his feet, an elegant figure made all the more exquisite by the lineaments of exhaustion. Despite it all his voice was still bell-toned and honey-sweet. "And when I come to court," he asked, "what am I to do, besides gain a knighthood?"

"Anything you please, my dear," they said. "You cannot fail us."

II

Against all previous expectation, the court's return to its seat in the capital that autumn was anything but dull. Little piles of silver were already passing from hand to jeweled hand, honoring strong speculation on the queen's newest study partner. No one could get quite near enough the strange beauty to discover the definite end of his charms; all that could be ascertained was that he did seem to understand whatever it was she was studying. He also proved to be a fine musician and an admirable dancer; and that was really what saved them all in the end from what had hitherto promised to be the most tedious winter in living memory—periods of mourning excepted, of course.

It was the autumn hunt that had suggested it to him, or possibly a bit of exotica from one of her books: after all, she couldn't possibly disapprove of a masque based on a classical theme, and the Hunt of the Unicorn was the subject of innumerable pages of commentary. Odds were ridiculously high that the masque would be approved even before he had played her any of the exquisite music he had composed, since the central role of the captivating Virgin could only be enacted by the court's own Sovereign Lady (*and only virgin*, the snigger went). No one even bothered to wager on who would be Unicorn, and so they lost an interesting gamble, for the composer demurred, and the role went to the young Earl Dumaine—a pretty enough dancer, but everyone knew she had tired of him last year.

On the night of the masque the great hall shone with a forest. Its pillars were wreathed in living greens, while flowery carpets hid the floor. The Master of Revels had outdone himself in fantastical trees of

paper, canvas, wood, satin... he had wanted live birds, but it was suggested that they might interfere with the music, and possibly the dancers, so he had to make do with elaborate arrays of feathers, with little jeweled eyes peeping out between the leaves.

The sides of the room were thick with courtiers who were not in the performance. Rehearsals had been going on for weeks behind closed doors; except for the subject matter, occasional public bickerings that broke out over costumes and precedence, and the stray tune that would at times escape someone's lips, no one else knew anything about the contents of the masque. They waited in eager anticipation, admiring the decor. The musicians, splendidly decked out in silver and green, were already seated on a dais trimmed with ribbons and boughs. Among them was Lazarus Merridon, holding the lute he would play. His cool eyes swept the audience; then he nodded to the sackbut player, and the notes of an ornamented hunting-call sounded through the hall. Immediately the watching courtiers stopped their gossip-ridden fidgeting to fix their eyes on the center of the room.

First came the dance of the Lovers, then the dance of the Hunters. Then the queen stepped forth, robed in virgin white, her pale hair streaming loose about her, her light eyes bright with excitement. And the Unicorn pranced out, capered with his ivory horn, earning applause for his spectacular leaps, until he danced his way to the seated maiden and, on a burst of cymbals, laid his glowing horn in her lap... Wildly enthused, the hunter-lords broke into unprogrammed shouting as they burst from the undergrowth to slay the unfortunate Earl, whose new silk doublet was actually slashed by a few of the spears. At the center of their dance of death sat the queen with hair unbound, her face flushed, her eyes glittering.

All the nimble of the court found themselves whirling and jumping to the final wild music of victory. The hall was streaked with spinning velvet, silk and satin, the sharp glints of blue, red, green, rainbow jewels flashing from hair and breast, belt and hat and dagger...

Above them, on the musicians' dais, Lazarus Merridon sat playing the lute, and smiled. In his mind, weaving in and out through the wild and measured rhythms of strings and brass and timpani, sounded the voice of the nameless man: *It's all right now.*

Lord Thomas Berowne would have been one of the masquers, being the younger son of a duke and owning an admirable pair of legs himself; but he had only just returned from a foreign embassy on the day of the performance. In the course of the afternoon, however, he had acquired all the gossip to be had about its originator, and he watched the lutenist carefully that night. Lord Thomas had only a rudimentary, nobleman's knowledge of music, but he knew a great deal about courts; thus he was not surprised at the news that followed the next afternoon. Being an extremely well-liked young man, and well-connected, he got it before most others, and managed to be the first to seek out Lazarus Merridon to congratulate him on his success.

Lazarus Merridon smiled, noting the scatter of costly rings on the young lord's hands. "My lord is too generous, truly. Once the music was written, my part was all idleness, while others did the Work."

Lord Thomas laughed, as though he'd made a joke. "Oh, the masque, of course! But your real achievement is the royal summons, you know."

Lazarus blinked. He had only just received the summons himself. God, what a place! "Her Majesty's retiring, yes," he said politely. "I shall be deeply honored to be in attendance tonight."

Lord Thomas smiled at this stiffness with cheerful amusement. "You're used to the ways of courts, I see. Never trust anyone who knows too much about you, or who acts too interested. But your own lines of information must not be very well set up yet: anyone here can tell you I'm harmless. My family's too rich to need to make trouble for anyone." His smile sought the musician's eyes. "But I didn't come to gossip

with you about the noble Berownes. I only wanted to pass on a little advice." Lord Thomas took his arm, walking familiarly with him down the gallery. It was an easy, comfortable hold. Lazarus tolerated it as he tolerated everything else the court had dealt him. "You see..." the young lord leaned his head of brown curls against the golden one—"I thought someone might as well tell you now. You're quite clearly the next royal favorite, and no one grudges you that—" *Don't you?* Lazarus Mer-ridon thought scornfully. "—but you can't expect it to last, handsome stranger. It never does. You haven't been here long, you haven't seen the rest of them come and go the way some of us have."

But, thought the stranger, have any of you ever seen my like before, Lord Thomas? A wry smile touched his lips; misinterpreting it Berowne said, "Don't ever consider it. The last one who tried to touch her was sent off to command a troop in the Northern Wars, and hasn't been heard of since." There was a tone to his voice that had been lacking before, a sternness underlying the friendly banter. Lazarus glanced at him, but saw only bland amiableness on the round pleasant face. He suddenly wished for an excuse to leave, to escape the company of this friendly man and his enquiring eyes. "Oh, dear!" Lord Thomas cried in mock distress. "And have I managed to insult you, my silent Master Merridon?"

"Of course not, Lord Thomas."

They stopped before a large diamondpane window. "It would be unforgivably clumsy of me to insult a man I admire," said Berowne. The sun struck red lights off his hair as he stared out into the garden. "I do, you know. Ever since you joined us on Progress—"

"Were you—?" Lazarus began. There'd been so many of them then, each a name and a face and a title.

"Oh, you won't remember me," Thomas smiled easily, turning from the window; "I noticed you, though—there was a quietness about you, an otherness, as though you came from very far away . . . you were raised abroad, weren't you?"

For a moment his repertory of lies froze on his tongue. "Abroad, yes..." Then he recovered his aplomb, saying ruefully, "I didn't think it showed so much."

Thomas laughed. "Insulting you again, am I? No, it doesn't show, not now. Not that it matters," he added cheerfully. "If I could play and sing as you do, I wouldn't care if I had two heads and a tail! But I haven't any talent, alas, only lots of expensive clothing..."

Lazarus said, despite himself, "I'm not what—not as good as you think I am."

"Aren't you?" the nobleman asked seriously. "Then I should like to meet your master."

His fair skin gave him away. Thomas saw the flush bleed across the musician's face, and immediately was all contrition, nimbly complimenting him on his fashionably pale complexion and diverting the conversation to his unusual ring.

Lazarus' long slender fingers lay loosely in the other man's soft, well-cared-for ones while Thomas scrutinized the gold signet. "That's fine work. Sun, moon... is that a man or a woman there between them?"

"I don't know," he said softly.

"It's nice." Lord Thomas smiled, releasing his hand. "You must come see my new paintings sometime; not now, though; you're about to be attacked by some new admirers." Surely enough, a pair of eager courtiers were making their purposeful way down the gallery. "I daren't stand between you and glory, my dear sir; I might get crushed. Master Merridon, good day—and good luck."

"My Lord." Lazarus bowed briefly, but was interrupted by a hand on his arm. "*Thomas*," the nobleman smiled. "If you think you can bring yourself to say it."

"Good day, Thomas." For an instant Lazarus met his eyes; then Berowne hurried off in the opposite direction as the two courtiers drew near.

He was relieved when evening came and he could withdraw from public attention to dress for the Retiring.

He arrived at the queen's apartments to find her sitting primly in her blue velvet chair, modestly wrapped in quilted satin and attending ladies. At the door he bowed, and again as he was bidden to enter; a third time before he approached, then he knelt to kiss her hand. When he rose, one of her women went back to brushing out her hair. It was long and fine, and clung to the brush like strands of cobweb. "Good evening, Lazarus," said the queen. She ignored the ministrations, smiling up at him with her pale, weak eyes. "Oh, please sit—there, in that chair; we're not so formal here at close of day. It is a time when I like the company of my friends."

He marveled at the thinness of her voice: one of the world's most powerful women, and she seemed as timid and brittle as a green girl. The fingers of one hand toyed with a golden tassel on her robe. Lazarus answered, "I am honored to be counted among them, Madam."

She leaned a little forward to focus her weak eyes on his face. "You *are* my friend. Your sweet voice and gentle music have lent grace to our court, and our studies together have given me great pleasure. Now I am able to give something to you." A small box was placed in her waiting hand. At a gesture from the queen he knelt before her. She lifted from the box a golden jewel glinting with gemstones, dripping with pearls. It was a unicorn, hung on a golden chain that splashed like water when she raised it. "Wear this for me," the queen said gravely, "in token of our friendship." He bent his head, and felt the heavy chain settle on his neck, weighting his shoulders. It was a princely gift.

Impulsively he twisted from his own finger a thin gold band set with a small ruby. "Madam, I have nothing so fine to offer in return. But if friendship will be content with tokens..."

The queen only stared at him.

"Have I offended, Madam?"

"No," she stammered; "no. It is a pretty ring. I—thank you." But still she held it in her hand, as though she feared it might break. Gently then he rose, and knelt down at her side, lifting her blue-veined hand to slip his ring onto her forefinger. "There." He smiled up into her face, his eyes deepened to summer—sky blue in the candlelight. "Now I am ever at your Grace's hand."

When she blinked bright drops stood on her short colorless lashes. "Thank you." She swallowed.

A lady murmured something about retiring. "Yes," said the queen, her voice still thin, "it is late."

Lazarus Merridon rose and bowed. "Then good night, Majesty."

"Good night." As he backed from the Presence, she recollected herself. "Oh—Lazarus. You will come tomorrow night, please— and bring your lute."

The court's attentions were, if anything, worse the second day. On the fourth and fifth they slacked off; those who desired to make their interest known to him had done so, and now they waited to see whether he were truly in. He was, and the seventh day brought him no rest at all from the favor-seekers, and, worse yet, people with long-term goals trying to convince him that they were his friends. He sought

refuge in his own rooms with orders to his servant to admit no one, and slept, deep muffled sleep with no dreams. Waking, he would sort through and return most of the gifts the courtiers had left, and dress for those dinners he could not avoid without seeming churlish. He dressed soberly, in tribute to his rank and to the queen's current tastes; the only gaudy thing about him was the unicorn jewel, which had been designed for show and not for taste.

He could, of course, do nothing for them but be graceful and witty at their tables, favoring them with what prestige his presence lent. The queen did not summon him to talk of court positions; she spoke of books and music and, recently, of the fears she harbored: of assassination, of her two sisters, married abroad to kings. "They never liked me—but how they would like my throne... My people love me, I know they do: they cheer as I pass by. But my younger sister always was a schemer—she seeks to suborn our loyal subjects to treason, for if I die her son inherits the throne... she has spies, Lazarus..." Then he would play the lute to her, as she lay back on many pillows in the great velvet bed of state, until she fell asleep, and her silent ladies blew the candles out.

He watched sourly for Thomas Berowne to come along with the rest of them, with more of his good advice and his friendly eyes; but the Duke's son was not among them—Too rich to need a favorite's favor, Lazarus told himself. When he encountered Lord Thomas about the palace, the young man only smiled pleasantly at him, and passed on.

The queen was more than usually melancholy, and did not wish to speak, so he sat and played to her while her ladies brushed and braided her hair for the night. She fretted under their care, turning her head so that her colorless hair escaped in cloud-snake wisps and had to be rebrushed, until she shook it out entirely and snapped to the hovering hands, "Be gone! I can attend myself."

The memories of the only other quarrels he had known made Lazarus nervous of this one; he kept his eyes on his fingers, his presence confined to the humming strings of the lute. Her ladies curtsied. They glanced at the gentleman from long, lowered eyes, waiting for him to stop playing and take his leave. He remained oblivious to their looks, though not to the tension they engendered; at last he looked up, only to hear the queen command, "Let him stay." She raised her voice again in the face of their dumb opposition, but the effect was childish, not regal: "Let him stay, I say! He is gentleman of the my court, he will not harm his sovereign. There is a guard outside the door," she added dryly; "I shall scream if I need help."

He slid his conspirator's grin to her amid the flutter of skirts, good-nights and trailing sleeves. When the great door closed on the last of them he said, "Your grace is very tartar tonight."

"I meant to be," she pouted. "Let them learn to obey me. I am their queen."

"And mine," he smiled, taking the hand that bore his ring. "How shall I serve my sovereign tonight?"

She pressed his hand, or gripped it, then released it just as suddenly and rose to walk about the dark and lofty room. Tall tapers threw her shadows long against the walls; they crossed and re-crossed each other so that the pacing lady peopled the room with smoky dancers. Lazarus waited for her to speak, but she only moved from object to object, picking things up and putting them down, a hairbrush, a mirror... Her long robe of claret velvet dragged sluggishly after her across the polished floor. He picked some random liquid notes from his instrument, but the queen whirled with a tiny cry. He put the lute down gently, knowing that no matter how awkward he felt, his movements would still express nothing but fluid ease. Watching him seemed to calm her. She came and stood at his side, looking down at the soft-fringed head made golden by candlelight, and said softly, "Lazarus."

He looked up. Her eyes were full of tears. The queen's sad gaze fell to where her small fingers twisted his ring around and around on her left hand. "Will you serve me in all things?"

"In all things, Highness."

She shook her head, lips pressed tight. "Not in duty, please, not now." He put up one hand to stop her nervous twisting of the ring, and was amazed at the fierceness of her grip. He asked. "In friendship, then?"

She nodded, full-eyed, not trusting herself to speak.

"In friendship I will serve you all I can." He took both her hands, and rose to draw her gently toward her chair. "Sit down, now, and tell me what I can do." But with a little cry she broke his grasp and clasped him to her.

Under his chin he smelt the clean smell of her hair. He put his arms around her to ease her trembling, but it didn't seem to help. Her hands were little fists, clenched into the small of his back. He felt a tickle of whispered breath close to his neck: "Please. Don't laugh."

"No, Highness."

She drew back enough to view his face fully. "Oh," the queen said softly. He didn't move. Her shaking fingers came up; their tips brushed his lips, then traced the sculpted ridges carefully so that he smiled, and they ran over the new shape as well. She returned him a dewy smile; then slowly, somberly she raised her face, her weak eyes still wide. When her mouth touched his her body shuddered. He kept his still, although he wanted to smile under her lips' rigidity. His own were soft, pliant... she felt them so and slowly let her own relax to meld with them. But when his mouth responded to hers she stiffened, and would have pulled away if he had not stilled it again.

Now her hand traced his jaw, dreamily curled the shell of his ear, parted and smoothed his feather-light hair. One fingertip lightly brushed a delicately-veined eyelid, and arced along the slender wing of brow above it. His eyes were closed. Stiff-fingered she untied his collar to rest her touch on the base of his throat, where the pulse beat against translucent skin between the rising Muscles.

The jet buttons of his doublet gave her some trouble; but when he lifted his arms to assist, her fingers froze until they withdrew. She unlaced his outer sheeves, and he felt the cool linen of his shirt hanging loose about his arms.

He was pure white and golden in the candlelight, almost too perfect to be real: gilded ivory, a confection... but his chest rose and fell with his breathing, deep and not so regular as it had been, the only sound in the still room. She kissed the soft mouth again, forcing it taut against her lips. She pressed her body to his, and her throat made a sound. "Highness," his quiet voice said into her hair, "shall I?"

Soft skin brushed her cheek as she nodded. Soon she stood with her feet in a pool of crimson velvet, and her white gown floated up over her head... He lifted her at last in his strong slender arms, without words marveling at her frailty, at his own infinite knowledge of her desires and his tender exaltation in them. He moved to her will, and his own thoughts made no difference as the unicorn jewel swung through the air, glittering in the candle flames.

Lord Thomas Berowne strolled down a long sunlit gallery of the palace, on his way to the library. In one hand he carried a scarlet rose: no matter the season. Berowne's wealth and desire kept him surrounded by flowers. Courtiers were clustered up and down the gallery in bunches, their voices hushed and excited. As he passed them people looked up, then resumed their conversation. Thomas lifted the delicate blossom to his nose. Suddenly there was silence at the other end of the hallway. It rippled out before the slender man approaching like some courtly spring tide. Lazarus Merridon walked with a breathtakingly careless grace, courteously answering isolated greetings, ignoring the buzz that grew

behind him as he passed. When he reached Lord Thomas, though, he hesitated. The young lord smiled. "Congratulations," he said, and offered him the rose.

"I never thought," she said, lying the curve of his arm in the dark, "that I would want to marry. Not once I was queen. And it doesn't matter that you are younger, and not of noble blood; I shall give you titles, and we will give my people an heir." She chuckled happily. "How my sister will be furious! There goes her hope of succession."

"You're not with child already!" he said, running his palm smoothly over her body.

She giggled. "No, silly man, how could I tell yet? But if we keep on like this, I will be..."

The queen's chief lady was being rudely shaken. She peered through sleep-gummed lashes at the intruder, and made out the sharp, pale features of Master Lazarus Merridon, her lady's para-mour. "What time is it?"

"Midnight," he responded tersely. "Her Majesty's physician—you must fetch him at once!"

Lady Sophia pulled a dressing gown around her ample form; she was used to emergencies, and even to the ill manners of hysteria. "What is it?"

"I don't know!" He was dressed as scantily—as hastily—as decency would allow. "I don't know, she is in pain—"

"Probably a touch of bad meat," Lady Sophia said comfortably. "Put your clothes on, Master Merridon, and go back to your own bed; I'll see to her Grace's comfort."

But for days thereafter her Grace knew no comfort. It was rumored that her physicians suspected poison. All her food was tasted, and certain investigations made, to no effect. Lazarus remained in her chamber, to sit by her side and play the lute and hold her hand. After a time her pain subsided into weakness, and he came again at night to give her joy.

"Lazarus, if I die..."

"Shh, shh, you won't die, you're getting better." But two days later, she woke up screaming again.

"Lazarus." He looked up. Thomas Berowne's hand lay on his shoulder, his eyes full of concern. "Lazarus, you can't sit here before her door all night like a dog. Her Grace is asleep, they say she's resting comfortably. Come up to my rooms." The eyes crinkled. "My dear father sent me a cask of old claret, I'd like you to help us empty it."

They had told him not to drink, Those Two. But what else had they done to him? What else had they told him? To hell with them and all their mysteries. Just once let him be—let him pretend to be a man like other men, and seek relief like others. Just once. He said, "I'll come."

Around Lord Thomas' polished table, faces were blurring. Lazarus Merridon dealt another round of cards. "Tentacles lead."

"Dammyou, Merridon," a lordling slurred, "you're as fresh as—a cucumber."

"I've been matching you cup for cup," said Lazarus mildly. "What do you bid?" His head was quite clear. Alcohol, it seemed, had no effect on him. Winning a minor fortune from the cream of the junior nobility did only a little to console him.

"Merridon, put down your card!"

He was putting it down. It was down.

"Well, Merridon?"

What was their hurry?

"Go ahead, pick one."

"Lazarus," Thomas said sharply, "are you all right?"

Of course he was all right. He was fine.

"Lazarus?"

"I'm fine."

"No, you're pale."

"I'm perfectly all right," he said. Why were they all moving so quickly? He reached for his cup, watching the light gleaming on the ring on his hand, bright ruby claret at the bottom of the cup... What was wrong with them all, were they nervous? Tom's mouth moved like hummingbird wings. "Hadn't you better lie down?"

"I am fine," he said. "Look at my hand—" he held it out steadily, "and look at yours."

Earl Dumaine sloshed some claret into his cup. "Keep drinking, then."

"No," Tom said quickly. "You'd better go. You're utterly white. My man will see you to your rooms."

Lazarus lay on his bed, wide-eyed, watching the carved canopy above him. There really was nothing wrong; only it had taken a long time, walking back. When he blinked the canopy went into darkness, then reappeared. This was not drunkenness, this was something else. Those Two, they must have known this would happen. Why had they not told him? Wryly he thought, they could hardly have been afraid he'd not believe them. What did they want? What did they want of him? Fear was forming, a dark, slow tide at the back of his mind. He would give it no room for advancement. Now... what, so far, had he done? The masque, where the court had danced to his music—not enough... Gifts, favors he had received—not enough... He had lain with the queen of course; but she wasn't pregnant, and he doubted that she ever would be, by him: the genius of his black-robed creator could only extend so far. Why would they want him with her, if not to get her with child? Did they think if he wed her he would strive for their advancement?

The candle at his bedside had burned low. Numbly he realized that he had been thinking for over an hour. Too long. Am I dying? he thought suddenly. Am I poisoned? But none of the other card-players had been affected this way; they were just drunk. They might have drunk themselves into a stupor by now. He had heard that you could drink yourself to death. Drink could poison. But I feel fine, he thought, just slow. I cannot get drunk, I cannot be poisoned...

He could not be poisoned. They had known this would happen, with wine, with any potent substance, and they had not told him. The queen was being poisoned, and he was immune. What poison had they taken together? But he had never reacted this way before. Of the poison they took together, he had never received his full share—It had come from him.

Lazarus Merridon turned slowly onto his side. It was ridiculous, a horrible notion. No one could do that, no one. It was unnatural, hideous, impossible. His candle flickered, guttered and went out. In the darkness he fell asleep.

"Master—" Lazarus jumped at the light touch on his arm. "I wouldn't have woken you, sir, but my lord sent orders the message was to be delivered at once."

It was breaking dawn. He sat up in bed and took the packet his man offered, and broke open the crimson wax that bore Andreas' seal. Several pieces of gold fell into his lap. They had been enclosed in a note from his patron:

My dear boy—

Your timing is abominable. Desist at once, and have the decency to wait until after the marriage, or you will make things very difficult for us. Remember: we made you. Do not fail us.

He looked at the note without seeing it, jingling the gold his patron had sent in his other hand. . . He had been right. Now there was nothing to do but to fail them.

The gold in his hand would see him out of the country; if he kept on the move he could live for nearly a year on it together with his winnings of last night; by then—God. His winnings. He had left them piled high on the table in Thomas Berowne's room.

Lazarus strode down the halls to Berowne's apartments. Light had just broken, only the palace servants were about. Lord Thomas' man protested that his master was not to be disturbed, but the pale gentleman brushed past him into the inner rooms.

Heavy curtains had been drawn over every possible source of light. Lazarus uncovered one window. He found the bed and pulled back its hangings. The curtain rings rattled on their rods, but the bed's occupant didn't stir.

"Thomas!"

Lord Thomas uncurled just enough to cast one eye up at his visitor. His head was rumpled and stubbled, and he stank of sour wine.

"Thomas, I need the money!"

"Who are you?" Lord Thomas managed to push out from some dimly-remembered area deep inside his throat.

"Lazarus Merridon; I need the money I won last night."

Thomas groaned, closed his eyes and listened to his head throb. "I put it somewhere. . ."

Lazarus gripped his limp shoulder. "Please, Tom, it's important!"

"Where's the water?" Berowne croaked.

Lazarus cast about the room for it, and found an enameled pitcher and basin. Tom took a swig from the pitcher and poured the rest over his head. He rose reluctantly and limped over to a cabinet, returned to his bedside for the key, and finally presented Lazarus with a knotted linen handkerchief heavy with gold.

"Thank you."

"Not at all," grunted Lord Thomas, sinking back as far as the edge of the bed. "Always delighted to oblige." He pressed his fingers into his eyes. "Now, would you mind telling me why you are calling for such fantastic wealth at this hour of night?"

"It's morning." Lazarus paced up and down the dusky room, nervously tossing the bundle in his hand. "I must ride home at once," he lied. "There was an urgent message from my guardian—"

"Does the queen know?"

"No." He shrugged brusquely. "She'll be all right now."

Tom's mouth opened and closed. "Will she?" he said quietly.

The fierceness of his visitor nearly knocked him over. "Yes! Yes, she will—Tom, you must believe me." The fair man clutched at Berowne's hand.

"Lazarus." Thomas looked at him. "What am I going to tell her?"

The silvery eyes darkened with tears. "I don't know," Lazarus whispered. "Tell her—I could not help it." He lifted the unicorn medal on his chest. "I have it still. I will send it before I come again. Can you tell her that?"

Lord Thomas closed his eyes. "Anything. Anything you like."

"Thank you." Berowne only barely heard the whispered words as he fell back within the bedcurtains. It was early yet... He never missed the fullblown rose plucked from one of his crystal vases, that the queen found beside her on the pillow when she woke.