

## To Whom the Queen Bows

by **Tori Schroeder**

**Q**ueen Lillian left the throne room with a swish of her gown, the wails of a peasant lost in the clack of her heels. She navigated the long winding halls with ease; trailed by the fading sobs that echoed off the stone walls, she began climbing a grand staircase. She paused at the first landing. Her fingertips drummed against the banister in anticipation. A resounding slam assured her that the issue was entirely dealt with, and that servants would be along shortly to clean any remnants of filth the beggar had trailed in. Satisfied, she continued.

In her ascent, the queen passed many lavishly furnished chambers. Parlours, libraries, and guest quarters flew by in her periphery, though all were devoid of life and scarce of the sun's warmth. She followed a path of lit sconces, up a further spiral of stairs. The train of her wine-coloured dress snaked up the steps behind her and glistened with the passage of each flickering flame. The entire castle seemed to resonate with emptiness, save for the piercing click of her footfalls.

As the silence struck Lillian, her pointed eyebrows furrowed. Then her step quickened. Reaching the top of the stairs, she was met with an ambient warmth and the scent of charred timber. She crossed the threshold into a very well-kept room, decorated with a four-poster bed, an intricately engraved wardrobe, and a velvet cushioned seat which faced the crackling fireplace. A few servants pattered around a seated figure, who was completely obscured to Lillian behind the chair's tall frame. Despite this, she knew exactly who resided there.

"Where are my musicians?" she demanded.

The servants averted their gazes and gave her a wide berth so as not to incur her wrath.

"I sent them away." A tired, gruff voice came from the seated man.

“What?” She stormed around the chair to face him, the servants scuttling like mice around her furious form. “Whatever for?”

“They hadn’t eaten in three days, Lily.”

“They hadn’t played anything adequate in three days. You can’t expect me to reward those who fail to perform their duties.”

The man breathed a long sigh, his eyelids heavy, and brow abundant in lines. He hunched, and brought a spindly hand adorned with multiple rings to his temple. Despite the luxurious accommodations, he appeared profoundly tired.

“They were trying . . .” he began, but she quickly interjected.

“I will not have you make *excuses* for them.” Her tone was laced with venom, and the servants instinctively flinched. She turned to the nearest one. “You, retrieve my musicians, or find superior ones.”

The woman gave a quick bow before hastily scrambling out the doorway.

“The rest of you, leave us!”

Within moments the pair was alone in the room. When the last of the servants had disappeared down the staircase, Lillian strolled to the western-facing arch window of the chamber and looked out over the landscape. From here, she caught the last dying rays of daylight as they stretched out from the horizon, casting fiery orange and rosy red tendrils over the distant farmlands.

“You know, I have always held a deep admiration for this view. It is only from this tower that you can watch over the proceedings of the entire kingdom,” she turned to face him once more, “and that is why I wanted you to have this chamber.”

“And my aching knees thank you dearly each day for the climb,” he chuckled half-heartedly.

She continued, undeterred. “I wanted you to have this chamber so that each morning you could awaken to the sight of our great

accomplishment. That you could be greeted by our burgeoning city, and behold all that we own and defend.” Dusk’s amber glow bathed Queen Lillian’s angular face. She leaned forward against the window sill and met the cool evening breeze, letting it seep into her lungs. Her eyelids drifted closed as she basked in the invigoration of both the chill and her unquestionable authority over the land.

“Lily,” the gravelly voice began again, “this has gone too far.”

Instantly, her serenity was shattered.

“No, things are exactly as they should be, *exactly* as I planned.”

“The dungeons are full, the city is empty. This . . . this isn’t what I wanted.”

Despite her ebbing irritation, Lillian now looked upon him with only a mild discontent. “If they refuse to serve me, they refuse to serve our kingdom. For that they must be punished. I will make this land secure and strong, like we always dreamed.”

She didn’t want to fight with him; he was her father, after all. He would see reason. She had no doubt he remembered—surely better than she did—how in her childhood their small cottage on the kingdom’s outskirt had been subject to countless raids. At least twice their fields had been torn asunder, and any provisions or money they gathered with the intention of finding a home elsewhere became a tithe they paid to the marauders in return for a flimsy guarantee of safety. It didn’t last. Not even the king, supposedly sworn to protect and serve his subjects, took any initiative to solve the problem, dismissing it as a minor concern on the scale of the whole kingdom’s needs. But now? Now Lillian could imprison every last barbarian that threatened the innocent. Now she had the power to personally ensure that all her people were safe, and that nobody ever suffered the same fate that they had all those years ago.

Her father’s head hung low, his stare distant with contemplation. “But . . . at what cost?”

Lillian knelt beside him, taking his hand. Then, just as he used to say when she was a child, she repeated back to him, “Safety is its own reward.”

The corners of his mouth twitched with the hint of a weak smile. A glimmer of pride surfaced briefly despite the turmoil within, but soon his conflicted gaze came to rest somewhere in the middle-distance. She knew this would not be the end of their discussion. But perhaps at least she could remind him of the vision they had once shared.

“The kingdom will soon understand,” Lillian continued. “And once we quell the dissidents and transition to new laws, our people will never have to fear, not ever again.”

Her father placed his other hand atop hers with a deep sigh. “That would be the day.”



A thud rattled the walls, followed by a piercing shatter. Heavy footfalls passed by, and Lillian clutched the knob of the pantry door tightly shut, holding her breath. The sounds of skidding furniture met her ears, mingling with shouts from outside. For a terrifying moment, Lillian heard nothing at all. She froze in her huddled position, listening intently. Sweat formed on her brow. Then a resounding cry came from somewhere distantly to her left, and the footsteps lumbered by her once more, hastened. A tell-tale creak from the front door indicated the marauder’s exit. Lillian took a minute to breathe, still curled up between a sack of potatoes and the stew pot, her knees tucked close to her chest.

A few moments later the door swung open suddenly. Lillian recoiled and shut her eyes.

“Lily, it’s alright.” It was her father’s familiar gravelly voice. “It’s safe to come out now, we chased them off.”

She opened her eyes to find his broad-shouldered form filling the

doorway. He was loosely gripping a dirtied pitchfork in one hand, with the other extended towards her. He helped her up and out of the pantry. After retrieving the chairs from where they had been shoved across the room, her father rested the pitchfork against the wall and slumped into his seat at the dining table. Lillian joined him.

Though his head rested in his hands, she could see the scuffs and still-bleeding scrapes he'd sustained. Her brows knit together in concern. "Father, you're hurt."

"It does not matter."

"But, you're not a warrior, they can't expect you to—"

*"It does not matter."*

She gently rested a hand on his arm. "Maybe . . . maybe you shouldn't fight them anymore. I-I know it's to keep us safe but . . ."

Lillian's father took her small hand in his own large and calloused one. His eyes had a determined set. "Safety is its own reward, Lily, never forget that. And as long as the bandits torment us, as long as the king stands idle—and leaves us with nothing, *nothing*—we must fight. Without hesitation. They show us no mercy, so we cannot be merciful. And we must not yield. Do you understand?"

Though his face bore many creases, there was a vigor in his eyes. Lillian admired it. His drive, his determination—her father was so strong and brave that nothing could stop him.

She mustered a deep breath, balled her fists and sat tall. "When I grow up I'll fight too, father. I'll keep us both safe, and the other farmers, and I'll make sure the whole kingdom is safe! Just wait father, just wait!"

A smile tugged at his cheeks and made his eyes crinkle. "That's my girl."

Lillian bounded from her chair, across the room, and returned with the familiar texture of rough canvas beneath her fingers.

Excitedly, she unrolled the map on the table before them, as they had done so many times before. Both their fingers became busy tracing the neighboring mountain ranges and valleys, the rivers and forests and the castle, atop it all. Her father began describing strategies and cunning tactics, tracing lines along the landscape, instilling her with the taste of victory, imploring her to imagine, just *imagine* what they could achieve.

Eyes aglow, Lillian did just that, entirely rapt with visions of what the future would hold.