



"I'm bored!" Lillian Weathervane announced with an expectant pout on her face as she lounged on a dais and contemplated the man that sat across from her.

His lazy slouch was a mirror image of her lackadaisical repose.

But unlike most of her would-be suitors, Matthew didn't bother turning his eyes away from his prized papers.

She waited a moment and repeated her exclamation with far more intensity.

The object of her attentions didn't even stir his gaze.

Lillian however *did* hear a suspicious cough a few feet away.

When she turned to look out of the corner of her eye at the person who had caught her attention, Lillian saw the Baronet of Verne flush from the top of his scalp to the edges of his very pudgy fingertips. Apparently, now that he had her partially divided attention he had no idea what to do with it. As Lillian turned her full, imperious attention on him he almost dropped his sheet music in his desperate bid to play lively tunes under her wilting gaze. As if she was fooled.

Lillian set her jaw as she looked around the room. "Simpleton," she murmured as she checked on the positions of her admirers and would-be detractors.

She didn't like being ignored, but she was even less inclined to let someone *else* command her stage. And it was clear even to her that was just what she had done by begging for the attention of the young man in front of her. The court would be alive with malicious whispers before the night time was done. Lillian could shrug off a few whispers though. *If* it got her what she had wanted in the first place.

So for the moment, she let their murmurs slide. She would wait and see how it played out. If it didn't play out in her favor, well then she'd just have to corner the individual who had thought to plant the whispers in the first place.

But that's later, Lillian thought with a satisfied purr as she finally turned back to the one who commanded so much of her attention lately.

She shifted her body, did her best to thrust her chest out in an appealing manner, and tried for a flirtatious but approachable look.

He could be afraid to return my affections without a more direct invitation, Lillian thought confidently.

Apparently her looks were working on *someone* because the rich trader from the desert lands across the room flexed his muscles with an all-too-suggestive leer. Him however she didn't care about. His companion was even worse. The first was too much of a daredevil for her tastes and the second...too much of a cad. She only had eyes for the man in front of her.

But just as she ignored the others, he too ignored her.

Imagine! A musician too busy for the likes of a Weathervane, she scoffed in her mind as she sniffed loudly to get his attention.

No such luck.

The man was acting like the sheet of music he was slowly reading held the very secrets of the universe from the way he furrowed his decadent brow in concentration and his onyx stylus traced every line of notes.

"I don't have time for this," Lillian announced finally as she sat up and did what any spoiled court woman who was being ignored would do. She reached behind her, grabbed a suitably heavy satin pillow and lobbed it straight at his curly head.

Matthew had clearly been in his own world because he didn't see her attack coming at all. He didn't move as the large pouch of fluff hit him squarely in the head and knocked his loose papers off the table in front of him.

Only then did he sit up with an offended frown and looked over at her with ire in his eyes. She had a moment to admire the cross look on his beautiful copper face.

So luscious, she thought with an appreciative look.

That is before Matthew exclaimed, "What was *that* for?"

Lillian had been feeling a tad remorseful at catching him so unaware. But any remorse died with the tone of his voice. Gratitude would have been more in line for a man of his station.

Still she didn't let that dissuade her. At least *now* she had his attention. So Lillian sat back with a satisfied smirk plastered on her face and counted down the seconds before answering his question.

"I'm. Bored," she said with a daring smile. "Do something about it."

He narrowed his eyes and she waited for the feline look of hunger to cross his face. The look that all the ladies and men of court got when they were the recipient of her unwavering interest. Except it didn't appear.

The man looked back at his notes and scribbled something, then said quietly, "I can't quite understand how someone as talented as you could stand to dally on a couch the whole day."

Lillian said with a light challenge in her voice, "I'm quite *talented* as you say in a lot of things. If I have the right partner."

She waited for him to get the hint. It wasn't that Lillian desperately desired the man. Truth be told, she knew she'd forget his name in a matter of days. In two weeks' time, he'd be a meaningless lackey of the courts in her eyes once more. Unnoticed. Undesired. But for today, he was her conquest...if only he'd at least *try* to rise to the occasion.

But seeing her persist only seemed to push him away further. Lillian watched as he rolled his eyes and said with a snap, "Well, some of us have to work, Lady Lillian. I suggest you go find the ones that *don't*."

The seductive look on Lillian's face died as she looked over at him with disbelief.

She waited for the laugh that was presumably coming. The deprecating joke that said he had just been *teasing* her, the darling of the court.

When he didn't say a word, just lifted an eyebrow as if to say 'why are you still here?', she sniffed in feigned disdain, got off her lounging couch as elegantly as she could, and walked away. So this mouse didn't want to play her game. Well, she would find one that *would*.

Lillian knew that all he saw as she walked away, if he was looking, was a seductively swaying back and an heiress calmly walking off to pursue other amusements. He didn't see the small hurt in her heart because she didn't let him or anyone else see that.

Weakness, she thought with a shudder as she walked out of the room with her face carefully composed. She'd been taught from birth how to carefully navigate

the intricate rules at court. It was true that she was Lillian Weathervane. Rarely rebuffed. Always welcome. Her partners didn't approach her, she *chose* them.

But this musician seemed to think he was above her. Or *worse*...that he didn't *need* her. Which to Lillian was tantamount to heresy.

She was the jewel about which the court revolved. Not the empress. Not the emperor.

She.

She thought about what she would do to make him pay for the insult. But she wasn't sure if she *should*. At least not yet. Perhaps he'd just been irritable today.

"Or even better," she cooed to herself. "He's playing hard to get. That would certainly be a change."

She thought about it and decided that's what it was. It didn't necessarily make her inclined to like him, but it certainly gave her at least some semblance of mental entertainment. But for Lillian that wasn't enough. She needed to be *out*. She needed to be doing something. She'd been growing more and more bored with the courts of late and only the emperor's decision to take on a wife, the first of his reign, had alleviated that.

Instead of being a rival to Lillian, she had been a *blessing*. It hadn't hurt that Teresa had been a favorite plaything of Lillian's before her recent elevation and the youngest Weathervane never let her forget that. Teresa was an interloper upon the courts. Lillian was an institution, whose power only cemented further with each passing year.

Rounding a corner Lillian turned her thoughts away from her imperial ally and back to the small puzzle that was the musician named Matthew. She almost disgusted herself with how her thoughts focused on him, but he *intrigued* her so. Her thoughts were so consuming, that she didn't even bother to say a word to the

gentleman who strolled around the corner with a skip in his step and casually hooked her elbow with his arm.

That was apparently fine with Demetre because he quickly broke into conversation anyway. Whistling congenially he paused and said, "I do believe you owe me some shillings."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she deigned to say with her nose up in the air.

Demetre scoffed. "This is the second time you've struck out with that musician."

Lillian stopped and turned to glare down at him.

"And how would you know about that you little imp?" she demanded of the height-challenged courtier who looked up at her with mischievous blue eyes.

"Well, I was sitting under a certain loose-tied noblewoman's skirts," he said with a roll of his eyebrows.

She blinked and shrugged. "So what else is new?"

He winked. "It might be someone you know."

Lillian rocked back on her heels and thought for a moment. Then she got it.

"Ohhh, gross!" Lillian snapped. "You know very well that woman has more diseases than a dockworker's daughter."

He said with flair as he tugged her along to start moving again, "You exaggerate my dear. What she *does* have is great legs."

Lillian grumbled. "Enough of your floozies and back to my dilemma."

“Yes, do tell,” the imp said as he peeked around a corner and hustled her along.

Lillian was too distracted by the thoughts in her head to pay heed to whatever or whoever it was that he was avoiding. For all she knew, it was one of Demetre’s various liaisons ready to call him out for dallying with yet another beautiful and immediately available version of themselves.

Frowning she muttered, “He must a priest. Or a saint. Or both.”

“Uh-huh,” said Demetre in a far off voice. He was clearly paying just as much attention to her as she was to him.

Which was why she didn’t tell him that she thought the musician may have been playing hard to get. There was no need for him to know that or the even worse suspicion that she had come up with in her flights of fancy...the musician may just not have been *interested*.

For Lillian this was tantamount to sacrilege.

It didn’t happen to her. Not she who had her pick of any courtier or noble at court just based on her looks and vivacity alone. Add to that that she was the youngest Weathervane to actually develop her powers *and* they were seeing signs of other unique mage gifts, enough to get her a place in the famed mage academy near Ameles Forest. *She* was a catch for anybody’s arm. Let alone a mere musician.

Apparently Demetre could sort out her thoughts fairly well just from her expression.

“There, there, dear,” he said in mock consolation. “Rejection comes to the best of us all.”

She whirled on him as quick as a viper as they began to climb the stairs leaving the palace wing reserved for musicians and poets and other artists, and taking them out into the vast palace hallways with congregating servants and noblemen.

That didn't slow her down though. The thought of more people to appreciate her presence positively invigorated her.

"I was not *rejected*," she said with teeth clenched in fury.

Demetre eyed her and snorted delicately. "Have you considered that maybe, just maybe, dear, he's a musician trying to make his way in a court of indolent nobles; spoiled, pampered, and surely without a care in the world."

"Well, of course he is," Lillian said decisively. "I plan to help him with that too."

"Is that before or after you toss him in and out of your bed faster than a land snake?" he said derisively.

Before she could object, Demetre waved his hand in dismissal. "You know I'd do the same, so no shame there. It's just that the musician is looking for a proper place in court. Not a dalliance to detract from his prospects."

"I could have made a worthy minor patron for such a man," Lillian said in a pout.

She was careful to enunciate the difference between a patron and a *Patron*. The latter of which was reserved only for trained Companions of the Imperial Courts.

Demetre shrugged as they reached the top of the marble staircase. "Don't waste your time struggling to tap a dry well when the entire court is wet and eager for your attentions. The first among them being me of course."

She gave him a wry look. "You?"

"Yes," Demetre said with a puffed up chest. "Starting with that bit of wager profits you owe me. Considering he turned you down and all."

Lillian laughed as she tossed her curls over her shoulder. "You are incorrigible. A skinflint. A snake."

Demetre preened as if she had just given him the highest of compliments.

Lillian continued while glaring down at his smug boxy little face with the cutest dimples and vilest look in his pretty, cornflower blue eyes. "You'll have your coins don't worry."

"Good," Demetre said in satisfaction as he looked outside. "It's already late afternoon, so my choices are limited. Therefore I'll take your box seat in the imperial theatre this evening too."

Lillian gasped in horror and said, "No, not tonight! I have nothing else to do. I swear to you, Demetre, when I told Matthew I was bored, I wasn't lying."

Demetre laughed and pinched her shoulder lightly with his fingertips, which was as far up as he could reach to touch her without her bending over.

"Oh, I have no doubt you told that poor musician the absolute truth. It doesn't change the fact that you owe me both coin and luxury and the luxury I *choose* is access to the theatre. Since I've been dying to see this week's play performance."

Lillian gritted her teeth but she couldn't very well refuse him. It had been her proposal after all, a small wager to see if she could win the notoriously difficult musician's favor in a single afternoon. She had lost her own bet.

Finally she sniffed, "Fine, but you must take me with you."

"No can do," Demetre said cheerfully as they reached an intersection of the imperial corridor and prepared to depart.

"Why ever not?" Lillian asked with mild insult.

"I have an assignation tonight and as you well know—although extraordinarily well-placed, your box only fits two," Demetre said as he departed with a wave of his hand.

Lillian's jaw dropped as she watched him walk off down the corridor to the left. "You're locking me out of my own play box for a random trollop?"

Demetre looked back over his shoulder and gave her a suggestive wink. "As if you wouldn't do the same."

With that he was off and she was left standing in an empty corridor with her hands on her hips in disbelief. "Well, I never."

She turned around and immediately set off in the opposite direction. She wanted to fume and sulk in peace. Hopefully with someone delightful listening to her every word drop from her lips. There was only one place she could go where she was assured a captive and *silent* audience.

The imperial chambers of the Empress of Algardis.

With a smile on her face, Lillian Weathervane set off. "Today might not be so bad after all," she said to herself with mild glee as she stuck her nose in the air and was careful not to meet the gaze of anyone beneath her. Servant or noble.

Lillian Weathervane was the talk of the entire court. The brightest debutante it had seen and the envy of all the women, and not a few men, who sought to be the belle of the ball. Now, even though years had passed, the entire Imperial Court was her playroom. She had swept into its midst with the vivacity of a woman seasoned by years at court, which made sense because prior to her debut she had grown up here.

Unfortunately that also was Lillian's current predicament. There was nothing left. Nothing exciting happened anymore. She had seen it all; dallied with everyone from lowborn stableman to the emperor's own statistician. None of them gripped her fancy. She was half-convinced that she had only pursued the musician out of some whim at being ignored in the first place.

Aside from her love life, the duels between courtiers were a thing of commonplace. No one had *died* in weeks. Even the scandals seemed to be quite devoid of titillation.

And now, she had been stripped of her only reasonable bit of entertainment for the night —her boxed seats at the play.

Although she sought refuge in the royal salon, Lillian was well aware that chattering with Teresa could easily become fraught with boredom. Which is why she was taking charge of the conversation and their activities from the moment she entered the imperial's rooms, starting with dismissing all of the simpering courtiers who were lodging there like baby blue jays in the roost. Life would be so much more interesting when they were alone. At the very least it would be better than staying in her own suite of rooms with nothing else to do.

Then when she was done with her private conversations with Teresa, mostly consisting of Lillian holding court, she would just invite back all the simpering idiots into the rooms. The empress always had *something* or someone fluttering around her trying to get into her good graces with their insipid pleas. If nothing else happened tonight, Lillian could take pleasure in denying their banal requests.

She hasn't even been married to Bastien long enough for tongues to start wagging that she hasn't borne him the all-important heir yet, Lillian mused to herself as she continued her train of thought about the only woman she could be considered moderately close to at court.

She was careful though to not say anything aloud that might have even *hinted* at disloyalty. As Teresa's primary lady-in-waiting and her closest confidante, Lillian enjoyed extraordinary favor at court. But there was nothing the emperor hated more than gossip about his person and as magically talented as she was, she also *thrived* on the life blood of the courts—secrets and lies. Cymus, the late emperor, had *hated* her. It seemed that his sons were destined to share the same animosity. So it went without saying that despite her status as the court belle, Lillian didn't interact much with the emperor himself. Though to be fair he tended to limit his interactions with anyone who liked to have fun of Lillian's variety.

Bastien was said to be more lenient than his father but only in the sense that he preferred the *'lazy courtiers'* as he called them to keep their distance and stay out of his way, instead of banishing them outright like his father had. As for the mysterious *other* brother of the imperial family, well the less said about Maradian the better, mainly because no one knew where he was or what he was up to. Aside from being supposedly dead. She had enough things to worry about without solving the mystery of a missing imperial. For Lillian knew all too well that her exalted status had brought her many enemies. Numerous noblewomen and not too few others, like the Companions of court, were waiting in the wings to take her place.

Now Lillian was swooping down on the inner chambers on her way to the Empress herself.

"We may not have as much time as I thought," Lillian mused to herself as assorted people passed her by. "The courts seem especially busy today. Something's up."

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted the empty courtyards filled with mazes of green and not a hint of flowers in sight. Lillian had always thought the spot would be perfect for an elaborate set of fountains for courtiers and visitors alike to enjoy. Unfortunately, like the neglected rose gardens to the west, her vision was not to be.

Too bad, Lillian thought dismissively as she weaved between the ever-growing assemblage of nobles lining the entrance to the emperor's imperial audience chamber.

She managed to slip into the chamber with a refined nod at the chamberlain and skirted along the edge of the room, behind self-important barons and generals who hadn't seen combat in over fifty years. Not since the last flare up with the *kith* in the Ameles Forest anyway.

She didn't stop moving, even as some noblemen tried to catch her eye and ladies waved fans in invitation, all of them eager to capture the attention of the empress's favorite attendant.

They knew, and she knew, that if they curried favor with her it was as good as done that their families too would gain favor. After all, a rising tide raised all boats.

Lillian however wasn't feeling very inclined to be used this afternoon.

Sniffing in disdain as she dodged around a particularly malodorous gentleman, she thought to herself, *Now if that musician had just been a little more court-savvy he might have realized the same. A plum position in the empress's salon would have been worth a night in my bed and more. But no. He squandered his chances and prospects at court. Perhaps it's time to turn my pursuit into a hunt. That musician won't like how vengeful I can be.*

To be honest, the vindictive turn of her thoughts pleased her. If she wasn't going to be happy, neither was he.

Then she saw the one man she was dying to avoid this evening. He always ruined her *fun*.

She ducked behind a woman with wide-hoop skirts, the sort of fashion Lillian *detested* and hoped he hadn't noticed her.

No such luck.

She felt a tug on her floating gossamer gown and turned around with obvious reluctance. She let a small frown cross her face, briefly enough not to mar her serene expression but she knew he would see it and know her displeased. Not that he *cared* but she would have the satisfaction at least of being able to display some sort of irritation even if court rules called for cordialness. As her flighty uncle stepped in her line of sight, Lillian stifled a reluctant sigh.

She didn't want to say a word to him, but courtesy demanded it. If she bypassed her own blood without a word, especially when it was clear she had *seen* him, then the court would be atwitter for *days*.

And for all the wrong reasons.

"Uncle," Lillian said with a stiff smile.

"Niece," said the stick-thin man that reminded her more of a praying mantis than anything else. He leaned over and kissed her hand with dry lips.

Used to the sensation, if not entirely pleased with it, Lillian drifted a bit closer to hear what he had to say. He wouldn't have stopped her mid-court with prying eyes and ears all around them if he just wanted her to acknowledge him. A nod of his head and a nod of hers, two ships passing in the night, would have done that just as easily if so.

True to form, her Uncle leaned forward and whispered into her ear. Every word came with spittle to grace her perfumed and powdered flesh like drops of morning dew. Only the training drilled into her since birth kept her from flinching away at the sensation.

"Well," he said. "We have a newcomer to court."

Lillian shifted uncomfortably. "Another merchant perhaps?"

"No," said her Uncle softly. "Someone more important. The emperor has convened a group of nobles here not usually seen outside of their massive estates. *Look* girl."

Lillian obediently turned away from her view of the door that was her escape through the back corridors into the private wing of the imperial family. She still hadn't seen the empress after all and nearly an hour had passed since her time in

the salon with Matthew. Lillian was growing impatient but she turned her practiced eyes on the courtiers standing around.

It wasn't that she hadn't seen who was here before, it was just that no matter who came and went the court always stayed the same. Staid.

Nothing to see. Nothing to do, she thought with alacrity.

However, this time she was very much mistaken.

She noted that her Uncle was right. He may have been a scholarly-type without an ounce of *fun* in him, but he kept his eye on court mechanics like his life depended on it. And in a way it did. As an advisor to the emperor, her Uncle's task mostly lay in keeping an eye on bored nobility like herself and keeping everyone, from the musicians to the imperial armed forces, in check.

Unfortunately the latter purview of her Uncle took more work than one would think. A bored military was a dangerous one and there were dozens of garrisons of such armed men strewn throughout the empire. Ready and idle. After all, it wasn't like Algardis had been in any wars lately-skirmishes of forest land didn't really count, and aside from the rather unfortunate end of the former empress years ago, hadn't seen much turmoil either.

It didn't take Lillian long to notice the eddy in the current that made up the machinations of the imperial court powers-that-be. The most powerful were either surrounding a central figure standing near enough to touch the empty ceremonial throne or were making their way towards that person as surreptitiously as they could.

She couldn't see who that person was, but for him or her to have such an effect on the jaded nobility boded for an interesting night.

"Who is it?" she asked in a calm voice, her eyes studying the reactions of each noble who came in contact with the mysterious stranger.

“That is a dragon.” said her uncle softly.

“A dragon?” Lillian scoffed.

Her uncle clucked his tongue. “I shouldn’t have to repeat myself, especially to you.”

“Are you sure?” Lillian said with faint distaste. She had just gotten a good look at her uncle’s *dragon*.

The man was shorter than the butler currently hovering over him with a serving tray, had a balding head, and what looked like the most horrible case of buck teeth she had ever seen at court.

That was no dragon.

Dragons were supposedly the most beautiful, refined, and elegant creatures to grace the courts of either empire. Not that lump.

Her uncle sucked his teeth in disgust.

“No,” he snapped. “I’ve taught you better. *That* is the dragon’s bodyman. Look at the man sitting on the steps of the throne itself.”

And so Lillian did and her heart nearly stopped in her chest.

He was *beautiful*.

But his features, like a stone carving from the imperial gardens come to life, were not why she froze.

That dragon had his paws on *her* man.

Eyes wide, Lillian saw her musician not just serenading the dragon with his music, deft fingers flying over a lute in hand, but also sitting on the dragon's lap.

Not only that; the musician, Matthew, seemed quite *happy* to be there. Animatedly he played his music and let the dragon stroke his back without a care in the world. While the entire court watched.

The same court that would have undoubtedly heard that he had soundly rejected her advances just few hours before when the sun was up and the day had felt absurdly long.

Lillian was furious.

She wasn't good enough for the minstrel but the creature from across the waters was? Lillian was no fool. Dragons were beautiful and graceful, but *she* was Lillian Weathervane. There was no arrogance in suggesting that she was the pre-eminent catch of the courts. That is...until now.

Forget small revenge, Lillian fumed. I'll scratch his eyes out. I'll scratch both of their eyes from their cavities.

Fortunately before she could make good on that threatening thought, her Uncle interceded. "Niece," he said urgently. "I know that look in your eye. That look has a sense of urgency. A need for power. Harness that power, it has helped your family rise in the past."

It wasn't necessarily her Uncle's avarice that broke the furious thoughts that had taken hold of Lillian's mind. It was his thirst for power and the knowledge that he expected her, as always, to act in ways that benefited the family as well as herself.

Composure was expected.

Decorum was expected.

At the very least, a lack of bloodshed on the palace floors was expected.

So she smoothed her face and adjusted her bodice.

“I think it’s time I introduced myself to the newest guest at court,” Lillian purred. If her eyes didn’t match the warmth in her voice, well her Uncle didn’t necessarily expect miracles.

He let her go and she sashayed her way across the palace floor.

Before she’d even proceeded halfway though, an imperial chamberlain began knocking his very large ceremonial staff against the marble floors.

The sound was enough to get the swift attention of all those gathered.

Even the musician and his dragon.

They stood as smoothly as two choreographed dancers and Lillian barely held back a snarl as she smoothly about-faced with a rush of her skirts and faced the doorway.

The knock of the ceremonial staff against the marble floor meant only one thing.

The Emperor of Algardis was on his way. Everyone was expected to be silent as they awaited his glorious arrival.

She couldn’t help the tic in her eye as she tried to sneak a glance of her musician and her rival again but she noticed, with some relief, that the dragon was already walking away. At least far enough away that he wasn’t touching Matthew anymore. That relief was short-lived however.

The doorway to the inner imperial chambers swung open and out strode the emperor in a long, opulent robe and the empress tottering along behind him in fast heels.

As one the court dipped into deep bows and curtsies, Lillian among them.

When she rose the emperor was already pulling up the dragon envoy in a stiff embrace.

She held her breath as she too waited for what the legendary being would do.

Apparently used to human customs, the dragon accepted the emperor's touch with equal somberness and leaned forward to whisper a small something in Emperor Bastien's ear.

Whatever he said was too low for Lillian to catch but it caused the emperor to laugh loudly and slap the dragon on his back in a much more familiar gesture.

The dragon, a smirk on his face, stepped back and gave the empress a very salacious bow as he did.

The empress simpered and blushed as Lillian expected her to and swept up to her throne a step below her husband.

As they sat the dragon stepped to the side of the dark amber carpet that ran parallel to the steps leading up to the throne. He casually looped an arm around the musician's neck, claiming him for all the court to see, and kissed him with a bit too much ardor on the cheek closest to him.

Lillian couldn't believe it.

She didn't understand how this *envoy* could swoop in and take everything from her in one step. She'd been silently pursuing the musician for weeks and not once had he ever been inclined to show a preference for only men. In fact, she had caught him and a certain harpist exchanging far more tongue than even Lillian expected to see in public viewing.

So it was clear to her and to everyone else, that it was just *her* that he did not prefer.

This means war, Lillian thought with such fury in her mind that if she had the slightest inclination to pyrokinesis the entire court would have been in flames.

The emperor, apparently mimicking her thoughts, said aloud “For too long we were at war with the dragons of the Sahalian Empire. Now one of their own kind has come amongst us from across the sea in a journey that has not been made in terms of peace for decades. It makes one wonder why.”

Lillian blinked and stiffened. This didn’t sound good. It sounded serious.

Her dismay this time was quite real. The courts were supposed to be *fun*. War and politics were not *fun*.

“I know why,” continued the emperor with firm enunciation, “It is to finally reunite our peoples, a task that has gone undone for far too long.”

Fierce whispers started up from the back of the audience chamber and quickly swept through to the front. This was a subject that was tantamount to verboten in court life. The wars between Sahalia and Algardis, proxy and direct, had been the worst in Algardis history. They were not easily forgotten and to suggest consortium with one of the beasts, an *alliance* even, would have easily gotten another courtier hanged.

But this was the emperor speaking and his word was law.

Lillian strained to hear the emperor over the furious uproar that had erupted just minutes before. He was now surrounded by very anxious advisors who pushed and shoved to get close to him on the throne.

While the center of all this uproar, the dragon envoy himself, continued to stand at the foot of the stairway to the throne with a self-satisfied look on his face and fingers that were flying over the musician's torso with decorous attention.

Before too long she heard the banging of the ceremonial staff on the floor again and the loud command of "Silence!" rang out.

The murmurs and whispers and conversations died out.

The emperor stood up from his throne and pushed through his coterie of nervous advisors. *Like headless chickens the lot of them*, Lillian thought.

It was clear the emperor hadn't bothered to announce his plans to them before he took it to the entire court. She wondered if they had even known the dragon was coming.

When Lillian stole a look at the empress's nervous face, she got the feeling that even *she* who shared the man's bed—mostly—hadn't known either.

Bastien's got guts, Lillian thought with boredom as she twitched her fingers and wondered where this was going.

Emperor Bastien stood alone, his face determined as he said, "This will happen. This reunification will begin now. *Tonight.*"

One of the bolder barons came forward and asked in a booming, sarcastic voice, "And how do you propose we start to get along with our fey brethren? By dancing with them?"

A smile crossed the emperor's face. "Not a bad idea, Baron."

The emperor turned to his shell-shocked advisors and said, "A ball in the dragon envoy's honor. *Tonight.*"

They went from furious and shocked to aghast.

The man who held the purse strings for the entire empire, the imperial banker, rushed forward and immediately proclaimed in a whiny voice, “Improbable, Sire. We need to plan —“

The emperor held up a single finger. The man stuttered to a stop. Then Bastien said, “But not impossible. Make it so.” Without another word the emperor turned away and looked to the envoy, “The court is yours until we reconvene tonight.”

Lillian heard someone gasp as someone else said in a rushed tone, “That’s only a few hours from now!”

The emperor didn’t pause at the exclamation. Lillian wasn’t even sure he’d heard it. That was alright. It hadn’t been for *him*. It’d been for every other socialite within hearing distance who wondered if they could pull an outfit out of their closet as fast as a street mage pulled a rabbit out of a hat.

She watched as with the empress on his arm, the emperor descended the dais and swept out of the room. The entire court lit up in shouts as soon as the massive doors closed behind them.

Only Lillian was silent.

Only Lillian was smiling from ear-to-ear.

The courts had just become a lot less boring.

It was a few fast hours later and she was dressed in her best dancing attire. Emeralds adorned her ears and her hair was swept up in a frenzy of romantic curls. She had rouge on her face and a twinkle in her eye.

She was going to be the talk of the city. Not just for her elaborate dress that she'd been saving for just such a special occasion they would whisper, but because she also hadn't forgotten about *her* musician and that interloper dragon and she intended to do something about it.

Lillian danced with partner after partner for as long as the night went on.

Her heels flashed across the floor, studded as they were in emeralds bright enough to match her earrings. As they caught the light of the sconces and chandeliers with each high kick, their owner caught the eyes of numerous courtiers as she whirled in the arms of her dance partners.

Some of those eyes were lascivious; some were envious.

None could take their eyes off her, which was just how Lillian liked it.

So when she finally stopped dancing to catch her breath and a refresher drink, she was startled to find that the star of the night was nowhere to be found.

She had a thing or two to say to the dragon envoy but she couldn't do that if he were nowhere near.

She peered around but didn't see him in any of the talking circles or dark corners of the ballroom. When Demetre sidled up to her, he knew just who she was looking for.

Which was what she liked about him. He knew her so well that it only took a look for him to read her body language. That made him her favorite. Well that and the fact that he was quick to change his plans if a more tempting opportunity came about. Hence his presence here at the ball instead of the aforementioned play.

"The musician?" the drunk, human imp slurred.

Lillian sniffed, a bit intoxicated herself but not *that* far gone, as she said, “Him and his partner of the night.”

Demetre shrugged with a loose arm around some dancing woman’s waist and pointed with his other hand at a side door that led off into the interiors of the palace.

“They went that way,” he said with a squeeze of his woman. She giggled.

Lillian ignored her and set off.

“Wait!” Demetre called out. “Where are you going?”

Lillian turned back with an imperious eyebrow. “Isn’t it obvious?”

He stared at her and grumbled. “At least let me finish my drink.”

“Who said you’re going?” Lillian countered.

“There is no way I’m going to miss the imperious Lillian Weathervane get her butt handed to her,” Demetre said in a tone that indicated he was a lot less drunk than she had first thought.

Lillian huffed. “We’ll see about that.”

He snorted and off they went. When the dancing girl tried to follow, he swatted her on her bum and sent her away with, “Not you, dear. This conversation is for your betters.”

Lillian didn’t bother to turn around to see what she assumed was a characteristic pout on the woman’s face. She was focused on her mission.

As she exited the ballroom and some others fell in behind Demetre she began to feel a tad ridiculous. But she had started this little tete-a-tete; she would finish it.

It didn't take much for them to find the trail of the dragon and his presumed lover. A servant was all too happy to point the drunk nobles to the other drunker nobles just to get them all out her hair.

When Lillian approached the private corner that the dragon had apparently chosen, what met her eyes wasn't precisely how she had imagined this night going.

They all stopped in a stupor.

She alone walked forward across the empty, cool marble floor with moonlight shining down on her curls and delicate ribbon strewn hair.

There was only one other person in the large circular alcove big enough for fifteen or more people.

That person wasn't awake though.

He sat on a bench next to the only other door out of the marble alcove. He was slumped forward in an awkward position, his clothes disheveled and his cravat undone. His body was posed with an unnatural stillness and she could barely see the mist of his breath floating in the air. It wasn't because it was cold. It was because the air from his lungs had taken on a very nasty green tinge. He also had the undertones of someone who was deeply ill. Quite the opposite of the lively and vivacious young man she had seen just hours before.

As she stared at the musician and the single line of drool drifting down his arched cheekbones, she wondered what could have happened to him.

Fearing what she would see if she looked even deeper, she let her magic tentatively swipe over his aura.

Lillian sucked in a sharp breath. He wasn't just sick physically but magically.

“What happened to him?” Lillian asked the others behind her reflexively in a harsh tone. She didn’t really think the people following her like scared children had the answers. They were too caught up in their own fears. *That* she didn’t blame them for. It wasn’t often that you saw mage illness at court. And whatever had happened to him, his current state was most certainly the effect of a malady made of magic.

Demetre fluttered a distressed handkerchief at the door off the alcove.

“He went in there,” her friend said with a disturbed look.

Lillian gave him a sharp look, prepared to ask *how* the imp knew but then she remembered his ‘talent’. He saw things. Not so much memories, more like impressions. Demetre had always been able to tell what the last moments of a person were as long as he happened upon them and was in a mood to listen. It was how he’d always known who she’d been with last and how to tease her for maximum efficiency because of it.

But now he was not in a teasing mood. The imp looked almost as pale as poor Matthew, whose brown flesh had taken on a decidedly grey tinge, did and he seemed to be unwilling to say more as he rapidly pulled the handkerchief up and held it to his face as if to ward off a disease the musician had. A taint that even she could feel was in the air. Though she didn’t know what it meant precisely.

Lillian and her assorted followers shielding the musician from view of wandering individuals with their bodies, exchanged glances.

A girl in the group with short close-cropped red hair said to Lillian, “Well, you have been complaining you were bored.”

Lillian looked down at the musician in displeasure.

“So I have. But even I wouldn’t have wanted this,” Lillian conceded reluctantly as she eyed the slightly ajar door beyond the musician.

“Well,” prodded another bored dilettante from her circle.

Lillian looked over her shoulder at him with a sniff. “If you’re so interested, Charles, why don’t you go ahead and inspect the room?”

Though it wasn’t necessarily senselessness that had pushed her to dare the man at that moment. It was numbness. It was disbelief.

“Don’t!” said another one with more wisdom than either Charles or Lillian at the moment. “And if you do, at least take off those shoes first.”

“What?” Lillian asked.

“Shoes,” said the man firmly. “It’s important.”

Charles, a young man too proud to be shown up in front of his peers, did exactly what she had dared him to do. Though he took off his shoes at the man’s behest first.

Lillian and her friends waited with no little anxiety outside the door.

Soon enough he called out with a harsh whisper, “You lot get in here, quickly! I assure you boredom is long gone now.”

If his tone had a bit too much bravado, then Lillian couldn’t blame him. She was torn between running back to the ballroom to get a sentry and going in to see what he’d found.

Apparently the others thought the choice was between the room and the drooling person outside, so they took off their shoes and two of the airheaded girls rushed in without further thought. Lillian and one young man along with Demetre hung back.

When she turned around she was startled to see a nobleman not often caught participating in court antics. She raised a curious eyebrow.

The staid young man said with a censorious eye to the room. "I'm not quite as *bored* as you lot."

"Is that so?" asked Lillian unimpressed.

"It is," the man confirmed with a grimace as he walked towards Matthew. "But this young man needs a healer's aid or at the very least a stiff brew to knock off whatever fugue has overcome him."

"Yes, yes a good jolt of alcohol should do the trick," Demetre said from behind his handkerchief.

To Lillian's critical eyes it looked like the musician needed more than a mug of swillwater to get through the night but she didn't object as the young man heaved up the musician with a grunt and headed off muttering about idiots and sycophants.

When Lillian turned back to Demetre he seemed to have regained some of his composure because the handkerchief was gone and his shoulders were square. Wryly Demetre said with a wave of his hand at the door that had been knocked further ajar, "Shall we? We can't let the others have all the fun."

Lillian rolled her eyes and moved.

"Wait!" commanded Demetre with a snap of his fingers. "*Shoes, dear.*"

She did as he asked as she swept past him and into the mysterious room as requested, impatient to see what the others had found. She was no fool and although the musician was sick...that didn't necessarily mean his malady had originated in the room past the outstretched door. He could have ended up as he

was in a variety of ways and she wouldn't be who she was if she didn't at least investigate the room beyond.

When she did however, Lillian wasn't expecting to see what she saw. But she now knew why she'd taken off her shoes. The entire floor was caked in a fine white dust that would be hard to explain away to a discerning eye. Besides that the room was nearly devoid of furniture and barely visible with only the moonlight to guide their questing eyes.

In the center of the room was a long rectangular table.

Atop it was tomes and documents, gold and jewels, upturned canisters spilling mounds of particles onto the white tablecloth, and a simple cauldron boiling over with ooze.

It was quite...unusual.

But what drew her to the table's side, more than the eclectic mix of objects it possessed, was the strange aura of magic surrounding it.

Even she, not a trained mage in her own right, could sense it. *Taste* it on her tongue. It was like old cardamom spice mixed with the dangerous musk of heady intoxication. It was alluring. It was decadent.

As she stopped hesitantly in front of the table, in an unwilling trance, Lillian lifted her bejeweled arm and reached out to touch the table. Like an out-of-body experience, she watched another of their group manage to touch the contents before she did. A single gold coin.

The woman froze and fell at Lillian's feet, the same look of stupor written on her face as had been on the musician's at the door.

That woke Lillian out of her nightmarish dream fairly quickly.

Whispers erupted as half the group gathered around the fallen woman and the other half continued to stare at the table as if they remained entranced.

Keeping a wary eye on her comrades, Lillian took the chance to touch the woman. Her flesh was ice-cold. Like death.

Her magic was another thing entirely.

It was alive with the soul of a dragon. Lillian gasped aloud harshly and wrenched her hand back. She could feel the presence as surely as she could have touched her own magic.

One thing she was sure of now. The dragon was more than just an envoy. Much more. But Lillian knew as she stared back at the table with its treasure trove of secrets, locked by magic and by malice, that she wasn't the person to uncover those secrets. Not today. Maybe not ever.

"That is a job for someone with far more experience than I," Lillian Weathervane said in a decisively light voice. She was trying to make a joke of it. The others stared around at each other even more unsure than she was.

One person even reached forward to touch the edge of the glowing manuscript. Lillian hissed through her teeth with impatience and slapped his curious fingers away.

The signature was too dark for any of them, especially if the person tempted to try to overcome it was foolish enough not to heed the warnings of not one but two fallen individuals before him.

"These secrets are not for you either, Andre," she said in a steely tone. "Not if you want to wake up tomorrow and greet a new day."

He looked at her. He looked back at the table's contents. They were tempting. But apparently not enough to risk being incapacitated by them. He backed away from the table with a muttered curse.

And it was as if a spell was broken because the four others stirred around the table and they too looked at it with unease as they hurriedly rearranged their clothing so that the sheer dresses and cloth tunics closed tighter around their owners...almost like a flimsy shield.

Stirring herself Lillian Weathervane decided they all needed to get back to the festivities before someone found them here. They hadn't touched the table. Its wards were still locked. Even their shoes were clean. No one who saw them at the ball would know they had stumbled into here. And if the dragon knew they'd been in there...well, he had even less incentive than they did to speak up.

So she snapped at one of them, "Gather her up."

The rest she shooed out of the room with careful motions of her hands, like a mother hen herding chicks away from danger. The glittered and bejeweled nobles were only too happy to follow her commands now that their de facto leader had indicated a strategic retreat was imperative. No one lost face if everyone was doing it.

When she was the last one out the door, Lillian Weathervane paused with her hand on the golden knob. But she didn't turn around to view what even her gaiety-filled mind thought of as a dark trap waiting to snap closed around her neck. Instead she fixed her trademark smile on her face. Adjusted the emeralds in her ears. Knelt down to put the one-of-a-kind creations that she carried under her arm onto the floor and slide her soft feet into the soft caress of the perfect pair of heels.

All was right with her world as she closed that door with a firm tug and clicked back into the ballroom. This night had promised that if nothing else...the court wasn't going to be boring any longer.

And that was all Lillian Weathervane wanted.

Some entertainment. She hadn't bought these atrociously expensive heels for nothing after all.

If you've read Sworn To Secrecy: Courtlight #4, the mysterious dragon we meet here in Lillian In Heels might be familiar to you. I hope you enjoyed his entrance to court. He promises to be a very deceptive partner for Lillian and the entire Weathervane family to tangle with in future times.

Terah Edun

Terah Edun splits her time between Georgia and Washington D.C. She enjoys traveling, writing, and music. She has published two series set in the Algardis Universe – Courtlight and Crown Service.

"Lillian In Heels" explores the earlier life of one of the main characters in the Courtlight series. As always Edun's stories are drawn from her interest in coming of age tales starring women & girls in fantasy settings.

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