

Tatianna

The shadow Tentheth could only be reached over mountains. Which mountains did not matter, but to walk there through shadow, the path required mountains. Julian discovered this in confusion riding Morgenstern and exploited it later, keeping Tentheth for his own. His siblings had all of shadow, but they could not walk easily into Tentheth.

Tentheth was the domain of conjurers, magicians who evoked, created, and drew their form from other substance. Melies specialized in oil on paper and drew magnificent artifacts from painted forms. He did not require his own work though he preferred it, and on the morning of Julian's dawn, the day the prince of Amber arrived in the city on a carpet of rose pedals, Melies conjured a royal gift.

He used Ledes's last painting, the one he had died for. It was seven feet tall and eight wide, oil on canvas, and done in a cocaine mania of four days that took the painter's life. He captured Atiana of Terriana as he had viewed her, dark skin as he dreamed, long hair as he fantasized of running his fingers through, body divine, and lips soft. She was his Atiana, and his students called her the Tatianna. They sold the work to Melies to pay their master's debts.

Melies drew her forth. In oil Atiana of Terriana had rested on marble fountains, wrapped in a dress without sides that lay jumbled between her thighs, and wore a necklace of connected circles. One hand dangled fingers into the fountain waters, casting ripples in wide circles, and the other reached to the viewer. She asked to be lifted or beckoned to be joined depending on point of view. Melies chose the former. He worked magic of shadow, pulled threads of power, and took her hand in the painting. In his studio he pulled her from the canvas and let her stand on his oil-speckled floor. The gown hugged the curves of a full woman, and Tatianna spoke Thari.

"You're not Ledes," she said, confused and hesitating.

Melies was not. He wasn't fat, but compared to Ledes's manic-thinness, he looked positively corpulent. He had thick, curly hair and a straggly beard. His nose was too small for his face. Unlike Ledes who had lived and died in near perpetually artistic ecstasy, Melies maintained a discontented expression and little patience.

"No, he's dead. I am Melies, this is Tentheth, and you are Tatianna, Ledes's Tatianna in his memory of Atiana of Terriana. Your name is hers." He slapped two separated fingers together as the parts of her name.

"I'm their child?" she asked.

"Hers and Ledes, or his and his muse's, which is much the same thing. You know how we name children?"

"No," she said, but added, "Yes," and a moment later, "It comes to me, but I don't know how or from where."

"From Ledes," Melies decided. He shrugged. "If he had the power to put that knowledge in you, he was a greater painter than I thought. But he's dead now. You killed him."

"Oh, dear God," she whispered and sat down.

Melies looked unmoved. "Don't think about it. Everyone dies. You are going to Julian of Amber, who is our new God, and hopefully he will find you worthy. That will mean great things for me. You're ample enough, if he likes such things. Your sex is largely useless, but I hear you're good for ornamentation."

Tatianna looked up through her fingers. The conjurer caught her hands and pulled them away so he could look over her again. "At least you're already made up. Come. We're leaving."

"Can I have a moment?" she asked, and Melies said, "No."

They took a carriage to the Kraviset where the crowds grew so thick they couldn't drive and walked the rest of the way. Tenthet grew among the mountains. The thrust of stone pushed buildings out of dirt, and erosion carved stairwells and streets. Avalanches cleared parking lots and tumbled rocks over deep ravines to fall together like bridges. Humans came behind and merely inhabited what the range had made. Two deep river canyons merged and together poured their life down a great cliff, the Omnigral Face, against which the city grew. Denizens of Tenthet called the houses, buildings, and roads growing from the Omnigral the Krav, and the roadway up it, a treacherous series of switchbacks and sharp turns, the Kraviset. Throngs had gathered to see Julian, and the prince sat in white on a high balcony, sipping wine, and accepting gifts.

Melies fought his way through the crowd and up, dragging Tatianna along with one arm. She got whistles and looks. Her dress hung from her necklace of circles, and more circles linked the front and back. Dark skin moved under cream silk. Melies pushed upwards and finally got close enough to the front that the guards recognized him, and they made a path. The two trekked upwards past kings and emperors.

The building Julian had taken was a broad white orb that resembled an eye. It jutted from a yellow vein of schist over a granite intrusion. Two heavy wrappings on top and bottom broke the hemispherical perfection but looked like eyelids, and in their center opened a deep cavern. From the outside the darkness in the middle of the white rock made the entrance to the cavern a perfect black disk, and from the inside one could see all the city. The king and several local mayors were controlling who could enter and see Julian, but Melies was somewhat known. The mayors looked at Tatianna and sighed, and they hurried the conjurer and his gift to the front of the line. Inside the Kravisorb the air was cold.

"Now make a good impression. Don't speak unless spoken too. Don't make eye contact unless he does first, but then smile. Jiggle a little There are men who like that," said Melies, not looking at her. "Call him sir. Or master. But make a good impression."

"Yes, Melies," said Tatianna with her eyes down.

"You'll do," he said and added, "You'd better."

And the king of Tenthet took them in to see Julian of Amber.

The cavern itself was round and flat-floored, and its circumference intercepted the eye's pupil making a window. The room was known and usually used as a tourist spot. A marble bench stood just inside the eyeball and on this Julian sat. Piles of gold lay here and there. Fragrant cedar boxes lay open with gems, and bolts of silk languished in heaps. Melies brought Tatianna to the edge, and she appeared to those below as a white dress against the shadow. Her skin was too dark to see.

"My Lord Julian," said Melies, instinctually knowing this was what to call him. "I am honored to be in your presence."

"Good," said Julian.

Melies rose and looked at Julian longingly, admiring the way his armor resembled nothing of the world, and the way the king and emperors hungered after his words. "Yes. I have a gift for you, an act of conjuration I brought from my own craft into the world, and I give it to you. This, My Lord Julian, is the work of the conjurers of Tenthet. This is Tatianna."

He bowed again and pushed her forward.

Tatianna did not bow but looked down as instructed. The sun caught her and turned her silk translucent, but against the shadowed background her body appeared as a ghost wrapped in mist. Black hair fell over her shoulders. Silver circles gleamed around her neck. Julian watched her.

"My Lord," said Tatianna when the silence dragged.

Julian stared for a while. Echoes of the crowd crept into the cavern, but otherwise the room was quiet. The noble functionaries hung at the back of the cave and waited, while Melies remained bowed. With his eyes down and his hair hanging forward, he gritted his teeth. Sweat beaded on his nose.

"Are you a conjurer, Tatianna?" asked Julian.

"No, I— Yes, My Lord. I have some of that power."

"Conjure something, Tatianna," Julian ordered.

"I need a form," she said. "I need a thing to be drawn."

"Drawn? You need a thing to be drawn as in conjured, or a thing drawn on parchment so you can conjure it?" asked Julian.

"Either, My Lord. Both."

Julian reached up and stroked his chin hairs, short and stiff from several days without shaving. After a moment he took a small bronze coin from his pocket and flipped it to her. It flew up, out of the light, and fell back in a spinning flicker. She looked up to catch it and looked at Julian where he sat with eyes half-lidded and betraying nothing.

Tatianna examined the coin. It was a three sestertii coin with an unevenly milled outside. The front had a picture of the sun and the back a dagger, and the whole thing could fit on her thumb. She looked back at Julian. He was still examining her with a cold, inscrutable expression and suddenly unsure, she looked over at Melies. He was sweating hard with his face the same level as his waist, apparently examining the floor.

"Yes, My Lord," said Tatianna, and she drew the knife.

She pulled it with her thumb, brushing it against the edge of the coin. The knife turned and cut her, and she pushed again. The handle protruded from the coin edge, through a small crack in the raised lip. She switched hands and pushed, and the knife moved further until blade followed handle, and it dropped into her other hand, covered in her blood. The blade was longer than her hand and the handle almost as big with a pommel larger than the coin.

She offered it to Julian.

"Is it worth anything?" he asked.

"Three sestertii," she replied.

Julian laughed. "And what use do I have for a three sestertii knife?" he asked.

Tatianna saw his smile. She saw his smirk and saw the nobles in the corner. They sweated like Melies now, beads of it dropping down their faces and falling onto stone. She saw her conjurer, and he had cracked his

head sideways a fraction of a degree so he could look at her. His eyes were furious. He ground his teeth and clenched his shoulders.

Julian waited, and Tatianna understood. She had conjured a knife, Melies's back lay open, and Julian waited for entertainment.

She tried to put the knife back, but it wouldn't fit onto the coin. Instead she merely drove the blade through the small sestertii piece, and it wrapped around the blade like a split clam. She tossed both back to Julian.

He laughed and said, "Rise, Melies. Take Tatianna back with you and teach her something of conjuration. Teach her everything you know."

And in a different tone he added, "Learn something I haven't seen already. Show me in Amber."

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Melies hadn't known what to make of the situation and took Tatianna home with little more than occasional suspicious looks for conversation. When travel called for vocalization, he grunted.

They arrived home, Melies walked ahead to his studio, and Tatianna followed to sit on a massive crystal of heterogenous stone. In Melies's style of conjuring he often required mass, and the rude cube contained quartz and granite, marble, schist, shale, slate, and basalt. So many different colors came together they formed an earthy brown with sparkling crystals in the matte faces, and Tatianna's long legs formed the same brown, gleaming with sweat instead of mica. Melies didn't know what to scowl at, so he scowled at the world.

"Who's Julian?" asked Tatianna.

"Guardian of the pathways to Amber," said Melies. "Prince of Order. God."

Tatianna waited while Melies did not explain. Her smile sharpened.

"What's Amber?" she asked.

"Don't you know anything?" Melies demanded.

"No," she replied.

"You— oh. Right." Melies sighed and rubbed his face. "Amber is the center of everything. From there Julian draws all order from chaos, form from nothing. You will discover you need light to work, and Amber itself is Julian's light. It is the glorious city on a mountain that shows the world itself.

"To get to Amber, you need to go through Julian, for he guards the way. He is the way. He is perfect," said Melies and paused in thought, his mouth slightly open. The conjurer remained transfixed while Tatianna waited, and when he remembered himself he shook like waking up. Melies wetted his lips with his tongue and continued.

"And he wants you to learn something of conjuring. Everything I know. I doubt you can learn all that, but I can at least teach you something. If you can learn, Julian might accept you."

And he taught her the nature of forms. Melies taught Tatianna that any image could be summoned, and taught her to draw, to sketch, and to sculpt. He taught her the harp until she drew rain from the falling scales. The

boys who came to his studio taught her to dance and bake, and soon Tatianna learned to evoke apples, cinnamon, and barely from the air as well as drums and even running horses from her footsteps.

After the beginning he paid little attention to her himself, leaving her to his visitors. When he did notice his conjuration, he said only, "Study so that Julian will be impressed."

Time in Tenthet flowed its own way. It did not run slow and straight, but bounced down the mountains and sprayed nights into wild summers and deepened winter in mountain pools, sometimes plunging until cracks in the rock until they forgot the light of day. Tatianna drew sunlight with a dance, and finally, demonstrated her greatest work: the Horseman. She danced like Morgenstern, and the great horse clapped its hooves. She loped on all fours like Stormhounds in chase, and they bayed behind the music. She spread her arms and swayed as hawks in flight, and the cries of high raptors echoed from the ceiling like birds of prey that nested among the mountains. The looming image of Julian appeared, and Melies lost his voice. The boys judged her dance ready.

They left for Arden along the highest pathways of the world where mountains became trees, and their white leaves melted into the fine wisps of cloud that winds drew from snowcaps. The road sank into green fields. Melies said that long ago the Devil Corwin had claimed this place for his own evil lusts. Tatianna did not understand, for they had taught her little of Corwin. But she nodded, and they continued, and Tatianna rode a hippogryph whose rear hooves sounded of her tap shoes and wingbeats echoed her arms in loose clothing. In time they found Julian.

Under a yew tree with elves in armor, Julian lay on a pile of fir branches doing little at all. He had wine and a pile of dogs, but otherwise didn't even join the foresters in roasting a boar. They'd spitting it through the mouth, and took turns spinning it while scooping basting gravy from a soup-caldron. Julian smelled the boar and scratched the dogs, and lay staring at the sky through clusters of flat spines. The Stormhounds lifted their ears at Melies's coming, but the elven foresters and Julian himself paid them little attention.

"Um, excuse me, My Lord Julian," said Melies and threw a deep bow.

Julian looked at him, sipped his red, and went back to staring at the sky. It was blue on blue, deep ocean reflected from the horizon, and winds scuttled evergreen boughs across it instead of clouds.

Melies waited.

The boar turned.

The conjurer stood back up and straightened his shirt.

Melies said, "My Lord Julian, I have brought you the greatest creature of my artifice, Tatianna, whom I presented to you in Tenthet to your great interest."

Julian replied, "Uh huh."

One of the elves took a basting syringe and injected melted butter and wine into the roasting pig. The others continued to drink.

"My Lord?" asked Melies.

Stirring very little, Julian lifted himself enough to displace two of the great dogs that lay on his chest. One took only a few steps before flopping in a pile with his brothers, but the other trotted over to the conjurer and the dancer. Up close its jaws crackled like static, and its teeth were cold metal. Its fur rose in silver spikes.

The Stormhound approached Melies, passed him, and circled once around Tatianna with its head at level with her waist. It pushed her around with its body and stopped, sniffing her butt.

Tatianna said nothing lest God hear her thoughts and wondered if the beast was carrying Julian's presence in some manner. She did not understand why he would sniff her butt if so. She knew this was normal for dogs, but deeply uncomfortable for a woman meeting the Conjurer of Order.

"Well?" asked Julian. "Do it, whatever it is you're going to do."

The dog sat down, scratched his ear, and waited. Tatianna noticed the Stormhound was male. Was it Julian? She turned back to the Prince of Amber.

"Dance!" ordered Melies.

"I need music or—" but Melies interrupted her.

"Then play!" and he tossed her a harp.

Tatianna tuned the harp on a fallen log. When she was finished and Melies again sweating, she began with a falling scale, beginning her piece on rain. Her hands found the strings up by her head and wandered downwards, away from her body while never going quickly. They hit notes in falls, and even as her hands moved, her fingers ran laps around her palms.

Tatianna played rain and called it, and the sky remained calm. She played rivers and called them, and the ground stayed dry. She called wind, beasts, and birds, and only sounds of one small harp walked among the trees of Arden. Finally, crying, she played the sound of bubbling water and men laughing, and drew it out with all her power.

When she finished, the glade of Arden was unchanged. Elves turned the boar and Stormhounds waited, and she knew she had failed.

"Nice, but I don't care. I told you to learn something of conjuration," said Julian.

Tatianna couldn't reply through her tears.

"And you, Melies of Tenthet, have failed too. She's too dark for me, and her skills insufficient. Begone and don't return unless you have something worthwhile."

Melies drew into himself slowly. His face narrowed, starting with his eyes. Crows feet appeared at the corners of his eyelids, and his brows clenched. He pulled his lips together until they turned white. He had difficulty breathing. Melies turned on Tatianna and grabbed her by the hair before dragging her back to the hippogryph. Without a word he threw her on it and climbed onto his own horse. His fingers found his knife, and he told her to ride back to Tenthet.

Tatianna knew she was going to die. Julian watched with the same expression she had seen before. He waited to be entertained. Behind them one high mountain rise to the south and east with a castle on top and a city stuffed into its cracks. Amber glowed in the afternoon sun. To the west rose the many peaks through which she had come. Melies told her to ride west. He had a knife in his hand.

A Stormhound walked away from the pack, sniffed Melies horse, and lightning crackled in its teeth. His horse and her hippogryph shied, and Melies fought for control. Tatianna gave the beast its lead and took off, riding hard to the east, until the hippogryph took flight. Julian laughed, Melies swore, and the hounds bayed.

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That was how she came to Amber where now Bley's pursued her with death on his mind.