

# Tatianna and Her Spait

Castle Amber sat on top of Kolvir and Port Amber occupied the mountain's foot, but the city of Amber hid everywhere.

Outside the fortress, houses and small cafes clustered by the gates, and further out among the lesser peaks gem houses and banks waited. Along the windy road down tap houses, cobblers, tailors, and even inns sprang up. By the harbor row houses lined the foothills. Guild halls, craftsmen's shops, and the shipyards stuck to the sea, but like barnacles rising out of the water as a ship hull rose on a wave, little cottages clung to flat spots on the mountain everywhere. There was no line on the mountain where one could say, 'This is the edge of the city!' Even the vale of Garnath where great Arden Forest rose, much of it new growth after the fires of the war, did not mark a sharp end of human habitation. Julian's rangers built houses among it, and those houses continued until one could not see human life from home, yet there was no true end of City Amber.

To Tatianna, that meant she couldn't get away.

Clutching the cashmere bag of gold rings, Bleys pursued her through piles of trash or flimsy walls. He kicked apart ramshackle houses built upslope of the warehouses. People who hiked home every evening didn't pay for thick walls in Amber's eternal summer. They built light. The prince didn't care, and smote bricks to the ground as he ran.

He gained on Tatianna, and her bare-feet hurt. Her lungs burned. She clung to the sheet as her only protection from nudity like it would shield her from Bleys, and the terrible swing of his longsword, but her legs were weak and her arms slack. Blind panic drove her on beyond when she should fall, and she did not noticed clutching the small gold ring about her right index finger.

She ran through a tavern and leaped out an open window, but instead of grass landed on the old sign. The bar had changed its name after the Battle of Arden, for it stood on a hill that had overlooked the carnage. Now it was The Pipes, and on a door a minstrel played two flutes for children. But it had been the Dragon, and behind the building, where Tatianna fell, lay the old sign of a great black wyrm, wingless and terrible, and slain with a black sword.

Bleys sprang out and landed beyond her, cutting off her flight. But Tatianna could run no more. In breaking the window she had cut herself to the bone, and shards of leaded glass jutted from her skin. She lay against the building, and deep red blood spread across the old sign. Her blood followed the carved scales of the dragon, and the ring glittered. The morning sun shone brightly, but this westward part of the building lay in shadow.

"Thief," said Bleys.

"Why don't you laugh, prince of Amber?" asked Tatianna quietly. "You are the laughing prince. Even when you attacked, when you fought up the side of Kolvir, the men said you laughed. They told stories of your jokes. I think that's what scared them the most. Your jokes. They say you laughed when you slew them. Can't you laugh for me?"

Bleys looked her over. Bleeding and beaten, she had a hard time moving. His ring gleamed on her finger. The dragon under her foot turned bright red as her blood seeped between its scales. For some reason he tossed his sword like a knife, and it slammed through the old sign point first, impaling the wood to the ground.

"Thief," repeated Bleys. "I'll kill you, but you won't laugh about it."

"I know," said Tatianna quietly. Her bare feet bled from light scratches. "I know. I'm just tired, and I wanted you to laugh a little."

Bleys put a foot on the sign. It shifted underfoot. He drew his knife.

"Nothing for a thief," whispered Bleys.

He stood up again, and the boards shifted. The loose wooden hooks on the left side clattered. Even consumed by despair Tatianna tried to retreat, and her feet kicked uselessly at the black-eyed dragon, moving it. Its scales ran red with blood, and the sword of Bleys jutted out of one broken leg.

Bleys tried to take another step, and the sign shifted treacherously underfoot. He shook, waving his arms. Sure-footed Bleys, home on land or sea, master of a thousand places who had run through the City of Amber without ever stumbling, suddenly could not keep his feet as the sign shifted and slid. He flailed his arms and somehow dropped the bag of rings.

Tatianna kicked the sign, trying to make it knock him over. "It's just when you don't laugh, I remember what a bully you are. What all you princes are. All-powerful with infinite worlds at your fingers. I wish something bigger than you could make you suffer like I did. You take my ring and make me fall on glass, and I just wish something of shadow or the rings or born of the shadow of the rings could come that's bigger than you are! Meaner! More filled with malice than you and your princes when you treat the flesh of humans like so much meat!"

She kicked the sign again, banging her feet against it like a child having a temper tantrum. The gold ring on her finger gleamed, and the dragon bounced and shook underfoot.

Bleys tumbled and fell. He landed on his face, rolled over, and looked for his cashmere bag of rings. One remained on his finger.

"Laugh, damn you!" yelled Tatianna.

"No!" swore Bleys.

The sign laughed. Slow, deep, and powerful, it laughed in old evil and ancient malice. The sign chuckled with a voice like a dying smoker, nearly consumed with cancer and still gasping in ancient fury. Emerging from the sign of the Dragon, the beast laughed.

Bleys rolled away, and the wingless black dragon with scales rimmed with Tatianna's blood and a royal sword of Amber in its arm climbed from the old sign. It slithered out of worm-eaten wood turned black with ancient rot and mildew, and towered over The Pipes. It was long, grim, and terrible, and its laughter was worse than Bleys's silence. The dragon smiled.

Bleys was neither stupid nor paralyzed. He did not look the dragon in the eye, but leaped to his feet and ran. The dragon pursued him, and the soil of Amber turned dead and black where it tread.

Tatianna slumped and fought for consciousness. Like Captain Armist, she lay bleeding. Unlike the captain, help came swiftly.

Random and Gerard came riding on horseback, and Fiona rode with them. Benedict came too. His good arm was bandaged into a stump, like Gerard's hand, but the Weapons Master of Amber rode with hints of pressure between his knees. Caine was there as well, cold eyed and suspicious. Even Florimel rode with them, blond, beautiful, and at the king's side. They rounded the tavern and found Tatianna, bleeding on a plain board.

King Random the First, Son of Oberon, King of Amber, Master of Everything, Lord of the Pattern and Conqueror of Chaos, demanded, "The hell is going on here?" He was a wiry little man with straw-colored hair and a crown hanging partway out of his saddlebag. It had been clipped down to keep it from falling out.

"Oh, save me, my king," whispered Tatianna and fell over. Her sheet fell, and bloodstains dripped down her naked flesh.

"Well, yes, but...someone get her and cover her up!" yelled the king.

Fiona and Gerard did, swinging out of saddles and converging on the injured woman. Benedict trotted a few yards forward, paused the horse, and leaned over, staring at a black trail of blighted soil that wound down the hills of Kolvir toward the forest of Arden.

"It went this way," he announced. "It came from her and went this way."

"Then definitely bring her with us," added Random. "What's that?"

He pointed at a small bag in the weeds. Caine got it.

"Rings," replied the ship-captain and dumped them onto his hand. He handed one to Random and looked at one himself.

"Fiona, how bad is she?" asked Random.

Fiona had already completed her triage assessment. "Bad. She's lost a lot of blood, and she's from shadow. I don't have anything that will match her in the castle."

"Well, she's bleeding at the spot a dragon appeared, so we don't want her dead. Can you get her to a decent medic in shadow?"

"Easily. Before she dies? Possibly."

"Do it. Take Gerard. Gerard, if anything tries to happen to them, stop it. Stop it hard and with great finality."

Gerard nodded. "Yes, Random. Come Fiona. I think we've done this before."

"Be nice," ordered the redheaded princess. They began talking swiftly of shadow and how to carry Tatianna without moving her.

"May I see one of those?" asked Flora to Caine.

He grunted and handed her a ring. Like Random, she examined it.

"Heading toward Arden!" yelled Benedict, pointing his stump.

Far away down the hill they saw it, the scaled wyrm chasing Bleys towards the forest. It moved like a freight train on a twisted railroad. If the impalement of one arm slowed it down, its true speed would be terrifying. Before it ran a red-headed figure in robes of orange, unable to get away, but fast enough that the wyrm couldn't catch up.

"Let's go! No more brothers die!" yelled Random and put his heels to his horse. Benedict was already away, and Flora matched the king's pace, at his side and just a little behind. Caine leaped into the saddle without

using the stirrups and rode hard in pursuit.  
Gerard, Fiona, and Tatianna were left behind.

"Where do you want to go?" asked Gerard.

"I have a shadow nearby. Magic can't work there, but wounds heal quickly. Can you carry that?"

"Easily, but if I carry it alone, I'll dump her. You have to get you side," replied Gerard.

"Ugh," said Fiona, and the two of them walked around the corner, facing each other over Tatianna's body on the blank signboard. Fiona's two hands made a triangle with Gerard's one. They passed the edge of the tavern and did not come around the far side.

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Thundering into the Vale of Garnath rode four scions of Amber. Their horses wore barding, and the princes carried spears. A trail of dead grass lead the way, shadowed by trees with withered limbs and dead leaves. Corpses of rabbits slumped in the mouths of their burrows, and sparrows fell out of the air. Benedict noted constrictors emerging from the underbrush to scavenge the dead. He said nothing but rode on.

They burst from cover into a wide glade, for there Bleys had turned to stand against the dragon. On the east, toward the sea, the river Mellengroth cut into the glade and had created an oxbow pond, an arch of still, brackish water that mirrored the curve of the river itself. On the west grew tall elms and thick yew. Shrubs and young trees covered most of the ground, but here and there old, burned stumps and the spires of charred pines stuck out of low foliage.

Bleys had taken position on top of a fallen giant, a redwood of immense side and girth that ended in the root cluster. The roots themselves implied no sense of depth and lacked a taproot. They spread out in what would have been shallow depth. On top of these stood Bleys, cackling and laughing as Tatianna had said, and before him reared the blood-scaled dragon, breathing acrid fumes.

"Distract it," judged Benedict.

"Get 'im!" yelled Random and crouched his spear.

Random, Caine, and Flora put heels to their beasts and charged, forming a wedge with Random at the point. All three leaned forward over their lances. Caine lost his hat in an instant, and it shot off his head like it was tied to the trees by invisible line. Flora's blond hair streamed. Benedict stopped his horse and turned it sideways with his knees, one arm ending in a stump and the other bandaged until it might as well have been. The horse had no reins.

The dragon's name was Spiat, and it had been whispering to Bleys before it ate him. When his brothers arrived, he stood initially transfixed, and did not move. The dragon did. No sooner did the other Amberites appear and charge than the dragon whirled. It could move like a sidewinder and threw loops of itself away from the dashing horses. Random did not pursue, but put himself between Bleys and the beast, and Flora stayed with him. Caine advanced, and the dragon retreated.

"Bleys, how are you?" asked Random, not looking backwards. He lifted his spear, but kept the horse's flanks to his brother so he could watch the dragon.

"What?" asked Bleys.

"Bleys! Wake up! How are you?"

"What?" said Bleys again.

Spait moved sideways and found itself against the oxbow pond. This old course of the river was far deeper than it looked. Reed and root grew in from the side, but the fires of the war had killed the plants that could grow deeply. Into the pond slithered Spait, and his head initially disappeared. Caine trotted sideways, and Spait's long snout emerged. The wyrm's eyes were black, without pupil or iris.

"Are you bewitched?" demanded Random. "And where's Julian? Shouldn't he be out here?"

"Julian?" repeated Bleys. "Julian's the whole problem!"

Random turned around. "He is? Why?"

"Julian's the one who summoned the girl! Spait told me that. He's the one who brought her, and she summoned— YOU STOLE MY RING!"

He screamed like madness: uneven, broken, furious. Random flinched back, and Flora sideways so she could see him. Even Caine whirled around.

Bleys stared at them, and his eyes burned. His head flushed and eyes bulged. "You all have them! You're in it with the dragon! You've stolen my rings!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked Random.

"Thieves!" screamed Bleys. "Thieves! Thieves! Thieves!"

He screamed again and again, and each shout echoed more shrilly than the last. As he yelled he faded, and the other princes of Amber felt like they were seeing him from an immense distance. Bleys retreated. He didn't shrink in size, but suddenly he was farther away than before. The roots he stood on were lost in darkness though the sun still rose. Flame-haired Bleys stood at the center of darkness and screamed, "Thieves! Thieves! Thieves!" until he was gone.

Random said something interrogatory involving procreation.

Caine heard laughter and whirled, but it was the dragon, lunging over the narrow bank between the pond and the river. Chuckling, Spait crested the bank and sank underwater with hardly a ripple.

A horn sounded brassy and challenging, and soon thereafter Julian appeared in brilliant mail. With him loped scores of Stormhounds, and hawks circled above.

"Too late, brother," said Random like it was a curse. "Too late."