

Engelian Adventures: Transformations

Book 1: Transgressions

Chapter 30

by

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Chapter 30

To keep Sarina's reputation as unsullied as possible I would once again have to call on my Attina identity. But, I would also need a change of clothes. Attina could hardly go rushing through Constantine in Sarina's fine dress. It would get torn and dirty and would not give me the freedom of movement I needed.

Fortunately Nathaniel's personal effects were still in his room and I was able to find a shirt and a pair of trousers in his armoire. They fitted me, more or less, with some assistance from one of his belts. I left Sarina's dress and the circlet within the armoire for safekeeping.

The sight of a woman with Alfaren features dressed in old, badly-fitting, male clothing running through the precincts of the school no doubt made the day of a lot of the students. Thankfully I did not meet up with any of the magi and none of the students had the presence of mind to try to stop me. However, as I approached the gatehouse, Bruxa started barking. Fortunately for me he was tied up.

"Hareld! Quick let me out. I must go."

Master Minton stepped out and I was vaguely aware that there was someone behind him.

He raised a cautionary hand and spoke loudly over Bruxa's barking, "Stop Wamzut. I do not think you should—"

"Cyrus!" I interjected, as the head of the school stepped into view and my post-hypnotic blocks fell away releasing the suppressed memories of the Library of Arunz. I fell silent at the implications that they brought with them.

The satchel in which Seeker Harlan had discovered Nessa's moon-phase medallions was the same one in which I had placed the Library. But where was it now?

"No, I am Negress," said the newcomer somewhat resignedly, "Cyrus is my brother."

I barely heard him. I stood staring at Hareld's widening eyes as he followed my train of thought.

Minton had said that trust was a noble trait and that the truth can be ugly. Had Nessa taken the Library of Arunz to prevent its discovery by Seeker Harlan? No. She had replaced it with her medallions. This was not a sensible thing for her to do considering they could be used to find her. But if she didn't know enough about scrying to realise that, then perhaps they were supposed to be some sort of parting gift, in trade for the library, perhaps?

She must have planned all this before Seeker Harlan had become involved. Or worse. Perhaps she had seen Harlan arrive and swapped the medallions for the library. She would then be implicating me for the murder in Ilbarsis.

"No!" I cried with grief, anger and power in my voice.

Bruxa quieted immediately and lay down. The effect on Hareld and the other man was less obvious as they did not know what it was I wished negated, but they both stood stock-still and looked at me with uncertainty and growing fear in their eyes.

But I cared not.

I turned to the gate and let myself out before Hareld and the Cyrus look-alike could stop me. I didn't feel like talking to anybody at the moment. Tears blurred my vision as I began to run in the general direction of the Scholar's Retreat.

"Why the rush, laddie?"

I had just turned the first corner when a mailed arm across the chest brought me to a surprised stop. The jolt also brought me to my senses and I blinked away my misery and tears to see the two armed and armoured

men who blocked my path. The golden sunbursts on their tabards and their polished-brass skullcaps told me instantly who they were and the crossbows in the hands of their two companions who stood back a ways told me that I could be in trouble.

"By Mithra, it is a woman!" said the shorter of the two men as he removed his hand from my chest.

"Nay, look at the eyes," said his companion and his hand reached for the longsword at his side. There was a silence broken only by the long, soft sound of the blade being drawn from its sheath.

I backed away cautiously as the crossbowmen brought their weapons up as well. My first thought was of which spell might save me. Then I realised that in my haste I had not meditated back my magick.

"Stay your weapons!" said the short man in a loud voice, which drawled itself out as he turned and glared at his fellow guards. Sudden fear had triggered an adrenaline rush and the world was slowing down. Briefly I considered running but having them chase me through the streets was the last thing I needed. There had to be another solution.

The sword was reluctantly sheathed and the crossbows lowered slowly. Magick was out of the question ... or was it? Memories of Hareld Minton and the stranger standing dumbstruck at my command came to me. That was magick, wasn't it? Where had the power for that come from? The leader of the four slowly turned back to me, a smile on his face and I relaxed slightly, perhaps there was no danger at all.

"There is no need for alarm, fair one," he said slowly, opening his arms similarly to show empty hands.

Small shocks ran up and down my arms and legs as my body continued to urge me to fight or flee but I heeded them not and concentrated on slowing my heart rate down.

"Greetings. I thought never to see one of your race this far south," he said, a far-away look of memory in his eyes. "Well met," he said and extended his hand.

I ignored his hand for I was too confused to know what to do. Fortunately something said between the two crossbowmen caught his attention and he rounded on them.

"Shut your mouth, you stuck-up son of a camel herder! Can you not see she is not the one we are after? He turned back to me and said with another smile, "However, perhaps she might be able to help us."

"How? How may I be of assistance?" I said, regaining my wits and manners somewhat.

"You have just come from the School, have you not?" he said, gesturing in the direction I had come. At my nod of assent he asked, "Did you see a tall Gundian woman within? Her hair is the same colour as your own."

At my hesitation he added, "Your help would be welcome. She may be a murderess."

"Yes, I did. She was in the Library," I said, nothing better coming to mind.

"My thanks. At least we now know we are not wasting our time." He turned to his nearest companion and said, "Feizal, go tell our lord and master that we have found her." The man glanced in my direction then, after nodding to his leader, turned and trotted off.

"Now, I have to ask. Why is one of the Alfaren so far from home? I have never heard of any of your people in Constantine before." As he said this he looked me up and down, more in curiosity than suspicion. Fortunately the only visible qualities I had in common with the person he was searching for was hair-colour and gender.

"Personal business of an urgent nature," I replied. "And, if I may take your leave, I must be about that business."

He stared at me thoughtfully for a moment and then said quietly so that none other could hear, "One of your people once saved my life. He did not ask for anything in return." Then, so that his men could hear, he said, "Go with speed and may Mithra bless you this day."

Extremely confused with the workings of fate and gods I nodded my thanks and began to run again. The two crossbowmen gave me wary looks as I passed and I had an itchy feeling between my shoulder blades until I turned a corner.

At least this little interlude had made me realise how unprepared I was to go up against Seeker Harlan. I would need my magick to force him to forget what he had seen, so I tried to channel some of the magick on Attina's skin into my sorcerer's aura as I ran. Upon discovering this new capability on the night I had survived the storm I had practised it on and off and was delighted to achieve at least some success while being so physically active. The Scholar's Retreat was not far and I made good time but I stopped short of my destination. I had not recovered anywhere near enough magick to go up against a battle-hardened magus like Seeker Harlan.

From a side street I spied on the inn and could see no sign of the Seeker, his men-at-arms or even the runner that had been sent from the group near the School. The situation screamed trap and fortunately I was now in sufficient command of my emotions to recognise its call. I drew hard on the magick stored on Attina's skin. My hands and feet were tingling something fierce by the time I finished but I clamped down on these sensations with my mind — I had no time for such distractions.

I believed the best course called for speed and boldness. Hopefully, Harlan would think me at the School and I might be able to take him unawares. I was about to step into the street when the door opened and

four Mithran men-at-arms lead by the messenger, Feizal, stepped out. From my hidden position I saw them run off in the direction of the School. Good. Now there would be fewer of the enemy.

I made my way around to the back of the inn looking for an entrance that was less likely to be guarded. The window of our room, which I was sure we had left closed, was now wide open.

Once again there was trap written all over it and I was tempted to use that window and show Seeker Harlan that this time he had picked the wrong people to persecute. However, as my plan required my tampering with people's memories, the quieter I was, the fewer minds I would need to alter.

There was a yard surrounded by a high wooden fence at the back of the inn. I peeked through a knothole in the fence and was not surprised to see a Mithran soldier standing guard. Luckily for me he was talking with a young boy outside the small stable the inn maintained for visitors' mounts.

My Gundian cloak would have been perfect for this situation. Tears sprang anew as I realised that that was another item that Nessa had taken from me, along with the Library of Arunz and my heart.

On second thought I realised that her taking it was perhaps a stroke of good fortune. I could use it to find her. There should be enough of my own psychic residue on the cloak for me to be able to find it quite readily and it should make it easier for her to escape any non-magickal hunters.

Still that thought didn't solve my current problem. Time was still of the essence and if I wanted to contain the problem I needed to slip past this guard without him becoming suspicious.

The Gundian cloak makes its wearer invisible by the magickal warping of visible light, or so I believe. It is an incredibly sophisticated device made by one of the premier artificers of Gunde. Without it I would have to rely on my own variant of this spell. I would make myself unnoticeable.

There was no one in the back alley so I carefully wove about myself the complicated spell structures I needed. Of my own devising, this spell, is similar in concept to the one I used in Lady Cytherin's circlets. It effects the perceptions of everyone that I myself am aware of so that they will not notice me.

This has its advantages and its disadvantages. The main disadvantages are that the drain on my magick is based on the number of people I am trying to affect and that it will not work against the strong-willed or people of which I am unaware.

When I had finished my casting I made my way to the entrance to the yard and opened the gate. The guard looked my way but then turned immediately back to the boy in response to the effect of the magick.

So engrossed in their conversation were they that I heard part of it as I passed them by.

"Be it true what they say about the Duke?" asked the youngster.

"Well, young master Talus, that depends on what you have heard," said the guard casually, as he looked in the direction of the gate again.

"I heard that he won the big race and that he started well after all the rest of them," said the boy.

"It is true. The young Lord Samus is quite the horseman ..."

The rest was lost to me as I reached the back door, carefully opened it and slipped inside.

Immediately, I had to step lively to avoid being bumped into by one of the serving staff as they left the kitchen carrying a bucket of water and a mop. I followed the man along the corridor but, instead of entering the taproom, I turned right and went up the stairs.

So far so good. The corridor at the top of the stairs was empty so I let my spell dissipate. Its drain on my resources was unpredictable and I wanted to have as much magick available for the coming confrontation as possible.

Our room was several doors down the hall so as quietly as possible I walked the distance and put an ear to the door. I could hear nothing within. If Harlan was still investigating my belongings, then luck had favoured me indeed. I knocked loudly on the door hoping he would think me one of his men and I would be able to take him by surprise.

There was no answer. Perhaps, even now, he was scrying for the owner of the medallions not wanting to be disturbed. I cast my Mage Sight spell so that I would be forewarned against invisible magick and similar foes then pushed the door open carefully.

The room was unoccupied and apart from some sort of enchantment on the open window, there were no obvious magickal threats. Still the whole room smelt of trap and this was immediately confirmed when the next door along the corridor began to open. As fast as I could, I stepped into the room before whoever it was could catch a glimpse of me.

"Seeerr!" said Seeker Harlan from around the corner, his voice slurred because of my frightened senses. "I arrest you in the name of the King and the Temple for the murder ..."

As he spoke his warning I thought furiously.

"... and suspected murder ..."

Was this the full extent of the trap?

"... of several Mithran priests ..."

Presumably, whatever spell it was that covered the open window was designed to foil or at least slow down any attempt at escape, and the only other exit to the room was blocked by Harlan and presumably his men.

"... Come quietly..."

I found it hard to wait, but tactically it would be best for me to face them singly in the doorway.

"... Know that I am allowed to use deadly force if necessary."

I waited impatiently for him to finish and for something to happen.

"Seer Sarina ... If you are still aware?"

Curious? Perhaps, he thought that I might have succumbed to the power of the enchantment on the window.

" ... I am warded against the sorceries of Arion ..."

That was heartening to know. Most likely his protection would be useless against my own type of magick.

" ... so I recommend that you forget any foolish notion of attacking me. Come quietly and it will be taken into consideration at your trial."

He didn't bother to try to hide the insincerity in his voice.

Then he came into sight. The look on his face went from one of grim determination to one of surprise and the tip of his sword dipped in uncertainty.

"Who in the name of Donai are you?"

I watched as he slowly — to my eyes — took in the sight of a raggedly dressed stranger where he expected a known enemy and when his gaze reached my face I caught his eye and struck with the full force of my mesmerism spell.

Taken by surprise, he was unprepared for this form of attack. His mental defences crumbled before my assault and I almost had him when I felt something snag the material of Nathaniel's shirt.

Fortunately, Attina's heightened reactions allowed me to twist away from his reflexive stab but even so I felt something hot grate across my ribs.

We separated.

He reeled away shaking his head, trying to recover from the effects of my spell.

I staggered back and found myself against the table with one hand at my side feeling blood oozing through my fingers. My other hand had fallen on the wooden handle of Attina's hunting knife, which lay unsheathed on the table where Seeker Harlan must have lain it down after

examining it. Instinctively my fingers closed on the hilt, though perhaps those instincts were not mine.

I must end this quickly, I thought, before the shock and pain of my wound start affecting my ability to use magick. I knew he would not look me in the eyes again, so I tried my voice magick.

"*Drop the sword!*" I commanded, expecting to be obeyed and hoping I could take advantage of the action. However he did not. Instead he brought his other hand around and grasped the hilt of the sword in a double-handed grip.

"Nay witch," he said, as a look of grim determination came into his face, "I shall not."

He swung the sword slowly up above his head preparing to bring it down on me with the full force of both arms and I watched in fascination as the tip struck a beam in the ceiling.

Momentarily he was put off his blow and, once again, I moved almost instinctively.

For his blow to succeed he needed me at arm's length and so I moved in close to foil the downward swing of the sword. As I closed, the long knife in my hand turned under and came up in a vicious upward stab.

It was almost as much a surprise to me as it was to him as the point went through his tunic, in under his rib cage and found his heart.

For a moment we both froze. I, struck with the enormity of what I had just done, he, with surprise and indignation at the way of his passing.

Then, he dropped his sword and brought his arms down around me in a mocking embrace of death. Perhaps he wanted to drag me down with him, but he had no strength. He slumped to the floor, his weight pulling the knife out of my hand, its hilt now slippery with his life's blood.

"Donai, I call on thee ... Take me ... I am yours," he gasped as I looked on, stunned. " ... Revenge me."

His body failed at last as death claimed him and he rolled onto his back, lifeless.

I staggered back and supported myself on the table's edge, horrified by what had happened. I have been responsible for the death of many in my life, by all sorts of means, but this was the first time I literally had blood on my hands. If Seeker Harlan's men had been in the room at that moment, they could have cut me down without opposition.

Suddenly, I saw Harlan's body twitch and then it sat upright. I thought for a moment that he lived. This belief was rapidly dispelled by the dark radiance that shone from his eyes when his head turned towards me. There had also descended upon the room a palpable feeling of presence.

"I know thee, Wamzut of Ilbarsis," said a shockingly powerful voice that came from, but was not of, Seeker Harlan. *"Thou hast transgressed natural law!"* said the God of Death. *"Repent and kill thyself."*

The compulsion behind this command was incredible. My first inclination was to wrench the knife from the body of the Seeker and plunge it into my own but that would have meant approaching those malevolent eyes and that was something I could not do.

Instead, I moved over and picked up the Seeker's sword, reversed it and holding it by the blade placed its hilt on the floor so that I could throw myself onto its point. I was about to do this, when sanity prevailed and I hesitated.

"Yes, do it! Kill thyself," said the too eager voice of the god.

But the danger had passed. Anger bolstered my intellect. "Do it yourself, bastard" I whispered and let the sword drop to the floor.

"Thou shalt spend eternity regretting thy defiance," said Donai and I stood transfixed as Seeker Harlan's body climbed slowly to its feet and pulled the knife from its chest.

If I had been able to move I could have easily escaped the room, but I could not. Either I was being compelled not to or, I was too woozy from my wound.

Helpless, I stood and watched as the body stalked closer.

Suddenly, there was a burst of crimson light from the corridor. Harlan had either lied or his protection against such magicks had ceased with his death because the bolt of Arion's Fire burst against the body's right knee causing it to buckle. The revenging god toppled, a look of outrage on the possessed face of the Seeker.

I still could not see who was doing the casting but I heard their chanting and saw their handiwork as the front of Seeker Harlan's tunic blackened and spontaneously burst into flames as some hidden magical device was destroyed by an invisible spell. Then another bolt of Arion's fire destroyed those malignant eyes forever and I could suddenly move again.

I slumped to the floor my energies spent. I dared a look and saw that a large part of my left side was covered in blood. Feebly I tried to staunch the wound with my hands and began looking around for something that I could use as a compress. I was losing blood fast.

My rescuer, Simad, tentatively stuck his head around the corner of the door and started with surprise when he saw me. I was obviously not who he was expecting.

Feeling light-headed, I smiled weakly at him. "The cavalry I presume," I said and promptly passed out.

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