

# **Engelian Adventures: Transformations**

## **Book 1: Transgressions**

### **Chapter 31**

**by**

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## Chapter 31

Pain from my wound woke me where I lay awkwardly on a dark wooden floor. My surrounds were dark, but there was a strong smell of Jartinal Weed that made me cough, and through the rent in my shirt, I saw brownish blood seeping from under a makeshift bandage wrapped around my torso. Then a voice told me that I had to sleep again and I was not able to raise my defences fast enough to prevent some spell pushing me down into an even darker place.

Sometime later the blackness gave way to dreams where I was chased by a dark god with the face of Seeker Harlan. I took control of the dream and it was with great relish that I choked the god to death with my bare hands — lucid dreaming can indeed be very satisfying.

It took many years of practice before I'd learned to liberate my astral self at will from my body but now, as in the beginning, I can readily do it in my sleep.

I left my body and looked around at the place where I now lay. It was a small, sparsely-furnished room, lit by an Ilbarsian light jar attached to an old sconce on one wall. There was a heavy door of dark oak in one wall and the lack of windows made me think the room was underground. The limited furniture consisted of a solid desk littered with paper and writing materials, an old, battered bookcase which contained a number of weighty tomes and a wooden chest which was at the foot of the bed upon which my body lay covered by a thin blanket.

At least it did not have the appearance of a prison cell, which had been my first fear. The presence of the bed, books and desk made me think that this was someone's private room. The chalk drawings on the walls and floor, which mostly featured the symbols of Arion, made me think that perhaps Simad had carried me to his own abode. There was a

fine network of psychic material lining the ceiling: a magickal protection spell, no doubt. I was now, most likely, in that other protected place he had hinted at. And if my waking moment had any meaning at all, it was somehow associated with a large store of Jartinal Weed. I looked once more at the light jar on the wall and wondered at the coincidence that I should find some of my own handiwork here.

At this point, Simad and another man wearing dark blue robes, numerous amulets and other magickal symbols of power, entered the room. The newcomer was of medium height with short, dark, curly hair and a face that was dominated by a pair of violet eyes. This was not the only unusual thing about him. His psychic aura was that of a sorcerer and if the size of it was a true indication of his strength, then this man's power was equal to that of some of the greatest Wizards of Gunde. Curiouser still was that he was a stranger to me — I had thought I knew all the people of power in Engle.

The two were obviously talking about me and Simad's air of deference indicated that the stranger was his superior. I moved closer to the bed and placed an astral hand into Attina's head so that I could hear what was being said. At first all I could sense was the pain from the wound in my side, then the pungent smell of a common herbal healing ointment reached me. Then ...

"... is like a lioness. This one is an alley cat. Guttled Harlan with a knife while he was wielding a sword."

"And you say she was in this Gundian woman's room?" said Simad's companion while giving me an appraising look.

"Yes, I was in hiding when I first saw her; I was keeping an eye on Harlan and his men. With those eyes, her pointed ears and the tatty old clothes she was wearing; well she looked so out of place I just had to follow her and find out what she was doing. Nearly lost her too when she went around the back of the inn. Lucky for her I didn't."

"So, do you think there is some connection between the two?"

"Must be, but I have no idea what it could be," replied Simad with a shake of his head.

"Umm ... A thief perhaps, one who has followed the Seer all the way from Gunde. But it must be something pretty special to try to steal it out from under the nose of the authorities like that. Unless of course she was unaware that they were there ... You saw nothing of interest in the room?"

"Nothing obvious. Though I did not have the time to do a thorough search, perhaps I missed something."

Simad led the other man across to the bed and I had to move to one side to avoid him moving into my space.

"I had to get her out before Harlan's men recovered from the spell I put them under. And I do not mind telling you that I was pretty spooked at the time. I have never seen anything like what happened with the Seeker."

"An Alfaren in Constantine; strange times indeed; I think I will have to ask our Lord Arion for guidance on this matter. Hopefully this time he will be less obtuse."

"Have you noticed how her whole body glows with magick?" said Simad, peeling back the blanket to reveal my arms and torso.

The look the other man gave me was not one of scientific appraisal, so I decided that it was time for me to recover my dignity. I let my astral cord pull me back into my body and forced myself to wake.

"Do you mind!" I said as I grabbed the blanket and pulled it up to cover my exposed breasts. I was reassured to find that I still had my trousers on at least.

The senior man smiled at me and bowed; an old Sorendenese custom.

I sat up and winced at the pain that simple action caused. I turned and leant against the wall and wrapped the blanket close as a shiver went through my body and my vision swam. *Just how badly am I injured?*

"Good afternoon. My name is Isatics and this is Simad. We are simply repaying you for the favour you have rendered unto us."

I raised an eyebrow uncertain what he was talking about.

"You rid us of a most troublesome enemy and were injured in the process. My colleague thought it only fair that we repay you for the deed by saving you from the retribution of the Mithrans and tending your wounds."

"My thanks for that at least," I said quietly, the pain in my side making me wonder if their ministrations were of any value. "But you misunderstand. What happened was an accident. He attacked me. My reaction was instinctive and I am afraid far too effective."

"Accident! Self-preservation most likely, but I care not," Isatics said, waving away my explanations. "You were safely spirited away before anyone saw you and the state of the body is such that it is unlikely the Priests of Donai will be able to interrogate it." He smiled broadly at me. "And there is another thing in your favour. The Mithrans already suspect another, who will doubtless take the blame."

"No! You must stop them," I said, realising who he meant.

"Who?" said Simad, confused.

"The Mithrans," I said trying to think. "I want them to know that it was I who killed Seeker Harlan."

They both looked uncertain at this and then Simad said, "No. You do not want that. The Mithrans would hunt you down and execute you without trial for killing one of their own. They were investigating the woman whose room it was anyway. Let her take the blame."

"No, I do not want anyone else taking the blame for me," I said, trying to sound resolute. "I will hopefully be long gone before they come looking for me, but they must not blame another."

"You have changed your tune," said Isatics, "First it was accidental and now you want official recognition for your deed." He smiled ruefully

and then asked, "And by-the-way, how do you know that you have not just confessed to two members of the Mithran church?"

"You are both sorcerers," I said and looked around the room, "and besides, this place is hardly devoted to Mithra."

"True," Isatics mused. "And it is interesting that you recognise and understand these symbols."

"What did Seeker Harlan do that warranted such retribution and why do you want recognition for your revenge?" enquired Simad.

I had dug myself a large enough hole as it was with my unplanned lies, so I decided not to jump in it by making up more details on the spur of the moment. So in an attempt to end the matter I said, "I have said too much. Let me just say that the Mithrans will understand why he was killed, if they know it was I who did the deed. Now, just exactly who are you and where are we?"

"I am Isatics, the Voice of Arion, and this is Simad, one of my priests. Are you a follower of the First?"

Simad frowned at his leader's admission and then turned and looked at me intently. It would have been easy to get them on side by pretending to be a foreign worshipper of their god, the so-called first sorcerer, but it was something I would not do.

"No," I answered, "but I am knowledgeable enough in magick to recognise his mark. Now, you say you are indebted to me, so I would ask your indulgence and let me keep my secrets and allow me to go on my way."

Simad smiled ruefully. "I am afraid you will not be fit enough to travel much of anywhere for a while. Your wound, though shallow, is long. I had to use quite a few stitches. You have also lost a fair amount of blood. You will need to rebuild your strength."

"And," added Isatics, "we have such an opportunity here for learning. You are an Alfaren magus. There must be magick and spells that we can

teach each other. Stay here until the Mithrans lose interest and you have recovered, then we can help you slip out of town."

"What time is it?" I asked, suddenly realising that my identity as Sarina was dependent on my returning to the school before she was missed.

"It is about a candle after sundown. The moon has just risen," said Simad with a surety that struck me as strange.

I tried to stand up but had to collapse back onto the bed as pain lanced into my side. I stifled a groan and, realising the truth of Simad's statement said, "Perhaps you are right. Could you please provide me with some clothing at least?"

The man gave me an apologetic smile and dug a coarse, long-sleeved grey shirt out of the chest at the end of the bed. "Here, use this," he handed the shirt to me. "I am afraid the one you were wearing had to be put to use in staunching your wound. It is beyond repair."

I took the proffered shirt and tried to drape it over my shoulders with my free hand.

"Do you need assistance?" he asked, moving as if to help.

"No thank you. I think I can manage," I said, pulling the shirt closer. "However, if I could have some privacy. I think you have already seen enough of me for one day."

A blush appeared on Simad's pale cheeks and he bowed an apology and then motioning for Isatics to follow, left the room. Isatics, who had been staring at me intently during this exchange, shook himself and followed, catching Simad by the sleeve. They left the room talking in lowered voices.

From the smell of it, the wound in my side had been liberally covered with an ointment made from Jartinal Weed, the white-green mould that grows on bread and rendered animal fat. Simad had said he had put in some stitches and he had wrapped me in a proper bandage at least. It seemed that he was something of a surgeon, for which I was grateful, as

otherwise I could have very well bled to death. The ointment should stop the wound from becoming infected and help take the edge off the pain but, by the dark brown stains on the dressing, I could tell that the wound would be a long time in healing.

Nessa could have healed me in minutes. Tears sprang unbidden to my eyes as I was reminded that she had not only abandoned me but incriminated me for her crime as well.

I put a mental block on the physical pain and carefully put the shirt on. Then I sat back on the bed to do some thinking in this brief moment of privacy.

I desperately wanted to chase after Nessa and find out why she had betrayed me, but I was in no condition for that. The safest thing would be to make my way back to the school and hide in my identity as Sarina. If Hareld Minton cooperated, Sarina would have an ironclad alibi for the time of Seeker Harlan's death.

But of course I was unlikely ever to find succour at the school again. Although Minton was unhappy with the current Mithran temple hierarchy, he would never conspire over the death of a priest and when he found out, by reading my own thoughts, that Donai had named me as a transgressor against divine law. He would have no choice but to inform temple authorities.

The only way I could prevent him learning my culpability was to stop him having free access to my thoughts, which would make him suspicious. I could, I suppose, tamper with my own memories again but that had already proven to be a costly mistake. Besides, I could hardly outwit the god's attempts at revenge if I made myself forget about his designs on my life.

I shook away my rising fears and brought reason to play. No, the gods were not all-powerful. Mithra himself had not been able to claim my spirit when I was technically dead and surely Donai would have claimed me if

he could while I was being brought here unconscious and completely helpless. They had limitations. The animation of Seeker Harlan's body by Donai was reasonable proof that he, at least, needed to work through physical means.

So what options did I have? Could I hide from one god in the temple of another? Was the only reason I was still alive because I was under Arion's protection? Would I be stuck here forever with Donai waiting to claim me if I ventured beyond the threshold?

This made me remember Harlan's comment of the previous night, about the Mithrans seeking to have the worship of Arion made illegal within Engle. Surely his death could now be used by the Mithrans to help bring this about. My ruse against Harlan in the Scholar's Retreat had no doubt branded Sarina as an Arion sympathiser at the very least. And Isatics, when he thought about the threat to his own, might decide to throw me to the Mithran lions as a means of saving his own people.

This meant my time of relative safety here could be very short and I should probably be trying to ingratiate myself with my hosts so they wouldn't decide to use me as a scapegoat at the first opportunity. I didn't like that idea for although Simad had done right by me, his leader, Isatics, was a different matter. There was something unsavoury in the way he looked at me and the way he had said that he was going to talk to his deity made me feel decidedly uneasy.

I got slowly to my feet. Time to find my hosts and find out what they were doing. I walked to the door, half-expecting to find it locked. Surprisingly it opened, but the area beyond was lit with an eldritch light of a deep, blood-red hue. Faintly, I could hear a guttural intonation of words I could not understand, but the implication of which made the hairs on the back of my neck rise up.

The bloody light was emanating from a glowing amorphous object, which floated in mid-air in the centre of the room. The object continually

changed in size and shape, its only constant properties being its crimson radiance and its position.

In this light, I saw Isatics sitting on the ground inside a chalked magickal circle of protection. It was he who was the source of the guttural intonations.

I closed my eyes and opened them with my Mage Sight. Magick streamed from Isatics' enormous aura into the object. From his visage and his glances towards me I could see that not only was he aware of my presence but also he did not dare interrupt his spell.

Briefly I wondered whether this was something that I should do myself but my feelings of dislike towards him were not sufficient grounds to interfere and perhaps cause a dangerous failure of the spell.

Suddenly, the subject of Isatics' attention, exploded soundlessly and an enormous flood of magick spilled into the room from the point where the object had been, buffeting my sorcerer's aura and feeling like a sudden warm breeze to Attina's Alfaren skin.

This much magick could only mean that his spell had opened a portal to another, more magickal, plane of existence, perhaps even the Golden Void itself. My respect for the man's ability increased immensely.

The flood of magick meant I could not see him, but I could still hear him chanting. Apparently, his spell was not complete. Then abruptly his voice descended to a deep repeating call.

"A-rion ... A-rion ... A-rion."

It took only three calls before there was a response.

A bright flash of flame made me blink and disrupted my spell, but even before I could react to the flame it was gone, replaced by a blurred hole in the air through which I could see — another place in which vague shapes moved.

Isatics approached out of the darkness and with a triumphant smile on his face said, "Lord Arion will know what should be done with you."

I did not like this idea and was about to say so when a surprised look came over his face. "The Mithrans have discovered us. They have just broken through my protective enchantments."

As if to punctuate his statement, I heard a crash and a muffled shout and torches appeared in a doorway opposite.

Isatics turned to the hole in space. "Lord Arion! The Mithrans come in force and I am depleted."

I heard someone shout, 'Do not let them get a way,' and then there came an enormous buzzing sound and a cloud of tiny bodies occluded the light.

*"Come! Be not afraid,"* said a deeply compelling male voice.

Isatics grabbed my hand and pulled me, painfully, towards the hole in the centre of the room.

I resisted.

"There is no other way out," he exclaimed, as if this was supposed to make me feel easier about travelling to another world.

Curses and cries and the sounds of hand swatting were now coming from the doorway.

*"Come! The portal will not last much longer,"* said Isatics urgently.

I held my ground.

"Be it on your own head," were his parting words as he jumped through the hole.

Flame flared magickally on the other side of the room and the buzzing decreased. Then someone start chanting a spell.

*"The Mithrans will not be gentle,"* came the powerful voice.

There was really no choice. I was not in any condition to fight. With much trepidation, I stepped forward and an invisible force plucked me up and drew me through the portal. Lights flashed ineffectually behind me like fireworks and then the portal closed and I was ... somewhere else.

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