

Engelian Adventures: Transformations

Book 2: Transitions

Chapter 24

by

Phillip Berrie

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Chapter 24

“Which way, Seeker?” said Hand-leader Rawl.

Seeker Lomani brought the long-stemmed pipe up to her forehead and closed her eyes. It smelt strongly of Jartinal Weed, the pungent odour of which offended her, but the association of the pipe with the one she was seeking had been too strong to ignore. It had been the best choice of focus by far amongst the belongings they’d found in Negress Black’s rooms. She cleared her mind of thoughts and rotated on the spot feeling for the faint tug on her aura that would indicate the direction in which the man lay.

She pointed and said aloud, “The Mithras-damned man is still moving around.” Then more quietly to herself, “What can he be looking for at this time of night?”

The worrying thought that nagged her was that he wasn’t looking for anything, that instead he knew she was seeking him and that he was actively trying to escape her. He was after all a sorcerer and an Arion worshipper. But was he *the* Arion worshipper?

An Arion worshipper had been involved with the death of Seeker Harlan; the damage from Arion’s fire on the Seeker’s body was proof of that. Yet no Seeker had been able to successfully find any of the people involved in that death, despite the ample physical evidence left at the scene of the crime. It was a worry. All Seekers feared there would come a day when their god-given talent would become useless. Some feared that day had come.

Lomani let her hand drop and looked in the direction her quarry lay. No, he was not the one. She knew Negress Black of old. He could run, but he could not hide — at least not from her talent. He was just an ordinary Arion worshipper and a mediocre sorcerer to boot. She could take him. And if she was lucky, he might lead them to the killer of Seeker Harlan.

In the light of the half moon she looked at the area Negress Black had run to. It was a run-down area of the city. Most likely populated by simple Stemian labourers and house servants who were not lucky enough to live in their employer's house. Not necessarily a place that Arion worshippers would find sympathy in, she would have thought, but then perhaps that was why he had chosen it.

“He cannot be too far away,” she said and left Rawl to organise the four men of his command as she moved off looking for any signs of unusual activity.

Lomani had been after her man since early afternoon, when her Temple superiors had finally stopped dithering about whether they could afford to risk upsetting the Archmagus. Given permission to proceed, she had traced him to the School of Occult Studies, a place she could not follow. She, among others in the Temple, had roundly cursed the dim-witted fool of a hand-leader who had let a disguised Negress Black slip through his fingers at the gate.

Later in the evening though her luck had changed. A chance seeking had revealed that her quarry had not stayed within the School and had somehow crossed the river. She had set out with Rawl and his men in pursuit, confident of a quick capture. And yet still he had lead them a merry chase all through the night, crossing backwards and forwards across

the city's southern extent in a most confusing manner. Lomani had eventually decided that Negress Black himself was in the process of looking for someone, or something.

Lomani turned a corner and saw a lighted building ahead. Most other buildings in the area were dark, their owners rightly tucked up in their beds fast asleep. However, the lit building was a tavern and it seemed business was good enough to keep it open even until this early candle of the morning.

"Seeker?" said Hand-leader Rawl as he caught up to her.

She used the pipe and felt for Black again. "Yes, it looks promising."

"Could be tricky," said Rawl. "If he does not come quietly, innocents might be hurt... And of course, he might have met up with some confederates. I think we should call for reinforcements."

"And risk the chance of losing him again?" said Lomani, turning on the hand-leader. "No. It is late, and I am tired. We finish this now. And, if we net more fish in our net, then all the better."

"Yes, Seeker," said Rawl, who then turned to brief his men.

Lomani hoped she hadn't just bitten off more than she and her men could chew.

"If I ever see that lying bitch again, I will kill her." Simad's eyes were hot with conviction even though the words were spoken in an even tone.

Negress leaned back against the tavern wall to escape Simad's gaze and thought about the change that had come over the Arion priest. Simad

had always been a man of conviction — that was something Negress believed came with being a priest — but the death for another that was in those eyes was a new thing.

Still, Simad looked like he'd literally been through a fire since the last time Negress had seen him. His face, where it could be seen under his hood, was pink with new scar tissue and an ill-healed corner of his mouth drooled beer-tinted saliva where it wouldn't shut properly. It was little surprise that he wanted revenge.

What Negress didn't quite understand was how the woman that Simad so hated, and the woman who was being feted in the School of Occult Studies as Aieda reborn, could be one and the same. Surely, such terrible acts against another would be against the principles of a goddess of healing, even a Mithran one.

The only thing that Negress could think of was that the woman in the School was lying about who she was and had tried to kill Simad because he could give her away.

Given other circumstances he would have approached his brother Cyrus to warn him, but that was out of the question at the moment. Right now the most important thing was for the Arion worshippers in the city to regroup and work out what they were going to do in response to the new law and the attacks of the Mithrans.

"What I do not understand is how you found us?" The speaker was the young man Simad had introduced as an apprentice from the School named, Allus. He sat opposite Negress at the table and seemed more excited than scared by recent events.

Negress fished his small dousing censer on its length of fine chain out of the pocket of his coat and laid it on the table. He had long since changed out of his expensive disguise into a set of nondescript clothes as might belong to a tradesman.

“It is a finding thurible and its use is a secret of magick given to us by Lord Arion himself.” He was hoping that this turn in the conversation might break Simad out of his mood, get him thinking about things other than revenge. It had been Simad who had talked the high priest, Isatics, into asking Arion for this magick on Negress’s behalf.

And it had been lucky for Negress that they had done so those many months ago. True, it had taken almost all the bits of Simad’s dead skin he’d taken from the healing hall, but he never would have found the man otherwise.

Trying another tack Negress asked Simad a direct question. “Have you seen any sign of Isatics?”

Simad shook his head. “The last I saw of him was when he sent me off to find out how the Mithrans were reacting to the death of Seeker Harlan.”

“What?” Negress said, and then looked around mindful of how loud he had been. Fortunately, most of the patrons were far too drunk to have noticed and the tavern staff seemed too busy. He lowered his voice. “Someone killed a Seeker? I had not heard this... Was it us?”

“No. We did not kill Seeker Harlan,” said Simad, his voice lowering and his eyes seeing past events. “But I was there when he died. And, I saw what happened afterwards...”

Simad was silent for so long that Negress looked questioningly at Allus. The young man just had enough time to shrug his shoulders in mutual confusion when Simad spoke again, "It must have been a manifestation of Donai — shit."

Once again Negress and Allus shared a look of confusion.

"What are you talking about?" Negress asked.

Simad took a long pull on his drink before answering.

"Seeker Harlan was killed by an Alfaren — no let me finish," he said raising his hand as Allus tried to interrupt. "When I first saw him, Harlan was dead. Had to be. He had a dagger embedded to the hilt in his heart. There was no way he could have been alive..."

He looked to Negress as though pleading for understanding. "But he was standing. Moving. He was one of the restless dead and he was trying to gain revenge on his killer..." He drank again before continuing, "I despatched the creature in the end. Arion's Fire put it down for good."

"Restless dead and an Alfaren? Here in Constantine?" Allus sounded doubtful.

Negress himself had thought the latter were a myth, but more importantly he thought Allus had missed the point. "What did you mean about Donai?"

The priest looked at Negress again, traces of panic in his eyes. "It must have been Donai animating that corpse... I heard the words it said. I did not understand them, but they were not what Seeker Harlan would have said."

There was silence at the table for several moments, but his realisation had sparked some life back into Simad. "First Donai, and now Aieda. If the Sun god joins them, we Arion worshippers are all doomed." He pushed his mug away and got to his feet. "We must make plans, decide whether we are going to fight or flee. But first... I must relieve myself. I have had too much to drink."

Negress watched the Arion priest as he walked to the rear door of the tavern. He had hoped Simad would know what to do. That he would be safe now. But things were even worse than he thought.

"Can you explain something to me, please," said Allus drawing Negress from his dark thoughts. "Not that I see anything wrong with what you have done, but how did the brother of the Archmagus get involved with the Arion cult?"

Negress never got the chance to answer because both their eyes were suddenly drawn to the front door as it was thrown open with force.

A Mithran Seeker stood in the doorway, a man-at-arms with a drawn sword behind her, and a head-sized ball of flame hovering above the face up palm of her right hand.

Like the rest of the patrons Negress froze with surprise. It was worse for him though. He knew the woman from his days at the School and had heard impressive things about Lomani as a Seeker. He knew she had come for him and that he was in trouble.

"Ahhh, Negress Black," she said catching sight of him. "You are under arrest for being a worshipper of an illegal god. Do not make this any worse for yourself than it needs to be."

Negress didn't move. He was well aware that Lomani was likely his better in sorcery and that the man-at-arms with her was undoubtedly one of many. If he was going to escape from this, he would have to use his head and act wisely and decisively when the time was right to do so.

But he hadn't counted on Allus. The young man sprang to his feet. "Run," he yelled, and began sprinting towards the rear exit.

Lomani's eyes snapped towards the young apprentice and even as Allus made his way across the taproom floor she sent her ball of flame arcing over the heads of several patrons to block his escape.

Negress took this as his opportunity. Quickly he channelled magick into his armbands and then in a single act got to his feet and with an upward heave sent the heavy table tumbling through the air towards Lomani and her man.

The sorceress saw her danger, but could not react in time. Negress saw her get knocked down by the flying table. The man-at-arms however, had dived to one side and was now moving towards him across the room.

Turning, Negress picked up the bench he had been seated on to use as an impromptu weapon. It was several spans of his arm in length. This and its length he thought would be useful against the man-at-arm's sword, for as long as Negress had the magick to continue to power his armbands.

"Die, Arion scum," cried the man-at-arms who, with a flick of his wrist, suddenly had a throwing knife in his free hand.

Negress barely reacted in time as the man threw the knife. The blade, which had been aimed at his face, embedded itself harmlessly in the wood of the chair. But then Negress realised it had been a diversion. He heard

the man closing and had no idea where his enemy's sword was. But before he could even begin to save himself, there was a flash of crimson, the sound of an impact, and a grunt from immediately in front of him.

His attacker ploughed into Negress's chair and pushed it and him to one side as momentum carried the man's dead body into the wall. The side of the man's head beneath his brass helmet had a large hole in it that still glowed with a crimson light where a bolt of what could only be Arion's fire had struck him.

Negress dropped the chair and staggered away from the corpse desperately trying to keep from throwing up.

"Negress! This way."

It was Simad, standing at the back door, an ashen-faced, but unburnt Allus with him.

"What about Lomani?" said Negress, his stomach still rebelling. He looked to where the Seeker had fallen. "She found me once, she can do it again."

"Kill her then," called Simad, while gesturing for a man standing too close to back away. "But, make it fast. There are more of them outside and I do not think I can keep them confused with my illusion for long."

Lomani was unconscious. There was a huge welt on her forehead from where the table had collected her. They had been lucky. If she were still conscious she would be roasting them all with her holy fire. And, unlike her squad leader, she would have protection from Arion's fire.

Negress drew the Seeker's dagger from the sheathe at her side along with his long-stemmed pipe — the presence of which was very telling — from where it had been stuck through her belt.

Either of them could end the immediate threat to him, but the dagger would make him a permanent enemy of the Temple and its Seekers. He rammed it as hard as he could into the floor next to the Seeker as a warning and then fled the building with Simad and Allus.

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