

Engelian Adventures: Transformations

Book 2: Transitions

Chapter 12

by

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Chapter 12

Negress Black hadn't opened his shop for business this morning and had even ignored the knocking of several of his most important customers. He'd been far too busy preparing his escape. Now though, there came the sounds of hammering from below and, when he peeked out through a gap in his curtains, the sight of brass helmets in the street below made his blood run cold.

"Damn!" he muttered to himself. "Too soon."

He'd hoped his twin brother's position as Head of the School of Occult Studies would keep him above suspicion. At least give him enough time to tidy up his business concerns and slip away from Constantine unobserved. Obviously he'd thought wrong.

Fortunately, his recent efforts meant he wasn't completely unprepared. The news — cried through the night by heralds — of the sanctioning of non-Mithran religions had made him nervous. Had kept him from sleeping. And finally, had caused him to collect together all his portable wealth, his ledgers — legal and otherwise — and those items of non-proscribed magick that he owned. He'd wanted to take it all with him when he fled the city, but now all he could do was hide it and try to save his own skin.

By the time he'd donned his cloak and the magickal equipment he was to carry on his person, those outside had resorted to trying to break down his door. He'd bought the stout iron-bound door specifically with

this eventuality in mind, so he knew he still had a little time in which to do what he needed.

He moved to the desk and added the last of his ledgers to the iron box. He then fastened the clasps and carried the box over to the fireplace. The hearth being cool enough, he reached in and up — being careful not to upset the bed of ashes in the fireplace — and hung the box by its handle on the metal hook that was suspended there, out of sight up the chimney. Then he set about carefully poking some life back into the fire so that it wouldn't be hot enough to damage his goods, but too hot for any casual examination of the chimney space by those who would shortly be looking for evidence with which to damn him.

The sudden breaking of the magickal link to one of his enchantments told him that his threshold had been breached and that it was definitely time he was gone. So, with the sound of splintering wood coming from downstairs, he got up on top of his desk and pushed against the hidden panel in the ceiling that was concealed there.

"I told you he would be long gone," said Hand-leader Rawl from the doorway.

Seeker Lomani turned away from her apprentice, Basilly, to look at the grizzled face of the leader of the squad of men-at-arms that had been put at her disposal.

"He was here though, Rawl. And not too long ago ... The ash in the fireplace is still warm," said Lomani in response to Rawl's unvoiced question.

"Damn it. We should have been breaking down his door last night," said Rawl slapping his gloved hand against his leg.

"The Council did not want to upset his brother," said Lomani, turning her attention back to the room in the hope of finding some clue to her suspect's whereabouts. *"And, I bet there will still be Donn's price to pay when the Archmagus hears about our raid."*

"Who would have thought the brother of the Archmagus was an Arion worshipper?" said Basilly from where he was examining the contents of a shelf.

"That is still not certain yet," said Lomani as she moved to the desk. *"We still need some hard evidence against him."*

"Evidence?" said Rawl. *"The man owned the building that Arion temple was hidden under. How could he not be involved?"*

"Oh, he is involved all right, I am sure of it," said Lomani as she looked through the muddle of papers on the desk. *"We were apprentices together at the School of Occult Studies and he never struck me as being very devout in his worship of the true gods. However, we do need that proof."*

Rawl sniffed. *"And, you think those scratchings will give you proof?"*

Lomani sighed and turned towards Rawl. *"Unlike you, Hand-leader, Negress Black is an educated man. I am hoping that he left some clue to his whereabouts in his ... scratchings. However, as it appears his account books are missing, the chances are slim."*

She turned away from the burly man and stepped over to where her Novice Seeker was inspecting something above the fireplace. "Anything?" she said, causing the young Stemian to jump.

"No, Seeker," said Basilly. "I was ..."

Whatever he was about to say was forgotten as he watched her picked up the pottery container he had been edging towards. She dumped the contents onto the fire and then threw the contents of a half consumed mug of char that had also been on the mantelpiece after it. There was an angry hiss from the fireplace.

"Jartinal Weed is not the way to enlightenment, Basilly," said Lomani looking down her nose at her underling. "Faith in our Lord Mithras is the true way and everything else is just distraction. Now come, we should check downstairs in the shop before Rawl's thugs completely obliterate any clues that might be there."

"Yes, Seeker," said Basilly and followed her from the room keeping his face turned away from Hand-leader Rawl and the knowing grin on his face.

To Negress Black it seemed that every person looked upon him in an accusatory fashion and that every corner he turned hid Mithran men-at-arms waiting to spring upon him and clap him in irons. However, despite these fears, he'd been able to make his way across the city to the only place in Constantine where he thought he might be safe from the Mithrans. The dimly-lit back alley had been a welcome sight, but unfortunately, it was not deserted.

He backed back around the corner into the larger alley. The two people he'd seen could be Arion worshippers seeking escape like himself, but he wasn't prepared to take the risk. They might also be Mithran spies or informants and Negress was under no false pretensions about his situation — he was a wanted man.

Some sound from around the corner warned him that they were coming closer. Negress retreated along the tall fence that made up one side of the alley he was in as quickly and as quietly as he dared hoping to reach the street before whomever it was came into view. On an off chance, he tried a gate as he passed it and, when it opened under his hand, he pushed his way through into the yard on the other side of the fence.

Standing with his back to the gate, and his ears pricked for any sign that he'd been seen by the people who was hiding from, he checked over the yard he now found himself in. It was empty, fortunately. With its ranks of tables and long bench seats, he decided that it must belong to a drinking house or similar establishment and so it wasn't too surprising that it was empty at this time of the morning.

The murmur of voices behind him told him that the strangers were passing his hiding place. Heart in mouth he dared open the gate a crack to see who it might be. He couldn't tell much from behind. One was broad shouldered and tall — at least a head taller than himself — and wore outlandish clothes, possibly Gundian. The smaller one was wrapped in a dark cloak and led the way with purposeful steps.

No one he knew amongst the faithful was a foreigner, or that tall, so he breathed a sigh of relief and decided he'd done the right thing by hiding. Then, after several long breaths without hearing or seeing any other activity he felt confident enough to slip back out into the alley again.

This time the back alley was deserted and he moved quickly towards the last building on the right and the hidden doorway with its intricate lock that, while not being magickal, could only be opened by a sorcerer who knew its secret.

He breathed a sigh of relief once he was inside. However, his feeling of security was short lived. There was a burning smell in the air, and not that of incense, and the light escaping through the curtain in the doorway at the bottom of the stairs looked strange — it flickered, like flame.

“Hello? Is there any one there?” he called.

With mounting alarm he hurried down the stairs and stopped in shock as he burst through the curtain.

Directly in front of him, part of the shrine's collection of rarities — a shelf of rare books and specimens that he himself had procured some of — was ablaze. The recently lit fire was already in the process of spreading to the symbol-covered wall hangings. But more importantly, there was a body lying on the floor before the burning shelves.

With one arm up to protect himself from the growing heat he moved to the body, fearing the worst. He expected it to be Isatics, the high priest, or perhaps even Simad, his lieutenant — but no, it was woman.

The stench of an open bowel wound assailed him as he turned the woman over and he swallowed back a flood of bile at the sight of the blood and the hole torn in her stomach. Then he looked at her face.

“Melissa!” His voice cracked with emotions that he’d thought long dead.

But it couldn’t be her. She’d been dead at least three years.

“Melitta?”

He put two fingers to her throat. Nothing. Melissa’s twin had joined her in death.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of breaking glass from the fire and then something exploded above him sending burning liquid spraying across the room.

Hastily, he dragged the body away from the flames, but then the smell of burning hair reached him. With frantic hands he patted at beard and the loose woven plaits of his long hair and then discovered that his cloak was also on fire. He took it off and threw it away and then began beating at his coat sleeves that were also smouldering.

By the time he was certain that he himself was no longer alight, all chance of his containing the quickly spreading fire and rescuing the body was gone. Thick acrid smoke was beginning to catch in his throat. And, worse than that, the flames had spread to the shelves next to the entrance and the curtains across the doorway.

Frightened now, Negress got down close to the floor, crawled to the nearest door and went through it into relative safety. He shut the door to keep out the smoke and was immediately plunged into darkness.

A moment's concentration allowed Negress to summon his Werelight and in its pale yellow glow he saw that he was in the meeting room, a room he knew had no other door. Still, that should not slow him down for long. After all, the fire was likely to claim anything he didn't destroy on his way out. And getting out was his main priority now.

There was an air vent in this room that lead up into the building above — he remembered counting the number of wooden slats across it at a boring meeting he'd attended once — and there had been thirteen of them. His lucky number, or at least it would be from now on, because that meant it was probably wide enough for him to get through.

His memory was true, for in the corner was the latticed grill. He stood beneath the vent, closed his eyes and began chanting while simultaneously tracing out the necessary gestures for the Levitation spell. It was this spell he'd used earlier to escape across the rooftops from the secret exit in the roof of his house. Now, he would use it to raise himself up from a basement. He smiled. Arion's law of magickal symmetry held true in all sorts of strange ways.

The spell complete, he rose to the ceiling and locked his fingers through the lattice at opposite corners. Bronze nails secured the lattice in place, but he channelled a little of his magick into the armbands he'd put on under his coat and, with his strength momentarily enhanced, tore the lattice free.

He let it fall and with his Werelight preceding him he moved up into the square shaft. It was a tight fit, but with his arms raised above his head and his shoulders oriented to opposite corners, he could just fit up the shaft as he had suspected.

With the aid of his spell, he rose up the shaft. After he had travelled about a body length, his Werelight began to dim. He stopped and tilted his head up to see why. An arm span above him smoke was pouring out of an opening that joined the shaft from the direction of the fire. He moved closer and felt the heat with his hands. It was hot, but not unbearable. He would just have to move quickly.

Negress took a deep breath and moved up the shaft as fast as his spell allowed. The smoke stung his eyes, but he dared not close them in case he missed a possible exit. Fear began to gnaw at him when the wooden sides of the shaft were replaced by brickwork without an intervening exit.

He thought he'd been clever, but, what if this shaft didn't lead to a way out he could use? Then the sudden realisation came to him. *A Chimney! I am in Mithras-be-damned chimney.*

The implications of this were brought home to him painfully as his fingers ran into the underneath of the chimney cap. Almost was he undone by this as his concentration broke and his spells failed plunging him into darkness and towards the bottom of the shaft. With a desperate twist he turned his body and at the same time spread out his arms to wedge himself into place.

Shit! Now what do I do?

Heat and smoke billowed past him, up and out through the gap under the cap. His fingers hurt like crazy, though fortunately it seemed none were broken. His eyes were stinging from the smoke and although he was starting to feel the want of air, he dared not breath.

Think you dullard. There has got to be a way out of this.

Negress ticked off in his head his list of useless spells. Useless, because they all required spell materials he didn't have, or gestures he couldn't make, trapped as he was. He couldn't even recast the Levitation spell to go back down the way he had come and really didn't relish the idea of falling all the way back down the shaft to the basement.

Then he realised that it all relied on his Armbands of Strength and his reserves of magick. If he was lucky, he could break his way out of the chimney, but he would have to be quick. Already his lungs were aching with the need to breath.

His fingers sought out the chimney cap. It felt both well mounted and heavy, which was unfortunate, because it was this stone that had to go. It would do him no good at all to break through the sides of the chimney only to have his brains dashed out by the chimney cap as it fell.

Pushing his legs out to the side he gained extra purchase against the sides of the chimney. This allowed him to inch himself higher. Then, he jammed his shoulders into place and hitched his legs higher again so he could bring the upper muscles of his arms into play better. Then he channelled magick into his armbands and pushed.

For a moment, nothing happened, except that his need to breathe became more excruciating. Then he heard a crack and felt something move and the chimney cap was suddenly gone as his arms went to full extension. Dust and grit showered his face and fell into his eyes, but that didn't stop him from grabbing the broken edges of the chimney and lifting himself clear so that he could finally take a breath of smoke free air.

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