

Engelian Adventures: Transformations

Book 2: Transitions

Chapter 14

by

Phillip Berrie

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Chapter 14

"I'll catch up with you shortly, Seb" said Allus coming to a halt just past the stairs to the School's hospice.

"They said everyone." Seb, who was six month's Allus' senior, also stopped, but his eagerness was written all over his face.

"I have to pee."

"You and your weak bladder. Serves you right if you miss all the excitement."

Allus gave his companion a weak smile and turned in the direction of the nearest tree. But it was the sight of his friend continuing on towards the dining hall that gave him the most relief. "*You* have got nothing to worry about my Sorendenese friend," he muttered at his fellow student's back.

It had just dawned on Allus the most likely reason for the calling of an emergency meeting of all staff and students of the School. Unconsciously, his fingertips sought out the raised bumps of the image scarred onto his chest. It was all the proof the Mithrans would need. Damn. He had been so proud when his father had marked him with the village's totem during his last visit home. It had marked him as a man in the eyes of his village. It had meant that his father had at last accepted that his son could be of both worlds: that of the old ways and that of the Sorendenese.

He doubted the Mithrans would be so accepting.

The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that this meeting must surely be because it had been decided that the king's rule must now apply within the walls of the School as well. As a Stemian,

and the acknowledged son of a village Shaman, he would automatically be at fault. He didn't like the idea of being made a sacrifice to show that the School was complying with the king's law.

Flight was his only chance. He would have to make his way out of the city somehow and then home, to warn his father of the new law.

He and Seb had been left to guard the so-called secret exit from the School. How naive they'd been to think that the masters hadn't known that the drain under the wall was used as such. Still, there was no one there at the moment. No one to stop him leaving while the rest of them were at the meeting.

But, it would be better if he didn't have to act alone. He turned his head towards the hospice and he wondered. Thought turned to action and he made his way up the stairs and into the building. The man he was looking for met him in the doorway of the room where he'd been taken. He was already dressed and had a desperate look in his bloodshot eyes.

"Journeyman Moonson," said Allus stumbling to a halt.

The man looked ghastly. Half his hair was gone and that side of his face was also bright pink with new skin. There was also the sign of livid bruising on his chest and neck where his shirt didn't cover his skin.

"Who are you? And why are you in such a hurry?"

"I have come to warn you," said Allus throwing all pretence to the winds.

"Warn me?"

"I fear that you and I are to be thrown to the Mithran lions."

"You," said Simad, wiping spittal from damaged lips. "I do not understand."

"The king has outlawed your religion ... and mine," said Allus and opened his shirt to reveal the red and black stylised fire spirit that marked his chest. "I plan to make a run for it. Will you join me?"

When Seb reached the dining hall it was already full. He and Allus had taken the time to secure the tunnel before heading back and this meant Seb was forced to sit with some of the younger students at a table near the entrance. All eyes were on Master Minton and the woman who stood with him in front of the head table.

It took Seb several moments to recognise that this stately looking woman was the same one who had tried to sneak into the School the previous night with Journeyman Moonson, so different did she look now. She was so full of life she almost glowed. Seb closed his eyes and opened them with his Mage Sight active. He expected to find that her appearance was illusory — the product of magick — but no, the woman looked exactly the same. What a glorious creature she had become. What had wrought this change in her?

Magus Minton, an infrequent smile upon his face, turned from his conversation with the woman and cleared his throat. In expectation the hall hushed.

"Good afternoon staff, students. Thank you for coming, one and all. It is nice to be able to see you all and not hear your thoughts for once."

There was a general murmuring in response to this statement and Seb remembered that Master Minton rarely attended events with large numbers of people; his gift of thought hearing made them painful and confusing for him. Yet, here he was smiling.

"First of all I would like to call off the search for our intruder." He turned and indicated the woman. "As you can see, here she is. It was all a misunderstanding. Is Journeyman Moonson with us?"

All eyes searched the room, but the injured party was not in evidence. Seb noticed that Allus hadn't arrived either — trust him to miss everything. He turned back to see Minton looking at the woman who gave him a little smile and a nod of encouragement.

"Not to worry. And now for the big news."

Minton stopped and looked around the assembled faces like some sort of performer in a mummer's show. Then he turned and indicated the woman next to him again, said, "I would like to introduce, Aeda-Nessa." He paused for effect. "She is a living avatar of Aieda, the Goddess of the Moon."

Stunned silence filled the room.

The woman stepped forward and spoke. "I can imagine this is all a bit hard to accept."

"Damn right," snarled Magus Narim, who was one of the closest adults. "You can not just sneak in here and ..."

Narim's voice trailed away and Seb followed his eyes and saw that they rested not on the woman, but on Minton, the GateKeeper — he, who Seb had been told, it was impossible to keep secrets from.

Magus Althea, who stood at Narim's side, took up the argument, but Seb could hear the uncertainty in her voice. "I am sorry. Are we supposed to accept you are a manifestation of the goddess on the word of one man?" She turned to Minton. "Sorry Gatekeeper, but I know there are people who are immune to your gift—"

"She is not immune," said Minton raising his voice to be heard over the growing murmuring. "I can read her thoughts," he continued into the lull he'd created. "She is who she says she is — the great healer ... And, she has healed me."

"What?" said Althea and Narim together and the room burst into talk again.

Minton stepped forwards, hands raised for quiet. Eventually, he got it.

Seb had not spoken. Instead he had watched the woman. When Magus Althea, Allus and he had trapped Journeyman Moonson and this woman entering the grounds she had suddenly claimed she was an Aiedan priestess — a fact apparently unknown to confederate. Then later she had almost killed Journeyman Moonson with some mysterious power. Seb was not convinced. Those were hardly the acts of a priestess, let alone a goddess of healing.

Minton spoke: "Those of you who know the nature of my power know that it was also my curse. The thoughts of those around me were like a constant babble in my ears." He stopped, looked around and smiled before continuing. "For the first time in many, many years I can not hear a single thought from any of your heads."

Over the sudden burst of talking Seb thought he saw Minton add, 'May Aieda be praised', and he realised just how much of a burden the Gatekeeper must have had all these years. Suddenly the all-knowing sentinel at the gate had become someone to pity. But still, there could be other explanations besides divine manifestation.

Seb once more looked for magic on the woman and found none. This was not conclusive evidence that Minton's mind hadn't been tampered with in some way, but that sort of ability, without the evidence of magick, was the province of ... the temple.

"Quiet!" shouted Narim waving his arms for silence.

The noise abated only slowly as several other masters of the School came up to confer with Narim and Althea. The woman, Aeda-Nessa, looked on benignly and listened to something Magus Minton was telling her.

"Is she really Aieda?" Someone was tugging on his sleeve. Seb turned to look at the girl next to him, one of the teenage novices, who he'd been forced to sit next to because of his late arrival.

"I do not know. Now shhh, let us listen, so we can find out."

Seb noticed that the girl was holding a bracelet in her hand. It was of silver and its charms represented the phases of the moon. Aieda was popular with the womenfolk.

"Be that as it may," said Narim in a loud voice. "The say so of one man, is not enough."

"What more would you have me do?" said the woman.

Narim opened his mouth and then closed it.

"Heal someone," suggested one of masters.

"Are there not others who can do this?" countered the woman.

"Have Mithra vouch for you," challenged Althea.

"Be careful what you wish for. The Sun god is not one to be trifled with. You might not survive the truth," said Aeda-Nessa.

Narim put his hand on Althea's arm to forestall her and then turned to the woman and said, "Prove you are who you say you are."

The woman smiled. "Very well."

She stretched out her arms and tilted back her head. Seb noticed that her dress was dirty, but then the dirt disappeared as the woman began to glow.

"I am Aieda, Healer, Goddess of the Moon, Mistress of Love."

Seb heard the words, but he wasn't really listening any more. She had become beautiful. She was the most beautiful, the most desirable woman Seb had ever seen. Passion stirred in his loins. He tried to get to his feet to go this marvellous creature; somehow he must take her to his bed.

A hand on his arm stopped him.

He turned to look at the girl beside him. She was looking at him with huge eyes that had a terrible want in them. She too had changed. No longer a child, she was now beautiful, desirous, and *much* more attainable.

She craned her neck up and her lips met his, her mouth opened, her tongue came searching. This was oh, so, wrong, but oh, so, right. Seb took her in his arms and began smothering her face and neck with kisses. She moaned in his ear. She was ready. She was willing.

"Enough!"

And she was a girl again. Lust turned to guilty fear in her eyes.

"By the gods!" Seb was mortified. "I did not mean," he stuttered, as she ran from him and the room. His erect manhood was proof positive that he had in fact meant everything that the last few seconds had promised.

Stunned, Seb turned to look around the room where similar scenes were being enacted. And not only between man and woman. Embarrassed men and boys shunned desperate clinches. Two young women, both of whom Seb had bedded in the past, were now looking at each other in shock. The magi Narim and Althea were rising from the ground and adjusting their clothing.

"Mithra's proof would not have been so pleasant," said Aeda-Nessa and laughed as she pushed a dazed Minton from her breast.