

Engelian Adventures: Transformations

Book 2: Transitions

Chapter 2

by

Phillip Berrie

A Story (Vers 1.0); © Phillip Berrie, 2010.

Check www.phillberrie.com.au/Fiction for other episodes and other tales.

Chapter 2

The mud beneath the dock smelled more of the sewer than the river and the thin mist coming off the darkly flowing water provided no warmth for Nessa as she huddled against a slimy pylon wrapped in her, probably, ex-lover's magickal cloak; an enchanted piece of clothing that seemed to repel heat as effectively as it did light. While wearing it she was invisible to the normal eye, but that had done her little good against the noses of the dogs and the magickal senses of the magi that were searching for her.

In desperation she had made her way to the riverbank hoping to elude the dogs by wading through the shallows. A trick she had been taught by one of her older brothers many years ago, when she'd had a family. Back before she had become one of the Chosen of Mithra and a priestess of Aieda. Back before she had been sent to the small town of Ilbarsis in the north as punishment for not submitting to Seeker Harlan's sexual advances. Back before she had killed a lay priest with her supposed power of healing. Before she had let the fear of capture and punishment by the temple bureaucracy she now despised make her steal from her lover and leave without saying goodbye. A tear of regret fell from her cheek and was instantly lost in the mire.

Wamzut had said he would protect her. That he was more powerful than Seeker Harlan — stupid male pride. What he did not understand was that in a woman's body he had more to contend with than simple swords and sorcery. His male mind did not appreciate the prejudice against women that existed in society and that the temple of Mithra was a power unto itself in matters of its own clergy.

Seeker Harlan was but the beginning of their troubles. Their only hope was escape and she had told him so but, being as pigheaded as any man, he'd refused to leave Constantine before he had finished his sorcerous researches. So she had left him, and regrettably the beautiful Attina, whose body he possessed.

It had been a difficult decision to make. She had been taken with Attina from the very first moment she had laid eyes on her in a drinking house in Ilbarsis. And, she had to admit, Wamzut, the magus who now inhabited the beautiful Alfaren's body and whose male mind had become so besotted with her own, had been very useful in helping her escape from the temple's retribution in Ilbarsis. However, it was her own safety and freedom that were paramount now. She would not submit to the likes of Seeker Harlan again and if that meant leaving Attina, the temple and Constantine, then so be it.

Her decision to leave, made after a night of soul searching, meant that she had already packed her belongings and left the inn by the barest of margins when the Seeker and his men-at-arms had come calling. Word must have reached Constantine of the lay priest Nessa had killed in Ilbarsis and the involvement and quick departure of the Lady Sarina, Wamzut's new official, but illusory, identity. Nessa had not stayed to watch but she felt certain Seeker Harlan's diligence had a lot to do with the slight Sarina had made towards him on the previous evening. Still, he would have found evidence-a-plenty in Sarina's travelling chest.

Nessa regretted leaving her moon medallions now, they were particularly damning, but she hadn't had the heart to throw them away and had assumed that they would be safe in the Wamzut's belongings.

Besides, she owed him something to replace the golden ring and the other things she had taken. Not that they were of equal value but the medallions were the only things of any worth she possessed and she wouldn't have been able to sell them.

She pulled the bag that carried her possessions to her and felt again the hard metallic ring that it contained. A thing of wondrous magick according to Wamzut but she was more interested in the weight of the gold it was made of. Surely, somebody would give her enough coin for it for her to escape Constantine with some hope of a future.

The water was noticeably closer now. The tide would flush her out of her hiding place soon enough without the need of any dogs. Perhaps she'd already waited long enough. There had been no sounds from above for a while. She eased into a half crouch and rubbed her cramped legs through the material of the trousers she had stolen off a washing line. Then picking up her belongings she made her way slowly towards the end of the dock and the dim light provided by the waning three-quarter moon.

When she was able to stand erect she did so only to check that there was no one visible either on the road that ran along the riverbank or the dock behind her. Satisfied, she found a dry rock and, after undoing the top clasp of the cloak so that she could see herself, sat down and removed the worst of the mud clinging to her boots with a slimy piece of driftwood. Then she clambered up the short grassy slope to the roadway and with her bag on her back started walking upriver searching for a small boat that she could use to get herself across the river. It was the only thing she could think of to finally throw off the dogs and their masters. She could do

nothing against any magick they used, but that she was still free, meant that it was not infallible either.

Within a hundred paces it appeared as if Aieda had smiled upon her plight for in the pale light of the moon she saw a small coracle lying upside down on the bank. She slipped and slid her way back down the grassed slope. The owner had tied it to a gnarled root, probably thinking it would not be worth stealing, but Nessa was desperate. She turned the small craft over and untied the greasy rope. It was as she pushed it down into the water that she realised that without a paddle she would be at the mercy of the current and the owner had apparently not been that trusting. Stymied, she pulled the coracle up onto the bank again and upturned it so that it hid her bag of possessions. She then scurried up the bank again and went looking for something she could use as an oar.

The other side of the road was lined with warehouses all locked up for the night. Closing the top clasp of the cloak again she made her way back to the docks. Here there were large piles of anonymous goods contained in boxes, barrels and bags but nothing that suited her needs. Off in the distance there was a lantern burning and the night watchman who sat in its glow was awake enough to be smoking a pipe. Although the cloak made her invisible Nessa was loath to approach too closely for fear of alerting him with the sound of her footsteps; an eerie quiet had settled on the place. She shivered with the cold and something more.

Instead, she ventured into an alley hoping to find some discarded timber. Little if any light made its way to the ground and she was reduce to scuffling around with her feet amongst the litter she could feel there. A faint, cloying, burnt smell made her think that someone had cooked

something near here recently. Perhaps there would be some wood left over from the fire.

"Who goes there!" said a hoarse voice in the darkness.

Nessa froze.

A small orange-yellow light blossomed in the darkness and a voice that spoke to her experienced ear of pain said, "Reveal yourself or I will strike you down. I am not done for yet."

Lying up against the side of the warehouse was an injured man. In the light from his magick she could see immediately that he was both badly burnt and bloodied. Instinctively she moved forward to help. In response he mouthed something she could not hear and twisted his undamaged left hand into a strange shape. Suddenly that hand was swathed in crimson fire. Realising her danger she stopped, but he flung the fire anyway and Nessa screamed as something warmed her hip as it passed through both front and back of the cloak, narrowly missing her body.

Aghast, she stood frozen, paralyzed with indecision. She had never been attacked magickally before and did not know whether flight would do her any good or just make things worse.

Fortunately, the fire on her attacker's hand flickered and died. "Get thee gone, magickal spirit," cried the wounded sorcerer. "Though my magick cannot touch you I am vouched safe from your kind by Arion, Lord of Magick himself. Touch me at your peril."

The mention of the god's name brought back a memory. The memory of a slim mage with long lank hair who had showed defiance against the

taunts of Seeker Harlan in the Scholar's Inn the previous evening. The hair was gone now mostly — burnt away — the face left seared and blackened, the voice though was still defiant. A name came to her.

"Simad! Stop. I can help you," she said, his pain overriding her fear.

"A woman? I do not know any woman who can make herself invisible. Be gone, taunting spirit," he said and with a quivering hand inscribed a ward against evil in the air.

Nessa undid the top clasp of the cloak and became visible. The cloak smoked from the holes in front and back. "Passing strange to see one such as thee using a Mithran symbol," she said as she slapped out the smoldering edges of the holes with her hands.

Simad was past responding to flippancy. His head dropped back onto the ground with a thud. The magickal light faded and everything was once more dark in the alley.

Nessa lost no more time and from a pocket of her purloined workman's coat she withdrew another stolen item — Wamzut's Light Jar. Mindful that she was making it easier for her pursuers to find her, but unheeding the consequences, she twisted the top of the device and activated the magick within. Light once more illuminated the alleyway and she bent to the injured man.

The sword wound in Simad's right arm was nasty but not life threatening. Of more concern was the fire damage done to the poor man's head. Still it must have been a very short exposure to the heat, as he showed no sign of damage to his eyes or of having breathed in the flames.

She concluded that the injuries were mainly cosmetic, obviously very painful, but something she could deal with.

In a voice cultivated from years of bedside ministrations she explained that everything was going to be all right. That she was going to use a gift from the Moon goddess herself to heal him. That he should trust her. He was beyond caring so she placed a hand upon his brow and with some trepidation sent him to sleep to both relieve his pain and so that she could work without interruption.

The last time she had done this it had been in anger and the man had resisted. His heart had failed him and she had not been able to restart it – the man had died in her arms. She pushed these dark memories from her mind and got on with the task at hand.

Her hands moved lightly over the blackened skin while she poured her healing energies into the still living flesh beneath. She felt it respond and start to heal. The second pass of her hands over the effected areas was rougher, sloughing off the dead skin to reveal the new underneath.

The shirtsleeve of the wounded arm was covered in blood and she tore it away to prevent the material fouling the wound. It still bled sluggishly, which was fortunate, as she had not the time or means to clean it. She prayed to Aieda that there was no dirt or other corrupting influence within for that would make the healing harder and take longer as the body dealt with the foreign material. Once again she applied her gift and finally sat back to survey the results.

Although he still looked a mess Simad was now more or less healed. Even his hair had sprouted again showing as a fine prickle on his scalp,

cheeks and chin. He would need an overall shave if he did not want people to stare at him for she had only needed to heal one side of his face.

A smile appeared on her face only to disappear moments later as she heard a sound behind her. She looked over her shoulder and saw a thickset man in seaman's clothes standing at the end of the alley. His pipe fell unheeded at his feet as he turned and ran off — the night watchman — she had to get away before the guard or worse, her Mithran pursuers, arrived.

Knowing of the animosity between her own religion and the worshippers of Arion she decided she could not leave the unconscious Simad to their mercies so she shook his shoulders. "Wake up! We must leave this place."

"Wha — What is happening?" he said groggily.

"If you stay here you will be found by the Mithrans," she said dragging his sparse frame up into a sitting position.

At this he sat up straight and said, "Those bastards have already had one go at me tonight. I was badly injured. I cannot ... Wait! I feel no pain. Whose blood is this? Who are you? What is going on here?"

"Questions later. We have to go now," said Nessa all thoughts now on escape for both of them. He looked on in consternation as she began looking around the alleyway.

"Aha! This will do," she said and picked up two staves from the remains of a broken barrel.

"I am sorry but just who are you?" Simad said feeling his healed arm. The blood was still sticky and his left hand came away stained.

"You do not recognise me but I saw you yesterday in the Scholar's Inn. Now get to your feet and come with me. I have a boat, but I need your help."

"But what is your name?" asked Simad as he slowly climbed to his feet.

Nessa hesitated. "My name is Belle," she said using the false name they had given her. In truth she looked very unlike the elderly matron she had been disguised as the previous night. She now wore a man's clothes and a man's cloak and with her short cut bleached hair hidden under her hood she had been taken for a slightly built man more than once this long day. "Now, come quickly, I do not think the guards are far off and the night watchman will know where to find them."

She thrust the makeshift paddles into his hands and picked up the Light Jar from where she had left it on the ground. Reversing the twist of the lid she plunged them back into darkness and put the jar back into the pocket of her coat. Then she reached for him and found an arm. "We must be quick and quiet," she said and led the way back to the docks.

**Enjoying the Story?
For more, and other stuff, visit
www.phillberrie.com.au/Fiction**