

Engelian Adventures: Transformations

Book 2: Transitions

Chapter 4

by

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Chapter 4

Nessa and Simad had almost made it to the coracle when he plucked at her sleeve. "Do you have anything to do with the moon?"

She stopped in sudden fear. Did he know her true identity? She turned to look at him, but his ravaged face was only a silhouette outlined by the distant light from the night watchman's hut. "Aieda? Why do you ask?"

"No. Not the goddess, the Moon." Simad pointed to the heavens where the glow of the waning moon was obscured by clouds. "My forecast told me that a Moon-aspected woman would enter my life and that she would bring both life and death with her, so I was wondering ..."

Nessa stood speechless. Forecasts. Life. Death. She'd heard of people who used the slowly changing face of Aieda and her phases to predict the future, but this was the first time she'd actually met a practitioner, and one who was a magus to boot. Surely he should know better to believe in such superstitious nonsense.

The sudden arrival of men carrying lanterns in the distance made her come to her senses and she pulled him down the bank to the river's edge

and out of sight. Both of them ended up with wet muddy feet as they overshot and stumbled into the water.

"Faah," said Simad as he lost his footing and sat down heavily in the mud.

"Quiet," hissed Nessa. She pulled her feet free of the cloying mud and, keeping low, crept up onto the bank.

Simad groped in the river and withdrew a muddy slipper from which he poured water. "Where is this boat?" he whispered in obvious disgust as he put the shoe back onto his stockinged foot.

Nessa quietly upended the coracle and put her bag into it. Looking along the riverbank in the direction of the docks she could see a lantern held high in a gloved hand.

"If you think I am—"

She stopped his complaints with a hand across his mouth and a warning in his ear, "Be quiet. They will hear us."

He removed her hand and in a quieter voice said, "I am not getting into that thing. I can not swim, and it would no doubt sink first thing and

drown us both." He shifted around into a crouched position. "Now, let me have a look at what we are up against."

Nessa pushed the coracle into the water while Simad moved carefully up the bank. The stupid man could do what he liked. She *could* swim and the mist on the river meant she only needed to go a little way from shore and she would be hidden from sight.

"Not a sorcerer amongst them," Simad said. "This should be fun."

Nessa hesitated. Normal city guards? She could not hear the dogs that the Mithran men-at-arms had been using earlier. Simad was a hunted sorcerer, a worshiper of the dark god of magick, Arion. Would he kill them?

"What, what are you going to do?" she whispered.

"I think the time and atmosphere is right for a little subterfuge. Let their own fear defeat them. Now be quiet I need to concentrate."

Nessa's indecision delayed her long enough for her to see the sudden appearance of a faintly-glowing and undamaged duplicate of Simad on the roadway above. He gave her a quick glance and winked at her before

turning his attention back to the illusion which began striding off in the direction of the guards.

"Stop! Who goes there?" came a deep but uncertain voice.

Simad whispered into cupped hands and his image said, "So, you would hunt me?" The left hand of the illusion became limned with crimson fire and it lifted as if readying to throw the fire. "Stand and fight, and Arion's fire will strike you down. Flee, and I will spare your pathetic lives so that you can tell your masters that the followers of Arion are merciful and not murderers like those accursed Mithrans."

There was no dissension amongst the gathered guards and Nessa heard the crash of a lantern hitting the ground and the sound of running feet.

Simad's apparition disappeared and he turned towards her. "I have bought us some time. The Mithrans will come in their place and will not be so easily fooled."

"Yes. We must flee!" Nessa turned back to her boat.

"No," said Simad. "We must hide, and there is a place near here where their magick will not be able to find us."

Half a candle of stumbling movement amongst the moorings and riverside detritus later Nessa had become convinced that Simad must be able to see in the darkness and mist far better than she could. Finally, after scraping her shin against yet another taut rope on the dark and slippery bank she called a halt.

"I must rest," she said and sat down on the damp earth.

Simad's insistence about the unseaworthiness her coracle had made her doubt it herself and so she'd decided to stay with him. His knowledge of this area of the city was better than hers anyway and, she had to admit to herself, it felt better to have a companion.

"We are almost there, Belle," came the soft eager reply. But he came back and sat by her while she rubbed and healed her damaged skin.

"You still have not told me where we are going?"

"And you still have not told me who you really are. For the life of me I can not remember you from last night, but never mind." He pointed ahead along the bank to where magickal lights on poles stood above a dark wall. "See those lights ahead. They belong to the School of Occult Studies. Within its walls the sorcerers of the Mithrans will not be able to find us."

"Why would the School hide us from the Temple?"

"A sense of fairness and an enlightened point of view, perhaps," he replied glibly. Nessa's brief moment of hope was dashed when he added, "No, perhaps not, but I am a graduate of the School and I do know that it governs its own grounds by King's law. Besides they can not give us over if they do not know we are there, and *I* know a secret way in." He got to his feet and held out his hand to help her up. "Come, the sooner we get within those walls, the safer I will feel."

Their moment of rest over, they began moving again across an area of parkland that separated the School from its neighbours.

Nessa initially wasn't sure the School was the best option for her, then changed her mind deciding it probably was. The last time she had seen

her lover she'd been in her disguise as Sarina the Gudian Seer on her way to the School. The magus in Tina's head, Wamzut, had been wanting to do some research in the library there. If he was still in the School then perhaps, considering recent events, he could be convinced that what Nessa had done had been in both their best interests. And anyhow, if he'd found out the truth, then the School was probably the last place in all of Constantine that he would search for her.

Simad stopped suddenly and pushed her unceremoniously to the ground. "Sshh," he said quietly as she started to protest. He pointed towards the street in the distance where she could now hear the barking of dogs. Two men-at-arms carrying lanterns stood at the corner looking in their direction; she could tell they were Mithrans from the yellow gleam of their polished brass helmets. As she watched another two came into view being dragged by eager dogs on long leads.

"Come, we must move quickly," was Simad's only comment as he moved off, now on his hands and knees.

Nessa followed as best she could burdened as she was with her bag. Was this the right thing to do? Should she perhaps go the other way?

Perhaps the dogs would scent Simad and he would lead them a merry chase away from her. Should she use the cloak, stand up and run? These men-at-arms were not Seekers or Priests. She would be invisible to them and be able to fool the dogs by going back into the shallows of the river.

Before she could make up her mind a bright light appeared near the wall between themselves and the Mithrans. The light was on the top of a long staff held in the hand of a large bearded man wearing a green cloak. The dogs stopped at his appearance and put their tails between their legs and Nessa heard a gruff voice calling on the guards to stop.

A hint of motion out of the corner of her eye made her turn toward Simad to see him signalling her frantically from much nearer the wall. She ducked her head down and crawled towards him as fast as she could dragging her bag after her. In the distance a conversation was going on between their rescuer and the Mithrans, but she could not make out the words.

"Quickly." Simad pointed down into a narrow ditch that ran between the wall and the river. *A drain?* she thought, momentarily disgusted with

the idea. *Still, it could hardly be worse than the mud under the docks.* She entered the ditch.

Simad kept watch and uncertain as to what was expected of her she moved slowly towards the wall feeling suddenly claustrophobic. Despite the sight of Aieda veiled in thin cloud high above her she felt that there was now something between her and the sky. Tentatively she reached out a hand but felt nothing.

Simad joined her. "We are in luck," he whispered, "Magus Narim, the School's Defender, is providing a diversion for us." He squeezed past her towards the wall and she flinched as his sorcerer's aura came close enough for her to feel the tingle of it against her face.

So like Tina — No, not Tina, that was Wamzut, the magus who was within Tina's body. It was he who was the magus. It was he who'd got them into this mess with his arrogant male pride. A woman would never have slighted Seeker Harlan as he had.

Simad stopped immediately under the wall and she heard him mutter something then there was a soft squeal of metal on metal. He disappeared into a hole and pushing her belongings before her she

followed him past a lattice of cold metal strips that had been swung aside like a gate. Within, there was a dark low-ceilinged chamber and she saw his arm, head and torso briefly silhouetted against the lighter darkness outside as he pushed the gate closed again behind her. There was a click as it locked into place.

"If Narim is outside, then hopefully we can sneak in without being seen. Follow me," he whispered in the darkness before pushing past her again.

Nessa followed the sounds of Simad's crawling along a narrow-sided tunnel then saw dim light past the silhouette of his body. Suddenly, he pitched forward and a set of vertical wooden bars clattered down directly in front of her face pinning Simad's legs to the ground.

She stopped immediately, a feeling of rising panic threatening to overwhelm her. In desperate haste she reached up and closed the top clasp on the cloak making herself invisible. Perhaps they would not be able to see her or perhaps not notice her if she made no sound.

A woman's voice came from above, "Show us how you are privy to the secrets of the School of Occult Studies?" it challenged.

"I am a graduate," came Simad's muffled reply. Through the bars Nessa could see that a stout pole with a fork on its end held his head down in the muck at the bottom of the channel.

"Prove it," came the stern voice. Simad squirmed and Nessa saw a pale white glow coming from the region of Simad's head.

"State your name and the reason for your visit. I advise against lying as I will know it if you do." Although the words were strict something about the woman's voice had softened. Was this all an elaborate test?

"My name is Simad Moonson — it was Bhail Nochadan. As my medallion proves, I am a graduate of the School under the second name and a priest of the god Arion under the first. I am fleeing the King's decree that has made me an outlaw and beg sanctuary for myself, and the woman with me."

King's decree? This was news to Nessa. Last night Seeker Harlan had spoken of a Mithran petition to ban the worship of Arion; this had been tried before without success. Where did this talk of a King's decree come from? Though it did explain why there were so many searchers in the streets. How unkind were the fates that had thrown her together with

someone who was even more wanted than she was. She winced and expected immediate retribution to fall upon Simad.

"Is she a sorcerer?" asked the woman. The voice had hardened again.

"No," said Simad, "She is a healer though, I owe her my life."

"Is she a priest?"

"I ... I do not know. You will have to ask her that yourself."

"You, you in the tunnel, I call on you to surrender," came the woman's voice, "I can fill this channel with water in an instant, if I need to. If you do not wish to drown you will tell me who you are and why you wish to claim sanctuary in the School?"

Nessa had failed. Her attempt to flee the authorities had come to naught. Wamzut had told her of the School's gatekeeper; a man who could hear a person's thoughts as if they spoke them aloud. There was no use lying if he were present. All would be revealed and she would be handed over to the Temple and be punished for her crimes. Her only

chance was if she could convince these people that there had been extenuating circumstances.

"My name is Nessa Hilgar, I am a priestess of Aieda." Silence answered her claim and she saw Simad's body tense. No doubt he now thought her a spy, caught in the act. "I seek sanctuary because I am fleeing from Temple authorities for a crime I committed in the north. Wamzut, the magus of Ilbarsis, will vouch for me and confirm that my crime was committed in self defence."

Once again stunned silence met this revelation.

"That is absurd enough to contain at least some truth," came the woman's voice, "However, the wizard can not vouch for you as he is dead—"

"You may know him as Sarina the Gundian Seer," said Nessa quickly.

Simad made a muffled exclamation as though he knew that name and then the woman's voice said, "Let them up, boys. I for one need some answers to these riddles."

Nessa saw the pole and then the wooden bars lift up from off of Simad. As he struggled to his feet she undid the clasp on the cloak. There was no need to make this situation even more tense by not being visible when she crawled out of the tunnel. And besides, Wamzut had told her that the cloak would not fool a sorcerer for long, so no doubt it would be useless here anyway. Still it might serve as a diversion for the rest of her treasure, if she was lucky.

Simad climbed out of her way and Nessa heard a gasp and then a young male voice said, "By the gods man, what happened to you?"

"The Mithrans did it when they attacked my home," Nessa heard Simad say as she emerged from the tunnel.

"Quiet!" said the woman's voice. "You in the ditch, stand up, slowly."

Nessa got carefully to her feet. A number of people were clustered around the trench and the huge tank that fed into it. Two were youths dressed in grey tunic and trousers and sporting large copper amulets like the smaller silver one that she now saw hanging from Simad's neck. One of the youths carried the forked pole while the other held a spear at the

ready. The third person was a dark-haired woman and although she wore a voluminous dark cloak Nessa could see a golden amulet gleaming on her breast.

"Remove the magick cloak," commanded the woman.

Nessa did so and placed it on the ground, which was about level with her hips, then she slowly turned around when commanded to do so. She was taken aback at the venomous glare that Simad gave her. In his eyes she was now one of the enemy.

She was told to empty her pockets, which she did, placing their contents on the cloak. These were then taken away by one of the young men who also took her bag. Simad was treated similarly and relieved of a gleaming silver bracelet and a belt knife. Only then were they allowed to climb out of the channel.

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