

# **Engelian Adventures: Love is Blind**

by

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## Love is Blind

"Miss Cytherin? The magus will be here soon and you are not ready."

Lucinda held up the pot of foundation cream. To hide the scars on her mistress's face they had to cake on Cytherin's makeup. It made her look like an actress, or worse, a courtesan. But what else could they do?

Cytherin sat looking distinctly out of place at the unadorned dressing table amid the manly furnishings of the bedroom she and Lucinda had been given to use. She was staring at her pock marked image in the old-fashioned mirror they had had to ask specifically for and sighed. "I know Lucinda ... I know. However, his message said specifically that I *not* apply makeup today."

"What? Why not?"

Cytherin shrugged. "I don't know. Perhaps he wishes to check that I am no longer diseased. With my luck he will find something, have the wedding called off and send us all home to Constantine in disgrace."

"He would not dare. Would he?"

Lucinda had been part of Cytherin's household since before the pox had marked her face and taken her younger brother. The girl had been six and lucky to survive. Now she was seventeen and Lucinda had been the closest thing to a confidant the poor girl had had since coming into womanhood after the death of her mother five years before.

"Damn scars! I hate them," said Cytherin.

"Now, now, a few spots are nothing, you could have died, my dear."

"How could I forget? You keep reminding me." Cytherin's tone was one of exasperation and defeat. "How could any man love this?"

"My dear, you do yourself an injustice. You obviously won Lord Vead's heart with your intelligence and charm when he came to visit last year," Lucinda said picking up a hairbrush and running it through Cytherin's hair; it ran freely, the hair already combed and glossy. Lucinda envied the girl her height and hair if not her blemishes. "Don't you remember how he singled you out for attention at the masked ball."

"Yes, I remember ... I also remember how he recoiled when he saw my face the next day."

"Still, there were many eligible women at the ball that night but it is you he chose to pay the bride price for." Lucinda handed her mistress an atomiser containing her favourite perfume.

"It is my father's political favour he wants," said Cytherin spraying on the scent. The smell of rose blossoms filled the air and she breathed deeply before continuing. "His father is a commoner, some sort of merchant, isn't he?"

"I believe so. But it is the son you are marrying, not the father, and don't forget he's a rich man. *Very* rich, or so—."

A knock at the door stopped Lucinda and the two women looked at each other, eyes wide. "You had better let him in," said Cytherin finally.

Lucinda walked across and opened the door enough to peek out. The man in the plain brown robes on the other side was not what she had been expecting. He was old and short and pale of skin like her, not tall and brown-skinned like the Sorendenese; the conquering race. He had long hair and a beard, both grey, but they were straight, not crimped into tight curls as was the

norm for patriarchs. At first she thought he was a servant but then she noticed his eyes and their strange colour, which was blue.

"Magus Wamzut?"

"Good morning ... Lucinda, is it not?"

Those strange eyes had focussed on her briefly in an unnerving manner before softening. Despite his apparent age there was no weakness in this man and his voice had a compelling quality which made Lucinda bob her head.

"Yes, magus."

"Might I see your mistress? She is expecting me, I believe."

"Yes, magus, come in." Lucinda backed away allowing him entry. "I am afraid she is not as ready as she could be for your audience."

"I am a wizard," said the strange man as he entered, age-spotted hands clutching a brown velvet bag in front of him. "And she will be fine as she is."

"Pardon?"

The man was looking beyond Lucinda. Turning, she saw her mistress standing proud and tall in the centre of the room looking very much the young Sorendenese lady, despite her tender years. The uncovered blemishes on her face tore at Lucinda's heart.

"I'm from Gunde. Magi there are called wizards."

Lucinda started. She had assumed the man had forgotten her.

"Good morning to you master ... Wam-zut," said Cytherin having trouble with the unusual name. "I am ready for your testing."

"Testing?" He approached Cytherin his eyes passing up and down her form as men's eyes do any young woman. "What is this testing of which you speak?"

"You wished to examine me." Cytherin's demeanour bordered on defiant. Behind him Lucinda gave her head a warning shake but Cytherin took no notice.

"Examine? I am no physick. I have come to give you this, and a gift." He thrust forward the bag he carried.

Cytherin looked down at the little man; she was almost a head taller than he. She reached out and with some trepidation and took the bag by its bottom and, as the wizard released the top, the sides fell away revealing a gleaming silver headpiece. Cytherin removed the circlet and examined it more closely.

To Lucinda's eye it was an ugly thing. A broad plate of metal with unfamiliar and non-symmetrical decorations was to sit upon the brow to be held on the head with a simple band of heavily inscribed silver. It was not a good example of the jeweller's craft to her mind.

"I ... I am to wear this?"

"Yes, please. Now take a seat, you are too tall for me standing."

Lucinda hurried and brought a stool for her mistress to sit upon. Cytherin gave her a secret and anxious questioning look, but Lucinda was in no position to help. She had no idea what was going on either.

"So, you *are* going to examine me?" said Cytherin.

"No, no, can I have the circlet back?" Despite his words he was studying Cytherin's head intently.

She gave him the ring and the wizard placed it on her brow. Lucinda could see that it sat too low on her mistress's head. Surely she would not be expected to wear something so ugly?

"It does not fit," said Cytherin.

"Hmmm, yes, sorry about that. I was not sure of the size. I will fix that later. Now, if you will please be quiet I have to make a few adjustments."

Lucinda was beginning to think that this *wizard* was not quite right in the head. *Adjustments? What is he talking about? And why is he staring into Cytherin's eyes so intently?* A nameless fear made her step forward to intervene, but she stopped aghast as her mistress's face began to blur.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Shhh. I must concentrate," said the wizard.

Cytherin said nothing and sat just staring at the man's eyes. Lucinda reached out and dared to grab the wizard's arm. "Stop! You must not—"

*"Be quiet woman and sit down."*

The compulsion in the voice could not be denied and Lucinda staggered backwards until she ran up against the table which, against her will, she sat upon in deference to his command.

Anxious for Cytherin's safety she tried to stir, but she could not break his spell. All she could do was watch on with helpless anxiety as ... her mistress's face reappeared, blemish free, the circlet on her brow now a thing of delicate beauty.

"Good woman ... I am sorry," said the wizard turning towards her. "But it was a critical moment. And now, I need your eyes."

Free to move again Lucinda brought her hands up to her face fearful for her sight.

"Come here, please, I will not harm you. "

"Magus?" She did not trust him. She had never really been comfortable with magick.

"I need you to look at your mistress's face. The illusion does not work properly on me. I need you to tell me if I have missed anything. Can you see still see the pock marks?"

Lucinda got to her feet and moved closer her eyes fixed on Cytherin placid and unresponsive face. The scars that had marred it were gone. She was beautiful.

"How?"

"Can you see any marks?" The man turned Cytherin's face casually from side to side.

The skin was flawless. "No. Where have they gone?"

The man gave a small laugh of satisfaction. "Not gone, just forgotten. Now stand back, please."

Lucinda stepped back, as did the wizard. He clicked his fingers.

Cytherin gave a start and brought her hands up as if to ward off an attack. "What happened? Your eyes ... What did you do to me?"

"Forgive me, Cytherin. It was necessary. I needed your aura as calm as possible so there would be no distortions or imperfections. Now, the only limitation will be distance, which solves the problem anyway. And of course you still need to wear clothes to cover the scars on your arms and legs, but no doubt you are used to that already."

"I ... I do not understand. Distance?"

The man turned to Lucinda. "Bring your mistress a mirror."

"A mirror?" echoed Cytherin.

As Lucinda returned with her mistress's hand mirror she saw that Cytherin's hand had risen to her face. She appeared crestfallen. "I thought you had perhaps healed me," she said.

"I wish I could," said the wizard in reply, his voice gentle.

Lucinda did not understand. There were no marks. He had healed her, hadn't he?

"If you keep your hand where it is so you can feel the scars I will show you what I have done." He took the mirror from Lucinda and oriented it so her mistress could see her own face.

"I know this face. I hate it," said Cytherin.

"And your fingers are forcing the truth on your eyes," said the wizard. "Now, remove your hand."

Cytherin let her hand fall and although Lucinda saw no apparent change Cytherin's eyes widened and she breathed a single word, "How?"

The wizard chuckled again. "The enchantment of the headpiece makes the eyes not notice the marks, but it is a weak effect and not strong enough to deny the truth as revealed by your other senses. However, while you wear the circlet this is how others — bar those gifted like myself — will see you." Wamzut turned and spoke to Lucinda, "Beautiful is she not?"

"Yes," said Lucinda tears in her eyes. "It's like I've spent ages working on her face, but, it is so natural looking. She looks like I have always imagined she should look."

"This is amazing," said Cytherin taking the mirror. Her grin was infectious.

"A gift to you for your wedding, my lady," said the wizard bowing deeply.

"Just the wedding?" There was alarm in Cytherin's eyes.

"The circlet is yours to keep, my lady, though I will need to adjust it to fit you properly at some stage. But we do want you to look your best for the ceremony, don't we? Lord Vead wants it to be an event that the whole of Ilbaris will remember."

"And he needs a beautiful wife for that, doesn't he?" said Cytherin there was a note of something lost in her voice.

"My lady?" The man's eyes tightened but Lucinda could not interpret the emotion behind them.

Cytherin relaxed. "I am sorry. You have done a wondrous thing, master wizard. I am grateful for the gift."

The wizard bowed to Cytherin. "And now you must forgive me as I have other duties to attend to."

Cytherin smiled at him and went back to looking at her face in the hand mirror while Lucinda accompanied the wizard to the door.

"Lucinda," he said on the threshold. "You must remind your mistress that the illusion, though continuous, is tenuous. Anyone touching her face or even the circlet will see the truth behind it. She must learn to keep people at a distance if she does not wish them to see her as she truly is."

"Yes, master wizard."

"It will all be fine, master," said Lucinda to Cytherin's father for what must have been the twentieth time that morning. The old man was worrying worse than any mother would have, she was sure, and she was becoming concerned that the excitement might be too much for him.

Having spent the earlier part of the morning preparing Cytherin as best they could she had since been delivered into the hands of the clergy so that she could be given the rites of passage of womanhood by the priestesses of Aieda. Now all they could do was sit and wait with the rest of the guests until the ceremony.

The courtyard walls had been covered with colourful flags and streamers. Servants ran hither and thither either taking tumblers of cordial to the guests or food and wine to the trestle tables where the wedding feast was being prepared. Musicians, specially brought all the way from Constantine, filled the air with joyous music to keep those assembled happy while they waited for the great god Mithra in his chariot of fire to reach the zenith and the wedding to begin.

Despite the large number of guests, Lucinda and Cytherin's father were the only ones from Constantine present — her older brothers not being available to attend — and consequently they felt a little on the outer. This became doubly so when the wizard joined them. It appeared he made the people of his own town nervous.

"Do you think your master is going to survive?" said the wizard a twinkle in his eye.

"Yes, master Wamzut. He will survive, but you must understand that Cytherin is Lord Brin's only daughter and the last of his children to leave him. It is quite a day for him."

"Here give him this. It will help him calm his nerves. It's medicinal herbs in alcohol. If one doesn't work, the other will."

Lucinda eyed the stoppered flask he had given her and then passed it onto her master who gratefully accepted the container and took a surreptitious sip. He grimaced then smiled and nodded his thanks to the wizard.

"Don't suppose you would like a sip?" Wamzut said holding up a similar container.

She shook her head. "It would not be seemly."

He shrugged and took a sip himself before stuffing the small flask back under his robes.

Lucinda made sure her master was happy and was about to get up to find herself a non-alcoholic drink when the sound of a gong announced the commencement of proceedings.

The priests of the Sun god, magnificently dressed in their cloth-of-gold robes were the first to appear. They were followed immediately by their Moon goddess equivalents comparatively austere in their midnight blue dresses and veils, silver pendants in the shape of the full moon standing out in stark contrast against their breasts.

Then, Lord Vead, dressed in finery befitting a lord, took his place on the male side of the ceremony. He was the image of the Sorendenese noble man. His dark hair, beard and moustache trimmed short as befitted a man of action. He wore ceremonial armour and sword, indicating his right to bear arms as a citizen of Sorenden and, his rank as lord of the frontier city state of Ilbarsis was signified by the silver crown upon his brow. Lucinda's heart fluttered. A finer specimen of manhood she had not seen in a very long time.

Last to appear was the soon-to-be Lady Cytherin. She was dressed in the traditional dark blue garb and veil of the bride. There was a murmur from the crowd as she joined the Aiedan priestesses and Lucinda felt a lump of pride come into her throat and had to wipe away a tear. She had been waiting, just as expectantly as any mother, for this day for many years. She looked to the heavens and gave her own little prayer to Aieda that everything would go well.

The Mithran high priest, his long beard tightly curled and oiled in the style of the Sorendenese patriarch, spoke the necessary prayers and made the necessary sacrifices to Mithra in the ever-burning fire that had been brought, at great expense, from the temple proper just for the occasion. The prayers were long and the sun hot and Lucinda had to nudge the foot of the wizard when he nodded off and it looked as if he might fall from his chair. The man showed no remorse and Lucinda became convinced that he must be a heathen.

At last the sun priest finished and the first priestess of the goddess, her face covered by the veil of mystery, made her own brief offerings and blessed the union of the happy couple wishing upon them many children to bring happiness to their lives and security for their futures.

And then the time came for the joining and the two high priests of the respective sects came together to speak the words of the marriage lore. The couple were brought together and bound with the symbolic ties of love and devotion and at last were pronounced man and wife to a cheer from the crowd. Simultaneously, there was a great blast of trumpets from the parapets and thousands of flower petals began floating down from on high to signal the beginning of festivities.

Lucinda in her position near the front leapt to her feet and cheered with the rest but then she stopped to watch the unveiling. Smiling, Victus Vead turned to his wife. With great care he took off her headscarf revealing the magick circlet — its appearance a more delicate version of his own crown — and her thick glossy black hair.

Lucinda stole a look at the wizard and noted that although he was still seated he had an approving smile on his face. He saw her glance and winked at her so she turned quickly back in time to see Lord Vead remove Cytherin's bridal veil. Lucinda heard Cytherin's father gasp — he had not been privy to

their special preparations — and no wonder, her beauty was stunning and unmarred.

Then Lucinda's heart stopped as she saw Lord Vead take his wife's face into his hands. Then it started again with a joyous bump as, without hesitation, he kissed her.

THE END

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