

The Strangest of Days

By Tim Macauley

Phaedra placed another log in the hearth. It was the third one yet and she was beginning to feel physically anxious. Her man should have been home four hours ago. It was already at least half-two—the moon well into her descent. He was not much of a night owl. She sat huddled in a leopard pelt, poking at embers with an iron while she tried to run through numerous possibilities.

She was lost in this dismal train of thought when the door to their cottage suddenly swept open and Montague traipsed in. He was sporting a charcoal-ash leather coif, a tough jerkin with a russet tone—pockmarked with creases from years of use, and dun britches that were covered with filth.

“Sweetheart,” he said swiftly, pulling back his hood and tousling his already unkempt hair. “Sorry to have kept you.”

Phaedra rose instantly, her leopard pelt held tightly wound about her figure, in the fashion of a native squaw of Bendrasil. “What happened? What's wrong?” She asked with genuine concern.

“Nothing. I'm fine. The day went....longer than I had intended. That business with Percy was resolved. Amicably, I should add. I didn't have an advantageous spot when Deacon Whitehoor's wagonhouse passed. Clumsy of me, I know. I got caught up by Hector and you know how that goes. I agreed to only a single pint, but I got lost a bit in the cups. I'm sorry, love.” He bent over and kissed her firmly on the forehead.

“You should be,” she said, with a pouty demeanor. She was beginning to relax now. “You're not coming to bed with that stench on you. Peel it, I mean it.” She pointed firmly to the corner.

Montague acquiesced, stripping quickly down to his smallclothes. He filled two warming pans with coals and placed them under the bed and then immediately crawled beneath the covers. Phaedra joined him on the right-side, sliding over to spoon him from behind, her arm draped about his left shoulder.

She was disappointed to find him fast asleep. She longed for the comfort of her lover's touch; the reassurance that carnal intimacy would bring. She was tempted to wake him, but she thought better of it and instead gently stroked the tufts on his chest....occasionally clenching a handful firmly in a balled fist. She imagined herself a puppeteer, holding a thousand marionette strings and snickered. *There's a kernel of truth to it, I'd wager*, she thought to her own private amusement.

She loved this man fiercely. She rested her jaw on his shoulder for a spell, gently gnawing her teeth on his skin. He was clearly exhausted and she resisted waking him. As she lay in the darkness, watching the colored shadows of the hearth dance about on the ceiling, the faintest tendrils of a scent whuffed up to her nose. It was not offensive, mind you, not some sinister *balrog* that Montague birthed unknowingly in his state of slumber, but quite the opposite. It was a terribly pleasing, alluring scent—one that was of far more disconcerting consequence than had it been something most foul (which he himself would readily admit he was wont to do on occasion). Phaedra put her nose to the back of his neck, near the base of his hair and inhaled deeply again. It was jasmine—no doubt about it. This discovery left her restless now. She could not quiet the chorus in her mind and it was a very great while before she finally found sleep, which was fitful at best.

She awoke the next morning to Montague leaning over her, gently shaking her shoulder. “You slept later than I. Best get a move on. The shoppe opens in a quarter hour. I left some winterleaf that I picked yesterday in your satchel. At least I think it's winterleaf.” He smiled at his ignorance of herbs and leaned in, kissing her brow. “Here, break your fast on this, love.” He placed a platter next to her, with several small portions of smoked Gouda and an apple that he'd sliced up. She noticed he was already dressed.

“Where are you off to today? She asked sleepily.

“I've a wain of hides to return to O'Darcy's beamhouse,” he said with a sigh. “I was intendin' to sell to Dewald or the Tackmann Tannery today, but O'Darcy's lads didn't do a proper job on my second stack. A milky drop on the binding rope caught my eye and I gave it a closer look. And a good thing that I did, for much as I feared, it was milk of the lime. The hides appear to have been hastily ran through the process—I can still smell the strong odors of agents they've been exposed to, but they must have done it at a blazing speed, as there's tons of matted hair, grease, and fats still clinging to them. Even nails. I don't know who's scudding for him these days but he should be pickled himself. It's quite unsatisfactory work and there is no way Tackmann will take

these off my hands without charging me for the whole process to start anew. Let that be a lesson to me, always trying to skimp and save. Should have just done the whole process at Tackmann's—shoulda paid the premium and be glad I did for it.” He sighed again. “But enough of my misery. How is your day shaping to be? Do you need a ride to the shoppe?”

“It is a ride that I'm in need of, but not to the shoppe....” She looked coyly at him. “Maybe you should rest a few more minutes with me here?”

“I wish I could, love,” he said in a tender voice. “But I really must be on my way. Too much to do.” He stroked her cheek gently several times, gave a short kiss on her lips and left out the front door. No sooner had the front door clattered shut than Phaedra sprang from the bed. She threw on her cream chemise and beige tunic, slid into her chartreuse ranging pants and rammed both feet into her supple ermine boots. Foregoing both her herb satchel and her blade, she slipped out the back door of their cottage and strafed quickly around the woodpile, where she could espy the road in front of their home. The wain was already loaded with goods. She watched Montague finish tightening leather straps on the canvas that concealed the hides. He glanced at their small privy shed on the other side of the cottage and then walked around to the chestnut palfrey, already harnessed and waiting patiently in the front. His name was Shonodor—a name she had given him. Montague scratched Shonodor's long nose and whispered some indecipherable words to him before feeding him an apple. Her man then climbed up on the wagon's seat and looked by all accounts to be leaving—but Nature must have gotten the better of him, for a moment later, he just as quickly dismounted and hastened over to the privy.

Phaedra screwed her face up in a look of determination and ran full bore out to the wain. She reached the back and vaulted into the dark recess of the canvas, finding just enough space to wedge herself in. *The gods, if I had eaten another capon last night I wouldn't have fit!* She curled up and caught her breath. The noxious, foul-smelling scent of the hides was overwhelming—it stank of urine and meat that had run its course. She could feel the semi-gelatinous texture of lard pressing in on her from the hides. *Oh sweetheart, what have you gotten yourself into?* She thought to herself, her nose tucked into the crook of her elbow.

Several minutes later, his bowels presumably relieved, Montague returned and set the cart in motion, heading down the only road tangential to their lot. A quarter-hour more, the cart arrived at the first intersection and he headed east, as he should have, for no beamhouse or tannery would exist down the southwestern alternative. In fact, no other trades or craftsman would be down there for that matter. She was squatting now mostly on her haunches, her hands curled over the back slats of the wagon. She peered out from the darkness within, wincing with every jostle of the axle. It was a terribly uncomfortable ride and she did not envy him having to do this drive regularly. She was also beginning to seriously regret not having had the chance to make her morning water, her bladder shouting expletives with every rut in the road. *Is he actually trying to hit every pothole he can?* She asked herself. *What the blazes am I doing here? What on Earth will I say when he finds me...and he will find me. Make no bones about it. He always does.*

Just as she began berating herself, telling herself he'd never given her cause for concern, the cart made a curious lurch in the northeastwardly direction. She squinted out from the confines of her bumpy hideout. Already they were on the outskirts of Corithine. A tiny stone chapel appeared and began to fade on the left side of the wagon's wake, but it was a chapel that should have been on her right. She didn't know what to make of this. That means they were just at the junction of Avendale and Market and he took Market. But she knew for a certainty that O'Darcy's beamhouse was not down this road. The wain rambled on and she did her best to quell her nerves.

Soon enough they were in the city proper and the streets were congested with pedestrians, so much so that Montague had to noticeably slow Shonodor down. The wain rambled on another fifteen minutes before coming to a sudden halt. She felt the wagon shift as Montague stepped down and then all was still. She resisted jumping immediately out, trying to practice advice that the very man she was stalking had taught her: always count to thirty when tailing a mark. She did so, but it wasn't exactly the way he had intended. It came out under her breath in one mad streak as fast as her internal monologue could count: “one-two-three-four-five-six-seve—”

She vaulted over the wain's back slats and landed as softly as she could on gravel, immediately falling into a crouch. She peered around the aft-side and was surprised to see a tremendous amount of foliage. There

was a very long building—made nearly entirely of glass. It must have cost a fortune. It was then that she realized how carefully groomed the foliage was. Everything was manicured and potted; not a single plant within the Earth itself. It was clearly a nursery of some kind and the house of glass had to be a greenhouse. She'd heard of these recent novelties but it sounded like a decadent gimmick to her. While sunlight would be nice while tending to herbs, she would never want competitors able to watch her do her alchemy work—whose secrets were safeguarded for generations. She had to protect the formulas of her tradecraft. Besides, they didn't run in the social circles that could afford such glass. She *hmped*. At least she didn't.

Montague was nowhere to be seen. She dashed across the exposed gravel causeway, dodging into the labyrinth of potted saplings and plants. Doubled-over at the waist, she scurried down a seemingly endless row of hydrangeas before finally reaching the edge of the greenhouse.

She slowly parted a curtain of tulips and peered into the glass building. Its interior was packed with the most remarkable assortment of flora. She cursed her own hair, which at moments like these felt like an incandescent sea of green, waving "*yoo-hoo, over here!*" Under ordinary circumstances, she liked it—seeing it as an expression of her individuality...but on a day like today, what she wouldn't have traded for a masculine skullcap...

Inside the greenhouse, not ten feet away, stood Montague, speaking with a woman of the most striking cheekbones. She wore a honeyspun robe embroidered with cherry blossoms in crimson thread. Her hair was fastened up in a bun by what appeared to be a knitting needle. She had pale porcelain skin and enormous tear-shaped eyes that were offset by a slight angular tilt. It brought a butterfly to mind. *A moth, more like*, Phaedra snarled, *a drab hairy moth the color of soot*. She felt an unconscious sneer take hold on her face, the left-side of her lip curling upward. She couldn't help it.

The two inside laughed about something and then she saw the Moth give Montague a hug. Phaedra's snarl darkened into a scowl. She barely got her head down in time as Montague left out the door not one stride away. She stayed frozen to the spot, listening as his steps in the gravel receded. She felt her hackles raised but resisted the strong urge to storm into the greenhouse, grab the moth by the throat and roar, "*Feel the flame, bitch!*" She laughed at the ridiculousness of her own imagination and instead consoled herself by dropping her drawers and making water right then and there in the middle of the nursery aisle. *That helps*, she admitted.

She scurried back now to the edge of the nursery lot but realized with apprehension that she would not be able to return to the wain undetected. Montague was already driving back to the main market thoroughfare. *Just great, how could this get any worse?* She wouldn't have to wait long for an answer.

Phaedra darted out from the labyrinth of plants as the cart turned left onto Market, disappearing behind a line of tall hickories that lined the lane. She rounded the corner and entered a river of humanity. She could just make out Montague's leather coif some five wains ahead. In between scores of carts and horses were countless smallfolk, hawking or buying wares, milling in and out amongst the pack animals and the vendors that lined the shoulder of the road. It would probably have been a godsend for Montague if he were tailing a mark, but for her, it was a nightmare. She wove in and out of cover, ducking amongst mules, and hucksters, ironmongers and artisans of simple taste. For several minutes, she walked in lock-step behind a portly brewer, pushing a wheelbarrow laden with a half-barrel keg. But the wheelbarrow was slow-going in the mud and she felt the need to close the gap between herself and her prey. She worked her way up to a livestock cart immediately behind Montague. It was partitioned in the middle, with goats on one side and pigs on the other. She shadowed this cart for only a handful of minutes before her luck took a turn for the worst. Up ahead, she heard Montague whistle a signal to Shonodor and his wain pulled off on Leary. It was a perfectly good road...if it's the wharf district one were seeking. But much as before, there were simply no beamhouses nor tanneries down there. She let loose a hopeless sigh.

As fate would have it, the livestock cart ahead of her chose to follow suit, with all the rest of the wagon train continuing their long trudge further north. Phaedra was so exposed that she had no other choice than to clamber up into the cart—landing in a sty of mud and manure. A large sow came over to investigate her, sniffing profusely at her left ear. She seemed to have arrived at a verdict of some sort, making a loud snorting sound and retreating as far as the cart permitted. *Not a happy verdict, I suppose*. Phaedra tried to blow one of her bangs out of her eyes but failed. She unconsciously used a hand, leaving a streak of mud on her brow. *The gods!*

Do they all hate me so? She thought to herself as she crawled on her knees to the front of the livestock pen. The gods—with their impeccable timing, responded in kind. A goat, not a yard in front of her, let loose its bowels, nonplussed about painting the newcomer in their midst. Phaedra shook her head in frustration and cursed the heavens.

She gave herself a ten second count to feel sorry for herself—and this was a proper ten second count, perhaps even a liberal ten second count, before deciding it was time to accept the situation such as it was and move on. The stench about her was overwhelming. As if the tannin and the rotten putrid fat from the hides earlier hadn't been enough, she now had to contend with the appalling odor of steaming nightsoil. She tried again to blow the lock of hair out of her eyes, mindful not to touch her face, but the effort was pointless. A look of chagrin crept over her.

She gently navigated past the livestock toward the front of the cart and peered through the wood slats. She could see Montague's wain still ahead. They were on cobblestones now, so the ride was extra rickety and jarring. She couldn't conceive for a moment what business would bring him down here. They had just passed Pimlico and were approaching the piers along Shelley when Montague abruptly pulled the wain into an unfamiliar alley. Phaedra shuffled to the back and—after the livestock cart had cleared the alley, she shimmied over the side. She leaned against the wet dark stone of the closest wall and took a deep breath. The stench simply wouldn't go away. She reeked! *I'm gonna ring his neck, no matter how this shapes up!*

She caught her breath and then very, very slowly peeked around the corner. She could see a score or so of people sitting in a half-moon about a proprietor of some sort. They were nearly all kneeling and acting very excitedly, passionately holding up small stubs of paper. A large chalkboard chock full of tally marks hung behind the proprietor. Phaedra felt her breath drawn out. *NOOO! This HAD to be Dice Alley!* She had heard about this illegal gambling operation, constantly on the move so as to avoid giving the crown its share.

She couldn't determine what game they were playing, and as a lady, she's rather pleased to think she wouldn't know. She could see them rolling bones of some sort, a cry went up amongst the players and shady individuals claimed the paper markers from the hands of those that lost. She could see her man now on the backside of the half-moon, speaking into the ear of one degenerate fellow, who was sporting a chester brown derby hat and a chin as long as a horse. He also appeared to have a phobia of razors, judging from the two nasty clumps of hair that once were sideburns. The degenerate laughed, nodded, and then held out an open hand, into which Montague placed a small leather pouch. Phaedra felt the air drawn out of her. *So he's a gambling problem! My cur of a man has been squandering his salaries on what—games of chance?!* She slunk closer now, using the cover of some nearby crates to try and eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Describe her to me then, in painful detail," the degenerate said.

"Well what do you want to know?" asked Montague.

"Anything you're willing to share, lad. Anything at all," said the long-faced man in a lively voice.

"For starters. She's unlike any other woman I've met. She can be a firebrand, in the best sense."

"I pray thee, do tell!" the degenerate wiggled his eyebrows and drummed his fingertips together.

"She—"

Just as the conversation was getting good, the mustachioed face of a flat-nosed man leaned over the crate, stopping only a foot from Phaedra's.

"Now what do we have here?" said the mustachioed man.

"Just...um...foraging for a bit of food, m'lord." Phaedra said nervously, her eyes downcast.

"Pilfering you mean, but...gods....you smell something awful. Here...have a blood orange and be off with you then. I mean it, don't let me catch you here again." The man dropped a ripe blood orange in her lap and stared at her expectantly.

"Thank you for your generosity, sir. I won't pilfer again," said Phaedra, before scampering down the block and into the alcove of a deep doorway. After a minute, she risked looking out from her vantage point. The mustachioed man was gone and she could see Montague gesturing to his wain. The ugly man nodded and Montague clapped him on the shoulder before leaving Dice Alley on foot, heading toward the wharf. He was headed directly toward her doorway. She retreated as far back as the doorway would permit, willing herself to not be noticed. Her juju seemed to have worked, as her man passed by without event, continuing on to the

next junction where he hooked a left onto Gliesen. Phaedra was quite surprised to see that he had left the wain. She was skilled in a great many things, but her man fared better at navigating. She was not familiar with this portion of town at all and for the first time, found herself concerned for her whereabouts.

If she had any hope of catching him on foot, she had to move immediately. She rounded the corner and approached the first cluster of a dozen or so vagrants sprawled out along the eastern wall. Nearly all were unconscious from the bottom of a bottle. She stood over one who slept on his side. He had managed only to get one arm in his cloak and was snoring loudly. The internal monologue in Phaedra's mind went something like this: *That cloak is worth only five copper new...likely two copper in its present state. It's worth another five copper for the inconvenience of replacing it, she reasoned. And another five as a gesture of goodwill, so as my actions be viewed in a more favorable light—not one of thievery but of necessity—the precise position she found herself in. And with that, she leaned down, placed fifteen copper inside the man's trouser pocket, and gently rolled him to the side, slipping his other arm out of the cloak. She pulled it up and draped it over herself, disappearing completely into its appalling midst. I must make quite the sight, she thought disparagingly. And the gods, just when I thought I could not possibly smell worse....for heaven's sake....I do believe grog vomit is even more repugnant than goat shit.* She fought her gag reflex, certain for several moments that she was going to vomit, before the unconscious urge subsided. She had to hurry. Hunched over, she clambered down the alleyway, ignoring several drunks who moaned incoherently as she passed by.

She'd shuffled only three doorways down on Gliesen before realizing the alley ahead of her was empty for as far as the eye could see. She turned back around and risked raising the hood of the cloak slightly. The entire alleyway appeared deserted in both directions. Her man had just up and vanished. She was nearly at a loss for what to do, the safest consolation being to return to the wain and simply wait it out, either stowed away again in the back or sitting blatantly on the driver slats above. And then she heard a door open somewhere close by and the loud din of drink and merriment spilled out into the day. *That's a tavern, that is.* She collapsed into herself, forming a sad puddle of cloak and filth at the base of the wall, hoping she'd pass as an androgynous vagrant.

The loud voice of a morbidly obese man cried out, “Are you....are you sure you want him?”

“Absolutely,” replied the voice of her man.

“What is done cannot be undone. Remember that, Master M.”

“Aye, I'm good for it, Ogfried. Relax,” said Montague.

“And the head? Are you sure you be wanting his head as well?”

“Aye. Put it in the bag and deliver it per my terms. You'll have your remaining coin. No head, no coin.”

“So I will. So I will,” the large man said, more to himself than Montague, and retreated loudly back from whence he came.

Phaedra's heart was racing. *What kind of madness was this? Her man soliciting for another's head? Using a go-between like some kind of gutter rat? Sure he had killed before, but always for reason and for the right. What the Hell was this about?!* She could hear the softest of footfalls approaching. She dared not look up, but instead held out her hand as beggars often do. The pedestrian paused when he reached her and placed a single coin in her hand, saying, “Things will get better, old fellow. First things first, get yourself a hot bath.” It was Montague. Phaedra felt like melting into the trickle of water that cascaded down the very cobblestones she leaned against. She didn't dare even a grunt, but merely tilted her cowed head even further forward in appreciation for the coin and friendly words.

Phaedra waited until he turned the corner and then scampered after him. She cringed to imagine how her comely form looked now, her hair undoubtedly plastered to her forehead, with streaks of filth across every portion of her body. She rounded the corner and saw Montague talking with men in Dice Alley again. She scurried around the outside of the wain and clambered back into her original hiding spot. It was lucky that she made it when she did, for no sooner was she in position than she felt the wain shift as Montague took the reins and started off again. The cart ambled now for a good long while, left on Halsey, right on Dickensworth (she'd recognize the pleasant scents of this street even if she were on her death bed), and then several half-furlongs on roads that she was not familiar with. Eventually they had left the urban area of Corinthine and had moved to a very rural forested region. It had been ten minutes since they'd passed another cart and there were enough

birds in the region that she was actually surprised to hear their love songs above even the clacking of the wain. Finally the wagon came to a stop; Montague dismounted and walked away. She did her hasty count again, vaulted out of the wain and found herself in the middle of...nowhere. He had parked the cart on the side of the dirt road, in an area completely surrounded by trees. Shonodor's reins were loosely tied about a bough. A small footpath disappeared northward into the woods. She started up the path; it was time to put an end to this foolishness.

The path remained covered by a canopy of trees, and it rose and fell with the terrain, crossing two small brooks before leading into a modest dale. She had walked on the order of a furlong before the path abruptly spilled out into a clearing. She stopped short of entering and crouched again, sidestepping as quietly as she could into the bushes on her right-hand side. She thought through the lessons that her man had taught her about stalking. *Move and wait. Always stay mobile. Most of the game is waiting. Have more patience than your prey.* So she'd stay in one place for what felt like two minutes and then shift another twenty yards to the right. Then wait another two minutes. Comfortable that she had not been spotted, she slowly crept up to the edge of the foliage and parted two boughs so she could reconnoiter what lay ahead. The clearing appeared to be mostly circular, with a diameter on the order of 25 yards. In the center sat a modest table with linen draped over it. Two oak stumps sat on either side. The table was dressed with a linen cloth, a small candelabra and two modest clay mugs. She reeled in horror. It was *her linen!* *The one her oma had embroidered with a daybloom blossom just for her!* Her blood began to boil.

Just then, a woman's voice carried across the air. It was the Moth! She was gaily singing some old Celtic ditty and carrying an enormous bouquet of flowers. There were roses and chrysanthemums, daisies and carnations. It was a menagerie of all the colors of the rainbow, sucked from the ether into these blossoms and bound together for this brief burst of beauty. *She's lucky I've not got my blade with me,* Phaedra thought darkly. The woman set her bouquet on the table, stood to one side and admired the view, then shifted to another, tapping thoughtfully at her chin. She reached forward, adjusted the bouquet, primping several stems on the left and then smiled to herself. She turned and headed back down the very path she had arrived on, her honeyed voice singing strong and true: "Drink to her who long hath waked the poet's sigh, the girl who gave to song what gold could never buy. Oh! Woman's heart was ma—"

Phaedra gathered herself on her haunches and was a mere half-second from lunging into the clearing when she heard another sound. It, too, originated from the footpath. A deep man's muffled voice said, "Well, hello Madam Mariana! What a pleasure to see you here."

The woman replied, "You as well, Ogfried! Heavens, I had no idea I'd be seeing the likes of you here. It's just lovely."

"Just you wait til I'm done," the fat man said.

"I will at that," replied the Moth in a merry voice.

Phaedra could hear the loud footfalls now of Ogfried approaching the clearing. She settled back to her prior position, one foot folded under her derriere, the other leg kneeling upward. She rested her chin on her kneecap and held the bough steady ahead of her, straining to see the path. A moment later, the obese man from the tavern entered the clearing. In his arms he carried a grocer's bag, which seemed dwarfed by the weight of flesh he carried upon himself. He was huffing and puffing, clearly exuding a tremendous effort to walk so far. He reached the table and looked about ready to capsize. *He's going to sit on my linen, Athena's arse, I just know it!* She thought angrily. And he looked as though he considered it too. But the man settled for one of the tree stumps instead, sitting down with an obvious look of relief. His backside completely engulfed the stump, draping over it like a mushroom cap. Phaedra winced. *What the devil was going on here?!*

The obese man reached into his bag and first pulled out a pair of lambskin gloves, which he put on. Then he pulled out cutlery and dishes, setting the table with a startling prowess. It was impossible to make out what exactly he was placing, but she saw five or more dishes of different color emerge. He even tossed what appeared to be chickpea greens or some equivalent in a bowl. He finished by gingerly placing two small tarts near the base of the bouquet. Just as the florist had done, he too seemed to appraise his work. He whuffed a hand over the stew, drumming the aroma up to his nose and smiled contentedly. Satisfied with the aesthetics of his presentation, he looked toward the path and grimaced, then righted himself and slowly shuffled out of the

clearing, back down the path with his grocer's bag in hand.

This is the queerest thing I have been witnessed, she thought.

No sooner had the obese man shambled out of the clearing than another man entered. He was tall and skinny, with shallow cheeks and sallow skin, and hideously bushy chops hanging from both temples. It was the degenerate man from Dice Alley! Phaedra gave a tiny gasp. He walked to the table, stepped on top of one of the stumps and cleared his throat.

"There was a lass from Ben-dr-as-il, with a thumb so green and a face so fine," his beautiful tenor voice soared out across the clearing. "Her beauty awoke, the heart of a bloke, who said I'm gonna make her mine." Phaedra's mouth became the hinge on a stable door from which all the horses had fled. A guttural '*guhhhh*' sound emerged from deep inside her as the performer continued. "Now a firebrand with a sword in hand is trouble as all can see, but the one to claim this fiery dame was a son from Corinthine!"

Phaedra began to cry. Just as she reached to dab her eye, a hand from behind gently stopped her wrist and she gave an audible start. She sobbed now in earnest. She could feel her man's presence wrapped around her.

"*Shhhh*, love. There, there." he tried to tenderly comfort her.

Through quivering lips, her voice cracking, Phaedra said, "Why did you do this to me? *Wwwhhhy?*"

"Why did I want to surprise you, love? With flowers, food and song? Because I love you, lass, and I always will, but I'm no good at flowers....I've not a green thumb anywhere on me. You know this....you remember how I killed your hydrangeas when you went to visit your mother? So it's better for me to do what I'm good at and pay someone else to do what they do in kind. That way you get the best. And as for food....well....we don't have enough fingers and toes between the both of us to count the number of times I've spoiled a good dish. A simple dish." Montague laughed good-naturedly. "So I figured it was worth commissioning Ogfried's culinary skills. Sure the place he works at is a dive, but we've eaten worse, I guarantee it, and you'd be surprised at how hard it is to get someone to deliver outside of town. And as for Deckard the Degenerate....yes, he has a gambling problem. Yes, in a few short hours, he'll likely be on his way to spread my coin—our coin—amongst the denizens of Dice Alley....but I didn't hire him for his poor comprehension of numbers. I hired him for his excellent understanding of words. He was a playwright, in another life. A poet....a bard. And he can stitch words together far better than the likes of me." She still was not facing him, but she could feel him smile. "Besides....he was removed enough from our lives that I could confide in him my feelings of affection for you without....well frankly, without having to hear him tease me about it in the company of me mates in a pub."

This made Phaedra laugh out loud, a belly-aching laugh.

"I look terrible. I can't possibly go out there now," she said. "I don't even want you to see me."

"Too late for that, love." She could feel him smiling again behind her.

She jabbed her elbow back playfully without turning around and felt satisfied to make contact. "When did you first see me?"

"This story again? All right. It was harvest season. I'd just come in fro—"

"No," she interrupted. "Today. When did you first see me today?"

"Now you're sure you be wanting me to answer that, are ye? You want the half-truth or the whole-truth or the version with the nice finger dance in the middle?"

"You know which one, mister."

He sighed, not unhappily. "I noticed you behind the wood pile, your clothes all in disarray, darting those beady little eyes at me," he said, unable to keep the amusement he found in it from his tone.

Phaedra suddenly forgot about her disheveled state—her untidy hair, the streaks of mud and whatever else that had caked on her cheeks, her bangs plastered from sweat on her brow—and she spun around aghast. "You did not!" she exclaimed.

"I did, I did!" the braggart teased. "Oh come dear, why do you think I took so long in the privy, hmm? Is that my *modus operandi*? You know me, I'm a fast shooter. I just wasn't sure how fast you could move your sweet little arse over that wagon!" He feigned quickly with his left hand and then reached with his right behind her and gave her bottom a quick firm squeeze.

She squirmed and tried to fend him off, slapping him and feigning annoyance at her complete failure as a spy.

“The gods, aren't you a sight?! Look at that face!” he cried. “You've got a streak of mud right—”

“It's NOT MUD. It's GOAT SHIT!” she screamed back, feigning anger. “AND YOU LIKE MY EYES!”

“I do, I love them!” He laughed gleefully.

“And I quote, '*darting those beady little eyes!*'” she repeated as she wrapped both hands around Montague's throat and squeezed.

Montague pantomimed choking, rolling his eyes and letting his tongue roll out. Then with lightning speed, he brought both hands to her ribs and unleashed a flurry of tickling, which instantly neutralized her choking endeavors. He fended off her subsequent blows, all the while making an animated face, as though he had a case of the willies. He caught both her wrists and said, “Might be that streak on your face has excellent nutrients for your herbs though!” before breaking down again into stitches. She started into another spate of slapping him, which he blocked effortlessly.

Soon enough, her energy spent, Phaedra now looked as though she might cry again, this time for the wrong reasons, but her man was prepared.

“I knew riding with my hides would be a mess—although it serves any stowaway right, ahem. I hadn't counted on the livestock cart nor the vagrant's cloak. That was good impromptu thinking, mind you,” Montague said with as sincere a voice as he could muster. He failed miserably to suppress a laugh.

“Shut up.”

“No, I'm serious. Look now, I mean it. You adapted to the situation....often without much cover. That's good field work. You did well.” he said earnestly.

“Go on, get it out of your system,” she said in a hurtful voice, although the ridiculousness of it all was hitting her as well. She fought the corners of her mouth from morphing into a smile.

“And when you...and then....oh the gods be praised, it was all I could do to not wet myself, I'm not ki—”

“All right, enough, Mr. M!” she shoved at him again in a playful nature.

“Yes, quite right...ahem,” he choked down another surge of the giggles. “I did take precautions.”

He opened a rucksack and took out a fresh towel, a cake of soap, a wineskin of water, fresh smallclothes and a dress. “I thought you might need to wash up. It won't be a deep cleansing, but I hope it...alleviates...some of the—AHAHA—” and he was off again, uncontrollable.

“—yes, the one to tame and claim this fiery dame—” the degenerate poet continued in the background.

Phaedra took the items and sniffed the cake.

“Jasmine?! Really?!”

“What? Madam Mariana threw it in when I ordered the bouquet from her. Her best bouquet, I might add.”

Phaedra rolled her eyes, pointed at him and only said, “*Yooouuuu!*”

Montague believed that the fairer sex communicated in a more complex, higher form, and he was pretty sure that Phaedra was doing this now. He interpreted her look and “*Yooouuuu!*” as really saying “*oh, I'm going to kill you—and then I'm gonna make you mine!*” but he couldn't be certain.

“Moi?” he said innocently, before leading her to a nearby brook surrounded by a dense thicket of brush. “I'll leave you here to bath.”

“Privacy, 'Son of Corinthine',” she said in a mockingly deep voice.

He chuckled. “It's yours, 'Lass of Bendrasil'. Take as much time as you need.” He planted a loving kiss on her dirty forehead, made an *ewww* face and then retreated back to the clearing.

Phaedra took her time scrubbing herself clean of the day's grime. She felt like a new woman. She wasn't crazy about the notion of wearing a dress, but putting back on her ranging clothes was not an option. *I see what he did here. He created a situation where I had to wear a dress.* She made a *hmp* sound, the second for the day.

After she was good and ready, she emerged from the thicket and—true to his word, Montague was sitting patiently where he had first found her. His face lit up upon seeing her.

"You look...stunning," he said.

Through the surrounding brush, they could still hear the tenor's voice soaring in a new song.

"—if the radiance of a thousand suns were to suddenly find themselves undone, this is how it feels to be loved by you—"

"He's actually surprisingly good," Phaedra admitted.

"I know, love. I didn't skimp," Montague said, with an endearing smile. "And he's just going to keep going until we dismiss him."

"Let's send him away then. Let's send them all way."

Montague nodded. He took her hand and together they stepped out from the thick undergrowth and into the clearing.

"You can go home now, lads and lassies. The whole lot of you." he called out in a loud voice. Deckard the Poet abruptly stopped, took a slight bow and headed toward the path. Elsewhere in the brush, Ogfried grabbed a large branch and shook it several times while stomping his monstrous boots. He tapered this unconvincing ruse after a few moments; all the while holding a sliver of the boughs ahead of him parted, giving him and the florist a good view of the clearing.

"We both know you're fatter than that, Ogfried. Now bugger off! All of you! Your services are no longer needed!" Montague called out boisterously, never breaking his eye contact and embrace with Phaedra. Her cheeks were getting tired of smiling and she giggled at the thrill of well-intending voyeurs.

"Fine, fine!" Ogfried's voice called out from the thick vegetation. "We're going. How you ever nabbed her is a mystery of the cosmos! A veritable conundrum!"

Phaedra laughed gaily and called out, "Thank you, all of you! This means so much!"

Madam Mariana the Florist, Deckard the Poet, and Ogfried the Cook departed from the brush and headed back to town on the footpath. They were nearly out of sight when Phaedra suddenly leaped up on Montague, wrapping her legs around his waist and throwing her arms about his neck. She tilted her head slightly forward and batted her peridot eyes with a look that Montague lacked the will to ignore.

"I've half a mind to stake my claim now, even with all of them interlopers watching in the woods," he said. She laughed again. "But time enough for that later, love of my life. For the now, let me fill your belly," he said, gesturing toward the table in the clearing. He was demonstrating a remarkable display of control.

"I've nothing else on my mind," Phaedra said, staring longingly into Montague's eyes with the intensity of a wildcat.

And then an extraordinary thing happened. A cherise red blazed across the pigment of his skin, rising from his neck all the way up to the tips of his ears.

"I...I..." he stammered. She squealed with joy! Making her man blush was an accomplishment on par with winning other games that they played. She beamed with devilish pride.

"I do believe that got a reaction," she said in as innocent a voice as she could muster, tightening her grip about his frame. She could feel his member standing resolute in the tight confines of his leather britches.

"Yes, quite," she said, immeasurably pleased with herself.

"We can eat fast." He said weakly.

"As swift as an arrow, love." She purred in his ear, giving one long kiss on his neck before extracting herself from his towering frame.

He straightened his back, flattened the jerkin on his chest and took a long breath. Phaedra laughed playfully.

"Ahem...right then." He held out his upturned hand to the lovely woman before him.

"Dine with me, love?" Montague asked, rolling his hand and bending at his waist as a man of a higher station would do.

"Always," Phaedra said, making a sweeping gesture as though she were in a ball gown. She slipped her left arm through his and he led her to the makeshift table in the clearing. He pulled the stump out for her to sit on, pantomiming as though it, too, were a proper palace chair. He sat himself and then served them both, pouring the modest wineskin of Columbia Gold into the two clay mugs. They dined on river trout, and pigeon pie, venison stew and a small suckling pig—true to his word, Ogfried had included the head. (Phaedra insisted

Montague turn the pig around though, as she'd rather look at its plump loins than its sad little face.) There were even two ribs of lamb, peppered with garlic and herbs with buttered turnips. It was a heavenly feast.

The florist, the playwright, and the cook sat in the bushes unconsciously lost in the moment. Ogfried seemed touched most of all, dabbing a handkerchief to his eyes.

“Terrible allergies this time of season, just terrible.”

Madam Mariana smiled affectionately and put a hand on his back.

“Come on, boys. Let's leave them to things that are meant to be theirs and theirs alone,” she said, gently shepherding them out of the brush, leaving the two lovers alone with just themselves—and the distant burbling of the brook, the sound of birds singing and the fiery love that bound them together.

