

# Chapter One

"Miss? This is a bad idea."

"Aelon, I have to do it." Phaedra stared at the pastel sky above her courtyard, wondering if she would ever see such a view again. They said that the palace was entirely closed in so as to keep the wives and daughters from being accidentally viewed by outside eyes. "This is my last chance."

"Theseus will be coming for you tonight. It's—miss, it's your wedding night."

Despite her objections, Aelon was helping. She had used pins and ribbons to conceal Phaedra's long hair inside her himation, and they were now considering the tunic.

The night before, when she'd hatched this plan, Phaedra stole one of her father's tunics. It had taken all morning, a morning when her mother and sisters were running around making preparations to receive the Duke of Athens, but she'd finally made the garment suitable for her to wear.

Hadn't she?

They looked at it now, and it still seemed too big. The cloth was a brilliant red, covered with complex geometric patterns. Phaedra had almost felt bad ruining it. It was most definitely a male pattern, something she could never wear around anyone who knew who she was, but also beautiful. Her father had many such chitons; hopefully, he would not miss it.

"I have to go, Aelon. Once I marry Theseus, I don't know if I'll ever see the sun again, or feel the wind on my cheek, or smell the salt in the air. I must do this."

"If your father saw you—" Aelon pulled the chiton onto her mistress and set about cinching it tight. When she was done, Phaedra still looked female because of two prominent problems.

"He's not going to see me, is he Aelon?"

"No, miss."

"Listen, I know you think this is a foolish risk."

Phaedra took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It *was* a foolish risk; there was no way around that. If anyone found out—well, no one had better. She needed to experience freedom

once more, just once. She understood how excellent this match was for her family, how her father's money would secure Theseus' rule, and how Theseus' influence would improve her father's stature. She knew that this would be better for everyone, including Aelon, who would get to be a slave in the palace. She knew all of that, and yet—

She just couldn't leave all this behind. For years, since she'd had her first moon blood, the only sky she saw was the sky above her courtyard. Tonight, even that would be taken from her. She needed to get away. Just once.

"I—yes, miss. I do. But I understand. Here, let me put this last piece on, and perhaps the disguise will be complete."

They were both unsure that this would work, but Aelon took Phaedra's strophion and put her hands into the open sides of her mistress's tunic. Deftly she bound it around Phaedra's breasts.

"Oof!"

Phaedra gasped as the slave pulled the cloth tight, cinching it twice across her chest until they were as sure as they could be that no one would notice her distinctly womanly attributes. Phaedra was a beautiful woman: long, flowing hair, wide, innocent eyes, skin that was as soft as a doe's, and lips that were full and luscious. Between those qualities and her ample breasts, it was hard to hide who she really was.

However, she couldn't be seen going out of the house, either. Once a woman reached the age of majority, she became a precious asset to her household—first her father's, and then her husband's. Most women above a certain station were confined to their homes lest a wandering male catch their gaze and disrupt the delicate balance of the household with a bastard.

Phaedra envied Aelon that particular freedom. The slave could go wherever she wanted. She could not wed and her womb held no value to anyone, but in some ways she was freer than her mistress, in that she could go where she pleased, do what she wanted. And love whom she wanted. Phaedra looked up at the sky and sighed. She didn't love Theseus. She'd never met the man, but she was expected to bear his children.

"How is this fair, Aelon?"

"I couldn't say, miss."

Aelon considered the disguise. Without her makeup and with the male clothing on, Phaedra looked like a very beautiful son. It just might work.

"I don't even know him!"

"He's the duke of Athens, mistress. Does it matter? You'll have wealth, fame, power."

"Will I?" Phaedra looked down at the reflecting pool in the middle of the courtyard to consider her outfit. Something was still missing. "He has all of those things, Aelon. I'm nothing but, I don't know, another bit of his wealth."

"Mistress—"

"He'll lock me in my own personal treasure vault, and I'll never see the sea or the sun until I'm old and cannot bear him any more children." Phaedra turned this way and that, trying to figure out how to make the illusion complete. "Oh, I know! Aelon, go and fetch some of father's bracelets."

"Mistress?"

"I think it will help."

"Yes, mistress."

Phaedra sat on one of the benches in the courtyard and mulled over her problem. The plan was to take a stroll around the market, taste freedom one last time before being committed to a marriage not of her choosing. But maybe she could do more. Maybe she could just run away. With father's jewelry she could make a life for herself somewhere else, somewhere women were more than just property. Was there such a place?

"Mistress, is this all right?" Aelon returned with an armload of bracelets. "I told him I was going to polish them in preparation for the duke's arrival."

"Excellent, thank you, Aelon."

Phaedra grabbed the jewelry and put it on. It felt strange and heavy. The armlets were massive, golden, and more like armor than ornamentation. The necklace was bulky, the ear clips weighed heavily, and by the time she was done, she wondered how men wandered around wearing all of this.

"How do I look?"

The woman merely stared.

"Honestly, Aelon. Please?"

"I know you too well to comment, mistress. I'm sorry."

Phaedra looked at her reflection again and sighed. Aelon was right; they'd both been present for the transformation process so, to them, the change had happened so slowly that it seemed to not have happened at all. There was only one way to test it.

She walked to the door that led to the andron and looked out. It was a second courtyard, larger and more richly appointed with all manner of furniture, surrounded by rooms where the men entertained guests. Phaedra's family was wealthy enough to have three wings to their house: the andron, the women's wing, and the men's wing.

At this time of day, the andron would normally have been buzzing with activity. Politicians, merchants, and craftsmen visited her father regularly to ask for advice, for money, or simply to discuss current issues. On any given day there could be a dozen or more people jockeying for position and playing politics in the warmth of the Mediterranean sun. Today, it was empty. Today, there would be a wedding.

It was before noon, and everyone was absorbed in wedding preparations. Theseus would arrive at the evening meal to formally request Phaedra, and then to take her to his father's home. There they would consummate the marriage, and she would become royalty.

Phaedra should have been preparing herself, sealed alone in her chamber and getting ready to please her royal husband. She should have been gossiping with friends or siblings, finding out what to expect, or at least trembling with a combination of fear and desire, wracked with trepidation for the life-changing event. She *should* have been doing any number of things. Instead, she snuck across the dirt floor of the andron and slipped out into the street.

Outside the relative quiet of Phaedra's house, Athens was a bustle of activity. It might be the most important, terrifying, ridiculously overrated day of Phaedra's life, but for everyone else it was just another market day. She blended easily in with the crowds and when, ten minutes later, no one had shouted that a woman was walking in their midst, she let out a terrified breath that she didn't know she'd been holding. Her plan was working.

Sometimes people gave her a second glance or a curious eye, but no one called her out, and she wondered if there was a different motivation for their looks. It was not unusual for older, richer men to take a younger man under their wings. Ostensibly this was in order to train them in the ways of life and give them a head start on their business, though everyone knew it was about sex. Phaedra wondered what the people who eyed her were thinking. Probably they were trying to gauge her wealth to see if she would be amenable to a little help improving her station.

When Phaedra was several blocks away from her house and still in the clear, she finally let herself look up and marvel at the world around her. Athens was huge. As a child she'd played in the streets, much like the young ones running around her feet and laughing as they chased balls or sticks or simply each other, but once she became a woman, that had all changed. To see it again, to feel the cool breeze of the ocean on her cheek and the warmth of the sun on her brow, it was glorious!

"Psst, mistress?" Aelon crept out of the shadows at the arranged meeting spot.

"Aelon!" Phaedra came forward and pressed a finger to her slave's lips. "I am your *master* today. Remember it."

"Yes—master." Aelon bowed her head. "You wished to see the market?"

"I did. I do—oh, Aelon, isn't this wonderful?"

"It stinks."

Phaedra laughed. It stank of excrement and mud and humanity and filth and, as they progressed down toward the ocean, like fish. Until then she hadn't noticed.

"It's so—"

"Filthy."

"Come on, Aelon, I know you see this every day, but where's your sense of wonder?"

"I'm only being realistic, uh, master. You may hate your father's house, but I know the fetid wallow that is these streets." There was a haunted look in her eyes as she said it. Aelon was at least twenty years older than Phaedra, but the family had purchased her when Phaedra was born. Until then, Phaedra had never wondered what horrors Aelon might have seen before being brought into a wealthy merchant's household as a slave. "Athens can rot to the ground for all I care."

"Oh, it's not that bad."

For the sheer joy of it, Phaedra skipped through a crossroads and grabbed a pomegranate off of a fruit vendor's stall. He was about to complain, but she put a coin in the fruit's place and went on her way.

"You overpaid for that."

Aelon's tone was flat. Was she angry? Phaedra realized that she was not only putting her own life in danger, she was putting Aelon's on the line, as well.

"So? Oh, Aelon, this could be the last time I walk these streets." Phaedra broke open the pomegranate and started eating the seeds. "Have some."

Aelon looked at the pomegranate with a strangely greedy look in her eye. With the offer open, she came forward and scooped out a handful of seeds. The two women, one of whom was trying as hard as possible to look like a man, popped pomegranate seeds into their mouths.

"Mmm! You can't tell me that's not divine."

"It's--oh, master. Thank you." Aelon's eyes were bright with glee, and she ate her portion of the fruit as fast as possible. "This is wonderful."

"Feeling better about this excursion?"

"Hmm, no." Aelon laughed. She was normally quite dour, so seeing joy in her eyes was a rare treat for Phaedra. "I still think this is high folly."

"Of course you do." Phaedra laughed. "We should run."

"Run?"

"Feel the wind in our hair. Revel in the beauty of the day!"

"Mis—master?"

Phaedra ran. She opened her arms to catch the wind and dashed through the market. She shouted for the joy of it, she relished the feeling of the wind in her hair and the salt on her face and the stench of the city and the freedom of the road. The market was in a lull after morning shoppers took their purchases home. Afternoon shoppers were not yet out, so Phaedra had a relatively open path.

"Master!"

Aelon ran to catch up. She sounded put upon, but when Phaedra looked back, she could see condensed joy in Aelon's eyes. Not often did one get a chance to be free like this, to feel the world like this. Aelon was enjoying it, too.

"Come on, Aelon!" Phaedra laughed and twirled. "Keep up!"

Phaedra dashed down an alley, sprinted across a road, and leapt into the air to try and catch a crow. It flew away, of course, but Phaedra didn't care. She laughed and spun and stumbled backward through the street.

"This is amaz—ooh!"

Phaedra hit someone. Hard. She gasped in pain and spun away, losing her footing and collapsing into the dirt street. Her jewelry scattered, and only a quick hand kept her cloak from coming apart and revealing her long hair.

"Who do you—" Phaedra was about to scold whoever she'd run into when her eyes picked up on what she was looking at.

The man in front of her was beyond beautiful. Angular features, proud eyes, strong jaw, and rippling muscles all combined to make a sight that stirred primal desire within Phaedra. On top of that, he had the look of someone who didn't do a lot of his own work, someone who was rich. His skin was bronzed but not leathered, his eyes were bright and quick, his fingers were smooth and un-calloused, except for where he would hold a sword. He had a haughty tilt to his head as he turned to look at Phaedra, ready to scold her.

"Theseus."

Phaedra knew the man, as any Athenian would. His likeness was on all new pieces of art, royal proclamations, scripts, and coins, everywhere. One couldn't turn the corner without seeing an image of him and knowing who he was. Duke of Athens, pride of the city, soon to be king when his father, Aegeus, passed away. The man Phaedra was supposed to marry that afternoon. The one person she could least afford to run into.

"Phaedra?" Theseus' expression was, at first, one of shock and skepticism.

As was customary, he'd been allowed to see Phaedra once before their wedding, weeks ago, as the deal was still being worked out and the haggling was still going strong. Her beauty was striking, everyone said so, and to simply have a glimpse of it was something that many of her father's friends had offered a high price for. She'd stood in the window between the andron and the women's chambers, her eyes averted so that she could not see Theseus and have improper thoughts before their wedding.

"Master, I—oh, no."

Aelon finally caught up and took in the scene before her. Phaedra still lay on the ground, her eyes wide in shock, staring up at the most powerful man in all of Athens, perhaps in the entire known world. Theseus, feeling scandalized and betrayed, stood looking down at his future wife as if she were something he'd just scraped off the bottom of his shoe.

The tableau lasted only a moment longer. Phaedra scrambled to her feet to try and run, but Theseus caught her, gripping her hair with his strong hand and pulling her hard so that she

fell, once more, to the ground at his knees. Swiftly, so no one else could know who she was, he wrapped her cloak around her face and hoisted her onto the back of his horse. He mounted and rode off through the streets, scattering the few people who were out and about and making a beeline for Phaedra's father's house.

Anyone who encountered him, their beloved duke, got out of his way quickly when they saw the anger in his eyes.

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"This is an outrage!" Theseus thundered, his voice rocking Phaedra's house to its foundations

"Your grace! I didn't know!" Phaedra's father, Megenus, stood solid as a rock.

The men, possibly the two most powerful in the city, squared off in the center of Megenus' andron. Arrayed behind Theseus were his guards, stony-faced men in armor carrying spears. Behind Megenus were his hangers-on, the wealthy merchants and minor nobles who hoped to better themselves by being associated with the great merchant. Collapsed in the center of the courtyard, Phaedra was crying.

"I cannot marry—this!" Theseus bellowed.

"Nothing happened!" Phaedra lifted her head and looked from one man to the other, her eyes puffy and red. "Please believe me, I was just walking."

"Phah!" Theseus spat. "Seeking a lover for one last tryst, no doubt! It doesn't matter!" Theseus' eyes flashed. "The wife of Theseus must be beyond reproach!"

"I agree." Megenus heaved a sigh. He was in the wrong; he was the one who had failed to control his daughter. "But this alliance is still for the best."

Theseus breathed in a deep, heated breath, and looked like he was about to exhale fire on the old merchant, when he stopped and considered the words.

"Yes. Yes! She has a sister?"

"Ariadne. But Phaedra is my eldest; to marry her sister would invite questions."

Phaedra pressed her face into the dirt, wishing she could sink into it and never return to this place. Today should have been joyous, glorious! She should have been a devoted daughter and doting wife; she should have done her duty and nothing more. Her selfish wishes had doomed her, and probably doomed her family.



And yet it was all so unfair! She'd never once, not once, been asked if she wanted to marry Theseus. She'd never been consulted as to whether she thought the alliance was a good one, and she'd certainly never been asked what she thought of being shut up in the palace for the rest of her life. Didn't she matter? Didn't her opinion count?

"I have an idea." A spark flared behind Theseus' eyes, and Phaedra was pretty sure that it was about to become clear that her opinion was irrelevant. "The tribute to Crete."

"Yes? What of it?" Megenus frowned, not following the line of thought.

"It is such a shame that, on the eve of her wedding, your daughter's name was drawn in the lottery."

"Yes?" Megenus perked up, suddenly seeing what Theseus was getting at.

"Seven youths and seven virgins we must give to Crete every year." Theseus' voice had a mocking kind of menace in it. He was suddenly enjoying himself. "Such a thoughtless waste of life, to feed them to the minotaur."

"Indeed, your grace."

"I only wish I'd gotten to partake of your daughter's beauty. Alas, our cruel overlords demand of us what they will, and my father's mistakes haunt us still. What can I do about it?"

"Nothing, your grace. It is such a shame."

Phaedra couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Father?" She tried to scramble to her feet, to run to him and demand that he not do this, but Theseus dragged her back to the ground by her hair. Hot tears burst from her eyes, and her scalp screamed in pain. She struggled, but he tightened his grip, and she fell back to her knees, crouched between the two men. "Father, you can't! You can't let him do this!"

"My daughter, I'm sorry."

Phaedra searched Megenus's eyes but she couldn't find sorrow there, nor one iota of guilt over what he was about to do. "No! No! This is—"

"An outrage?" Theseus laughed. There was cruelty in it; he was going to enjoy this. Phaedra had a brief moment of panic for her sister, but it didn't last much beyond another painful pull on her hair. "You would disgrace our marriage bed with your wanton ways, Phaedra." He spat. "Harlot."

His guards spat.

"No daughter of mine would leave this house, let alone dressed like—that." Megenus indicated the manly clothes that Phaedra still wore. They were torn and dirty from her rough treatment, but their intention was still clear. No woman would wear a tunic patterned like that; no good daughter would wear a man's jewelry and sneak out into the city. Megenus spat. "I didn't raise a whore."

Phaedra gasped. She wasn't sure if the words or the contempt in everyone's face bit into her worse, and she didn't get a chance to puzzle it through.

"Guards." Theseus snapped his fingers, and a half dozen of the most elite warriors in all of Athens stamped their feet smartly in response. "Take her to the tribute ship. If anyone interferes, give them this signet."

Theseus pulled a heavy ring off his finger and handed it to the closest of the guards. The man took it without saying a word, despite the heavy responsibility that carrying the duke's seal carried.

Phaedra was sobbing, out of control, unable even to fight back when the guards grabbed her wrists roughly and hauled them behind her back. They manacled her, bound her, and one man hoisted her onto his back like she was nothing more than a sack of vegetables.

"No! You can't do this! Father! Stop them! Tell them!" Phaedra screamed through her tears. Her mouth was hot and sticky with mucus, she could barely keep her eyes open, and she knew she must look a fright. She didn't care. When she left the villa, her life would literally be over. "Stop! Unhand me! Father!"

"I just got in some very nice wine from the north." Megenus put an arm around Theseus and drew the duke of Athens away from the hysterical woman. "Would you like to try some? My wife has just prepared the afternoon meal."

"Stop! Stop this!" Phaedra dangled from a guard's back as the entire company turned smartly and marched away. "Husband!"

Suddenly there was silence. All conversation stopped. The only sound was Phaedra's frantic sobbing. Theseus spun and dashed across the courtyard. He stopped just in front of Phaedra and bent down so that their eyes met. Phaedra was hanging upside down, so the duke looked like he was coming up out of the sky to meet her.

"We! Are! Not! Married!" Theseus' face was red with rage. "You are a disgrace to your family, a blot on the name of all good Athenians and, worst of all, you did it to yourself!"

Phaedra sniffled, silent in the face of Theseus' anger. His impossibly perfect pectorals, visible because of how he'd tied his chiton, flexed and reminded her that besides being the most politically powerful man in Athens, he was physically powerful, as well as armed. He could have killed her if he wanted, and no one would have complained.

"Try to keep what dignity you have left and go to your fate quietly." Theseus spat once more, and then went to join Megenus for lunch.

Phaedra tried to catch her father's eye, to find some sense that he sympathized with her or that he was hurt by the impending death of his eldest daughter at the hands of his soon-to-be son-in-law, but she couldn't. As Megenus led Theseus away, he didn't look back once. Phaedra's last glimpse of her father, as the guards hauled her out, was his cold and uncaring back.