

ACT 1

Lights up on the stage, minimally decorated to resemble an old forest. Three prominently placed seats have Reserved signs on them. Ian, an actor, enters.

IAN  
Oh, lost am I that--

Caitlin, the stage manager, pops her head on stage. Caitlin wears black clothing and a headset.

CAITLIN  
(hissed)  
Not yet!

IAN  
Huh?

CAITLIN  
(hissed)  
Pre-show speech!

IAN  
Really.

CAITLIN  
Yes!

IAN  
Are you sure?

CAITLIN  
(points at headset)  
It's why I said "Cue pre-show show chat" just now!

Phil, the writer/director, and Mera, producer, enter, glowering at Ian.

IAN  
If we were doing a pre-show talk,  
where are Mera and Phil?

Mera clears her throat. Ian thinks, pulls a small mirror out of a pocket, uses it to see behind him. He panics slightly at seeing Mera, thinks for a moment, and begins creeping towards the exit. When he approaches the curtain, he turns to the audience.

IAN (CONT'D)  
Ladies and gentlemen, put your  
hands together for our fearless  
leader, Mera Lucas!

Ian runs offstage, with little dignity.

CAITLIN  
Yeah. Covered perfectly.

Caitlin exits. Mera sighs deeply.

PHIL  
Wonderful.

MERA  
(turning to the audience,  
forced cheer)  
Well. That... is a thing that  
happened.  
(looks at the "reserved"  
seats, concerned)  
Hm. Good evening, everyone, and  
welcome to Taranto Theatre's latest  
production! I'm Mera Lucas,  
executive producer, and with me is  
our humble playwright in residence,  
and author of tonight's show, Mr.  
Phil Payton.

Mera keeps glancing from the empty chairs to the door.

PHIL  
Hi.

MERA  
(leaning into Phil,  
smiling at audience)  
A little more enthusiasm, please?  
Trying to bounce back, here.

Ian re-enters.

IAN  
Oh, lost I am that--

MERA  
*Not now, Ian.*

IAN  
I heard a lull. Thought you were  
done.

PHIL  
Do we *look* done?

IAN  
...Not especially.

Ian slinks back through the curtain, though it takes him a moment to find the opening.

PHIL

Hi... Ladies and gents... like Mera said, I'm Phil, I wrote this. In a bit of a hurry. They came to me and said "We lost the rights to a play--"

MERA

After saying "Keep this part quiet, but--"

PHIL

(noticing Mera looking back and forth)  
What? What is it? What are you looking for?

MERA

Can we not? The audience is right there.

PHIL

It's just so distracting.

MERA

Well... we were expecting one of our high-end patrons, but she isn't... just keep going.

PHIL

Right. "So could you write us a quick replacement?" they said. And I said "I guess I could write something up," and they said "Good, just be quick about it," and then I said "One condition though... I think I'd like to direct this one." They agreed. Really fast. Should have... should have known that was a bad sign.

MERA

(muttered at Phil)  
What do you think "enthusiasm" means?

PHIL

Looking back it's pretty clear they were holding back laughter... but here we are, despite some confusion and calamity...

There is noise and commotion from outside.

PHIL (CONT'D)  
 ...with Star-Crossed, a show that  
 we're proud to...

ELEANOR  
 (from off)  
 I assure you, young man, they  
 wouldn't *presume* to start the show  
 without *me*. Move aside now, there's  
 a good lad.

PHIL  
 Um. Proud to...

ELEANOR enters, followed by her assistant, RAPH. She makes her way towards her seat, greeting and bumping into ushers and audience members.

ELEANOR  
 Excuse me. Pardon me. Hello there.  
 Lovely evening, is it not? Raph, be  
 a lamb and take my coat?

RAPH  
 Of course, Ms. Marsden.

MERA  
 Eleanor Marsden, ladies and  
 gentlemen, president of the Marsden  
 Foundation for the arts, who I was  
 just about to thank for their  
 generous patronage tonight. Their  
*extremely* generous patronage.

Mera and Raph applaud. Mera nudges Phil to do likewise. When the clapping dies down, Ian enters.

IAN  
 Oh, lost am I that--

MERA  
*Not now Ian.*

PHIL  
*Not now Ian!*

BOTH  
 NOT NOW IAN!

IAN  
 I heard applause, I assumed.

Caitlin enters, begins dragging Ian off.

CAITLIN

*When. I. Tell. You.*

Caitlin and Ian exit.

ELEANOR

Yes, well, I thought I may as well drift by and see what our money is funding. You there, Phillip... you're the one who wrote those little comedies about the spy... his name left me...

PHIL

(slightly sullen)  
Dirk Rhombus.

ELEANOR

That's the one. "Destiny Was the Weatherman." My youngest thought that one was cute. Is that what you're doing tonight? Another Dirk adventure?

PHIL

No... haven't done a Dirk play in years.

MERA

Tonight...  
(turns back to the audience)  
Tonight we travel back to the days of yore in Phil's latest original script, "Star-Crossed," featuring... what is it featuring again?

PHIL

I knew you didn't read it, I *knew* you didn't--

MERA

*I skimmed it, and can we not in front of the audience.*

PHIL

Look, you'll see what it's about, that's why you bought a ticket. Let's just... let's just do this, please?

MERA

Fine. *Fine*. So, big thank you to the Marsden Foundation, without whom we literally could not do this, and on with the show while you're all still here.

Mera gestures to the booth and the lights go out.

PHIL

Inspiring.

MERA

Shut up.

PHIL

You shut up.

Phil exits backstage. Mera sits in a reserved chair near Eleanor and Raph. Lights come up on the stage. Stage is empty for a moment.

IAN

(from off)

Oh, now?

Caitlin shoves Ian on stage.

CAITLIN

(hissed)

Yes now!

IAN

Oh, how lost I am that am lost in love! I toil day and night for my master, the merchant Venturewell, in the hopes of learning his trade and making my fortune.

ELEANOR

Is he talking to us?

RAPH

I believe that's an aside, madam. A sort of monologue.

ELEANOR

I see.

IAN

But how could I have known, what sign could I have read, that would let me know the true fortune I would seek would be Venturewell's daughter, fair Luce? She is more valuable to me than gold, her eyes shine more brightly than diamonds... well, most diamonds... well, certainly many gems of decent value.

ELEANOR

Well who wouldn't melt to hear *that*.

Ian clears his throat and talks louder.

IAN

But as a mere apprentice, how am I to marry anyone? Let alone the daughter of my master? Not that my prospects are much improved as a *failed* apprentice. Even the seamstresses, ladies whose affections are oft negotiable, would not grant me the day of the week without a penny to purchase their thoughts. Curse my stars... life as a merchant's apprentice was supposed to make finding a wife easier, not nigh impossible. But there can be no other wife in the world for me, not after Luce. And so must I find a way to challenge my stars.

MARTIN

(from off)

Jasper! I say, Jasper my boy!

IAN

My master approaches! I must be cautious.

ELEANOR

You certainly must be, young man, scheming against your employer.

Phil leans on stage near Mera and clears his throat at her.

MERA

What do you want me to do, shush our biggest donor?

PHIL  
 Could ya?

MERA  
 Let her get into it.

Phil exits. VENTUREWELL (played by MARTIN) enters, followed by LUCE (played by GEORGIA).

MARTIN  
 There you are, Jasper, I've searched high and low for you.

IAN  
 And a cheerful afternoon to you as well, Master Venturewell. And to you, Miss Luce.

GEORGIA  
 Jasper.

MARTIN  
 What exactly have you been occupying yourself with, lad? Lollygagging about while my shelves remain unshelved?

GEORGIA  
 Unstocked.

MARTIN  
 (breaking character a little)  
 Is that not what I said?

GEORGIA  
 No, you said "Unshelved." Again.

MARTIN  
 Oh. Oops.

IAN  
*In any event...* why, Master Venturewell, the store was seen to hours ago. I put the boys on stocking and shelving and a modicum of sweeping.

MARTIN  
 You saw to the tasks I assigned you by assigning them to someone else? How are you to learn the business that way?



IAN

Finding labourers to handle the menial tasks of the day seems the very heart of your position, Master.

GEORGIA

It's true that I haven't seen you carry a box since I was a girl, father.

MARTIN

Well I hardly see how that's... and why are you so quick to come to his aid, Luce?

GEORGIA

I was simply making an observation, father, what Jasper does or does not do is of little consequence to me.

ELEANOR

Swift with a denial, isn't she.

RAPH

Methinks the lady doth protest too much.

ELEANOR

Astute, Raph, and so well phrased. How did you come up with that?

IAN

*It's Hamlet.*

GEORGIA

(glowering)  
What is?

IAN

It's... ham, left to go bad, is what it is.

GEORGIA

Which means...

IAN

Relying on one simple apprentice to manage all of this labour, it's inefficient when we have all this hired help to do it for us. And if we didn't use them, think of all the ham that would go bad.

MARTIN

...Yeah.

GEORGIA

Smooth.

IAN

Thank you.

GEORGIA

(whispered)

Get it together.

IAN

(whispered)

Get your *face* together.

GEORGIA

(whispered)

Less smooth.

MARTIN

I suppose I see the logic of your choices, but as my apprentice, you should be following my instructions, not devising your own schemes.

IAN

If that is how you see it, sir.

MARTIN

It is indeed. Luce, would you excuse us? I must speak with my apprentice.

GEORGIA

As you wish, father. I think perhaps I'll take a walk through the gardens.

IAN

Certainly a lovely day for it, Miss Luce.

GEORGIA

So it is. I'll see you at home, father. Good day, Jasper.

Georgia exits.

MARTIN

Now then, Jasper. I have a matter to discuss with you, man to man.

IAN

Yes, sir?

MARTIN

I have done my best to teach you the ways of a merchant.

IAN

As I have done my best to learn them.

MARTIN

But the most important thing that a merchant can do is extend his share of the market. And I have found a way to do just that.

IAN

How's that, sir?

MARTIN

I've arranged for my daughter to marry another merchant, joining his business with mine.

IAN

What?

MARTIN

Through Luce, I shall control both, and be wealthier still! Also Luce shall be well provided for.

IAN

She... would be indeed, though one could argue you yourself could provide her with all she needs--

MARTIN

The best way to do that is to provide her with a husband who can do the same. And so that she might give me grandchildren that can carry on my legacy. I'd once hoped to have a son to carry on my name and legacy for me, but fate had different notions.

IAN

I had hoped that perhaps I could one day be the son you wished for, Master Venturewell.

Martin glowers at him.

MARTIN  
Tell me, lad. You have parents of  
your own, do you not?

IAN  
I do.

MARTIN  
And how would they say you rate as  
a son?

IAN  
My mother has often indicated there  
is room for improvement.

MARTIN  
Has she.

IAN  
Before handing my brother another  
sweet.

MARTIN  
And there we have it. As an  
apprentice, you've been...

IAN  
Well, sir, no need to gush--

MARTIN  
Adequate.

IAN  
I misread where that was going.

MARTIN  
But a son? No no. No no no. My  
fondest hope for you is that you  
would take everything I taught you,  
strike out on your own, build  
yourself a successful store...

IAN  
So I also hoped.

MARTIN  
...which I could buy out from under  
you.

IAN  
That less so.

MARTIN

In appreciation of your service I'd offer you very nearly what your business was actually worth.

IAN

How kind.

MARTIN

But let me be clear on this matter, boy. I have seen the way you look at my Luce. You do not hide your... urges as cleverly as you think.

IAN

Urges? Sir, my feelings for Luce are nothing but chaste--

MARTIN

Save your honeyed words, lad! And put any thoughts of romance between you and Luce far from your mind. She shall wed the man of my choosing! Marriage traditions still matter in this household!

ELEANOR

Good lord. Is that what passes for subtle commentary these days.

MARTIN

See to your chores, Jasper, and think not of my daughter. She is Humphrey's wife-to-be and nothing else! I shall see you at closing, and the store had best be spotless.

Martin exits.

IAN

Luce? To be married? This is a disaster!

ELEANOR

Your master just left, I imagine he can still hear you.

Ian twitches.

IAN

But how am I to prevent her marriage without ruining my own standing? I must think. But first, I must away to Luce!

Ian exits. Lights fade. Caitlin and Trix begin changing the set. Eleanor gets up and makes her way through the audience. Mera, alarmed, follows her after a moment.

ELEANOR  
Excuse me... pardon...  
(vamps until she reaches  
the far side)

MERA  
Ms. Marsden... Ms. Marsden, what  
are... why... if you could just--

Eleanor exits. Mera and Raph follow. We find ourselves, through theatre magic, backstage. Caitlin and Trix are attempting to move set pieces. Various cast are present. Ian is not currently wearing pants. All gradually stop and watch what's happening.

IAN  
Um.

PHIL  
(to Mera)  
What is this. What is happening.

CAITLIN  
(to Ian)  
Where are your pants?

IAN  
(to Caitlin)  
I'm changing for the next scene.

CAITLIN  
(to Ian)  
You wear the same costume in the  
next scene!

IAN  
Right.

ELEANOR  
Excuse me, Mr. Payton was it?

PHIL  
(to Mera)  
*What. Is. Happening.*

MERA  
I don't know.

ELEANOR  
 Could we have a quick word?  
 About... all of this?

MERA  
 Or, maybe, we sit quietly and watch  
 and talk about this after?

ELEANOR  
 I think it best we move on this  
 quickly, Ms. Lucas, we really  
 shouldn't wait.

MERA  
 ...Shouldn't we?

ELEANOR  
 Mr. Payton, Phil if I may--

PHIL  
 Do I have a say in any of this?

IAN  
 UM.

CAITLIN  
 (to Ian)  
 Put your pants back on!

IAN  
 (to Caitlin)  
 Fine, fine...

Ian searches for his pants, while keeping an eye on Phil. Caitlin starts prodding Trix to continue the set change. She does, while trying to watch what's happening.

ELEANOR  
 This play of yours... I must admit,  
 I'd expected something closer to  
 your little Rhombus romps.

PHIL  
 Which I haven't written in years.

ELEANOR  
 If you say so, but you see what I'm  
 saying. Something... zippy. Action-  
 packed.