

CHAPTER THREE: Double Cross

Lady Squee carefully pinned the jeweled flower barrette into her hair, looking at her reflection this way and that before fixing her mirror-self with a determined stare. Outside, a light rain fell over the city, the droplets merging and streaming down the windowpanes that lined the pyramid stronghold of the Everetts. She smiled at her reflection, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. Perhaps today would be the day she would be noticed.

Lady Squee smoothed her hands over her dress and rose to her feet. Today she would be dining with the King and Queen and their son, David before they set out the next day for some political business. *Prince David*. She savored the name, and excitement prickled at her skin. Perhaps today she would *finally* be noticed! It would be about time. Perhaps the first time since they were mere children playing together. Lady Squee and the Prince had been raised together since their infancy, but something had happened to make David lose all interest in her. Lady Squee sighed heavily, turning away from her image. She would have to work hard to impress him, to catch his eye. Lately all the prince had shown interest in was the coming and going of spies, vagrants, and Morrows. If he wasn't out skulking about in the city, he was inside the library, tucked away with a book of political history, or spying on the servants or his own parents, scrounging for more information to feed his insatiable brain. Perhaps finally her beauty would persuade him to pay attention.

She gathered up her skirts and swept out of her room, met by one of her chambermaids who led her quietly through the twisting hallways and to the dining rooms. To Lady Squee's surprise, the prince was already in attendance, lounging on the table, holding the core of an apple.

"Evening, Squee," he said easily. He slid off the table and flicked the core onto an empty plate.

Lady Squee gave a deep curtsy, feeling a blush creep up her neck. "Evening, Your Grace."

"That's a nice dress. Have you worn that one before?" the prince asked, stepping closer to her.

Her heartbeat spiked. "I believe so, Your Grace," she said.

"Oh." The prince stepped away from her. "It's nice."

Just then the King and Queen entered, and the prince turned his attention to his parents. Squee felt herself wilt.

The dinner began, and Squee nibbled daintily at the food, doing her best to keep interested in the conversation that was passed back and forth between the royal family. If Squee had had any family left, she thought, their conversations would not constantly involve politics and war. But of course, as a mere ward of the royal family, Lady Squee was subjected to such things on a daily basis, or whenever her protectors saw fit. Her parents, the Lord and Lady Merrin, had died a number of years ago of an illness that had swept through the Everett capital, likely a poison slipped into the water by the Morrows.

"I don't see why you would willingly walk into a meeting with the Morrows without some kind of immediate plan to secure our [safety](#)," the prince was saying. "No doubt The Morrows will have thought out every possible way to ensure their safety and every possible way to orchestrate all our deaths. No disrespect, father, but all you've thought of is what kind of food we ought to pack."

King Sole sighed. "We are Everetts. We approach negotiations of peace with honesty and integrity. We are not barbaric as the Morrows are."

"In this case the Morrows are being *smart*," the prince hissed. "Planning isn't barbaric, father. It's logical."

"I'm growing tired of your sympathies of those people, boy," the king said curtly.

"Sympathies? I am attempting to help you care for my people. Our people! It is not a matter of sympathy, it is a matter of survival!"

"Enough. Leave this room immediately."

Prince David's lips curled into a sneer and he stood abruptly, wiping his mouth with a cloth napkin. "Gladly."

He stormed from the room, leaving Lady Squee and the royal couple sitting in silence. The king sighed heavily, but picked up his glass and began to dine again. Queen Esper gave a glance to Squee, silently giving her permission to leave. Squee quietly rose to her feet, curtsayed deeply to both, and fled the room, fighting back tears.

"Gods, this is uncomfortable." Jorick tugged at his collar, his lips pressed into an unhappy line. "A horrible, horrible thing to wear." He growled, yanking at the long robe, and then at the dark robe that hung at his shoulders. "This is ridiculous. Why is there a dress policy for merchants?"

"It's a sign of your high status," Hank said plainly, clapping the disguised prince's shoulder. "Now shut up."

"A sign of *status*? I'm nothing but a fucking wine merchant to these people."

"At least the wine is good, eh?" Hank grinned, and took a gulp from his goblet.

"The way you're drinking it, it won't stay good for long. It'll be gone."

Hank shrugged, gesturing to the cart of heavy wine casks they had wheeled through the city. "There's plenty left."

The two stood outside the Pyramid in Everett City, waiting at one of the back entrances. Jorick felt half-tempted to rip down the door, take out his dagger, and hunt down the royal family. As it were, they were waiting for their Palace contact to arrive and show them in.

Jorick had never met Grif, the contact. Even Hank didn't know much about the man. Rumor had it that Grif had never made claims to be either Morrow or Everett. He lived within Everett walls, inside the palace itself, but had served Jorick's mother and father for as long as he could remember. If Grif were double-crossing them, the Morrrows were apparently willing to overlook it in light of the amount of valuable information he'd supplied (or sold) them over the years.

There was a sound of voices close by, and the door swung open. Hank hid his goblet behind his back.

"Master Grif!" he said. "Splendid to see you this afternoon... And I see you're not alone."

Master Grif stood in the doorway, fingers tapping together compulsively. He was flanked on either side by two boys, barely young men, barely as tall as Grif himself. Jorick held back a snort. Grif stood about as tall as Jorick's chest, and slouched. His hair was slicked neatly back, his eyes glittered, and he wore robes marked with the royal emblem of the Everett house.

"Pay no heed to my assistants, my lord Hank," Grif said. His voice was clipped and seedy, but still somehow a bit pompous. He gave a sharp little bow, his fingers still tapping together.

"This way." The small man turned sharply and scurried off into the corridor, his assistants close at his heels. Hank and Jorick exchanged a glance before following.

They were taken to a shallow storage cellar, where twelve casks of wine, identical to the ones on Jorick's cart, sat stacked. "This is the wine cellar," Grif said in his reedy voice. "I took the liberty of unpacking your earlier shipment."

This time Jorick could not hold back a slight chortle at the thought of this minute man hefting a dozen casks of wine by himself. He attempted to mask the sound by grunting and beginning to unload his casks, but Grif fixed him with a cool look regardless.

"You will be expected to arrive here first light tomorrow morning to begin the day's work. You will be in charge of the Pyramid's daily wine needs. Meals, guests, events--"

"*Daily wine needs?*" Jorick repeated incredulously. "Who do you think I--"

"You will also preside over a wait staff, if necessary, and oversee all reordering and stocking once the stores need to be replenished. Do you understand?" Master Grif's voice left no room for argument.

"Yes," Jorick said finally.

"Good. Let's go, then. I'll show you to your rooms. This way."

Jorick was shown to his room. It was small and simple, in a back hallway of one of the top floors of the Pyramid, but Jorick found he liked it well enough. Eventually Grif dismissed his servants. He turned to Jorick and bowed low once they were out of sight.

"Prince Jorick. Forgive my behavior thus far, it was a matter of protocol. I have someone else, of course, lined up to manage the wine setup in your stead. No one will know the difference, I assure you."

Jorick immediately felt his tense shoulders relax. "Master Grif. Glad to hear it. Thank you for securing a position in the Pyramid for me. I am sure you will be handsomely compensated for your trouble."

"No trouble, no trouble," Grif said, waving both hands. "No trouble for assisting the Prince of the Morrows. Tell me, your Grace, do you need anything more to help make your stay more comfortable? Food? Drink? Women?"

Jorick's lips curved in a slight smile. "I think I'm all right for the moment. Though I may take you up on all three in time." Grif bowed low again to each of them in turn. "Then good evening for now, my lord, your Grace. Feel free to tour the Pyramid. Do please try not to reveal yourself or kill anyone." Grif smiled thinly, and was gone.

"Odd little fellow," said Jorick.

"Indeed."

Jorick inspected the ridiculous amount of green foliage that spilled over the railing of the top floor of the pyramid. The plant's tendrils hung nearly to the balcony of the landing below, pale yellow

flowers sprouting off it, looking like, Jorick thought, the prettier versions of an old man's fingernails. Sunlight filtered down from above, where the peak of the building was nothing but panes of glass. If Jorick had known that, he told himself, he would have used that vulnerability long ago to break in and kill ever last one of these pompous, sickening Everetts. He would start with the king, then he would work his way down to the lowliest serving girl. Then he'd burn the city to the ground.

Today was his third day at the Pyramid. The rest of the palace staff was bustling about, preparing for the excursion tomorrow that would take the royal family and a select number of their peers to neutral territory to meet with Jorick's own family. Since his arrival, Jorick had taken meticulous notes on the Everett family, observing their behaviors and habits.

The King was a strong leader, but a silly idealist dreamer. The Queen was mostly decorative, which somehow made Jorick begrudgingly more thankful for his own stepmother. Queen Esper also seemed fragile and sickly. Perhaps an easy target. Their son, David, was trickier to pin down. He was a slippery young man, perhaps Jorick's age, give or take a year, and had eyes like a hawk. He was quick, smart, and not at all like his father. The King had a ward, a young woman whose body figure had made Jorick observe her more thoroughly than necessary from time to time. It was painfully obvious that Lady Squee was desperately in love with the prince. David was either absolutely oblivious, or ignored her affections completely. Jorick had shadowed his own 'job' while Grif's assistants took care of the majority of Jorick's assigned 'duties.' He'd appeared at one banquet, and had observed two meals during which Jorick's wine was highly complimented. The Everett people were exceedingly kind. It was what made them easy to kill.

Tomorrow Jorick would follow the caravan to the neutral ground, circle back, and meet up with his family and face the Everetts as his true self. But Jorick doubted the family would even notice the double-crossing. They seemed like the type to gloss over the details. Their loss, he supposed.

Footsteps echoed behind him, and Jorick turned to see the Prince moving toward him.

Jorick bowed ever so slightly. "Your Grace."

"Good afternoon. Enjoying the view, hmm?" Prince David's eyes were focused on him, too bright.

Jorick shifted. "Yes, your Grace."

The prince came to stand next to him, bracing his hands against the rail. Jorick thought about shoving him off the balcony.

"You are not a wine merchant," David said calmly. Jorick paused. "I beg your pardon, Your Grace?"

"You are not a wine merchant. I know you aren't. I'm not sure what you are or who you are, but I'm certain you're no merchant. Perhaps something higher. A lord, perhaps? Hmm."

"Your Grace, I--"

"No need to deny it. I won't tell anyone. For now. Tell me." David turned, leaning against the balcony and fixing Jorick with a look. "Do you enjoy women?"

Jorick stared at the prince, unsure of what to say.

"Do you enjoy men? Very young women? Very young men? Black haired, blonde haired?"

"What do you want from me?" Jorick clenched his jaw, watching him warily.

David smiled. "I like the company of people I am not quite sure I can trust. It just happens that you fit into that category, you see. It's marvelously exciting. There's a wonderful establishment on the fringe of the city that a friend of mine owns. Care to join me? I promise you, it will not disappoint."
