

Chapter One: Andromeda

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The last time Valdesia hosted a gala of this scale, Princess Andromeda was almost assassinated. That was news to nobody, of course. It happened often enough.

Which was why Andromeda found herself alone in the meeting chamber, waiting for her biggest adversary to stride through the doors.

Late.

She folded her hands before her on the gleaming wood of the table, then folded them in her lap, then crossed her legs and set her hands on her knee. Each tick of the tall clock in the corner scraped against her nerves.

Couldn't expect much less from Levesca. She'll hold her meeting with the princess only at the time she pleases, and no other...

The doors opened. Andromeda immediately shot to her feet, hands interlacing behind her back.

"Forgive our tardiness, Your Highness. We were delayed," said Lady Levesca, sweeping right in in her black silk gown. Many dark signet rings adorned her milk-white hands. A young woman – one of her daughters, who absolutely hadn't been invited – strode in on her heels. She barely skimmed a cursory glance down Andromeda's heavier figure, stiffly smoothed by her corset. Andromeda bristled.

So it's to be two against one, then.

Andromeda gestured to the seats around the head of the table and gave them both a pleasant smile. "No trouble at all, my ladies," she said. "Please sit."

Levesca and her daughter took their seats without another word – one on either side. Flanking her. *No wonder she brought an ally*, Andromeda thought as anxiety gripped her once again. *These meetings are battles, and I'm already outnumbered.*

She kept her back straight and spoke first. "I've come to you with matters of security for the gala," she said. "The Royal Guard will be on watch the entire time, but with so many guests in attendance, it's in our best interests to bolster the garrison."

"Wisely so," Lady Levesca droned.

"My f- " Andromeda started, but then she backtracked and began again. *A leader is decisive.* "I thought it best that we spare no expense," she said. "Your House knights are the best trained in the kingdom, my lady, and their addition would be a great asset to the court's security."

Levesca hummed, unimpressed by the look on her frown-lined face. “And does the king agree with this decision of yours?”

Of course, my opinion is never sufficient. “He does,” was all she said.

The two ladies merely sniffed. House Levesca was the most influential in the kingdom, and for as long as Andromeda could remember, they’d always been her father’s most powerful enemies... and, by association, hers. Getting anything out of their matriarch would take as much strategy as a war.

But this is why I volunteered to head this confrontation. Father will see I can still hold my own. I can still fight and win for him.

He’ll see I’m still deserving of the title he gifted to me so long ago.

Crown Princess, heiress to the Valdesian throne.

“How many of our knights would you have us provide?” Lady Levesca asked, her gaze like a vise.

Just like a battle. Movements and regroupings and counterattacks. “Approximately fifty, to be spread throughout the castle where the Royal Guard is thinnest.”

“That is nearly half of our manor’s garrison,” the daughter was quick to retort, but Levesca lifted a bejeweled hand.

“The Royal Guard cannot be spread to accommodate the posts of fifty soldiers?” she asked. Her question weighed more like an accusation.

“I did the calculations myself last night, my lady,” Andromeda replied. “This castle has not hosted an event this size for many years. Every additional knight will be an asset.”

The two Levesca women shared a brief look over the table. “We can spare two dozen,” the matriarch said.

“I’m afraid that will be too few,” she replied.

“Do you have a more reasonable request?”

“The Guard can do with forty, if fifty cannot be spared.”

“We can send thirty of our finest soldiers. You’d be hard-pressed to find their equal from any other House.”

She’d never put up so much resistance if this were a discussion with Taegan.

Andromeda’s fists tightened in her skirts at the thought of her brother. “I am aware,” she said carefully, “which is why a minimum of forty, spread amongst the Royal Guard, would be ideal.”

“Your Highness,” said the matriarch with a flat smile, “I applaud your vehement interest in this topic, but I’m afraid you must look elsewhere for the numbers you seek. My House will not spare more than thirty.”

Vehement interest. As if she doesn’t know why I need the added security.

“Galas have always proven the highest risk for... disruptions,” Andromeda retorted, “and I’m sure that this one, with my hand in marriage at the center of attention, will be no different. Threats can slip through the cracks if our guard presence is insufficient.”

“May the gods forbid such a thing ever happen.”

It truly chilled Andromeda to see a look of genuine concern on Lady Levesca’s face. Nothing suggesting that the woman reveled at the very thought. Nothing suggesting that her House was the one behind those threats every time. It wasn’t a secret that the Levescas had always favored Taegan for the throne over her, or that the dispute had been slowly splitting the court in two.

There came a point when it was simply easier to eliminate the obstacle at the heart of the issue than to try to out-argue the king.

The Levescas never meddled enough to incriminate themselves, of course, not at the risk of their status. But their pockets were deep, their influence vast and far-reaching across their countless ranks of middlemen.

Middlemen like the only assassin that had ever laid a hand on Andromeda. The very first they’d sent, who’d only managed to mark her left temple with the scar cutting into her hairline.

Levesca and her daughter awaited her next move.

Andromeda set her shoulders. “As much as I understand your hesitance, the security of this gala in particular should not be trifled with,” she said, as calmly as she could. “Many of our guests are traveling great distances to attend. The way I see it, it would be horrifically inconsiderate if anything happened to one of their hosts after such a journey. Or, gods forbid... the very woman whose hand they’re coming so far to win. Wouldn’t you say?”

The young lady looked to her mother with a flicker of doubt. A glare hardened over Levesca’s features, for now it was Andromeda patiently awaiting her response. Her counterattack.

And before she could make one, Andromeda loosed the ambush she’d kept in reserve all along.

“Of course, if thirty knights is truly the best you wish to offer, I’d be more than happy to hold you to that number,” she said with a piercing little smile. “I’m sure my father will remember it, as well, if something should *happen* to me under their insufficient watch.”

She kept her gaze carefully off of either lady's face, but the warning lingered in the air. Levesca's daughter said nothing.

Her mother, on the other hand, deflected the veiled accusation with uncanny ease, holding Andromeda's gaze with a definitive air. "House Levesca will supply thirty-five of our finest knights, and not a squire more," she said. "Dispatching any number of guards from our own lands is always a risk, I'm sure you understand."

"Of course," she replied with a swell of pride at her small victory. "I would not ask that of your House."

"And we, in turn, would not leave Valdesia's court without a sufficient garrison," Levesca said. "It would indeed be a tragedy for our guests to travel so far, only to find the object of their attention indisposed."

A chill skittered down Andromeda's spine at the ease of the lady's words, her proud feeling gone as quick as it came. She quashed her resurging nerves. "We see eye to eye, then."

"It appears we do."

Andromeda rose from her seat, and the two ladies immediately followed suit. "Oh," Levesca suddenly added, "our soldiers will be permitted to display our House colors while on duty, won't they? We couldn't have them confused with the Royal Guard."

"I..." Andromeda blinked. *Leaders are decisive. She may rescind her number if she's denied...* "Yes, that should be fine."

"And I assume I will be consulted as to my own knights' stations for the gala?"

Decide. "Yes," she said again. Her heart raced from being put on the spot twice in a row.

"Good," nodded the Levesca matriarch. "Then we'll take our leave from you, Your Highness."

The doors opened, and the two Levesca ladies swept out of the dim-lit meeting chamber, one after the other. A blade's width of light fell across the polished table in a slant.

And then they were gone.

Andromeda closed her eyes and let out a slow, wobbling exhale. Her fingers twinged as she unclenched them, flexing them before her. She felt as exhausted as if she'd just come out of a late-night training session for her sorcery.

A battle indeed.

The lap of her gown had wrinkled where she'd clutched the silk. She attempted to smooth that away.

She would most likely have to sit down with the Levescas again to adjust one detail or another. The thought made Andromeda want to whimper. The lady would no doubt invent complications of her own just to put her on the spot.

A costly battle, yet the war rages on.

Andromeda took one last deep breath and brushed her long hair back off her shoulders. Adjusting the silver-spired crown atop her circlet of braids, she strode out of the stuffy chamber at a confident pace.

Her court would never get to see the nerves gnawing deep into her belly. Above all other things, that was always certain.