

The Princess's Revenge

Chapter 1

Valencia's POV

The morning air of Mistmarsh Pack carries the scent of wet earth and decay, but I barely notice it anymore. A month in the dungeons have dulled my senses to everything except the weight of the iron collar around my neck. The guards are coming for us soon—I can hear their boots echoing down the stone corridors, getting closer with each heartbeat I have left.

Strange, how peaceful I feel now. A month ago, when they first dragged me to this cell and announced I'd been chosen as one of the twelve to accompany Alpha Marcus in death, I raged against the bars until my hands bled. I screamed until my voice gave out. But time has a way of wearing down even the sharpest edges of despair, smoothing them into something almost like acceptance.

Through the narrow window high above, I can see the sky is heavy with clouds. Winter in Mistmarsh is always cruel, but I've learned there are worse things than cold. The scars on my arms itch beneath the rough fabric of my torn dress—Marcus's "lessons" as he called them. Each mark a reminder that I survived another day, though I'm not sure that was ever a victory.

The cell door scrapes open, and the guard's face appears—the one with the crooked nose who likes to spit when he talks. "Up, wolfless bitch. Time to meet your maker."

I stand slowly, my joints protesting after days on the damp stone floor. The other eleven girls are being pulled from their cells too. Some are sobbing, begging the guards, the Moon Goddess, anyone who might listen. Sweet Mira, barely sixteen, clutches at the doorframe until the guard pries her fingers away one by one. She hasn't stopped praying since they brought us here.

"Please," she whimpers. "I've done nothing wrong. I've served faithfully—"

The guard backhands her casually, and she crumples. "You think faithful service matters? You're property. Property doesn't get to bargain."

I help her stand because it's something to do with my hands, something besides thinking about what comes next. Her weight is nothing—we're all skeletal things now, years of scraps and beatings having worn us down to essentials. She looks at me with wide, terrified eyes, searching for comfort I don't have to give.

"How are you so calm?" she whispers.

Am I calm? Or am I simply empty? There's a difference, though I suspect it doesn't matter anymore.

"There are worse things than dying," I tell her, and I mean it.

The guards herd us up the stairs and into the grey morning light. The clouds hang low enough that I could almost imagine touching them if my hands were free. The air is sharp with winter's bite, but after the dungeons, even this bitter cold feels like freedom. The other slaves shiver violently in their thin garments, but cold hasn't bothered me for as long as I can remember.

We're loaded into an open cart like livestock—which, I suppose, we are. The wheels groan under even our meager weight as we begin the journey toward the ceremonial grounds. Members of the pack line the streets to watch us pass. Some throw rotten vegetables. Others just stare with the blank curiosity of people watching animals being led to slaughter.

I recognize some faces in the crowd. The baker's wife who used to kick me when I begged for bread. The warrior, Johnson, who broke my ribs last summer for walking too slowly. Luna Kestrel's personal seamstress who made me unpick and resew the same hem fifty times because my stitches weren't "worthy of the Luna's presence."

They all blend together now, a sea of faces that never saw me as anything more than a thing to be used and discarded. And why should they? In their world of strength and power, what am I but an aberration? A wolfless girl whose parents died trying to protect a pack that was doomed anyway.

The memory tries to surface—mother's scream, father's eyes going dark as the sword pushed through his skull—but I push it down. I've become good at that, creating walls between myself and the memories that could still make me feel something. Feeling is dangerous when you're trying to accept death.

The cart jolts over a pothole, and Mira falls against me. She's mumbling prayers under her breath, the same verses over and over. Another girl, Sera, has gone completely silent, staring at nothing with eyes that have already gone somewhere else.

As we leave the main settlement behind, the landscape becomes wilder. Mistmarsh Pack's territory stretches into wetlands—places where the ground can swallow you whole if you step wrong. The mist rises from the boggy ground, reaching for us through the bars of the cart. The guards mutter uneasily among themselves.

The execution grounds are in the old part of the territory, where ancient stones still stand from whoever lived here before the wolves came. My mother once told me stories about those first inhabitants, but those tales died with her. Everything good died with her and father. Everything except Kai—

No. I won't think about my brother.

His blue eyes, so bright with trust that his big sister would protect him. The way his small hand felt in mine as we ran through the smoke and screams. The moment I realized he was gone, swallowed by the chaos, and I couldn't find him no matter how hard I searched.

If there's a mercy in dying today, it's that I'll finally stop wondering if he suffered. If he called for me. If he died alone and afraid, or if somehow, impossibly, he survived and has spent these years thinking I abandoned him.

The cart stops. We've arrived.

Ancient stone pillars rise from the earth in a perfect circle, each one carved with symbols. At the center, they've built the funeral pyre. Marcus's body lies in state within an ornate coffin.

The crowd is already gathering—the ranked members of the pack in their finery, come to see their Alpha off in proper style. Luna Kestrel stands at the front, draped in mourning black. Her son, Wiley, supports her arm. He has his father's cruel mouth but his mother's calculating eyes. The pack's new Alpha, once this ceremony is complete.

They're unloading us from the cart now, and my legs barely hold me as my feet touch the ground. The shackles are so heavy, and I'm so tired. Not just from a month without proper food or water, but from years of this.

My strength finally gave out completely when my left foot sank deep into a patch of boggy ground. The mud seemed to swallow my ankle, and I couldn't find the energy to pull myself free. I toppled forward, landing hard on my knees in the muck, my shackled hands unable to break my fall properly.

"Get up!" The guard's boots splashed through the mud as he approached. "Get up, you fucking piece of shit."

The whip came down again, and again, striping my back with fresh wounds. But the pain felt distant now, muffled by the exhaustion and despair. I could barely feel the sting of the lash anymore.

Through the haze of my failing consciousness, I saw him—a small figure crouched beside me in the mud. My younger brother, Kai, his face innocent the day he'd disappeared during the raid on our pack. His blue eyes were filled with concern as he reached out to touch my cheek.

"Sis," he whispered. "You're so tired. You can rest now."

Tears spilled down my cheeks. I reached for him with trembling fingers, desperate to touch his face one more time, to tell him how sorry I was that I couldn't protect him.

But rough hands tangled in my hair, yanking me back to brutal reality. The guard dragged me through the mud like a sack of grain, and I clawed at his grip to keep from losing my scalp.

"Pathetic," he spat, hauling me toward the altar. "Can't even walk to your own death with dignity."

The crowd parted as we approached the altar, their faces twisted with revulsion and cruel anticipation.

My eyes swept across the sea of Alphas, Lunas, and Betas. The crowd of nobles watched us with expressions ranging from boredom to mild revulsion. Some were actually laughing, making jokes about our suffering.

Every last drop of energy had drained from my body. The agony I'd just endured had wrung me out completely.

The guard unlocked my shackles with rough, impatient movements. He grabbed me and shoved me against one of the stone pillars. The rope bit into my wrists as he bound them behind the pillar, the coarse fibers rubbing my skin raw. My ankles were next, tied so tightly I could already feel my circulation cutting off. When he stuffed the dirty rag into my mouth, I nearly gagged on the taste of mold and something else I didn't want to identify.

Around me, the other girls are crying, begging, praying. Someone is promising the guards anything, everything, if they'll just let her go.

The grey sky stretches endless and uncaring. I fix my eyes on it and I find an unexpected moment of something almost like peace. Soon, this will all be over. No more beatings. No more starvation. No more being reminded every day that I'm an abomination in the world.

Death, when it comes, will be my first and final freedom.