

The Princess's Revenge

Chapter 2

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Chapter 2 The Awakening Bond

Valencia's POV

The drums begin, a deep thrumming that seems to rise from the earth itself. The ceremony is starting. The priests emerge from behind the pillars, moving in ways that make my skin crawl even though I can't quite say why.

The High Priest wears robes the color of dried blood. In his hands, he carries a bronze censer, releasing smoke that shouldn't exist—smoke the color of old blood, thick and wrong, crawling through the air.

The stench hits me even through the gag. Rotting meat mixed with something chemical, something that burns the inside of my nostrils and makes my eyes water.

The High Priest's face is hidden beneath his hood, but I can see his hands—too pale, with fingers that seem just slightly too long. When he raises one of those hands, the crowd immediately falls silent and takes several steps backward.

The smoke from the censer grows thicker, and through my tears, I swear I can see shapes forming in it. Faces that appear and disappear. Reaching hands. Open mouths screaming silently. Maybe it's the lack of food and water making me hallucinate.

The High Priest reaches into his robes and draws out a blade. He begins to speak in a language I don't recognize. The drums adjust their rhythm to match his chanting, and the smoke from the censer starts moving with purpose, circling us.

To my left, Mira has gone rigid against her pillar, eyes wide with terror behind her tears. The fear that I thought had died in me stirs weakly in my chest.

The High Priest approaches the first pillar, where the youngest of us is tied—a girl who can't be more than fourteen. Her whole body shakes as he raises the curved blade. The chanting grows louder, and the smoke thickens around her until she's barely visible.

The blade descends.

The girl's muffled scream cuts through the air, but it's not the quick death I expected. The High Priest makes shallow cuts along her arms, letting blood run down to pool at

the base of the pillar. The stone seems to drink it eagerly, those ancient symbols beginning to glow with a faint, sickly light.

He moves to the second girl, then the third. Each cut precise, ritualistic, designed to bleed but not to kill.

My turn is coming. Seven girls away. Six. Five.

The fear grows stronger now, breaking through the numbness. Not fear of dying—I made my peace with that—but fear of dying slowly, of being fuel for something evil.

Four. Three. Two.

Mira whimpers beside me as the High Priest approaches her. The blade rises.

One.

Mira's blood is the warmest thing I've felt in days as some of it spatters onto my bare arm. She sags against her bonds, still breathing but barely conscious.

Then he turns to me.

Logan's POV

I stand among the crowd, my expression carefully neutral as I survey the ancient stone circle.

Beside me, Elton shifts his weight, barely suppressing what looks like anticipation rather than grief. His Beta, Zephyr, stands at attention with that perpetual smirk he thinks is subtle. Luna Quinn dabs at completely dry eyes with a silk handkerchief.

A pack of fools playing at grief, I think coldly.

"Such a tragedy," Elton announces to no one in particular, his voice dripping with false solemnity. "Marcus was a great Alpha. Taken by bears, of all things. Who could have predicted such a fate?"

Everyone with half a brain knows Marcus's death had nothing to do with bears. The man had more enemies than the kingdom has trees. But here we all stand, pretending to mourn, because that's what politics demands.

The drums begin their deep, rhythmic thrumming. The ceremony is starting.

"Barbaric tradition," Soren murmurs beside me, though his tone suggests mild disapproval rather than true outrage. My older brother has always been better at the diplomatic dance, at saying the right things without actually feeling them.

Elton's gaze wanders to the sacrifices, and his expression shifts to something cruder. "That one's not bad," he comments, nodding toward one of the pillars. "Pretty face, just too skinny. Could have been useful before all this."

"Show some respect," Soren says quietly, but it sounds more like a reminder of social etiquette.

I follow Elton's gaze, more out of curiosity about what kind of woman would catch his tasteless attention than any real interest. My eyes land on a girl bound to one of the center pillars.

She's different from the others. While her fellow captives writhe and weep against their bonds, she stands utterly still, her face turned toward the grey winter sky with an expression of profound calm. Even emaciated and filthy, there's something striking about her.

My wolf, Knox erupts in my mind. He becomes restless, pacing and growling with an urgency I've never felt from him before.

"What's wrong with you?" I demand silently.

"Her scent... it's different. Unique." Knox's mental voice is sharp with certainty. "I think she might be our mate."

The words hit me like a physical blow. My entire body goes rigid. For a moment, I forget how to breathe.

"That's impossible," I snap back. "I can't sense any wolf in her. She's clearly wolfless."

"I know it doesn't make sense," Knox admits, his confusion bleeding through our connection. "But this is the first time I've ever sensed a mate bond. The scent doesn't lie, Logan."

I force myself to focus. A wolfless girl as my mate? It violates everything I understand about how the Moon Goddess works. Wolfless are considered defective, broken, inferior. How could one possibly be destined for an Alpha?

But Knox has never lied to me. Never been wrong about his instincts.

I study her more carefully now, searching for some explanation. She's young, maybe nineteen or twenty, though starvation has carved years into her features.

Purple eyes.

The realization hits me like a physical blow. Purple eyes—the exact color my mother had written about in her journal.

My heart pounds against my ribs. How is this possible? A slave with eyes of such a rare, impossible color. Brown hair matted with mud and blood frames that striking gaze, making those violet irises even more pronounced against her pale skin.

There's something deeply unsettling about her calm. I've witnessed countless executions, seen warriors face death with stoic bravery, watched prisoners break down in terror. But this girl—she's something else entirely.

She's not resigned. She's not brave. She's simply... absent. Like she's already left her body behind, leaving only an empty shell waiting to catch up with where her spirit has already gone.

It fascinates me in a way I don't entirely understand.

"Knox," I murmur internally. "Are you certain?"

"As certain as I've ever been about anything." His growl rumbles through my chest. "That's our mate, Logan. I'd stake my life on it."

The High Priest approached the first pillar. The youngest sacrifice—barely more than a child—begins to shake violently. The curved blade catches what little light filters through the grey clouds.

When he makes the first cut, the girl's muffled scream pierces the air. But it's the stone that captures my attention. The ancient symbols begin to glow, drinking in the blood. The High Priest moves to the second girl. Then the third.

I find my eyes drawn back to the girl again and again. While the others writhe and sob, she remains perfectly still.

Knox grows more agitated. His pacing becomes frantic, his growls turning to snarls.

"We have to do something," he demands. "She's ours. We can't just stand here and watch—"

"Control yourself," I snap back, but my own pulse is quickening. My hands have curled into fists at my sides without my conscious decision.

The High Priest turns to Valencia.

Every muscle in my body goes rigid. Something snaps inside me.

Not love. Not some noble desire to save an innocent. This is more primal. She's mine. The mate bond might be one-sided, might not make any logical sense, but it exists nonetheless. And I'll be damned if I let some priest in a blood-colored robe take what belongs to me.

"Stop this ceremony." My voice cuts through the air like a blade.

The drums falter. The High Priest freezes, blade poised above Valencia's skin. Every head in the crowd turns toward me.

Soren's expression is carefully blank, but I can see the question in his eyes: What the hell are you doing?

My hand moves to my sword as I begin walking toward the altar.

"Logan?" Soren's voice is low, questioning. "What are you—"

BOOM!

A tremendous explosion shattered the night.