



109 The Tribute

Eve 1

Jules turned back around slowly, her uniform hanging loosely from her shoulders. Her expression was unreadable, but her eyes were heavy with something that made my heart ache—pain, fierceness, and a lingering vulnerability that she had likely fought to bury for years. 3

"Much like in Silverpine Pack, Obsidian Pack is divided into quarters, ruled by governors and ambassadors. Those are the more urban regions. But within the quarters are rural sectors, and that is where I am from." Her voice was monotone, as if she was dissociating. My hand twitched where it lay, but I knew I could not interrupt her.

"I understand," I murmured.

"I am from Ravenridge Sector, and my father was the Alpha and still is." Her voice cracked at the word father, and a lump formed in my throat.

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"Ravenridge was—" she croaked before giving a wry smile. "Ravenridge prides itself on its rich traditions and warrior heritage. The sector adheres to strict honor codes and follows older, more conservative werewolf laws." Another shaky smile touched her lips. "Those were my father's words." She ran her hand through her hair. "My father... loved me, you know? Even though my mother died when she gave birth to me, I was still his little prinžā." 1

I stayed quiet, watching her as her bottom lip quivered.

"But good times never last." She sighed. "Life simply does not work like that. First, he remarried, and I ended up getting a stepsister. Then the dispute with Ironclaw Sector happened." She cringed. "Ravenridge, though wealthy in traditions, has been facing a food shortage due to infertile land, exacerbated by growing population pressures. Ironclaw, rich in mineral resources but lacking fertile land, refused to trade fairly, demanding more than what Ravenridge could afford. We were going to starve, Ellen," she muttered. "We were desperate, so we encroached on the Ironclaw Sector, and it was then that it began. The war that would truly turn everything on its head."



My blood ran cold at the mention of a war. A dispute over land and resources had turned bloody, and a thirteen-year-old Jules had witnessed it.

"To say it was a bloodbath was an understatement. We were hungry and tired, and Ironclaw was ruthless. Alpha Thorn did not believe in leniency, something that I would learn personally with time. As you could imagine, we lost horribly." Jules drew a shuddering breath, her shoulders slumping as though the weight of her memories was too much to bear. Her fingers fidgeted with the loose fabric of her uniform, and for a moment, she seemed lost in the past.

"When Ravenridge surrendered," she continued, her voice barely above a whisper, "it wasn't enough to just admit defeat. Ironclaw demanded restitution—something to humiliate us, to remind us that we were broken and powerless. Alpha Thorn invoked one of the oldest traditions... a tribute."

I stiffened, my stomach knotting as her words sank in.

"They demanded a girl, Ellen. One of ours, sent to live in their sector, to be raised as their own, molded into their servant or... whatever else they



"A draw was to be pulled, and my stepsister's name, Adela, was the one that was to be given away. But when the time came..." Jules's voice cracked, and she swallowed hard, her gaze fixed on some invisible point in the distance. "I woke up in the carriage instead."

I felt my breath hitch.

"My stepmother drugged me," she said, her tone flat, emotionless. "She switched us, made it seem like a mistake. I didn't even know until I woke up at the Ironclaw border, the enforcers waiting for me like wolves circling their prey."

Her hands clenched into fists at her sides, her knuckles white.

"I thought... I thought my father would come for me. That he'd fix it, that he'd take me home." Her voice wavered, and she laughed again, a sound filled with bitterness and heartbreak. "But he didn't. I made it to the border once, Ellen. I ran, barefoot and terrified, all the way back to Ravenridge, thinking I just had to reach him. That if he had a chance, he would save his little prinzã. He just had to see my face, he had to see my state."

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Tears welled in her eyes now, and her voice grew thick with emotion.

"When I got there, my sector's enforcers tried to force me back, but I refused with all the power I had left. I told them that I was not leaving without seeing my father. And after what felt like my whole lifetime, my father came to see me. I'll never forget the look on his face. Cold. Distant. Like I was nothing to him. He summoned the Ironclaw enforcers himself. And then he said—" Jules's voice broke completely, and she wrapped her arms around herself as if to keep from falling apart. 1

"He said, 'You're a sacrifice the pack won't forget. Go back where you belong, my little prinzã.'"

I gasped, my hand flying to my mouth.

"I begged him," she continued, her voice trembling. "I begged him to take me back. I screamed, cried, but he didn't even flinch. He turned his back on me, Ellen. My own father."

Jules's tears fell freely now, and I reached out, placing a hand on her arm, but she didn't seem to notice.

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"The Ironclaw enforcers dragged me back, and as punishment for running... they made an example of me." Her voice dropped to a whisper, and she turned her head slightly, her gaze distant and hollow. "Thorn's whip left the scar you saw. He made sure it was deep enough to remind me of my place. Of what I'd lost."

I felt tears sting my own eyes, my chest tight with helplessness and rage.

"After that, I learned to survive. I kept my head down, did what they wanted, stayed quiet. But every day, I thought about that moment at the border, about the way my father looked at me... like I was nothing. Like I wasn't even his daughter anymore."

Jules finally looked at me, her eyes glistening with pain. "I was fourteen and I had no wolf yet, but it is widely known that when a child goes through enough torture and torment, it can either scare their wolf away or cause an early shifting. Mine was the former, and that is why I do not have a wolf."

Jules's voice was barely a whisper as she finished that thought, the weight of her words settling between us like a crushing presence. I wanted to say something, anything, to fill the silence, but



"I thought that maybe if I worked harder, stayed in line, they'd leave me alone," she continued, her voice hollow. "But Thorn... he thrived on control. On breaking people. I think he enjoyed the fact that I didn't have a wolf. It made me... weaker, easier to manipulate. He used to call me 'his little ghost,' a reminder that I was less than everyone else in his pack. And no one stopped him."

Jules took a shaky breath, her fingers brushing against the scar on her arm, as if the memory of it still burned. "I became... nothing more than a shadow. I cleaned their halls till my knees bled, served their meals while they starved me, took their punishments when they needed someone to blame. For years, Ellen. That's all I was."

Her words pierced me like daggers, the raw pain in her voice unbearable. I reached for her again, desperate to comfort her, but she pulled away, wrapping her arms around herself.

"And then one day," she murmured, her gaze distant, "Thorn decided I was no longer useful. He started mentioning the *others*—the rogue sectors that were desperate for anything, even broken girls like me. He said he'd trade me, that I'd serve them better as their 'entertainment.'" Her voice trembled, the words coming out like



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I froze, my stomach twisting in horror. "Jules..."

"But the king came through the sectors, and I was rescued with others like me." Her eyes twinkled for the first time since she began, a ghost of a genuine smile tugging at her lips. Then her smile faltered, like a wilting flower. "But after eight years in Ironclaw, I was already broken," she looked down at her hands. "I am still broken. I am nothing." 1

"You are still here, though," I said, my voice a soft murmur. "They broke you, Jules. Over and over again. But you refused to stay broken. That's what they don't understand. The scar they gave you... it's not just theirs. It's yours too. It's a reminder that you survived, that you are still standing, no matter how many times they tried to tear you down."

I did the only thing I could—I reached for her and



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She clung to me like a lifeline, but what she didn't know was that I clung to her like a lifeline as well, because my tears fell like hers.

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