

Broken 331

Chapter 331 Undercover

SELENE

I had been in Lelo for six weeks. Six long weeks of pretending I was just another consultant handling infrastructure audits and land-use permits for a mid-tier park that barely registered on the map. No guards. No title. No one bowed their head or lowered their voice when I walked past. My father called it “keeping me safe.” I called it exile. I sat at the long table in the temporary operations office staring at the same project file I’d already reviewed three times that morning. The numbers were clean. The land surveys were fine. The security upgrade proposal was basic but functional. Nothing was wrong. Which was the problem. I pushed my chair back and stood. The office smelled like paper and recycled air. Too quiet. Too normal. “Selene?” one of the coordinators asked. “Is there an issue with the western access point?” “No,” I said. “Everything’s fine.” He nodded, relieved, and went back to his screen. I grabbed my jacket. “Are you heading out for the day?” another staff member asked. “Yes.” It was barely noon. I left the building and stepped into the open courtyard. The park was calm. Too calm. Patrols moved at regular intervals. Wolves laughed near the training field. No tension in the air. No edge. My father hadn’t sent me here to manage a project. He sent me here to keep me out of the way, I got in my car and drove without thinking about it too hard. If I did, I might talk myself out of it. By nightfall, I was crossing back into the southern territory. The land felt different almost immediately. Heavier. Charged. My wolf stirred under my skin, alert and restless. This was home, whether he liked it or not. The manor lights were on when I pulled in. That surprised me. I expected quiet. Maybe a few guards. Not full illumination. I walked in through the main doors without announcing myself. The guards stiffened but didn’t stop me. They knew better than to try. My father’s voice carried from the inner hall. “...timing matters,” he was saying. “You don’t rush this.” I stepped into the room. “Funny,” I said. “You didn’t seem worried about timing when you sent me away.” He turned slowly. His expression went from surprise to irritation in seconds. “What are you doing here?” he asked. “I live here.” “You were told not to return.”

“I was told not to return until it was safe,” I replied. “You didn’t say I wasn’t allowed to think for myself.” “This isn’t a discussion.” “It is now.” He dismissed the guards with a look. They cleared the room quickly. “You disobeyed a direct instruction,” he said. “You hid something from me,” I shot back. “Which means you don’t trust me. Which means you don’t see me as an asset anymore.” He crossed his arms. “You’re emotional.” I laughed once. Short and sharp. “I’ve been handling your projects since I was eighteen.” “And you let personal feelings cloud your judgment.” “That’s rich,” “You don’t see the full board,” he said. “You react.” “I adapt,” I said. “You just don’t like that I ask questions.” He stepped closer. “This is exactly why I needed you out of the territory.” “Because I won’t sit quietly while you make deals in the dark?” Before he could answer, the door behind him opened. I smelled Elias before I saw him. Clean. Controlled. His wolf muted in a way that felt wrong. He looked rested. Well-fed. Dressed like he belonged here.

He stopped when he saw me. “Well,” he said. “This is unexpected.” My father didn’t turn. “So this is it,” I said. “You sent me away to make room for him.” “That’s not-” “Don’t insult me,” I snapped. “I’m not blind.” Elias watched us with interest, like he was studying a board position. “You replaced me,” I said to my father. “With him.” “You were becoming a liability,” he replied flatly. My chest tightened. “Because I

questioned you?" "Because you think with your heart," he said. "And this requires precision." I looked at Elias. "And you think he's precise?" Elias smiled faintly. "I think strategically," he said. "Emotion complicates outcomes." I stepped toward him before I could stop myself. "You don't belong here." "This isn't your call," my father said. "It should be," I said. "You taught me everything. Or was that just until I stopped agreeing with you?" He exhaled slowly. "This plan needs discipline," he said. "Not sentiment." "And you think I'm sentimental because I don't want to tear packs apart?" "You hesitate," he replied. "He doesn't." I looked back at Elias. "So that's why you told me to leave," I said. "So you could bring him in without resistance." "Correct." The word hit harder than I expected. "You chose him over me." "I chose results." Elias stepped forward. "With respect," he said, "this isn't personal." I laughed again. "It always is." My father turned to him. "You can wait outside." Elias inclined his head and left the room without a word. The silence that followed was heavy. "You think this will work," I said. "Binding yourself to someone like him." "He's controllable," my father said. "Focused." "You're wrong." "You're biased." "No," I said. "I know what he is." "You know what he was," he corrected. "I've corrected that." That made my skin prickle. "What did you do to him?" "That's not your concern." "It becomes my concern when it blows up in your face. O "You don't see the full picture," he said again. "And that's why you were sent away." "Because I'm a woman," I said quietly. He didn't deny it. "You lead with emotion," he said. "That makes you predictable." "And you think he isn't?" "He's efficient." "Until he isn't," I said. "And when that happens, you'll wish I was here." "You'll do as you're told," he said. "Or you'll stay out of this entirely." I stared at him, really looked at him, and realized something had shifted.

Chapter 332 Control

SELENE

This wasn't about safety. It was about control. "Then you've already lost me," I said. He said nothing. I turned toward the door. "Don't interfere," he warned. "I never do," I replied. "I expose." I walked out before he could say anything else. Behind me, the manor felt colder than it ever had. I didn't like reaching out to Clara. I hadn't liked her even when we were supposed to be on the same side. She was reckless, emotional in the worst ways, and always convinced she was smarter than everyone else in the room. But Elias had a way of pushing people into corners they didn't choose, and right now, I was standing in one. He had taken our place. Not just mine. Clara's too, whether she wanted to admit or not. I sat in my car outside the private residence Mark owned, fingers tight around my phone. The engine was off. The windows were up. I didn't want to be seen pacing like I didn't know what I was doing. I knew exactly what I was doing. I was offering Clara an alliance and I hated myself for it. I sent the message first. Short. Direct. We need to talk. It's about Elias. The reply came five minutes later. Where are you? I gave her the address. She didn't invite me in when I knocked. She opened the door, looked me over like I was something she hadn't ordered, then turned and walked back inside. I followed. The house smelled like alcohol and something sweet underneath it. Mark wasn't there. That was obvious. Clara had the place to herself, and it showed. Shoes abandoned near the stairs. A half-empty glass on the counter. She leaned against the kitchen island and crossed her arms. "So," she said. "What do you want?" I stayed standing. "You know why I'm here." She laughed, but there was no humor in it. "Let me guess. Elias." "Yes." Her eyes sharpened. "You're late." "I was removed," I said flatly. "Just like you were." She tilted her head. "I walked away." "You were pushed," I corrected. "You just refuse to say it but loud." Her jaw tightened. "Careful." "Elias took our place," I said. "In the south. In the plan. In our father's trust. He's sitting where we used to sit." She picked up her glass and took a slow sip. "And?" "And I'm not going to pretend that doesn't bother me," I said. "And you shouldn't either." She studied

me in silence. "You came all this way for that?" she asked. "To whine?" "I came to propose a way forward." That got her attention. She set the glass down. "I'm listening." I took a breath. "Elias is bound to the Southern Alpha now," I said. "Which means he's not as free as he wants people to think. Bindings always leave cracks. Dependencies. Pressure points." Clara smiled faintly. "So you want to break him." "I want to remove him," I said. "Quietly. Permanently." Her smile widened. "And where does that leave you?" "Back where I belong." "And me?" "With leverage," I said. "Protection. A clean slate."

She laughed again, louder this time. "You really think I'd trust you?" "No," I said. "I think you'd trust the outcome." She pushed off the counter and walked closer. "You think this is about Elias," she said. "It's not." "It is for me." "For you," she repeated. "Not for me." "You hate him," I said. "He ruined your plans." She stepped closer, lowering her voice. "He didn't ruin anything," she said. "He accelerated it." I frowned. "What does that mean?" "It means I don't need you," she said. "And I don't need some neat little alliance where I share credit." "This isn't about credit." "It always is," she snapped. "With you. With your father. With everyone." I felt my temper rise. "You're not as alone as you think." "I am," she said. "And I like it that way." I took a step forward. "You can't take Elias alone." She smiled, slow and sharp. "Watch me." I stared at her. "You're being reckless." She leaned in. "And you're being desperate." Silence stretched between us. I tried again, softer this time. "Clara," I said. "He replaced us. Both of us. Don't you feel that?" Her eyes flickered, just for a second. Then she straightened. "I feel motivated," she said. "And I don't work well with partners." "You'll fail," I said. "Or I'll win without you," she replied. "Either way, I don't need your permission." I clenched my jaw. "So that's it." "That's it." I nodded slowly. "Fine." I turned toward the door. "Just know this," I said without looking back. "When this blows up, I won't be standing beside you." She laughed behind me. "You never were." That did it. I spun back around. "You think you're smarter than everyone," I said. "But you're predictable. You move on impulse. You let your feelings make decisions for you." Her eyes flashed. "And you hide behind plans," she shot back. "While other people actually act."

"At least I know who the enemy is." "So do I," she said. "I just don't need help killing him." I stared at her for a long moment. Then I turned and walked out. I didn't slam the door. I didn't look back. But the anger followed me all the way to the car. I sat behind the wheel and let it settle. Let it burn. Let it sharpen. Clara was wrong. Working alone was a mistake but she had made her choice. Which meant I had to make mine. If I couldn't remove Elias through cooperation, then I'd do it the only way left. From the outside. And when it all came apart, Clara wouldn't be standing in the clear like she thought. She'd be right in the middle of it. Whether she liked it or not. When I finish dealing with everyone my own way, I will make sure that they regret it. Daniel, Amy, Clara, Elis and my father would regret pushing me aside.

Chapter 333 Breakdown

CLARA

My body betrayed me before my mind could catch up. One minute I was standing in the kitchen, staring at the counter like I'd forgotten what I came there to do. Next, my knees buckled. The floor came up fast. I didn't even feel pain at first. Just a strange lightness, like the room had tilted and decided not to come back. My ears rang. My vision blurred at the edges. I tried to call out. Nothing came out. My wolf stirred, weak and confused, pressing against me like it didn't understand why I couldn't stand. I hated that feeling. Weakness had never suited me. I don't know how long I was on the floor before Mark

found me. It could have been seconds. It could have been minutes. Time did something strange in my head, stretching and folding over itself. "Clara?" His voice sounded far away. "Clara!" Footsteps rushed closer. A shadow fell over me. His scent hit me next—sharp, familiar, grounding in a way I didn't want to admit I needed. "Hey. Hey. Look at me." Hands touched my face. He lifted my head slightly. My throat felt tight. "I can't—" I tried to say. My chest burned. Breathing felt like work. Every inhale scraped. Mark swore under his breath. "What happened?" he demanded, like I had planned this. I shook my head weakly, "I don't know." That part was true. The room spun again. I felt his arms slide under me, lifting me off the floor. I wanted to protest. I hated being carried. But my body refused to cooperate. "Stay with me," he said. "Clara, stay awake." "I am," I muttered, though my eyelids felt heavy. He moved fast. I could tell by the way his steps hit the floor, sharp and uneven. The front door opened. Cool air brushed my skin. The world tilted again as he put me in the car. The door slammed. The engine roared to life. I stared at the roof of the car, counting my breaths. One. Two. Three. My wolf whimpered. That scared me more than the dizziness. "Don't," I whispered. "Don't panic." Mark glanced at me. "You're not fine," he said. "You passed out." "I didn't," I argued weakly. "I sat down." "That was the floor." I closed my eyes. The drive felt endless. Every turn made my stomach twist. My heart raced, then slowed, then raced again. I hated this. I hated feeling out of control. I hated that the one person with me was Mark. The irony tasted bitter. When we reached the hospital, everything moved too fast. Doors opened. Voices overlapped. Hands touched me that weren't his. "Wolf or human collapse?" someone asked. "Wolf," Mark said immediately. "She's not human." "Vitals?" "I don't know. She just went down." They wheeled me inside. Bright lights burned my eyes. I squeezed them shut. "Ma'am," a healer said. "Can you hear me?" "Yes," I said, though my voice shook. "What's your name?" "Clara." "Any prior conditions?" "No." Mark snorted softly. I shot him a weak glare. "Stress doesn't count," I muttered. The healer didn't smile. They took blood. They checked my pulse. They whispered to each other in low voices that made my skin itch. Mark stood near the bed, arms crossed, jaw tight. He looked angry. Not worried. Angry. I That stung more than I expected. "Can you step outside?" the healer asked him. He hesitated. "I'll be right here," he told me. I didn't answer. When he left, the room felt quieter. Too quiet.

The healer looked at me carefully. "You've been pushing yourself," she said. "That's not a diagnosis." "It's an observation." I swallowed. "My wolf feels weak," I admitted. "Has anything been suppressing it?" she asked. "Potions. Compulsion. External influence?" My heart skipped. "No," I said too quickly. She didn't press. She wrote something down. "Stress, lack of rest, and internal conflict can destabilize a wolf," she said. "Especially in high-ranking bloodlines." I turned my head away. When Mark came back, he looked restless. "What did they say?" he asked. "She's alive," the healer said calmly. "Which seems to be your main concern." He frowned. "What's wrong with her?" "She needs rest," the healer replied. "And monitoring. We're keeping her overnight." Mark's shoulders dropped slightly. "Fine." I shot him a look. "Like you have a choice." He ignored that. Later, when the room was quiet again and the lights dimmed, he sat in the chair beside the bed. He didn't look at me. "You scared me," he said finally. I laughed softly. "That makes one of us." He turned sharply. "Don't joke." "I'm not," I said. "I don't even know what happened." Silence settled between us. "You've been different," he said. "Everyone keeps saying that." "You're on edge," he continued. "You're not sleeping. You're pushing too hard." I stared at the ceiling. "I don't have the luxury of slowing down." "That's not true."

"It is for me." He leaned forward. Clara "No." Leut in. "Don't." He stopped. I could feel his frustration like heat. "Why didn't you tell me you weren't okay?" he asked. I turned my head to face him. "Since when do you care?" He flinched. "That's not fair." "Neither is any of this." He stood up abruptly. "I rushed you

here." "Congratulations." He ran a hand through his hair. "You don't have to keep fighting everyone." "Yes, I do." "You don't have to fight me." I laughed again, bitter this time. "You're the only one I have to fight." His eyes darkened. "That's not what I want." "Then what do you want?" I asked. He hesitated. "I want things to stop spiraling." I closed my eyes. "So do I." The monitor beeped softly beside me. My body still felt heavy, but the spinning had ceased. Mark sighed and sat back down. "I'm staying," he said. "In case it happens again." I didn't thank him. I didn't tell him to leave. I just lay there, staring at the ceiling, my wolf curled tight inside me. This breakdown wasn't just physical. I knew that. Something was cracking. And for the first time in a long while, I wasn't sure I could hold it together.

Chapter 334 The Answers

ELIAS

I didn't ask questions at first. That alone should have told me how deep I was already in this. The Southern Alpha walked ahead of me, his stride calm, unhurried, like the entire park belonged to him—which, in practice, it did. I followed a step behind, hands clasped behind my back, my mind working faster than my feet. We were leaving the park. That much was obvious from the direction we took and the the guards parted without question. "Where are we going?" I finally asked. He didn't slow down. "That is none of your business," he said flatly. The answer landed hard but clean. No room for debate. I shut my mouth and kept walking. We got into the SUV without ceremony. He took the back seat. I slid in opposite him. The driver said nothing. The engine started, and we pulled away. Hours passed. The road changed from smooth pavement to rougher paths. Trees thickened. Cell service disappeared. I stopped checking the time at some point because it no longer mattered. The Southern Alpha sat with his eyes closed, one arm resting against the door, breathing slow and steady. He looked completely at ease. I wasn't. Eventually, the SUV slowed to a stop. "Out," he said. I stepped out into the cold air and dense forest. The smell of earth and pine filled my lungs. There were no lights, no buildings, no sign that anyone else had ever been here. The guards exited as well. Six of them. All silent. All watching. The Southern Alpha took a few steps forward, then stopped. Without warning, he shifted. I had seen wolves before. I had shifted wolves before. This was different. His form tore through the air with a sharp crack of bone and muscle, his human shape folding inward and expanding outward in a way that made my stomach tighten. He was enormous. Not just tall or wide, but heavy with presence. His fur was dark, streaked with silver at the shoulders and along his spine. His eyes burned with intelligence, not wildness. I froze. I had never seen a wolf like that. Through the mind link, his voice cut through me, "What are you waiting for?" I swallowed hard. "I don't know how, I admitted. The last time I tried... I felt human." His response came instantly. "Because you were dumb." I stiffened. "I restricted your wolf, you're free now." I clenched my jaw. "you have pledged your loyalty. The chain is gone. Shift." Fear flickered through me. Not of him—but of myself. I took a breath and reached inward. For the first time in years, I didn't push the wolf down. I let it rise. The change came fast. Faster than I expected. My bones stretched, muscles snapping into place, heat ripping through my veins. It hurt—but it felt right. When it was over, I stood on four legs, breath heavy, senses sharp. I hadn't felt this alive in a long time. "Good, the Southern Alpha said. Follow me." Three of the guards shifted as well. The others stayed behind in human form, watching us disappear into the trees. We ran. Not at a frantic pace, but steady, purposeful. The forest thickened as we moved deeper, paths appearing where none should exist. I realized then that this place was known only to those meant to find it. After a while, the Southern Alpha slowed and veered sharply left. The ground dipped. Rocks rose around us. A cave entrance opened before us. We shifted back at the mouth. No one spoke as we stepped inside. The cave led downward,

not rough or narrow as I expected, but smooth, reinforced. Lights flickered on as we passed, revealing metal walls, wide corridors, ventilation humming quietly above.

My steps slowed. "What the hell..." I muttered. The Southern Alpha glanced back. "Focus." The tunnel opened into a massive underground space. I stopped completely. It was an office. Not a crude setup or a temporary base. This was developed. Screens lined the walls. Long tables filled the center. Maps, digital displays, documents—everything organized with military precision. Alphas stood in clusters, speaking in low tones. I recognized some of them. Too many of them. My stomach dropped. These were leaders I never thought would align with corruption. With secrecy. With him. The Southern Alpha walked forward like he owned the room. Conversations quieted as he passed. I followed, my pulse pounding. One of the Alphas nodded at him. "You're late." "I arrived when it mattered," the Southern Alpha replied. Eyes turned to me. "This is Elias," he said. "He is with us." No one questioned it. That terrified me more than anything else. We gathered around the central table. A map of the territories flickered to life. "Our objective remains unchanged," the Southern Alpha said. "Daniel." Murmurs spread. One Alpha crossed his arms. "Direct confrontation won't work. He's too protected." Another nodded. "And the North stands firmly behind him." A third leaned forward. "Then we don't hit him directly." The Southern Alpha's eyes flicked toward the map. Toward the Northern territory. "Explain," he said. "Amy," the Alpha replied calmly. "She's the weakness." My chest tightened. "If Daniel loses his mate," another added, "he loses balance. Authority. Focus." I shifted uncomfortably. "That's risky," someone said. "Touching a Luna- "Risk is irrelevant." the Southern Alpha cut in.. Silence followed. I cleared my throat before I could stop myself. "And after?" I asked. "What happens after Daniel falls?" Several eyes turned to me. The Southern Alpha answered without hesitation. "The North and South join." A murmur of approval rippled through the room. "The strongest pack to ever exist," one Alpha said. "Unchallenged," another added. My mouth felt dry. "And the cost?" I asked quietly. The Southern Alpha looked at me then. Really looked. "Power always has a cost," he said. "The question is whether you're willing to pay it." I didn't answer. I couldn't. The meeting continued, strategies unfolding, names mentioned, timelines discussed. I listened. I absorbed. I stayed silent. Because I knew something now that I hadn't before. My life was no longer my own. Every step I took from this point forward was tied to him. To his plans. To Daniel's fall. And whether I liked it or not, the river had already carried me too far to turn back.

Chapter 335 The Rules

ELIAS

We left the underground space the same way we had entered it. No closing speech. No ceremony. The kind of ending that told me this meeting wasn't rare—it was routine, The Alphas dispersed in small groups, their conversations low, their expressions set. Nobody looked shaken by what had been discussed. Nobody hesitated. That unsettled me more than the plan itself. The Southern Alpha shifted first once we reached the outer tunnel. I followed, along with the guards. The run back through the forest felt longer, heavier. My body moved easily now, but my mind lagged behind, trying to catch up with what I had agreed to be part of. By the time we reached the SUV, the adrenaline had worn off. The drive back was quiet. No orders. No commentary. Just the road and the steady hum of the engine. When the familiar borders of the park came into view, I felt something close to relief. It didn't last. We hadn't even fully stopped when shouting broke through the stillness. "Why didn't you let me in?" I recognized the voice immediately. Selene. She stood just beyond the security barrier, hair pulled back, hands clenched at her sides. Two guards blocked her path. Their posture was rigid, professional. "You have no

right," she snapped. "Move." One of the guards replied evenly, "We're acting on direct instruction." The SUV door opened. The Southern Alpha stepped out. "They didn't let you in because I told them not to," he said. Selene turned toward him, her face tight with anger. "You sent me away like I was a liability, she said. "Then you cut me off completely." "You were given clear instructions," he replied. She laughed once, sharp and bitter. "And now what? You think I'll just disappear?" He said nothing. She stepped closer. "I'm not going anywhere," she said. "Unless you plan to kill me yourself. That's the only way you get rid of me for good." The guards shifted uneasily. For a moment, I thought he might explode. His jaw tightened. His hands curled into fists. But he didn't move. He looked at her the way someone looks at a problem they don't know how to solve without breaking something important. "Enough," he said finally. "You're coming in. But this is your last warning. You will not interfere. You will not question my decisions. You will not cause trouble." She held his gaze, breathing hard. "I won't promise silence," she said. "I didn't ask for it," he replied. "I asked for control." Then he turned and walked away. Selene stood there for a second longer, then stepped past the guards. Her eyes flicked toward I started to follow the Southern Alpha. Her hand shot out and grabbed my arm. "Elias," she said sharply. "Come here." I hesitated. "Now," she added. I glanced toward her father's retreating back. He didn't look back. I followed her to the side of the building, out of earshot. "What is going on?" she demanded. "Why are you suddenly everywhere he is?" I rubbed my jaw. "I wish I understood," I said. She scoffed. "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not," I replied. "I'm following his lead. That's all." Her eyes narrowed. "That's not an answer." "It's the only one I have." She crossed her arms. "Why is this happening?" she asked. "Why now?" I exhaled slowly. "Ask him," I said. "Ask him why he locked me in a dark cell for weeks. Then maybe I'll have something useful to tell you." Her expression shifted. Shock flickered across her face. "He did what?" she asked. I met her gaze. "You heard me." She stared at me for a long moment. "He told me you were being protected." I almost laughed. "He didn't protect me," I said. "He broke me down until I had no choice but to stand where he wanted." Silence settled between us. Her voice dropped. "Why didn't you fight him?" "I did," I said. "It didn't matter." She shook her head slowly. "This doesn't make sense." "Nothing about him does," I replied. She looked back toward the main building. "He's replacing me," she said quietly. I didn't respond. "That's what this is," she continued. "He sends me away. He brings you in. He shuts me out "I'm not here to replace you," I said. Her eyes snapped back to me. "Then what are you here for?" I hesitated. "I don't know yet," I said. "But whatever it is, it's bigger than both of us." Her jaw tightened. "You're choosing his side." "I'm choosing survival," I said. She studied my face, like she was trying to find something familiar and coming up empty. "Be careful," she said finally. "He doesn't keep people close unless he plans to use them."

"I'm aware," I replied. She stepped back. "If he hurts you again-" "He already has," I cut in. She fell silent. "I should go," I said. She didn't stop me this time. As I walked away, I felt the weight of everything pressing down harder than before. The meeting. The plan. Selene's anger. The Southern Alpha's control. Nothing about this path was clean. But it was the one I was on. And turning back was no longer an option. The days that followed moved quietly, but nothing about them felt calm. Plans were already in motion. Not spoken aloud in full, not written down, but understood. I felt it in the way the Southern Alpha carried himself. Focused. Controlled. Like every move he made was already ten steps ahead of everyone else. I stayed close. Close enough to listen. Close enough to be useful. Not close enough to ask questions he hadn't invited. That was the rule. We met late most nights, sometimes in his office, sometimes somewhere less obvious. Always behind closed doors. Always with at least two guards

nearby, even when it was just the two of “You’re learning,” he told me one evening, pouring himself a drink. “That’s good.” I didn’t answer. Praise from him felt like a leash tightening.

Chapter 336 Leverage

ELIAS

He leaned back in his chair. “Daniel is careful,” he continued. “He doesn’t move without reason. That’s his strength. It’s also his weakness.” I kept my face neutral. “Because he waits.” “Because he trusts,” the Southern Alpha corrected. “He believes loyalty is stronger than fear.” I thought of Amy. Of the way Daniel had defended her even when doubt surrounded her. “He won’t move unless he’s sure,” I said. “Exactly,” he replied. “So we make sure he’s never sure.” He slid a folder across the table. Inside were names. Locations. Small, harmless details on their own. Together, they formed a web. “These are pressure points,” he said. “People Daniel protects. Territories he can’t afford to destabilize. Allies who will hesitate when things get ugly.” “And Amy,” I said before I could stop myself. The Southern Alpha’s eyes lifted to mine. “Yes,” he said calmly. “Amy.” My jaw tightened. “You said she was leverage, not a target.” “She’s both,” he replied. “The difference depends on how Daniel reacts.” I didn’t like that answer. He noticed. “You’re attached to him,” he said. “That’s a flaw you need to control.” “I’m loyal to you,” I said carefully. “That’s not the same thing,” he replied. Silence stretched between us. “Do you know why I chose you?” he asked. “Because I had no choice,” I said. He smiled faintly. “No. Because you understand loss. You understand what it means to be stripped down and rebuilt.” I said nothing. He stood. “You’ll accompany the envoys tomorrow. Watch. Listen. Don’t interfere unless I tell you to.” “Envoys to where?” I asked. “The border packs,” he said. “The ones who pretend neutrality.” I nodded. The next day was spent traveling again. Shorter distances this time. Quiet conversations in moving vehicles. Every pack we visited welcomed the Southern Alpha with respect that bordered on fear. I watched how he spoke. Not demanding. Not pleading. Just stating facts. Daniel’s name came up often. Always with careful wording. “He’s unstable,” the Southern Alpha said at one meeting. “Emotionally compromised.” “With the Luna situation,” one Alpha replied cautiously. “Yes,” he agreed. “And that makes him unpredictable.” I saw it then. The seed being planted. Not accusations. Doubt. By the time we returned, I understood the shape of the plan more clearly. This wasn’t about brute force. It was about isolation. Back at the park, I crossed paths with Selene only once. She stood near the training grounds, arms crossed, watching wolves spar. “You look busy,” she said. “I am,” I replied. She studied my face. “You’re deeper in than you were before.” “Yes.” She laughed without humor. “Be careful you don’t disappear completely.” “I already have,” I said. She didn’t respond. That night, the Southern Alpha called me in again. “We move slowly now,” he said. “Daniel will feel it before he sees it.” “And if he strikes first?” I asked. “He won’t,” he said. “Not while Amy is under scrutiny. Not while his council is divided.” I thought of the meeting underground. Of the suggestion to use Amy.

“Clara is being handled,” he added. “She’s unstable, but useful.” That set something cold in my chest. “You’re playing with too many pieces,” I said. He looked at me sharply. “You’re forgetting your place.” “I’m doing my job,” I replied. “Which is to see risks.” His gaze lingered, then softened slightly. “Good,” he said. “Then you see that Daniel’s greatest weakness isn’t Amy.” “It’s himself,” I said. He nodded. “Because when this collapses, he’ll blame himself first.” Days passed. Reports came in. Small shifts. Council members hesitating. Allies delaying responses. Border packs growing quiet. Daniel was being boxed in without realizing it. And I was standing at the center of it, watching the walls rise. One evening, as I left the Southern Alpha’s office, a guard handed me a message. No name. No seal. Just a single line.

He's closer than you think. I stared at it longer than I should have. That night, sleep didn't come easily. I knew this plan would work. I could see it unfolding. Step by step. Clean. Controlled. What I didn't know was what would be left standing when it was over. And whether I would still recognize myself when Daniel finally fell. Selene stayed away after that brief encounter near the training grounds. I suspected it wasn't by choice. The Southern Alpha had a way of controlling movement without raising his voice. Guards shifted. Schedules changed. Doors closed that used to be open. Everything tightened. The pressure around Daniel was no longer theoretical. It was active. I could feel it in the reports that crossed my path, in the tone of messages from neighboring packs, in the sudden politeness layered over fear whenever his name was mentioned. He was being measured. And slowly found wanting. I was summoned again late one night. No warning. Just a knock and two guards waiting. The Southern Alpha didn't look up when I entered. "Sit," he said. I did. He slid another file across the desk. This one thinner. More deliberate. "Daniel's council is split," he said. "Three are loyal. Two are undecided. One is looking for a way out." "Names?" I asked. "You don't need them yet." I held my tongue. That was becoming a pattern. He finally looked at me. "You'll be my voice to the undecided ones." I frowned. "Why me?" "Because you look like someone who understands regret," he said plainly. "They trust that." I didn't like how accurate that was. "What do I say?" I asked. "Nothing false," he replied. "Just remind them that instability spreads. That alliances break when leadership wavers." "And Amy?" His jaw tightened for a brief second. Almost invisible. "She remains untouched," he said. "For now." I nodded. It was the best answer I was going to get. The meeting ended quickly. He didn't waste time explaining motives. He never had to. Everything he did pointed in one direction. Daniel had to fall. Not publicly. Not violently. Politically, structurally and permanently.

Chapter 337 Bound

ELIAS

Over the next few days, I met with council members under the guise of routine diplomacy. Neutral locations. Casual settings. Conversations that sounded harmless if overheard. "She looks tired," one of them said when Amy's name came up. "She's been through a lot," I replied evenly. "And Daniel?" I paused just long enough to seem thoughtful. "Carrying a pack and a mate under scrutiny isn't easy." That was all it took. No accusations. Just implication. By the third meeting, I didn't need to say much at all. They filled in the gaps themselves. When I returned to the Southern Alpha, he listened without interrupting. "Good," he said when I . "You see how easy it is." "Yes," I replied. "Too easy." He smiled faintly. "That's because Daniel built his power on trust. Fear lasts longer." Later that evening, I ran into Selene again. She blocked my path this time. "You're avoiding me," she said. "I've been busy," I replied. "With my father," she snapped. I didn't deny it. Her eyes searched my face. "You're part of this," she said. "Whatever this is." "I didn't choose this," I said quietly. She laughed, sharp and bitter. "Neither did I. But look at us." "Selene," I said carefully, "you should stay out of this." "Why?" she demanded. "Because I might ruin your plan?" "Because you're still his daughter," I said. "And he won't forgive interference." She stiffened. "So that's it. You're warning me now?" "I'm telling you the truth," I replied. She stepped closer. "And what happens when Daniel falls?" she asked. "Do you think my father stops there?" I didn't answer. She exhaled slowly. "You're smarter than this, Elias." "Smart doesn't mean free," I said. She looked at me for a long moment, then stepped back. "When this ends badly," she said, "remember that you helped." Then she walked away. That night, the Southern Alpha called for a secure briefing. Just us. No guards. "Daniel is starting to notice," he said. "His movements are changing." "That was inevitable," I replied. "Yes," he said. "Which means the next phase begins." He stood and turned

toward the window. "We push closer to Amy." My chest tightened. "You said—" "I said she wouldn't be harmed," he cut in. "Pressure isn't harm." "What kind of pressure?" I asked. "Social," he said. "Political. Emotional." I clenched my hands. "She's already fragile." "That's why it works," he replied. Silence settled between us. "You're hesitating," he said without turning. "I'm calculating," I replied. He finally faced me. "Don't forget your binding." "I haven't," I said. "I feel it every day." "Good," he said. "Because soon, there will be no turning back." The following day, an order came without ceremony. "Go to the hospital," the Southern Alpha said. "See Clara." That was all.

No explanation. No warning. Just a command wrapped in calm authority. I didn't ask questions. I already knew better than that. The drive was quiet. Too quiet. The kind that made thoughts surface even when you tried to push them down. Clara hadn't crossed my mind in days, not directly. She was part of the mess, tangled in it from the start, but the Southern Alpha had a way of compartmentalizing people. When they weren't needed, they were shelved. Apparently, she was needed again. I didn't ask for directions when I reached the hospital. I didn't have to. Clara's scent was still familiar—sharp, anxious, layered with something medicinal now. I followed it through sterile halls and muted lighting, past nurses who barely looked up. Her room was at the far end. I pushed the door open without knocking. Mark was there. He turned sharply, eyes narrowing the second he saw me. "What are you doing here?" Clara's head snapped toward me. Surprise crossed her face, then something tighter. Suspicion. Relief. Anger. All mixed together. I closed the door behind me. "You can relax," I said flatly. "I'm not here for you." Mark stood up anyway. "You don't get to just walk in here." I looked at him for a moment, then back at Clara. "Tell him to sit." She hesitated, then sighed. "Mark. Sit down." He didn't like it, but he did it. I stepped closer to the bed. Clara looked weaker than I remembered. Pale, still sharp-eyed, but tired underneath it. "So," she said. "You disappear for weeks, and now you show up like this?" "I didn't disappear," I said. "I was removed." Her lips pressed together. "Figures." I didn't waste time. "That business you started with the Southern Alpha," I said, keeping my voice low, "it didn't end. It went deeper." Her eyes flicked to Mark, then back to me. "What are you talking about?" "I'm talking about you remembering your place in it," I said. "And understanding that you're still part of it." Her jaw tightened. "After everything, he still thinks I owe him?" "Yes," I said simply. Mark leaned forward. "What deal?" I ignored him. Clara exhaled slowly. "You ghosted me," she said. "No word. No warning. And now you're here delivering threats?" "I'm delivering a reminder," I said. "I didn't have a choice. I still don't." She studied my face. "What did he do to you?" I didn't answer that. Instead, I said, "He told me to tell you not to forget your deal. Your role isn't. When the time comes, you'll be called." Her fingers curled into the blanket. "And until then?" "You recover," I said. "You stay visible but harmless. You don't act unless told." Mark stood again. "This is insane." I finally looked at him. "You're not part of this conversation." He opened his mouth, then stopped when Clara lifted a hand. "Leave us," she said quietly. He stared at her. "Clara—" "Please." He hesitated, then grabbed his jacket and walked out, shooting me a warning look as he passed. The door closed. Clara leaned back against the pillows. "So that's it," she said. "I'm still useful." "For now," I replied. "And you?" she asked. "What are you now?" I held her gaze. "Bound." Her expression shifted. "Then we're both trapped." "Yes," I said. She swallowed. "Tell him... tell him I heard." "I will." I said. I turned to leave, then paused. "He sends his regards," I added. "And his expectation that you recover quickly." Her laugh was dry. "Of course he does."

Chapter 338

CLARA

I lay there staring at the ceiling long after Elias left. The room smelled like antiseptic and flowers I didn't ask for. My body felt weak, but my mind wouldn't slow down. Too many thoughts. Too many loose ends. Elias's words kept replaying in my head, sharp and final. It went deeper. That part scared me more than I wanted to admit. I turned my head slightly, watching the door like it might open again. Part of me expected the Southern Alpha himself to walk in. Another part hoped he wouldn't. I didn't even hear Mark come back at first. The door slammed. I flinched. "What the hell was that?" Mark shouted. I turned toward him slowly. His eyes were red, his scent rough and unstable. He had been drinking again. I could smell it even from the bed. "What was what?" I asked. "Don't play dumb," he snapped. "That man. Elias. What the hell is he doing showing up here?" I pushed myself up a little, wincing. "Lower your voice." "I don't care," he said, pacing the room. "Do you know what kind of trouble I'm in right now? The council is watching me. Daniel is watching me. Everyone thinks I planned this whole thing." I crossed my arms over my chest. "You didn't?" He stopped and stared at me. "You know I didn't." I held his gaze. "Then why are you shouting at me?" He laughed bitterly. "Because every time I think it can't get worse, something else comes out of the dark.. And somehow, you're always standing right next to it." That stung. I swung my legs off the bed. "Careful." "Careful?" he shot back. "You dragged me into this. You said it would work. You said Amy would fall apart and Daniel would turn on her." I stood, even though my knees felt unsteady. "And she is falling apart." "No," he said harshly. "She's not. She's confused. Drugged. Set up. And now I look like a damn fool who kissed the Northern Luna on camera." I felt heat rush through me. "Don't act like you didn't want it." He stepped closer. "I didn't. Not like that. Not without knowing why." I laughed, sharp and tired. "Oh please. You've wanted her for years." "That doesn't mean I wanted to ruin my life for it." I clenched my fists. "You think my life is intact?" He gestured around the room. "You're the one lying in a hospital bed." "Yes," I said coldly. "Because this world eats women alive when they don't play their part quietly." He scoffed. "This isn't about that. This is about your obsession." That word hit harder than I expected. "Say that again," I warned. "Your obsession with Amy," he said. "How far are you willing to go just to see her crumble?" I felt something twist inside my chest. "You don't get to judge me." "I absolutely do," he said. "Because now I'm in it too. I can't step outside without someone watching me like I'm a criminal." I stepped closer, my voice shaking. "You think I planned for this to blow back on you?" "Yes," he said without hesitation. "I think you planned everything except the part where it costs you something." I stared at him. "You're unbelievable." He ran a hand through his hair. "You're sick, Clara." My breath caught. "Don't." "You are," he continued. "This isn't strategy. This is jealousy. Amy lives in your head rent free, and you keep dragging everyone else into it." I slapped him.

The sound echoed through the room. He froze, staring at me in shock. I stared back, my hand shaking. "Don't ever talk to me like that again." He touched his cheek slowly. "You just proved my point." I laughed then, but it came out broken. "You think I'm the only one twisted here? You kissed her. You let it happen." "I didn't choose it," he said. "That's the part you refuse to hear." I shook my head. "I don't care. She deserved to feel small for once." His eyes darkened. "You're talking about the Luna of the North." "I'm talking about a woman who has everything," I snapped. "Power. Love. Protection. And you all worship her like she's untouchable." "She didn't do anything to you," he said. "She existed," I replied. "And that was enough." Silence stretched between us. Then he said quietly, "I don't recognize you anymore." I felt something break loose in my chest. "Good." He stepped back. "I can't do this." "Then leave," I said. He shook his head. "No. I'm done arguing. I'm done covering for you. Whatever you're mixed up in with Elias and the Southern Alpha, I want no part of it." I smiled bitterly. "Too late." He stared at me. "That's exactly what scares me." I grabbed my jacket from the chair. "Get out." "I will

when I want to," he said. "Then I'll leave," I snapped. I walked past him, ignoring the ache in my body, ignoring the nurse calling after me. I didn't stop until I was outside, the cool air hitting my face. My hands were shaking. I leaned against the wall, breathing hard. I hated Amy. I hated how her name still controlled everything. And worse, I hated that even now, with everything falling apart, I still wanted to see her lose. I slid down against the wall outside, my knees giving way. My chest felt tight, not from sickness, but from rage that wouldn't settle. Mark's words replayed over and over, each one cutting deeper than the last. Obsessed. Sick. He said them like he was clean, like he hadn't benefited from every move I made. I pressed my forehead to the cool surface behind me. I hadn't done all this just to lose him too. People liked to pretend Amy was innocent, like the world simply handed her everything. They didn't see what it cost to always stand in her shadow. They didn't see how easily everyone chose her. Daniel. The council. The pack. I wiped at my face, angry at the tears. If this was the price of pulling her down, then so be it. I straightened slowly. I wasn't done yet. Not with Amy. Not with Mark.

Chapter 339 Welcome Back

AMY

I returned to Carter Holdings under pack monitoring. Two guards walked a step behind me as I passed through the glass doors. They were respectful, quiet, and professional, but their presence said everything. This was not routine security. This was supervision. The lobby looked the same. Polished floors. Quiet music. Screens scrolling market data and company updates. Yet nothing felt the same. People stopped talking when I walked in. I felt it immediately. The looks. The whispers that didn't stop fast enough. Assistants lowering their voices. Executives pretending to be busy. Guards straightened too quickly. No one said my name out loud, but it was everywhere. I kept my back straight and my pace steady. I didn't rush. I didn't slow down. I refused to look unsure. I was still the Executive Liaison Administrator of Carter Holdings. I reminded myself of that with every step. The elevator ride to the executive floor felt longer than usual. One of the guards pressed the button for me. Neither of them spoke. When the doors opened, my assistant stood frozen at her desk. "Amy," she said, too quickly. "You're... you're back." "I never left," I replied. She swallowed and nodded, stepping aside. I caught the faint scent of nerves in the air. Nub fear. Unease. Inside my office, everything was untouched. My desk was clean. My screen is dark. The chair still angled the way I had left it days ago. That should have comforted me. It didn't. I set my bag down and turned on my screen. Emails flooded in. Meeting requests postponed. Reports marked "pending review." Decisions delayed because someone else needed to sign off. They had paused me without officially removing me. That stung more than the whispers. I sat down slowly and forced myself to breathe evenly. I replayed the video in my mind without meaning to. The angle. The lighting. The way it looked real enough to destroy years of work. I hadn't done anything wrong. I knew that. But the truth didn't erase the damage. It only fought. A soft knock came at the door. Before I could answer, it opened. Daniel walked in. The room shifted the second he entered. I felt it in my chest, in the air itself. His presence always carried weight, but today it was sharper. Controlled. Focused. He was dressed in a dark suit, no jacket, sleeves rolled just enough to show his wrists. Alpha calm. CEO authority. "Amy," he said. I stood without thinking. My body reacted before my mind could. "You didn't tell me you were coming," I said. "I didn't want anyone preparing for it," he replied. He looked at me closely, not with suspicion, but with concern. Real concern. The kind that steadied instead of suffocating. "You shouldn't be here alone," he added. "I'm not," I said quietly. "Apparently." His jaw tightened at that. He turned and tapped the comm panel by my door. "Call an emergency executive briefing. Now. All senior management. Board members on-site. Pack-appointed

auditors included.” The voice on the other end hesitated. “Sir-” “Now,” Daniel repeated. The line went dead. I stared at him. “Daniel-” He crossed the room and stopped in front of me. His voice lowered. “They don’t get to suspend you in silence,” he said. “Not in my company.” Something in my chest loosened. Within minutes, my office floor buzzed with movement. Executives gathered. Assistants rushed. Security tightened. I followed Daniel into the main boardroom. Every seat filled quickly. Familiar faces avoided my eyes. Others watched me too closely.

Pack auditors sat along one side, neutral but alert. Corporate executives lined the table, stiff and formal. Daniel took the head seat. I stood beside him. He didn’t sit immediately. He placed both hands on the table and waited until the room settled. “This meeting wasn’t scheduled,” he said calmly. “Because what’s happening shouldn’t have been allowed to reach this point.” No one interrupted him. “There is a video circulating,” Daniel continued. “It implicates my wife, my Luna, and the Executive Liaison Administrator of Carter Holdings.” The words landed heavy. “There is an investigation underway,” he said. “Pack law. Corporate review. Both are active.” – He turned slightly toward me. “Until that investigation concludes, Amy retains her full authority.” Murmurs broke out. Daniel raised a hand. Silence returned. “Let me be very clear,” he said. “Questioning her competence is not neutrality. Undermining her authority is not caution. It is insubordination.” Several executives shifted in their seats. “One more thing,” Daniel added. “This company exists under my name, my ownership, and my Alpha authority.” He let that sit. “Attacking the Luna is attacking the Alpha,” he said. “And attacking the Alpha destabilizes the company.” No one argued. I watched faces change. The doubt drained away, replaced by calculation. Fear. Respect. Daniel finally sat down. “You will cooperate fully with the auditors,” he said. “You will not freeze Amy out of decisions. You will not delay her work. You will not whisper.” He glanced at the auditors. “If you notice interference, report it directly to me.” The lead auditor nodded once. The meeting ended quickly after that. No debates. No objections. As people filed out, some avoided me. Others nodded stiffly. A few offered quiet apologies. I stayed seated until the room emptied. Then I noticed him. He stood near the far wall, hands clasped behind his back. Not pack. Not familiar. Calm in a way that felt practiced. He stepped forward once the room cleared. – “I didn’t catch your name earlier,” he said politely. Daniel turned to him. “You weren’t introduced.” The man smiled faintly. “That’s on me.” He extended a hand toward Daniel. “I’m here as a temporary corporate compliance consultant. External investment bloc. Oversight role only.” Daniel didn’t shake his hand. “I don’t recall approving this,” Daniel said. “You wouldn’t,” the man replied smoothly. “The board fast-tracked it during the uncertainty.” My stomach tightened. The man finally looked at me. His eyes were sharp, measuring, but not hostile. “Executive Liaison Administrator,” he said. “I’ve reviewed your work. Impressive.” I didn’t respond. Daniel’s voice hardened. “You’ll submit your credentials and scope of access by the end of day.” “Of course,” the man said easily. “I look forward to working with you both.”

Chapter 340 Wolf Test

DANIEL

I had learned long ago that silence could either protect a pack or rot it from the inside. This time, it had done neither. Rumors had spread faster than facts, and Amy had carried the weight of it with more restraint than most seasoned leaders I knew. That alone hardened my resolve. The council chamber was full when I arrived. Corporate auditors occupied one side of the table, their tablets already open, eyes sharp and detached. On the other side sat the park council—older wolves, experienced alphas, and a few neutral elders who rarely spoke unless something truly mattered. Amy wasn’t present. That was

intentional. I wanted this handled without her having to sit through speculation about her character. The hotel staff member stood in the center of the room. Young. Nervous. His scent was all over the place—fear, confusion, the instinct to please whoever held power in the room. That alone irritated my wolf. Under park law, testimony given in an Alpha-led inquiry I reminded myself of that as I stood. Married weight, but only if it was clean. I invoked the oath first. Properly. Clearly. The staff member agreed, voice shaking as he swore to tell the truth and nothing but the truth under park law. That should have been enough. It wasn't. When he hesitated, when his eyes flicked toward the auditors and then away, instinct took over. I reached for alpha authority and compelled him. Not harshly. Not violently. Just enough to steady him, to push past fear and get the facts out. It was a mistake. He spoke then. Clearly. He stated that Amy had been professional. That there had been no prior arrangement, no intimacy planned, no manipulation on her part. He admitted the video had been selectively edited. He admitted the leak had not come from Amy. The room reacted immediately. Some relief. Some doubt. I felt confident—for exactly three minutes. That was when one of the auditors requested permission to submit supplementary evidence. Video logs. Energy residue scans. Proof of compulsion. The air changed. They laid it out carefully, methodically. Alpha influence markers present during testimony. Signs of forced compliance layered over an oath. Not enough to invalidate the facts entirely, but enough to call the method into question. I didn't interrupt. I let them speak. Inside, my wolf bristled. Not with guilt, but with frustration. I had wanted to protect Amy cleanly. Instead, I had handed them an opening. Murmurs spread through the chamber. One council member leaned back, arms crossed. Another whispered to the elder beside him. The auditors looked almost satisfied. They thought they had found leverage. Before the discussion could tilt fully against us, an elder stood. He was old enough that his wolf barely surfaced anymore, but his authority still carried weight. He looked around the room slowly before speaking. "What the Northern Alpha did," he said, "was act in defense of his Luna. He did not compel a lie. He compelled clarity. There is a difference." One auditor opened his mouth. The elder lifted a hand. "Pack law exists to preserve truth and loyalty. An Alpha who refuses to defend his mate in the face of coordinated character destruction is not restrained—he is weak." The room quieted. Another council member spoke next, then another. They didn't argue the technical misstep. They reframed it. Context mattered. Intent mattered. And under park law, the protection of a Luna carried privileges corporate policies did not override. The vote followed. Unanimous. Amy was cleared of wrongdoing under park law.

The auditors logged the decision with visible displeasure, but they logged it all the same. Their authority ended where the council's began, and they knew it. I stood once the ruling was finalized. "This matter is closed," I said. "Anyone who questions my mate's loyalty, competence, or position again will answer directly to me." No one challenged that. That was when I noticed the compliance consultant. He hadn't spoken once. He hadn't reacted to the ruling, either. His scent was controlled, layered, carefully neutral. Not submissive. Not aggressive. Observant. My wolf noticed him at the same time I did. It didn't snarl. It didn't push forward. It went still. That concerned me more than outright hostility would have. I dismissed the room and stepped aside as council members filtered out. The consultant lingered, watching the exits, watching me. When he finally approached, his posture was respectful but not deferential. "Well-handled," he said. "Given the circumstances." "I don't recall asking for commentary," I replied. He nodded once. "Understood." As he turned to leave, my wolf pressed closer to the surface. Alert. Measuring. This wasn't instinctive dislike. It was recognition of a variable I hadn't accounted for yet. I ordered a quiet background check before he reached the door. No formal flags. No visible interest. When he paused and looked back, his request was delivered calmly, almost casually. "I'll need access to

Carter Holdings' long-term acquisition records," he said. "Specifically the divisions overseen by Amy." I didn't answer immediately. That was when I knew this wasn't over. I held his gaze for a long moment, letting my wolf assess him. Controlled, precise, neutral—but there was something beneath the calm exterior. Something deliberate. My instincts told me he wasn't here for routine auditing. He was testing, probing, feeling the environment, gauging loyalty and resistance. "I'll consider your request," I said finally. "But access will be granted only under supervision. Any tampering, and you answer directly to me and the council." He inclined his head once, almost imperceptibly, and made no further move. That small gesture, polite but confident, unsettled me. Wolves didn't usually behave that way—especially not those with the smell of corporate authority layered over subtle control. After he left, my wolf stayed alert. My senses swept through the building, through the offices, the corridors, even the parking area. Nothing unusual—but the feeling remained, like a faint ripple beneath the surface of calm water. Someone—or something—was watching. Waiting. I returned to Amy's office, her scent immediate and calming. She looked up from her reports, tension still lingering, and I gave her a slight nod. She smiled weakly, unaware of the new shadow looming over our operations. I had cleared her name, yes—but the real challenge was only beginning. The consultant's presence wasn't normal, it was a warning. My wolf growled softly. We were being tested, and I intended to find out who, and why, before it was too late.