

Broken 371

Chapter 371 Reclaiming Power

DANIEL

I spent the first hour after Amy showed me the alert doing nothing but confirming it was real. I didn't trust a single report until I saw it from three different internal channels and one external registry. Ten percent of Qatar Holdings had changed hands quietly, legally, and without triggering any of the safeguards I had put in place over the years. That alone told me this wasn't impulsive. It was planned by someone who understood both corporate law and pack politics. Amy stayed with me at first, sitting across the desk while I made calls. She didn't interrupt. She didn't panic. She watched, the same way she always did when something mattered. After a while, she left the room without a word. That was her way of giving me space without abandoning the problem. I called the legal head first. "How did this clear?" I asked. There was a pause on the line. "It didn't breach any thresholds that require Alpha override," he said carefully. "The shares were distributed through layered holding firms. Individually, none crossed a trigger point." "So you're telling me someone broke ten percent into clean fragments," I said, "walked them through legally, and recombined them." "Yes." "Without my approval." "Yes." I closed my eyes briefly. "Can we reverse it?" "Not without cause," he replied. "And right now, there's no violation on record." I ended the call without another word. Next was the board secretary. Same answer. Then compliance. Same answer again, different phrasing. Everything had been done inside the rules. That was the problem. I could fight chaos easily. Order was harder when it was used against me. By midday, the conference room was full. Legal. Finance. Security. Two Northern elders who held legacy shares and pack authority. Amy joined us quietly and took her seat beside me. No one questioned it. They knew better. I laid out the situation plainly. No dramatics. No raised voice. "We are not dealing with a hostile takeover," I said. "We're dealing with infiltration. Whoever holds these shares doesn't want control today. They want access." One of the elders, Tomas, leaned forward. "Southern money doesn't move without purpose." "I know," I said. "That's why I want options." The finance head cleared her throat. "We could attempt a buyback." "Already tried," I replied. "The holding firm declined. They aren't interested in selling." Amy spoke then. "What about dilution?" "It would require board approval," the legal head said. "And justification strong enough to withstand challenge. Otherwise, it looks like panic." "And panic weakens confidence," Amy said. I nodded. "Which is what they want." Security reported next. No unusual movements inside the building. No breaches. Everything was quiet. Too quiet. I dismissed half the room and kept only the elders, Amy, and security. "This isn't just corporate," Tomas said. "This is pack pressure. Southern Alphas don't invest unless territory is involved." "I know," I replied. "And I can't respond like an Alpha inside the company." "And you can't respond like a CEO inside the pack," the other elder added. That was the tension. Two roles pulling in opposite directions while the same enemy tested both. I tried pressure next. I called in favors. Old alliances. Quiet inquiries. Every response came back the same. The shares were locked. Protected. Held by entities that answered to no one I could compel without starting a formal conflict. I considered compulsion and dismissed it immediately, Corporate oaths didn't bend to Alpha will. And using pack authority inside civilian law would give them exactly what they wanted. Proof that I couldn't separate power from governance, By evening, nothing had moved. Amy watched me pace the office. She didn't tell me to stop. She knew better.

“This feels deliberate,” she said finally. “Not aggressive. Containing.” “They’re boxing us in,” I replied. “Slowly.” She tilted her head. “Who benefits from us reacting too strongly?” “The Southern Alpha,” I said. “And anyone standing behind him.” I tried one more angle. An emergency board session under the guise of routine review. The motion to address recent acquisitions stalled immediately. Too many neutral votes. Too much hesitation. The new shareholders hadn’t spoken once, but their presence was already shaping the room. When the meeting ended, I stayed seated. Nothing I had tried worked. Not authority. Not law. Not leverage. I felt my wolf stir beneath the surface, restless but contained. He didn’t want to lash out. He wanted clarity. Direction. A target that made sense. Amy rested her hand briefly on my arm. Grounding. Familiar. “They want you frustrated,” she said quietly. “I know.” “And stretched,” she added. I looked at her. “Which means we don’t give them either.” Later that night, after the building had emptied, I stood by the window and looked out over the city. Lights on. Lives moving. People unaware that power was shifting above them in increments small enough to miss. Ten percent wasn’t dominance. But it was a foothold. And every attempt I made to push it out only showed me how carefully it had been placed. For the first time since this started, I accepted a hard truth. I wasn’t going to get those shares back quickly. And whoever sold them knew exactly why. I stayed there longer than I should have, watching the traffic thin out below. The city didn’t know it yet, but a line had been crossed. Not loudly. Not publicly. Just enough to change how carefully I would have to move from now on. I turned back to the desk and opened the internal access logs. Not to look for breaches, but patterns. Who had asked questions recently. Who had requested data they didn’t normally touch. The names weren’t surprising. None of them were senior enough to be bold on their own. That told me this wasn’t internal ambition. It was guidance. Amy returned with two cups of coffee and placed one in front of me. “You’re thinking too far ahead,” she said softly. “I’m trying not to,” I replied. “But this isn’t a problem I can solve head-on.” She sat across from me. “Then don’t. Let them think the shares rattled you. Let them believe you’re stuck.” I met her eyes. “You’re suggesting we do nothing.” “I’m suggesting we do the right nothing,” she corrected. “We watch who gets comfortable.” I exhaled slowly. It wasn’t weakness. It was patience. Something an Alpha learned the hard way. “Alright,” I said. “We hold. We observe. And we start preparing for the moment they overreach.” Amy nodded. “They always do.” That was when I understood this phase wasn’t about reclaiming power. It was about learning who thought they already had it.

Chapter 372 Private Conversations

CLARA

I returned to Mark’s house later than I said I would. The Northern gathering had dragged longer than expected, not because of speeches or announcements, but because wolves lingered. They always did when they sensed something shifting. Conversations stayed low. People watched each other more than usual. Mark was already home. I knew the moment I stepped inside because his scent was off. Not alarmed. Not angry. Uneasy. “You’re back late,” he said from the kitchen. “Traffic,” I replied easily, setting my bag down. I hadn’t even taken my shoes off when I felt it again—that pause in him, like he was deciding whether to say something. He leaned against the counter, arms folded. “Selene spoke to me today.” I kept my face neutral. “Oh?” “Briefly,” he said. “Nothing dramatic. Just questions.”

“What kind of questions?” He hesitated, and that mattered more than the words. “She asked how you were settling in. If things were... stable. And why you were suddenly around Amy so much.” There it was. I shrugged. “That doesn’t sound strange. She’s Southern. They like knowing where people stand.”

Mark nodded, but not fully. "Maybe. It just felt pointed." It was. Selene never wasted words. "She didn't say anything else?" I asked. "No. Just smiled and walked away." That smile was never harmless. I moved closer, brushing past him to the fridge. "If she was worried, she could have asked me." "She could have," he agreed. "Which is why it stood out." I let the silence sit. Pushing too hard would only sharpen his instinct. Mark wasn't stupid. He was emotional, not blind. "She probably doesn't trust me," I said finally. "Given... everything." That landed. Mark's jaw tightened, then eased. Guilt always worked faster than logic with him. "Maybe," he said. "Still. Be careful around her." "I always am," I said, and meant it in more ways than he understood. I left the house less than an hour later under the excuse of needing air. Mark didn't stop me. He never did when he thought he was being reasonable. Elias sent the location twenty minutes after I left. Same pattern. No greeting. No explanation. The meeting place sat near the Southern border, far enough from patrol routes to avoid attention, close enough to remind you whose land pressed nearest. Neutral ground only existed on maps. Wolves knew better. Elias was already there when I arrived. He stood with his back to the trees, posture relaxed, eyes sharp. His wolf was close to the surface. I could feel it the moment I stepped into range. "You're late," he said. "You gave me short notice." He didn't argue. "Selene has been asking questions." I didn't blink. "About what?" "About you," he said. "About Amy. About Mark." I crossed my arms. "She's curious." "She's positioning," Elias replied. "Don't mistake one for the other." I held his gaze. "You didn't seem concerned before." "That was before she started requesting reports under Southern authority," he said. "Independently." That was new. And worse than I expected. "So she's cutting you out," I said carefully. He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "No. She's testing limits." "And you?" "I'm watching who flinches." I didn't like the direction of that statement. Elias stepped closer. "Tell me something, Clara. What does Selene think of Amy?" I didn't answer immediately. That would have been a mistake. "She thinks Amy is protected," I said. "Overvalued. Emotionally weak." None of that was true. But it sounded believable. "And Daniel?" he asked. "She thinks he's predictable," I replied. "Strong, but reactive." That one was closer to the truth. Close enough to pass.

Elias studied me. "And you believe this?" "I believe Selene is emotional," I said. "She feels sidelined." "She is sidelined," he said flatly. "And she resents it." "Resentment makes people sloppy," Elias said. "Unless they learn restraint." I nodded. "She hasn't." He didn't respond. Instead, he shifted the conversation. "I need visible instability in the North," Elias said. "Nothing that points back here. Nothing direct." "I understand." "You'll help guide perception," he continued. "Social channels. Personal influence." "Mark," I said. "And Amy," he corrected. That tightened something in my chest, but I didn't show it. "I'm close," I said. "But she's cautious." "Good," Elias replied. "Caution delays action. Delay breeds doubt." I filed that away. Wolves didn't abandon Alphas over one mistake. They left when doubt settled in their bones. When the meeting ended, Elias didn't dismiss me the way he usually did. "One more thing," he said. I waited. "Selene doesn't know everything," he said. "But she knows enough to be dangerous." "And me?" I asked. "You're useful," he said. "Don't confuse that with safety." I drove back to Mark's house with my jaw clenched. When I arrived, the lights were low. Mark was on the phone in the living room. I stopped just short of the doorway when I heard Amy's name. "Yes," Mark said quietly. "I understand. I'm not pushing. I just wanted to say that." Pause. "No, I know trust doesn't reset overnight." Another pause. "I appreciate you even taking the call." I stepped back before he saw me. He ended the call a moment later. When he turned and found me there, his expression shifted—hopeful, cautious, exposed. "That was Amy," he said. "I guessed," I replied. "She didn't hang up," he added, like that meant something. "It does," I said. "For her." He nodded. "I think she's trying. In her way." [forced a small smile. "Then you should keep trying too." He watched me closely. "You don't mind?" "No," I said.

“I want you to make things right.” That wasn’t a lie. Just not for the reasons he thought. Later that night, after Mark went to bed, my phone vibrated. One message. Private conversation. Tomorrow. No oversight. Selene. I stared at the screen longer than I should have. She wasn’t asking. She wasn’t hiding either. That meant she believed she held leverage. I turned the phone face down and lay beside Mark, listening to his breathing slow as sleep took him. People always thought the first mistake was choosing the wrong side. They were wrong. The first mistake was thinking you were the only one playing.

Chapter 373 Wrong Information

CLARA

I felt it before anyone said anything. Pressure didn’t arrive loudly. It settled. It followed me from room to room, from conversation to conversation, until every word I chose felt measured against consequences I could no longer see clearly. Mark trusted me more now. Not blindly, but emotionally. He spoke freely around me. He didn’t guard his phone the way he used to. When Amy’s name came up, he no longer stiffened. That told me more than reassurance ever could. Amy let me close. Not warmly. Not fully. But she didn’t block me either. She answered messages. She stayed in the rooms where I was present. She spoke to me without raising walls, which was worse than anger. It meant she was observing. Elias demanded progress. Not loudly. Not with threats. His expectations were delivered calmly, as if my failure was not an option worth discussing. And Selene watched. She didn’t interfere. She didn’t warn me again. She simply existed in the background of every Northern interaction, quiet and alert, as if she were waiting for something to slip. It was in that space that I made my mistake. Mark mentioned Amy’s upcoming week casually over dinner. He didn’t give details. Just fragments. Meetings. Time blocks. At dinner Daniel was insisting on attending himself. Later that night, I sent Elias information. Not exact. Adjusted. I shifted the timing window by several hours. I told myself to be cautious. That I wasn’t ready to hand over clean access yet. That I needed leverage. The information was wrong. Deliberately wrong. At the time, it felt controlled. Smart. A way to test how much Elias depended on me without fully burning a bridge on either side. The fallout didn’t come as noise. It came as silence. The next morning, there were reports of a Southern-backed move that didn’t land. Nothing public. Nothing dramatic. And the 3A council approach that met resistance earlier than expected. A corporate push that found doors already closed. By evening, Elias contacted me. No greeting. “You were off,” he said. I didn’t ask what he meant. “Schedules change.” “Yes,” he replied. “They do.” His tone wasn’t angry. That was worse. “I adjusted based on what I had,” I said. “You adjusted,” he repeated. “Without telling me.” “I didn’t think-” “You thought,” he interrupted. “You decided.” The line went quiet for a second. I could hear movement on his end. Not pacing. Calm motion. “That won’t happen again,” he said. “No,” I agreed. “It won’t.” He ended the call without another word. After that, his messages changed. Shorter. Direct. No explanations. No context. He stopped asking for my interpretation and started giving instructions instead. Trust didn’t break loudly. It withdrew. Selene’s message came two days later. Just one line. “You’re bleeding.” No sender ID beyond her name. No follow-up. I stared at the screen longer than I should have. She wasn’t accusing me. She was informing me. That meant she already knew. The possibility settled slowly and then all at once: Amy might already know too. Or worse, she suspected and chose not to stop me. Letting someone continue is often more dangerous than cutting them off. That night, I returned to Mark’s house earlier than usual. He was in the living room, reviewing something on his tablet. He looked up and smiled when he saw me.

"You're home early." "I wasn't needed," I said. He frowned slightly. "Everything okay?" "Yes," I replied. Too quickly. He watched me, then set the tablet aside. "You've been quiet lately." "I'm tired." He nodded, accepting it. "Amy called earlier." My body reacted before my face did. I corrected it immediately. "What did she want?" I asked. "She wanted to clarify something about a schedule change," he said. "She sounded... alert." "Alert how?" "Focused," he said. "Like she already knew the answer but wanted to hear how I'd say it." That confirmed it. Amy was testing channels now. "She didn't mention me?" I asked. "No," he said. "But she asked if I'd shared anything with anyone." My chest tightened. "What did you say?" "That I don't share her business," he replied. "Which is true." It was. And it protected me more than I deserved. Later, after Mark went to bed, I stood alone in the kitchen. The house felt different now. Less like shelter. More like borrowed ground. I replayed every recent conversation in my head. Every word I'd chosen. Every moment I'd assumed control. I wasn't the only one shaping outcomes anymore. Elias was watching for weakness. Amy was watching for patterns. Selene was watching for collapse. And Mark was standing in the middle of it all, unaware, open, trusting in ways that made him vulnerable. There was no version of this where everyone walked away intact. I leaned against the counter and closed my eyes. Someone would be blamed when this broke. Someone would be presented as the explanation. And for the first time since I started playing this game, I wasn't sure I could choose who that would be. I was running out of space. And there was no safe side left. I stayed there longer than I should have, listening to the quiet of the house settle around me. This was what scared me most. Not Elias. Not Selene. Not even Amy. It was the stillness before decisions were made without me in the room. I understood then that I was no longer steering anything. I was reacting. Adjusting. Surviving moment by moment. If Amy truly knew, she was waiting. If Selene was circling, she was choosing her timing. And Elias would not tolerate uncertainty for long. Mark turned in his sleep down the hall. That sound grounded me in the worst way. He was real. Present. And completely unaware that his loyalty had become a bargaining chip. I told myself I would fix this. That I would regain balance. That one clean move could stabilize everything. But even as I thought it, I knew the truth. There were no clean moves left. Only choices about who would fall first.

Chapter 374 Settlement

CLARA

I agreed to meet Selene because refusing would have been worse. She didn't frame it as a request. She never did. The message was brief, precise, and timed to make it clear she already knew where I would be. Southern-controlled territory, wrapped in glass, steel, and corporate branding. A place that pretended neutrality while reminding everyone who owned the ground underneath. I arrived early. Not because I was eager, but because arriving late would have looked careless. I reviewed the lies I was prepared to tell, not word for word, but by shape. I needed them to be flexible. Selene didn't listen for statements. She listened for gaps. She came in without apology, dressed like she was stepping into a board meeting rather than a private confrontation. She didn't hug me. She didn't smile. She sat across from me and placed her phone on the table, screen down, like she wanted me to notice she wasn't recording. Or like she wanted me to wonder if she already had. "You look settled," she said. "That's new." "I've been busy," I replied. It was true enough. She studied me for a moment, not my face exactly, but the way I held myself. Selene always looked for changes first. She leaned back slightly. "Elias doesn't trust easily," she said. "So tell me how you managed that." I kept my expression neutral. "I didn't manage anything. He needed someone." "That's not an answer." "It's the only one you're getting." She nodded, like she had expected that. Then she shifted. "Amy," Selene said casually. "She was

unreachable for months. Suddenly, she's not. Interesting timing." I said nothing. Silence annoyed Selene more than denial. "And Mark," she continued. "Being positioned as a bridge. That one surprised me. He's always been emotional. Sloppy. Not Elias's style." "You're making assumptions," I said. She smiled faintly. "No. I'm confirming patterns." That was when I knew this meeting wasn't about discovery. Selene already had her conclusions. This was about pressure. About seeing how I reacted when she laid everything out without naming it directly. She leaned forward. "You're standing too close to too many moving parts. That wally means someone thinks you're disposable" I met her gaze. "You didn't ask me here to warn the "No," she said. "I asked you here to see if you knew There it was. The part she always enjoyed. Watching realization settle. She brought up our father next. Not his name, just the idea of him. The way he divided his attention. The way he decided who mattered and who didn't. Selene spoke without bitterness, which somehow made it worse. "You were never meant to be here," she said. "Not in this position. Not this visible. You were supposed to stay small" "I didn't choose where I was born." I said.

"No," she replied. "But you keep choosing where you stand." I didn't raise my voice. I never did with her. "I'm standing because I'm useful." "That's the problem," Selene said. "Usefulness expires." She paused, letting that settle before delivering what she really came to say. "When this collapses," she said, "the Southern Alpha won't protect you." I didn't react. I didn't allow myself to. "You were never meant to survive the endgame," she continued. "You were chosen because you're close enough to burn convincingly. Close enough to take the blame." "That's your theory," I said. She shook her head slightly. "That's the plan." For a brief moment, I wondered if she was lying to destabilize me. Selene enjoyed control. Fear was one of her tools. But this didn't feel like manipulation. It felt like confirmation of something I'd been avoiding She stood, signaling the meeting was over. "You're smarter than this, Clara. Don't mistake attention for protection." I remained seated until she left. Only then did I allow myself to process what she'd said. I replay the last few months, Elias's instructions, the way responsibility kept funneling toward me while authority stayed just out of reach. By the time I left the building, my face was calm. Anyone watching would have seen confidence, beside, doubt had already taken root I told myself Selene could be wrong. She had her own motives. She always did. But I couldn't ignore the logic. Elias positioned people like chess pieces. And I had moved forward too easily If I continued following him blindly, I wouldn't just be complicit. It would be convenient. When things. went wrong, they wouldn't look for the mastermind. They would look for the closest visible hand. And that hand would be mine. By the time I reached my car, I understood one thing clearly. Survival meant more than obedience now. It meant shifting the board itself. I didn't drive away right away. I sat there longer than necessary, hands resting on the steering wheel, eyes forward. I needed the space to think without performing for anyone. Selene's words stayed with me because they fit too well with what I'd already seen but refused to name. Elias hadn't threatened me. He didn't need to. He gave instructions, not reassurance. Each task came with more exposure and less cover. I had told myself that meant trust. Now I wasn't so sure. Trust shared weight. What he gave me was risk. I thought about Amy. About how she had never directly confronted me, never asked questions the way Selene had. Amy watched instead. Left room for mistakes. That was worse. It meant she might already know more than she let on and was choosing not to act yet. Mark, too, had changed. Not in distance, but in attention. He listened more carefully now. Asked fewer follow-up questions. That kind of restraint didn't come from ignorance. It came from awareness. I realized something then that made my chest tighten, not with panic, but with clarity. Everyone around me was adapting. Everyone except me. I had been reacting, not shaping outcomes. That was dangerous. Selene hadn't offered help. She hadn't asked for loyalty. That was deliberate. She

wanted me unsettled, yes, but she also wanted me aware. Because awareness forced choice. And choice created fractures. By the time I finally started the car, I understood there was no safe alignment left. Not with Elias. Not with Amy. Not even with Selene. Each path ended with someone deciding my value had run out. The only option left was to stop being a piece others moved without resistance. I didn't know yet how I would do that. I only knew this: the next mistake could not be accidental. If I was going to fall, it wouldn't be quietly, and it wouldn't be alone.

Chapter 375 The Scary Part

CLARA

I stayed closer to Mark after that. Not because I wanted to, but because there was no other clean way inside Amy's space anymore. Every door I had used before was narrowing. Every delay carried risk. Mark was the last path that didn't require force. We were at his house when it started to shift. Not during anything dramatic. Just dinner. Quiet. Familiar. That was when people talked too much. "I don't think Amy hates me," he said suddenly, staring at his plate. "I think she just doesn't trust herself around me." I didn't rush to answer. I had learned that silence worked better with him now. He filled it. "I keep replaying everything," he continued. "Every time I pushed. Every time I thought I knew better. I was loud when I should've listened." "You're still listening now," I said. My tone stayed even. Supportive, but not forgiving on anyone's behalf. "That counts." He looked at me, searching my face. "Does it?" "Yes," I said. "But it doesn't erase what came before." He nodded slowly, accepting that. That was new. Mark used to argue when answers didn't soothe him. Now he absorbed them. That made him easier to guide and harder to predict. He talked more after that. About feeling like a bridge people walked across. About always being in the middle of power struggles he didn't start but always paid for. About Amy being stronger now, sharper, and how that both impressed him and scared him. "I don't want to be a weakness anymore," he said. "Not for her. Not for anyone." I kept my voice calm. "Then stop letting people pull you into fights that aren't yours." He laughed once, short and tired. "That's easy to say when you're not born into it." I didn't correct him. I didn't tell him how much of my life had been shaped by other people's plans. This wasn't about the truth. It was about alignment. I could feel the shift as it happened. His shoulders eased. His guard lowered. Trust didn't arrive all at once. It settled in layers. That scared me more than it should have. Later, when we were sitting in the living room, he told me something without realizing how valuable it was. "Amy locked things down at Carter Holdings," he said. "She's filtering everything herself now. access, reports, even scheduling. I can't get anything unless she wants me to." I kept my expression neutral. "That must be frustrating." "It is," he admitted. "But I get why she's doing it. Too many leaks. Too many people assume they're entitled to her time." I nodded. Inside, I recalculated. Amy's narrowing control meant she suspected pressure. Maybe not me directly. But the field was tightening. "When did this start?" I asked. "A few weeks ago," he said. "Right after the Northern gathering." That tracked. He leaned back and rubbed his face. "I thought things were improving. Now it feels like I'm being managed again. Like I'm a variable she doesn't trust." "You are improving," I said carefully. "But trust takes consistency. Not access." He studied me. "You sound like her." "I've watched her long enough," I replied. "Patterns repeat." That was true. Just not in the way he assumed. That night, Elias called. I stepped into the study and closed the door. I didn't rush to speak. "You're slowing down," he said. No greeting.

"I'm adjusting," I replied. "Mark isn't a lever. He's fragile." Silence. Then, "Fragile things break faster when pushed." "Or when rushed," I said. "If he collapses, Amy shuts the door completely." "You're

protecting him," Elias noted. "I'm protecting access," I corrected. Another pause. Longer this time. "Hesitation reads as loyalty drift," he said quietly. "I haven't drifted," I said. "I'm still delivering. Just not burning bridges unnecessarily." "You don't decide what's unnecessary," he replied. "You decide how fast." I felt it then. The pressure I'd been ignoring. The narrowing tolerance. Elias wasn't threatening me. He was measuring how replaceable I'd become. After the call ended, I stayed there longer than needed. When I went back out, Mark looked up from the couch. "Everything okay?" he asked. "Yes," I said. And it wasn't entirely a lie. He smiled, relieved. That was the problem. His trust was no longer conditional. It was settling in. Becoming something that could turn into damage if exposed. That night, lying beside him, I understood something clearly. Mark wasn't just a path anymore. He was a liability. Not because he was weak—but because he believed me. And belief, once broken, had consequences no strategy could fully control. I stared at the ceiling, listening to his breathing, and accepted the truth I'd been avoiding. I was running out of time. If I didn't choose soon, Elias would push harder. Amy would seal herself off completely. And Mark—who thought he was finally standing on stable ground—would be the one crushed between decisions he never got to make. I didn't know yet who I would betray next. I only knew it wouldn't be clean. I stayed awake long after Mark fell asleep. Not because I was anxious, but because my mind was working through outcomes. I had learned to do that early. Sleep came after decisions, not before them. By morning, Mark was already making coffee. He moved easily around the kitchen now, comfortable with my presence. That familiarity carried weight. Wolves noticed that kind of thing. So did people. "I'm meeting Amy later," he said casually. Too casually. "For work?" I asked. "Yes. And... to talk." He hesitated. "I want to clear the air." "That's risky," I said. Not as a warning. As an observation. "I know," he replied. "But hiding hasn't helped." I nodded. He was right. And that was inconvenient. When he left, I stood alone in the kitchen and checked my phone. No messages from Elias. No messages from Selene. Silence from both sides meant something was being decided without me. I looked around the house, at the small signs of routine we'd built. Cups in the sink. A jacket on the chair. Proof of trust, left unattended.

Chapter 376 Logical Delays

CLARA

I noticed it first at breakfast. The subtle shift in glances, the micro-pauses in conversation when I entered the room. Northern wolves weren't looking at me openly with suspicion—yet—but I could feel the change. Their stance had stiffened, their eyes lingered just a fraction longer. My wolf felt it too. That weight of scrutiny, silent but relentless. Mark didn't seem to notice. He was absorbed in his morning routine, flipping through reports on his tablet. I stayed quiet, letting him occupy the space I couldn't yet command. When I finally spoke, it was almost casual. "Do you want cream in your coffee?" I asked. "Black, as usual," he said without looking up. I could hear the unasked questions in the room. Wolves notice patterns before humans do. They were testing me, sensing how I might move, how I might influence. Later, I heard it from a source I hadn't expected. One of Daniel's scouts, passing by the house, mentioned in passing that the Northern Alpha had authorized background checks for anyone connected to recent instability. The comment was offhand, but I froze. "Anyone?" I asked lightly, trying not to sound alarmed. "Pretty much," the scout said, shrugging. "Everyone who had contact with the border incidents. Names came up. Yours included." The words sank in slower than they should have. Daniel wasn't reactive. He didn't make announcements. He acted permanently. That meant my name was flagged. My wolf's ears twitched at the thought. This wasn't just scrutiny. This was a signal. I left the kitchen quietly, walking through the hallways of Mark's house. Alone, I let the weight settle. I could feel

the walls closing. The North wasn't just watching. They were measuring. Calculating. Waiting for an opening. And every step I took now had consequences. I knew I had to feed Elias something tangible. He needed a win to stay satisfied, and I needed to keep him invested in me, not questioning my reliability. I crafted a small piece of information about patrol timing and minor logistical delays—nothing dangerous, but enough to cause a minor embarrassment for the Northern pack. Later that evening, I sent it. His reply was immediate. Short. "Good. For now."

The relief was brief. In the same hour, a Northern wolf approached me during a casual check-in with Mark. He wasn't aggressive. He didn't need to be. "Is it standard for you to be near the restricted areas?" he asked, casually, with just enough emphasis to let me know I wasn't overlooked. "I was passing by," I said smoothly, keeping my voice even. "I needed something from storage." His gaze lingered longer than polite. "Just making notes." I nodded, even smiled. But inside, my wolf bristled. Wolves notice variables. Variables shift the balance. And I was becoming one. Back in the safety of Mark's living room, I tried to refocus. I watched him reading, adjusting his posture, letting his guard down a little around me. It was a dangerous sight. I reminded myself he wasn't mine to influence—at least not emotionally. He was a tool. And tools could break if mishandled. When I finally checked my phone, there was a message from Elias. "Good work. Keep pressure subtle. North is noticing patterns. Do not lose your role." I typed a response carefully, ensuring no sign of hesitation. "Yes. Understood." But as I sent it, my stomach tightened. The small victory I had delivered was already being overshadowed. Northern wolves were talking. Their observations were subtle but consistent. I wasn't simply being watched for mistakes. I was being watched because I was dangerous—because I represented an unknown variable. Mark, oblivious, called me for dinner. I joined him, taking my seat carefully. Conversation flowed, mundane, but every word had to be measured. Every laugh had to sound genuine. I encouraged him when he spoke of Amy, when he spoke of his desire to make things right. I smiled and nodded. I listened and recorded. I reminded myself constantly: what I showed the North and what Elias expected were different. I had to maintain that divide. It wasn't about guilt or conscience. It was about survival. Every misstep could be deadly. Later, I walked the perimeter of the property—Mark's estate, his security in place. My wolf stirred at the faintest movement beyond the fence, at the scent of a neighboring patrol, at the subtle tension in the air. Northern wolves were alert. My presence was being marked. My role was being defined without my input. I reviewed the day in my head. The minor embarrassment I had engineered. The questions from

Chapter 377 Sense Of Belonging

AMY

I arrived at the second series of the Northern function beside Daniel with my posture steady and my face composed. I had worn similar dresses before. I had stood in similar halls. But this was different. This wasn't ceremony. It wasn't tradition. It was assessment. Wolves were watching me. They weren't obvious about it. Northern wolves rarely were. Their attention came in stillness, in the way conversations slowed when I passed, in the way eyes lifted and lingered a second longer than courtesy required. They were measuring my reactions the same way they measured Daniel's authority. Calm. Control. Stability. I walked with my hand resting lightly on Daniel's arm. Not gripping. Not distant. Balanced. I could feel the tension in him too, controlled and contained, the way it always was when he stepped into spaces where leadership mattered more than strength. "You alright?" he asked quietly as we crossed the threshold into the main hall: "I am," I said. It was true, mostly. "Just alert." He nodded.

He understood the difference. The hall was full. Senior Northern wolves, corporate allies, pack elders, a few neutral observers who had no business being there unless something was shifting. Music played softly. Drinks circulated. Everything looked orderly. That made it worse. I scanned the room without turning my head too much. I didn't want it to look like I was searching for anything. That was when I saw Clara. She stood near one of the long tables, a glass in her hand, her posture easy. Too easy. Mark was beside her, angled slightly toward her, his body open in a way I hadn't seen in a long time. Clara smiled at something someone said. It wasn't forced. It wasn't cautious. She looked like she belonged. I felt my stomach tighten, but I kept my expression neutral. I didn't look away. I didn't stare. I noted details instead. Where she stood. Who approached her. Which wolves paused to listen when she spoke. Which ones nodded. She wasn't just present. She was being allowed to be visible. "That's intentional," I said quietly to Daniel as we stopped to greet an elder. He glanced in the direction I indicated without turning his head fully. "I see it."

"She's not pushing," I continued. "She's being placed." Daniel said nothing, but his jaw tightened slightly. He thanked the elder, exchanged a few polite words, and guided me toward a quieter corner of the hall. I felt the weight of the room press against me as we moved. Every step felt tense. Every breath is hitched. Luna. Wife. Stability symbol. The roles sat heavy on my shoulders, even though I had chosen them willingly. Mark caught my eye briefly as we passed. His expression was careful. Hopeful, maybe. I gave him a small nod. Polite. Nothing more. Clara didn't look at me at all. That bothered me more than if she had. We spent the next hour circulating. Daniel spoke with pack leaders and corporate figures. I joined conversations when appropriate, offered measured responses, listened more than I spoke. Wolves watched how I handled interruptions, how I responded to praise, how I reacted when someone mentioned recent instability along the border. I didn't react at all. Inside, though, my instincts were restless. Not panicked. Focused. I had lived too long in pack spaces to ignore that feeling. Something was being arranged. Not loudly. Quietly. At one point, an older Northern wolf leaned toward me as Daniel was briefly pulled into another conversation. "You've been keeping a low profile lately," she said. "I have," I replied evenly. "And now you're here." "Yes." She studied me for a moment. "It's good for the pack to see you." "I know," I said. And I meant it. When Daniel returned, I slipped my hand back into the crook of his arm. His thumb pressed once against my wrist. A question. I answered with a small nod. Later, when the crowd thinned slightly and the conversations became looser, I excused myself and stepped onto a quiet balcony that overlooked the grounds. The night air was cool. I rested my hands on the railing and allowed myself one deep breath.

Daniel joined me a moment later. He didn't speak right away. He stood beside me, close enough that our shoulders almost touched. "That went better than expected," he said finally. "Yes," I replied. "Which is what worries me." He turned to face me fully. "Talk to me." I kept my eyes on the grounds below. "This wasn't about showing unity. It was about watching for cracks." "In you," he said. "In us," I corrected. He didn't argue. "I didn't feel afraid," I continued. "I felt... recognized. Like someone knows me well enough to predict how I might fail." Daniel was quiet for a long moment. "You think someone's trying to provoke you." "I think someone is rehearsing a version of events where I lose control," I said. "Where I react badly. Where I confirm whatever doubt they're planting." He studied my face. "And Clara." "Yes." "She didn't approach you," he said. "No," I replied. "She didn't need to." Daniel exhaled slowly. "I won't dismiss this." "I know," I said. That mattered more than reassurance. We stood there in silence for a few seconds. I could hear the faint hum of conversation from inside, the soft music, the clink of glasses. Normal sounds. Controlled sounds. "I've been avoiding things like this," I admitted.

“Public spaces. Gatherings. I told myself it was about peace. Healing.” ‘And now?’ he asked. ‘And now I see it may have looked like retreat.” Daniel frowned slightly. “No one who knows you would think that.” ‘Wolves who don’t know me might,” I said. “And those are the ones being spoken to.” He nodded slowly. “I don’t want to disappear anymore,” I said. “If someone wants me unstable, they don’t get to do it in my absence.” Daniel reached for my hand. He didn’t squeeze it. He just held it. “We’ll adjust,” he said. “Together.” I finally turned to look at him. “I don’t want you to shield me.” “I won’t,” he replied. “But I won’t leave you exposed either.” “That’s all I’m asking.”

Chapter 378 Not Like This

DANIEL

I reviewed the internal reports alone in my study after the event. The house was quiet. Too quiet for the amount of movement that had passed through it earlier in the night. On paper, everything looked fine. Patrol rotations were logged on time. Attendance lists matched expectations. No formal complaints. No open disputes. No breaches. The kind of order councils liked to see. That was what bothered me. Wolves don’t behave this neatly unless they’re being careful. Careful usually meant direction. Or fear. Sometimes both. I leaned back in my chair and read the border summaries again. The same gaps stood out. Delays that didn’t trigger alerts. Minor reroutes that didn’t require authorization. Decisions that fell just inside acceptable limits. Clean gaps. Almost polite. Someone was shaping behavior without pushing too hard. A knock sounded at the door. “Come in,” I said. Rafe stepped inside, one of the senior Northern enforcers. He closed the door behind him without being told. His posture was respectful, but alert. “You wanted an update,” he said. “I did,” I replied. “Not the written one.” He nodded and took a seat across from me. “The pack’s steady. No signs of fracture.” “No signs,” I repeated. “But?” “But people are watching you more closely,” he said carefully. “Not with doubt. With expectation.” I studied his face. Rafe wasn’t a man who dramatized things. “Explain,” I said. “They’re not questioning your authority,” he continued. “They’re waiting to see how you’ll use it.” I absorbed that. “After tonight?” “Yes. Public unity helps. But it also invites comparison. Wolves want reassurance without noise. They don’t want spectacle.” I nodded once. That tracked with what I’d felt in the room. “Anyone pushing for action?” I asked. “No one openly,” he said. “Which is part of the issue. Normally someone complains. Someone demands blood. This time, they’re quiet.” “Quiet means listening,” I said. Rafe agreed. “Or waiting for someone else to move first.” “Anyone standing out?” I asked. He hesitated for a fraction of a second. I noticed. “Say it,” I said. “Clara,” he replied. “Not aggressively. But she’s being observed.” “Observed by whom?” “Everyone,” he said. “Because she’s everywhere she shouldn’t be, without crossing lines.” I exhaled slowly. “Keep it that way. Observation only.” Rafe stood. “Understood.” After he left, I stayed seated for a long time. Leadership isolation wasn’t new to me. It came with the role. What felt different now was the precision of the pressure. This wasn’t rebellion. This was provocation. I closed the file and headed upstairs. Amy was in the bedroom, changing out of the dress she’d worn earlier. She glanced at me in the mirror. “You’re still working,” she said. “I was reading,” I replied. She adjusting the hanger and turned to face me. “Anything wrong?”

“Nothing obvious,” I said. She walked closer, studying me. “That’s what worries you.” “Yes.” She sat on the edge of the bed. “Talk.” I leaned against the dresser. “The reports are too clean. The pack is behaving like they’re being graded.” “By you?” she asked.

“By someone else,” I said. “And they want to see how I respond.” Amy was quiet for a moment. Then she asked, “Are you protecting the pack right now—or protecting the image of strength?” The question landed harder than any council objection. I didn’t answer immediately. “I’m trying to do both,” I said finally. She shook her head slightly. “Those aren’t always the same thing.” “I know,” I said. “But reacting publicly gives someone exactly what they want.” “And not reacting risks making you look passive,” she said. “Yes.” She sighed softly. “So what are you going to do?” I met her eyes. “Nothing visible.” Her brow creased. “Nothing?” “Nothing loud,” I corrected. “I’m authorizing layered internal reviews. Quiet ones. Background checks. Access audits.” “On everyone?” she asked. “On anyone connected to recent instability,” I said. “Including people close to you.” She didn’t flinch. That mattered. “You don’t doubt me,” she said. “No,” I replied. “But proximity is being exploited. I won’t pretend otherwise.” She nodded slowly. “I agree.” That surprised me, even though it shouldn’t have. “I won’t announce it,” I continued. “No crackdowns. No statements. I’ll limit access to sensitive information. Fewer people will know full timelines. Fewer people will move freely.” Amy considered that. “That will make some people uncomfortable.” “Yes.” “And if they react?” she asked. “Then I learn who benefits from the pressure,” I said. She stood and stepped closer. “Just don’t mistake restraint for avoidance.” I placed my hands on her shoulders. “I won’t. I promise.” We stood like that for a moment. Quiet, Steady. After she went to shower, I returned to my office and made the calls. Not many. Just enough. I authorized a secondary review team that answered only to me. I restricted access to certain corporate schedules and pack patrol summaries. I adjusted clearance levels without explanation. No announcements. No justification. If someone was fishing for reaction, they wouldn’t get one. Not yet. By the time I , the house was asleep. I sat alone again, aware of the weight pressing in from all sides. Leadership always narrowed options. Tonight, it narrowed them further. This wasn’t about rebellion. It wasn’t about power grabs. It was about forcing me into a reaction that could be framed as weakness or tyranny, depending on who told the story. I wasn’t going to give them that. Not tonight. Not like this. Whatever was coming, I would meet it on my terms—or not at all. I shut down the terminal and stayed seated, listening to the house settle around me. My wolf was restless, not angry, not afraid. Alert. That mattered. Instinct wasn’t pushing me toward force. It was pushing me toward patience. Someone wanted me loud. Decisive in public. Predictable. I wouldn’t give them that. Tomorrow, the pack would see calm. Order. Routine. No signs of strain. Behind that, the net would tighten slowly, quietly, without warning bells. Whoever was shaping this expected an Alpha to react. They would learn instead what happens when an Alpha waits, watches, and lets the pressure expose its source on its own.

Chapter 379 Carelessness

AMY

I agreed to see Mark and Clara again on my terms. That decision alone told me how much had changed. I chose a neutral location, one that belonged to neither pack authority nor corporate control. A quiet private lounge attached to one of our external conference properties, Clean. Open. Staffed, but discreet. I limited the time before I even sent the confirmation. Forty minutes. No extensions. No private follow-ups. I informed Daniel before I went. Not to ask permission, but to keep transparency intact. He nodded once when I told him. “I trust you,” he said. He didn’t add conditions. That mattered. When I arrived, Mark was already there. Clara came in seconds later. She looked composed, careful in the way she held herself. Her scent was steady, controlled. She wasn’t nervous. That alone told me this apology was planned, not emotional. We sat. No one rushed to speak. I let the silence stretch. Wolves filled silence with meaning. Humans often tried to escape it. Clara waited me out, but Mark shifted slightly in his seat.

"I appreciate you coming," Mark said first. "We won't take much of your time." "I know," I replied. "I made the schedule." Clara's mouth tightened for a moment. She recovered quickly. "I wanted to tell you to give me a chance to prove myself to you again," she said. "For everything. I know words aren't enough, but I need you to hear it from me." I looked at her directly. I didn't nod. I didn't interrupt. She continued anyway. "I hurt you. I crossed lines I shouldn't have crossed. I made choices that caused lasting damage. I won't excuse them." Her voice stayed even. Her posture stayed open. It was well done. When she , I waited a few seconds longer than necessary. "I hear you," I said. "That doesn't mean what you think it means." Mark frowned slightly. Clara's eyes sharpened. "I'm not rejecting your apology," I continued. "I'm also not accepting it in the way you want." Clara drew a careful breath. "What does that mean?"

"It means forgiveness is not restoration," I said. "And trust is not something you earn through repetition." Mark leaned forward. "Amy, we're not asking you to—" I lifted a hand. Not sharply. Just enough. "I'm speaking," I said. He leaned back immediately. "I understand the need for resolution," I said. "I don't share it. I don't need closure from people who benefited from my pain." Clara's composure slipped, just slightly. "That's not fair," she said. "I didn't benefit—" I held her gaze. "You survived," I said. "That was the benefit." Silence followed. This one landed heavier. Mark swallowed. "I'm trying to do better," he said quietly. "I know I failed you. I know I failed Daniel. I'm not asking to go back to how things were." "I know," I said. "And I acknowledge the effort." His shoulders eased a fraction. "But acknowledgment isn't absolution," I continued. "You don't get access because you feel guilty. You get access when I decide it serves a purpose." Clara stiffened at that. "A purpose?" she repeated. "Yes," I said. "Clarity." I leaned back slightly, letting my tone stay level. "You both seem uncomfortable with neutrality," I said. "You mistake it for indecision. It isn't." Mark looked between us. "So what happens now?" "This," I said. "Limited contact. Public courtesy. No private conversations. No emotional bargaining. No expectations." "And if we respect that?" Clara asked. "Then nothing changes," I replied. "Which is already more than you had before."

Chapter 380 Compliance

DANIEL

I found the acquisition buried where most people would never look. It wasn't large enough to trigger alarms. It didn't breach voting thresholds or require board disclosure beyond a technical filing. On paper, it was clean, compliant, and forgettable. That was the problem. Southern capital had entered a Northern subsidiary tied to Carter Holdings infrastructure—logistics, not leadership. Access, not control. I stared at the report longer than necessary. This was not an accident. I called legal first. Not with urgency. Urgency alerts people. I asked questions the way I always did, calmly, precisely, as if I already knew the answers. "This should have flagged," I said. "Why didn't it?" There was a pause on the other end. Not long. Just enough. "It fell under passive investment," the attorney replied. "No board-level interference. No breach of governance rules." "Who approved it?" "Automated clearance. Reviewed by compliance." "Which compliance?" Another pause.. "External." That was new. I ended the call and pulled the internal access logs. Nothing had been altered. No obvious tampering. No forged approvals. Everything was where it should be. That meant someone had worked within the system, not against it. I tried again. Different angle. I reached out to one of the banks we had longstanding relationships with. I asked about the source. Not demanding. Curious. "They're protected," I was told. "Layered entities. Nothing illegal." "I didn't ask if it was illegal." Another silence. "They're well insulated," the banker said

carefully. “Reversing this would be complicated.” Complicated meant expensive. Public, Slow. I leaned back in my chair and exhaled once. Not frustration. Assessment I authorized a quiet freeze on expansion tied to that subsidiary. Not a shutdown. Just a pause. Within minutes, my office received three inquiries. All polite. All framed as concern. I didn’t answer any of them. By afternoon, it was clear. Every lever I touched resisted. Not aggressively. Smoothly. Procedures, timelines, oversight committees. All the things meant to protect companies from rash decisions were now being used to stall me. This wasn’t theft. It was pressure. I walked the floor that evening. Not with an entourage. Just me. I wanted to feel the place the way I used to, before every step carried meaning. Employees nodded. Some smiled. Some watched longer than usual. They sensed something shifting. At home later, I reviewed the numbers again. The acquisition itself was minor. The implication wasn’t. If Southern capital could enter here without my knowledge, it meant someone had learned how to bypass my awareness without challenging my authority directly. That was deliberate. Amy joined me after dinner. She didn’t announce herself. She just sat across from me and waited until I looked up. “You’ve been staring at that screen for an hour,” she said. “It’s not changing,” I replied. She glanced at the documents without leaning in. She knew better than to read over my shoulder. I appreciated that. “Is it bad?” she asked. “It’s quiet,” I said. “That’s worse.” She nodded once. “Did you try to stop it?”

“Yes.” “And?” I closed the file and rubbed my thumb along the edge of the table. “Nothing moves. Everything is correct. And nothing responds.” She considered that. “Then they’re not trying to take something from you.” I looked at her. “They’re trying to make you look ineffective,” she continued. “If you push hard enough, you’ll prove them right.” I didn’t answer immediately. The thought had been circling already, but hearing it said plainly landed differently. “They want me to overreact,” I said. “Yes,” she replied. “Or hesitate publicly. Either way, people start asking questions.” I leaned back. “This isn’t how Southern leadership operates.” “No,” Amy agreed. “This is someone else. Someone patient.” We sat in silence for a moment. Not heavy. Focused. “If I challenge this openly,” I said, “I give them visibility.” “And if you don’t?” she asked. “They gain time.” She met my gaze. “Then don’t fight the move. Trace it.” That was the answer. I closed the remaining files and powered down the tablet. “If I push for reversal, they’ll hide deeper. If I let it sit, they’ll get comfortable.” “Comfort makes people careless,” Amy said. “Yes,” I replied. “It does.” Later that night, after she went to bed, I made three calls. Not to executives. Not to lawyers. To people who didn’t report to me formally but had been loyal long before titles mattered. “I need to know who signed off,” I told one. “Not the name on the file. The person who suggested it.” Another I tasked with mapping the investment trail backward, not forward. Who benefited before the shares even moved. The third call was shorter. “Watch the watchers,” I said. “Someone is guiding this.” When I ended the calls, my wolf stirred. Not angry. Alert. This was not a threat that could be met with force or command. This was an attempt to narrow my choices until any move looked wrong. I would not give them that satisfaction. This wasn’t about reclaiming power. I still had it. This was about revealing who believed they could touch my territory without consequence. I didn’t sleep much after that. Not because of fear, but because my mind kept arranging pieces. Every delay, every polite refusal, every procedural wall pointed in the same direction. Someone wanted me contained without ever saying my name. That kind of pressure only works if people start believing the Alpha is limited. The next morning, I adjusted my schedule. I canceled nothing publicly. I attended meetings. I signed approvals. I listened more than I spoke. That was intentional. Wolves watch silence as closely as action. At Carter Holdings, I let the acquisition stand. I even allowed a secondary review to “stall” internally. That bought my opponent confidence. Confidence makes people sloppy. By midday, one of my quiet contacts reported movement. Not Southern executives. Mid-level facilitators. People

who don't make decisions but pass messages. That narrowed the field. I met with Amy briefly before leaving the office. I told her I wasn't going to fight this openly. She didn't argue. "Good," she said. "They're waiting for noise." "They won't get it," I replied. **W**(w)w.n@ve**l**wó**R**m.co**M** That evening, I authorized a shadow audit. No titles. No paper trail tied to me. Just verification. If someone believed they could erode my authority by forcing hesitation, they had misunderstood me.