

Broken 381

Chapter 381 Changes

CLARA

I noticed the change before anyone said my name. Northern wolves didn't block my path or glare. They adjusted. They stood a little closer together when I entered a room. Conversations ended faster. Not abruptly. Just . When I passed through shared corridors, eyes followed me without interest or judgment. Observation, not reaction. That was worse. Mark didn't see it at first. He was still moving on routine. Work, meetings, quiet dinners. He talked more now, maybe because I listened without interrupting. That part was easy. Listening had always been easier than explaining myself. One afternoon, as we walked back from a shared briefing space, a Northern enforcer slowed his steps to match mine. "You're spending more time on this level lately," he said calmly. It wasn't a question. "I accompany Mark," I replied. "His clearance covers it." The enforcer nodded once. "I know." He didn't ask for credentials. He didn't tell me to leave. He just let the moment sit, then walked ahead of us. Mark frowned slightly. "That was strange," he said. "It was nothing," I answered. It wasn't. That evening, I accessed my private channel and contacted Elias. I didn't tell him about the enforcer. I didn't mention Daniel. I gave him something else. A small internal shift. A scheduling oversight that made the North look careless for half a day. Nothing damaging. Just enough to remind him I was still useful. He responded quickly. "Good," Elias said. "You're correcting your earlier lapse." "I never lapsed," I replied. There was a pause. "You slowed," he said. "Don't." I ended the call before he could say more. My hands stayed steady, but my thoughts didn't. The North was watching me. Elias was tightening. Both sides expected movement. The next morning, Mark told me Daniel had authorized background reviews. Mark said, trying to sound unconcerned. "Anyone near recent instability." "And you?" I asked. "I'm cleared already," he said. "You'll be fine." He believed that. It made my chest feel tight in a way I didn't acknowledge. Daniel didn't run reviews for reassurance. He ran them for outcomes. Later that day, Selene crossed paths with me near the administrative wing. She stopped without smiling. "You're still here," she said. "Yes," I replied. "Is that unexpected?" "No," Selene said. "Just noted." She stepped aside to let me pass, then added, "Patterns matter here." I nodded and walked on. My pace stayed even. That night, I couldn't feed Elias anything else. The well was dry. I had already taken a risk. Another would expose the shape of my access. Instead, I stayed close to Mark. We ate together. We talked about nothing important. He mentioned Amy once. "She seemed calmer at the last gathering," he said. "Different." "I noticed," I replied. "She didn't argue. Didn't soften either." I said nothing. Amy didn't need to argue anymore. That was the point. Two days later, Daniel requested my presence indirectly. Not a summons. A scheduling overlap. I arrived at the shared office space and found him already there, reviewing files. He didn't look up at once. "Sit," he said. I did. "This isn't an accusation," Daniel said. "It's a clarification." "I understand," I replied. He finally looked at me. His expression was neutral. "You've been visible," he said. "More than before." "I haven't changed my conduct," I said. Daniel agreed. "Others have changed their response." He folded his hands. "Visibility can be granted. Or tolerated. Or allowed temporarily." I waited. "You're currently in the third category," he said.

"Is that a warning?" I asked. "It's information," Daniel replied. "I don't act on emotion. I act on trajectory."

“And what trajectory do you see?” I asked. “That depends on your next decisions,” he said. The meeting ended without resolution. That was deliberate. Outside, I leaned against the corridor wall for a moment after he left. Wolves passed by without comment. The pressure didn’t lift. It settled. That night, Elias contacted me again. “You’re being reviewed,” he said flatly. “I know,” I replied. “You’re running out of time,” he said. “So are you,” I said before I could stop myself. Silence followed. “That’s not your place,” Elias said finally. “Then adjust your expectations,” I replied. “Or replace me.” Another pause. “No,” he said. “You’re still positioned. Push Mark.” “I won’t,” I said. “That sounds like defiance,” Elias said. “It’s judgment,” I answered. “If he breaks, I lose access entirely.” “You’re hesitating,” Elias said. “That looks like disloyalty.” “I’m still here,” I said. “That should count.” The channel closed without agreement. Mark noticed the shift in me the next day. He didn’t ask directly. He offered to walk me out after meetings. He stayed closer than usual. He thought he was protecting me. That made everything worse. By the end of the week, the North no longer treated me as Mark’s companion. They treated me as a factor. Something to track. Something to account for. I understood then that I had crossed a line without meaning to. I wasn’t invisible anymore. I wasn’t trusted either. And in the North, that space didn’t last long. Time wasn’t narrowing. It was ending. Whatever move came next wouldn’t be careful. It would be decisive. And if I didn’t choose it, someone else would. That was the truth I couldn’t step away from. I didn’t sleep much that night. Not from fear, but from calculation. Every interaction replayed itself without emotion attached. The enforcer’s tone. Selene’s pause. Daniel’s phrasing. None of it was random. The next morning, I changed my routine. Not drastically. Just enough to see who noticed. I arrived earlier than usual. I avoided shared transit paths. I stayed within approved zones, even when shortcuts were available. It didn’t help. A Northern aide stopped me near the internal lifts. “Your access badge flagged late yesterday,” she said. “It cleared,” I replied. “Yes,” she said. “I just wanted to confirm it wasn’t an error pattern.” There it was again. Pattern. I thanked her and moved on. My hands stayed calm. Inside, I accepted what I’d been avoiding. The North wasn’t gathering evidence. They were narrowing probability. Later, Mark asked if I wanted to stay over that night. “You don’t have to,” he added quickly. “I just thought- “I’ll stay,” I said. ” Not because I wanted comfort. Because absence would be noted. As we ate, he talked about work stress, about Amy’s increasing presence, about Daniel becoming quieter instead of louder. I responded when needed. I smiled when expected. But part of me had already shifted. I was no longer planning how to serve Elias better. I was planning how to not disappear when the board finally closed.

Chapter 382 Events And Plans

AMY

I had known for days that I would have to speak to Clara again. Not because I wanted peace, and not because time had softened anything. I had known because patterns do not lie, and Clara had never been random. I had not said it out loud to anyone at first. Not to Daniel. Not to myself in full sentences. But it sat there every time I thought about the instability around us. Clara’s bloodline. The way she had survived consequences that should have erased her. The confidence she carried despite having no real protection. None of that matched the profile of a woman who should be keeping her head down. Clara moved like someone who knew she was still useful. That was the problem. I decided to let her closer the same way I handled most things now: deliberately and without drama. If isolation had worked, she would already be gone. If punishment had worked, she would not still be here. Whatever she was tied to required access, not distance. I chose a corporate setting for our first real conversation. Neutral. Public enough to limit damage. Controlled enough to keep witnesses nearby. No closed doors. No shared

transport. No room for performance that couldn't be observed. When she arrived, she looked prepared. Calm. Almost relieved. That reaction alone told me more than any apology could have. People who expect rejection arrive defensive. Clara arrived ready to build. "Thank you for agreeing to meet," she said, taking the seat across from me. I nodded. "This doesn't need to be difficult." Her eyes searched my face, slow and careful. She was looking for emotion. I gave her none. We spoke about surface things first. Scheduling conflicts. Work structures. Where she was currently based. Her tone was polite and measured. She chose her words carefully, like someone who expected to be corrected. I let her speak without interruption. I watched instead. She did not relax as the minutes passed. Her shoulders stayed set. Her attention stayed sharp. That wasn't fear. That was readiness. Clara wasn't waiting to be forgiven. She was waiting to be allowed. I began increasing contact after that meeting in small ways. Nothing dramatic. Brief check-ins that included other people. Shared time at events where leaving early was acceptable. I never invited her into anything private. Never gave her emotional space. I let her be seen near me without being close to me. Visibility without intimacy. It worked faster than I expected. Clara adapted quickly. She matched tone. She followed structure. She never pushed for more than what was offered, which told me she understood limits. But her attention never drifted. She watched reactions. She tracked who noticed her proximity. She was collecting something. Every time she stood near me, my body reacted before my mind could stop it. The memory did not arrive as images. It arrived as tension. As awareness. As my wolf pressing forward, reminding me that this woman had tried to kill me and had succeeded in taking something I would never get back. I kept it contained. I framed it as endurance. If Clara was connected to the Southern Alpha, then proximity was not optional. I told myself that control was not the same as healing. I did not need to be healed to be effective. During one of our later conversations, I began to ask questions that sounded harmless. "Have you been moving much between regions lately?" I asked, glancing at a report as if distracted. "Not really," she said. "I've kept to the North." I nodded. "Any Southern contacts still checking in?" She smiled slightly. "Less than before."

That answer was polished. Too polished. It closed the door without addressing who those contacts were. I noted it and moved on. Later, I asked about her views on leadership changes in the South. She responded with neutrality. No opinions. No criticism. No loyalty declared. That absence stood out. Wolves have opinions even when they hide them. Avoidance became its own language. By the end of the week, it was clear Clara believed she was being reintegrated. People noticed her proximity. Some were curious. Some were cautious. No one objected openly. That told me something else: they were watching me, not her. That night, I told Daniel exactly what I was doing. "She thinks I'm letting her back in," I said, sitting across from him in his office, "I'm not." He didn't interrupt. He never did when I spoke like this. "I want her comfortable," I continued. "Comfortable enough to stop guarding every word. Comfortable enough to move without checking over her shoulder." Daniel leaned back slightly. "You're sure this won't cost you?" "It already has," I said. "This is about learning what she knows. Or who she reports to." He nodded once. "Then I'll play my part." I looked at him. "You need to behave like you've forgiven her too. No tension. No distance. Let her believe she's misread you." "I can do that," he said. "But you know what this invites." "I do," I replied. "And I'm choosing it." In the days that followed, Clara grew bolder in small ways. She spoke more freely. She lingered longer. She began offering help without being asked. That wasn't gratitude. That was positioning. I let it happen. Inside, I remained alert. Every conversation replayed later in my mind. Every omission filed away. Clara was careful, but careful people slip when they think the ground beneath them is stable. Near the end of the week, I noticed something else. Clara wasn't reacting to what was happening around her. She was anticipating it. She adjusted before situations shifted. She arrived prepared for changes that had not been announced yet. That was

when I understood she wasn't waiting for events. She was planning. The realization didn't frighten me. It confirmed the pattern. Clara was not responding to forgiveness. She was responding to opportunity. When I left the building that evening, I didn't look back to see if she was watching. I already knew she was. What mattered was that she believed she was winning ground. She wasn't being redeemed. She was being positioned. And if she thought this was safe, then she was already making mistakes.

Chapter 383 Playing Dumb

CLARA

I believed I was winning. Not because Amy said she forgave me. She never said that. But because she stopped pushing me away. Because she let me sit across from her without tension showing on her face. Because she allowed my presence without protest. To me, that wasn't restraint. That was my weakness learning how to smile. I told myself she wanted peace. Or control. Or to prove she was above it all. People like Amy always needed to be seen as composed. As fair. As better. That need made them predictable. And predictable people could be managed. I made sure to behave exactly the way forgiveness stories required. I was polite. I was quiet. I never raised my voice. I never argued with her decisions, even when I disagreed. Especially when I disagreed. Wolves noticed effort before they noticed truth. Humans noticed optics before intent. I understood both. When Amy asked me to assist with internal coordination, I agreed without hesitation. "Of course," I said, keeping my tone light. "Whatever you need." She looked at me for a second longer than necessary. Then she nodded. "It's procedural work. Nothing sensitive." "I understand," I replied. "I'm grateful you're willing to trust me at all." That word mattered. Grateful. It made witnesses comfortable. It made Amy look generous. I stayed late when others left. I volunteered for tasks no one wanted. I kept my head down and my schedule open. When people walked past and saw me working near Amy, they drew their own conclusions. No one questioned a woman who appeared to be earning redemption. Privately, the resentment never faded. It sharpened. Amy didn't just survive me. She stood where she always had—protected, respected, untouched by the weight she placed on others. She had lost something, yes, but she had gained something too. Sympathy, Authority. Moral ground. I wanted that ground to crack. Not with accusation. Not with force. Those were crude tools. I wanted inversion. I wanted her restraint to look cold. Her silence to look calculated. Her authority to feel personal. I started shaping the story slowly. When I spoke about the past, I never denied what I'd done. I didn't need to. Denial invited scrutiny. Instead, I framed it carefully. "I've paid for my mistakes," I said once, quietly, to a small group that included two Northern wolves and a human consultant. "I don't expect forgiveness. Just space to do better." No one argued with that. Why would they? It sounded reasonable. Responsible. Safe. Later, when I spoke to Amy privately, I let my voice soften. "I know you don't owe me anything," I said. "I just want to coexist without causing more damage." She watched me as if measuring something. "That depends on what you define as damage." "I mean disruption," I replied. "To the pack. To the company." True words. Carefully chosen. I made sure people saw us together often. Hallways. Brief check-ins. Shared tables at events. Never long enough for full conversations. Never short enough to look forced. Witnesses saw proximity. They didn't hear content. That was important. My wolf stayed alert through all of it. Not afraid. Aware. I could feel when other wolves watched me more closely. I adjusted posture. Lowered my gaze at the right moments. Allowed submission signals without surrender. It kept suspicion muted. I identified Amy's vulnerability quickly.

She refused to react. When someone spoke out of line, she corrected them calmly. When tension rose, she de-escalated. When discomfort lingered, she let silence do the work. Wolves respected that. But respect could turn into distance. Distance could be shaped. I planned around that. The more she withheld emotion, the easier it would be to frame her as detached. Cold. Punitive without admitting it. I didn't need her to do anything wrong. I needed others to feel unsettled. I began placing myself where reactions could be misread. Once, after a meeting, I stayed behind while Amy gathered her notes. The room was empty except for us. 'I know being near me isn't easy,' I said quietly. She didn't respond right away. Then she said, "You're here because I allowed it. Don't mistake that for comfort." I nodded. "I won't." Later, I mentioned the exchange to someone else. Carefully. "Amy keeps things very contained," I said. "I admire that. I don't think I could be so controlled." The comment wasn't an accusation. It was an observation. Observations lingered longer. I made sure to be seen leaving meetings looking unsettled. Not crying. Just quiet. Thoughtful. When asked, I deflected. "It's fine," I said. "Some conversations are heavy." Heavy conversations invited speculation. I never spoke ill of her. I didn't need to. People filled in gaps on their own. The more Amy maintained her composure, the easier it became to suggest imbalance. Authority without warmth unsettled wolves. Especially when paired with a woman who appeared to be trying. By the end of the week, I had chosen the method. I would engineer a moment where Amy's silence would speak louder than words. Where her refusal to explain would look like guilt. Where her authority would feel personal rather than procedural. No lies. No covert attack. Just framing. Standing in Mark's kitchen that night, I felt the weight of what I was building. Not fear. Pressure. This wasn't about survival anymore. It was about correction. Amy believed she was positioning me. She didn't see that I was doing the same. And when the moment came, her restraint would not save her. It would condemn her. I went to bed certain of one thing. Amy thought proximity gave her control. She believed patience would reveal the truth. What she didn't understand was that closeness also created witnesses. When the moment arrived, those witnesses would remember my silence, my effort, my compliance. They would remember her distance. And when questions surfaced, as they always did, no one would ask who planned it. They would ask who looked capable of it.

Chapter 384 Staying Calm

CLARA

The day I chose was not an accident. I woke up early in Mark's house, already aware of the schedule. There was a joint review session at Carter Holdings later that afternoon. Not a board meeting. Not a pack council. Something in between. Senior department heads, a few Northern representatives, security present but relaxed. Enough eyes to matter. Not enough structure to protect anyone if the mood shifted. Mark was already up when I entered the kitchen. He was reading reports on his tablet, his posture tense in the way it always was before anything involving Amy. "You're quiet," he said without looking up. "I didn't sleep much," I replied. That part was true. He nodded, accepting it. "Today might be uncomfortable. You don't have to come." "I want to," I said. "If I'm going to be around, I can't keep hiding." He studied me then, searching for something. Whatever he saw must have satisfied him, because he looked back at the screen. "Stay close to me," he said. "If anything feels off, we leave." I agreed easily. That was part of the plan. At Carter Holdings, the atmosphere was controlled but loose. People stood in clusters, conversations overlapping. Wolves read the room the same way humans did, but with more attention to tone and space. I felt it immediately. The awareness. The quiet evaluation. Amy arrived with Daniel. She was composed, dressed simply, her posture straight. When her eyes met mine, she didn't hesitate. She nodded once, polite. Nothing more. That was important. I stayed near

Mark at first, letting myself be seen. I spoke only when spoken to. I listened. I smiled when appropriate. Several people approached me with cautious warmth. That was new. I responded carefully, always respectful, never familiar. Amy moved through the room with authority that didn't demand attention. That authority unsettled people more than aggression ever could. I knew that. I counted on it. The moment came when Daniel was called away for a private discussion. Mark followed soon after, pulled aside by someone from compliance. I stayed where I was, close enough to Amy to be noticed, far enough to look hesitant. She noticed. "Clara," she said, her voice even. "Walk with me." Several heads turned. That was fine. We moved toward a quieter corridor near the executive offices. Still public. Still visible. But removed enough that words could carry without being overheard clearly. "Is everything alright?" I asked, keeping my tone low. "Yes," Amy said. "I wanted to clarify something about your access schedule." I nodded, cooperative. "Of course." We stopped near an empty conference room. Glass walls. Transparent. That mattered too. She spoke calmly, explaining boundaries. Where I could be. Who I reported to. What information required oversight. Nothing unreasonable. Nothing threatening. I listened, hands folded in front of me. My wolf stayed quiet. Waiting. "I want this to work," Amy said. "But it only works if we're clear." "I understand," I said. "I don't want to cause trouble." She looked at me for a moment. Studying. Measuring. "That's good," she said. "Then we won't have problems." That was when I shifted. Not abruptly, Not dramatically. Just enough. "I'm trying," I said softly. "Sometimes I feel like no matter what I do, I'm already judged." She didn't respond immediately. "I know I don't deserve trust," I continued. "But being watched like this... it's hard." Amy's expression didn't change. "Accountability isn't punishment." The words were neutral. Reasonable. I took a small step back. Just one. "I'm not asking for special treatment," I said. "I just want to feel safe." That was when I let my breathing change. Faster. Uneven. "Clara," Amy said, her tone firm now. "You are safe."

She reached out, not touching me, but close enough that others could see the gesture. I flinched. It was subtle. Enough to register. Enough to be noticed by the wrong people. "I'm sorry," I said quickly. "I didn't mean-" Amy straightened. "There's no reason to be upset." Her voice carried slightly. Not loud. But audible. I swallowed hard. My eyes stung. I let them. "I'm not upset," I said. "I just... I didn't expect this to feel so much like before." That was the line. Her jaw tightened. Just briefly. "There is no 'before' here," she said. "We are discussing work." Her restraint was perfect. And fatal. Footsteps approached. Two department heads. A security officer slowed as he passed. "I think I should go," I said, backing away. "I don't want to make this worse." Amy stepped forward, instinctive. "Clara, wait." I raised my hands. "Please," I said, my voice shaking now. "I'm trying to stay calm." The silence stretched. People stopped pretending not to watch. Amy lowered her hands. "No one is attacking you." looked at her. Really looked. Let my face register fear instead of anger. "I didn't say you were," I whispered. That was when I scratched myself. Quick. Controlled. Just enough to sting. My nails broke the skin on my forearm. I hissed softly, like it was an accident. Then I pulled my sleeve down halfway, leaving the mark visible. Amy saw it. Her eyes flicked down. Then back up. "What did you do?" she asked. "I'm sorry," I said, stepping further away, "I didn't mean to react like that." Voices murmured now. Confusion. Concern. "Clara?" someone called. "I need a moment," I said, tears spilling freely now. "Please." Amy stood still. She did not reach for me again. She did not raise her voice. She did nothing. And that was the point. Hands touched my shoulders. Gentle. Reassuring. "It's alright," someone said. "You're safe." I nodded, wiping my face. I didn't look back at Amy as I was led away. Later, in a quiet room, people asked careful questions. I answered them carefully too. "I don't want to cause problems," I said. "Amy didn't mean anything by it. I just... I'm still sensitive." I was never accused. I never blamed. I let the room decide. When Mark found me, his face was pale. "What happened?" he asked. "I think I misunderstood," I said.

“It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have let my past reactions show.” His jaw tightened. “She shouldn’t have cornered you.” “I wasn’t cornered,” I said quickly. “Please don’t make this worse.” That only confirmed it for him. By the time Amy returned to the main floor, the room had shifted. Conversations stopped when she passed. Not hostile. Careful. Daniel noticed immediately. His eyes met mine across the space. I looked away.

Chapter 385 No Accusations

AMY

I knew something had shifted the moment I walked back into the main floor. Conversations didn’t stop outright. That would have been easier. They slowed instead. Voices dipped. People looked at me a second longer than normal, then away. Wolves didn’t stare. They assessed. And assessment carried weight. Daniel was across the room speaking with two Northern reps. He caught my eye almost immediately. His posture changed. Not alarm. Recognition. He excused himself and crossed the space without urgency, stopping just short of touching me. “What happened?” he asked quietly. “I’ll explain later,” I said. “Not here.” He nodded once. He trusted my read of timing. That mattered. We the session without incident. No one challenged me directly. No accusations. No raised voices. That absence was the problem. I had spent enough time in pack politics to understand silence as a decision, not neutrality. On the drive home, Daniel didn’t press. He waited until the gates closed behind us, until the staff dispersed, until the house settled into its evening quiet. Then he spoke. “Start from the beginning.” I told him exactly what happened. No emotion. No defense. Just sequence. The conversation. The boundary discussion. The moment Clara flinched. The scratch. The way others arrived only after the frame had already been set. Daniel listened without interrupting. His face stayed controlled, but I could feel his wolf pacing under the surface. Not rage. Calculation. “She never accused you,” he said when I . “No,” I replied. “She didn’t need to.” “That makes it worse.” “Yes.” He leaned back in his chair. “She engineered witnesses.” “And timing,” I added. “She knew when you’d be gone. She knew when Mark would be distracted.” Daniel exhaled slowly. “Then this wasn’t improvisation.” “No. It was execution.” Silence settled between us, heavy but familiar. “I didn’t react,” I said. “I didn’t raise my voice. I didn’t touch her.” “I know,” he said. “That’s why this works.” I looked at him. “You believe me.” “That was never in question,” he replied.. That steadied something in me I hadn’t realized was shaking. Later that night, I stood alone in the bathroom, staring at my reflection. I looked the same. Composed. Controlled. But my wolf was restless, circling close to the surface. Not urging violence. Warning. I understood then what Clara had done. She hadn’t tried to destroy me. She had tried to reframe me. The next morning, the fallout arrived quietly. Addison brought me the first report. Not formal. Not documented. Just observation. “People are asking questions,” she said. “Not openly. But they’re watching Clara more closely. And you.” “Which people?” I asked. “Mid-level leadership. A few pack liaisons. Security noticed shifts too.” I nodded. “No one is to confront her.” Addison frowned. “Amy-” “No one,” I repeated. “Not yet.” She studied me for a moment. “You’re letting this sit.” “I’m letting it settle,” I corrected. After she left, I received a message from Mark. Carefully worded. Polite. Concerned. I hope you’re okay. Clara didn’t mean for things to get tense. I didn’t respond. An hour later, Clara sent her own message. I’m sorry if I caused discomfort yesterday. That wasn’t my intention. Still no accusation. Still no blame. I forwarded both messages to Daniel without comment. He replied with a single line. She’s pressing the narrative. Yes, she was. And now I understood the shape of it. 6:9 By afternoon, the whispers had found form. Nothing actionable. Just questions framed as concern. “Is Amy under too much pressure?” “Do you think she’s handling reconciliation well?”

"Maybe things are still raw." No one said unstable. They didn't have to. I met with Daniel again that evening. This time in his office. Doors closed. No staff. "She's building a story where you don't explode," he said. "You intimidate by presence alone." "And my silence becomes confirmation," I said. "Yes." I folded my hands on the desk. "Then we stop playing defense." Daniel raised an eyebrow slightly. "What are you thinking?" "We let her get closer," I said. His gaze sharpened. "Closer how?" "More access. More visibility. More responsibility." "That's dangerous." "I know," I replied. "But she's already counting on restraint. If I pull back now, it looks like retreat." "And if you push forward?" "She has to escalate," I said. "And escalation creates mistakes." Daniel considered that. "You're asking to put yourself directly in her line." "I already am," I said calmly. "The difference is whether I pretend otherwise." He was quiet for a long moment. Then he nodded. "Alright," he said. "But this time, we document everything. Quietly." "Agreed." The next day, I called Clara into my office. She arrived composed, dressed conservatively, posture careful. Her eyes flicked briefly to the door, then back to me. "Thank you for seeing me," she said. "I wanted to clear the air," I replied. "Yesterday was... awkward." Her shoulders relaxed slightly. "I didn't want to make you uncomfortable," "I know," I said. "That's why I wanted to address it directly." She waited. "I don't want tension between us," I continued. "If we're going to coexist professionally, we need clarity." She nodded. "I agree." "I'm willing to move forward," I said. "That means trust where appropriate." Her breath hitched. Just a little. "I'd like you to assist with a short-term internal project," I added. "Nothing sensitive yet. But visible." Her eyes widened. Gratitude. Surprise. Triumph. She masked it quickly. "I'd appreciate that," she said. "I want to contribute." "I'm sure you do," I replied. She stood to leave, hesitated, then spoke again. "I know forgiveness takes time." I met her gaze evenly. "This isn't forgiveness." She blinked. "It's structure," I said. "And structure protects everyone." She smiled, uncertain. "Of course." After she left, I sat alone for several minutes. My wolf paced, unsettled but alert. This wasn't healing. This was positioning. That night, as Daniel and I prepared for bed, he watched me closely. "You're calm," he said. "I'm focused," I replied. He reached for my hand. "You don't have to carry this alone." "I know," I said. "But I need to carry it deliberately." As I turned off the light, one thought stayed with me. Clara believed yesterday had weakened me. She didn't understand yet that she'd only confirmed what I already suspected. And now, she was close enough to prove it.

Chapter 386 Unfit To Rule

AMY

I woke up already alert. Not anxious. Alert in the way you get when you know the ground has shifted but hasn't cracked yet. The house was quiet. Daniel was already gone, which told me he'd decided movement mattered more than rest today. Clara's name was on my schedule before breakfast. I didn't change it. At Carter Holdings, the atmosphere felt tighter. Not hostile. Watchful. Staff greeted me the same way they always had, but their wolves paid closer attention. Respect was still there. Certainty was thinner. Addison walked beside me as we moved down the corridor. She didn't speak until we were out of earshot. "She's been busy," she said. "I expected that," I replied. "She hasn't said anything outright," Addison continued. "But she's present. Helpful. Careful. People are noticing." "Good," I said. Addison glanced at me. "That's not the reaction I thought you'd have." "I don't need her quiet," I said. "I need her comfortable." We reached the conference room. Clara was already inside, standing near the table, reviewing a file on her tablet. She looked up when I entered and offered a soft smile. "Good morning," she said. "Morning," I replied. "You're early." "I wanted to be prepared." Of course you did, I thought. The meeting itself was straightforward. Project timelines. Access limits. Reporting lines. I kept my tone even. Professional. I didn't challenge her input. I didn't reward it either. Neutral ground. Clara adapted

quickly. She mirrored my pace. Didn't push. Didn't hesitate. That told me she was paying attention. When the meeting ended, she lingered. "Amy," she said, careful with my name. "I wanted to thank you again for the opportunity." "You don't need to," I replied. "You're doing work. That's all." She nodded, then hesitated. "I know things have been... tense," I didn't respond. She filled the space gently. "I hope you know I'm trying to do better." "I see effort," I said. "That's enough for now." Her shoulders relaxed. She took that as reassurance. After she left, Addison exhaled hard. "She's good." "Yes," I said. "She is." The rest of the day unfolded without incident. That, too, was intentional. Clara stayed visible. Never alone with me. Never out of sight. She spoke when spoken to. She listened more than she talked. By late afternoon, the first subtle shift appeared. A junior manager approached Addison, then glanced toward me before lowering his voice. Addison didn't answer him. She redirected him to protocol. Good. That evening, Daniel and I met again. He'd already gathered his own observations. "She's shaping perception," he said. "Carefully." "And you're seeing the same gaps I am?" I asked. "Yes. She avoids direct questions about the Southern corridor. She deflects with process language." "That's where she's tied," I said. "Not just by blood. By obligation." Daniel leaned forward. "She's not here to destroy you outright." "No," I agreed. "She's here to soften me. Make me look unfit without ever challenging authority." "And when people start believing that," he said, "the Southern Alpha doesn't have to move openly." "Exactly." There was a pause. "She'll escalate again," Daniel said. "Soon." "She has to," I replied. "This only works if she keeps control of the story." The next escalation came sooner than I expected. Two days later, Clara requested to accompany me to a pack-adjacent meeting. Not a council session. Not formal. A joint review with logistics heads and security liaisons. Public enough. Flexible enough. I approved it.

The meeting took place in a secondary hall. Long table. Open seating. No assigned hierarchy. Clara sat two seats away from me. Close enough to be seen. Far enough to feel respectful. Halfway through, a disagreement broke out between two department heads. Not unusual. Voices rose slightly. I intervened, firm and brief. "Enough," I said. "We're not turning this into a standoff." The room quieted. Clara shifted in her seat. Just a little. Her wolf brushed outward. Not aggression. Unease. I felt it. After the meeting, as people filtered out, Clara stayed behind. "You handled that well," she said. "It wasn't complicated," I replied. She hesitated. "Some people find your presence... intense." There it was. I looked at her calmly. "Leadership isn't meant to be comfortable." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Of course. I just worry people misunderstand." "I don't manage leadership through misunderstanding," I said. "I manage it through clarity." She nodded. "Right." That evening, the whisper network worked faster. A liaison asked Daniel if I was under strain. A security head mentioned Clara seemed shaken after the meeting. Nothing accusatory. Just concern. Daniel shut it down each time. Calm. Consistent. At home, I finally let myself sit with the weight of it. "She's testing how far she can frame authority as threat," I said. "And she's measuring how much you'll tolerate," Daniel replied. "I'll tolerate more," I said. "Until she thinks she's safe." Daniel studied me. "You're sure you can hold this line?" "I'm sure I have to," I said. That night, I dreamed of nothing. No memories. No fear. Just empty space. That told me my mind was staying awake even when my body rested. The next morning, Clara arrived with coffee for the team. Small gesture. Visible. Harmless. She handed one to me last. "I remembered how you take it," she said. I accepted it. "Thank you." Her smile widened. She thought she'd scored something. What she didn't know was that she'd just confirmed another pattern. She was no longer reacting to me. She was managing me. And that meant she believed she was in control. By the end of the day, Addison brought me a quiet update. "She's been invited to an informal gathering this weekend," she said. "Pack-adjacent. Southern reps will be present." I looked up. "She didn't mention it." "No," Addison said. "But

she made sure others did." I nodded slowly. "She's setting her stage." "And you?" Addison asked. "I'll attend," I said. "Together?" she asked. "Yes," I replied. "Publicly." Addison's eyes widened slightly. "That's risky." "So is letting her go alone," I said. That night, as I stood at the window and watched the estate settle into darkness, one thing became clear. Clara wasn't trying to push me out anymore. She was trying to stand beside me long enough for others to question why I was still standing at all. And now, the next move would decide who lost their footing first.

Chapter 387 Narrow Window

AMY

The day started like any other day would—reports queued, meetings staggered, nothing urgent flagged overnight. Daniel had already left for an early council briefing. I stayed back at Carter Holdings to finalize internal approvals that had been delayed by the previous week's tension. By midmorning, the atmosphere shifted. It wasn't panic. It was restraint. People spoke softer. Movements slowed. Wolves paid attention without admitting they were paying attention. Addison was the first to say it out loud. "Something's wrong," she said, standing at my office door with a tablet pressed to her chest. "Security is requesting clarification on an internal release." "What kind of release?" I asked. She hesitated. "Strategic vendor data. The northern logistics projection." I stood. "That information hasn't left this floor." "That's what I said," Addison replied. "But the trace shows executive authorization." I took the tablet from her. The screen displayed access logs, timestamps, clearance paths. My clearance path. I didn't react right away. I needed to be sure of what I was looking at.. "This isn't possible," I said. "I didn't approve of this." "I know," Addison replied. "But it's already been flagged." "Who has it?" I asked. "An external analysis firm," she said. "Southern—adjacent." The room felt smaller, not because of fear, but because of consequence. This wasn't an attack. It wasn't sabotage in the obvious sense. It looked like a mistake. "I need security records," I said. "Full access history. Not summaries." "They're already compiling it," Addison said. "Daniel's been notified." "Good," I replied. "Let him hear it from me before someone else frames it." The word frame settled heavier than I expected. By the time I stepped into the executive corridor, people had started to notice. No one confronted me. That was worse. Wolves didn't accuse unless they were certain. When they weren't, they watched. Clara stood near the conference area, speaking quietly with two department heads. She looked up when she saw me. Concern crossed her face quickly. Too quickly. "Amy," she said, stepping forward. "I heard there was an issue." "I'm handling it," I replied. Her brows knit together. "Of course. I just wanted to check on you." I nodded once and moved past her. As I walked away, I felt it. Not relief. Not sympathy. Satisfaction. It wasn't obvious. It was a small thing—a stillness in her eyes that didn't match the concern she was performing. I registered it without understanding it. At that moment, I didn't attach meaning to it. I was too focused on the problem unfolding. Security requested a formal clarification by noon. Sue was assigned as part of the review team. That alone told me how seriously this was being taken. Sue didn't investigate the noise. She investigated patterns. We sat across from each other in a small conference room. No observers. No recording devices. "I need to ask this plainly," she said. "Did you authorize the release?" "No," I replied. "And I didn't delegate it." She nodded slowly. "The access path says otherwise." "I know what it says," I replied. "It's wrong." Sue studied my face, then looked down at her notes. "There's no forced breach. No override. Whoever did this had clean access." "I don't share my credentials," I said. "Not even with Daniel." "I know," she replied. "That's what complicates this." She paused, then added, "This doesn't look malicious." That was the second thing that unsettled me. "Explain," I said.

"It looks careless," she said, "As if someone acted under pressure. Or misjudged risk." I leaned back. "You think I slipped." "I think that's how it will be interpreted," Sue replied carefully. The distinction mattered. But not enough. By the afternoon briefing, the damage had already begun. A temporary review was announced. Limited scope. Non-disciplinary. Language chosen to calm, not accuse. But wolves heard what words didn't say. Access to certain streams was paused pending review. My name was attached to the pause. I stood through it without comment. Clara sat two rows behind me. When the announcement ended, murmurs spread. People shifted. Wolves adjusted posture. I turned slightly. Clara's face was composed. Respectful. She looked exactly like someone worried for a leader under strain. And then, for a moment, when she thought no one was watching- There it was again. That same quiet satisfaction. I looked away immediately. Not because I understood it. Because I didn't. Daniel joined me later in my office. He closed the door and rested his hand on the back of the chair across from me. "This wasn't random," he said. "I know," I replied. "But I don't know what it was." He sat. "Security thinks it was a lapse." "It wasn't," I said. "I believe you," he replied. "But belief won't stop the review." I nodded. "Who benefits from this?" Daniel didn't answer right away. "Someone who wants you questioned without being attacked." exhaled. "That narrows it too much." Or too little," he said. told him about Clara. About the look. Daniel's jaw tightened slightly. "That's not proof." I know," I said. "And that's what bothers me." The next day, the consequences solidified. I was asked to step back from two operational approvals. Temporarily. Until clarity was restored. No accusation. No confrontation. Just removal. Clara adjusted immediately. She increased visibility. She offered support in meetings. She spoke carefully about stress and responsibility. 'She's under pressure,' I heard her say once, not to me, but close enough to be heard. "Anyone would struggle." She never said my name. She didn't have to. Sue visited me that evening. Not officially. She didn't sit. "I don't think this was an accident," she said quietly. "Do you think it was Clara?" I asked. She hesitated. "I don't know." Neither did I. "That's the problem," Sue continued. "Whoever did this planned for uncertainty." After she left, I sat alone in my office and reviewed the timeline again. Not to find guilt. To find intent. The release had occurred during a narrow window. A moment when my schedule was public.

Chapter 388 Secondary Access Point

AMY

When I was in transit between meetings. It was precise. But precision didn't equal proof. What I knew, with certainty, was this: someone wanted me blamed without being accused. Wanted doubt without rebellion. Clara had looked satisfied. That was all I had. And it wasn't enough. Yet. I understood then that whatever had gone wrong was not the end of something. It was the beginning of a shift. Trust didn't break loudly. It thinned. And whoever had done this expected me to react. I didn't. I stayed calm. I complied. I waited. Because the next move wouldn't be careful. People who succeed quietly always push once more. And when they did, I intended to be watching. I stopped pretending the situation was temporary the morning the access badge failed. It wasn't dramatic. No alarms. No denial message. Just a quiet red indicator where green used to be. Addison noticed before I did. "That's not right," she said, glancing at the panel, then at me. "Your clearance should still work." "I know," I replied. She swiped her own badge and stepped aside so I could enter behind her. No one said anything, but the message was clear. I was being escorted in my own building. Inside, the floor felt different. People greeted me with respect, but it was careful now. Wolves weren't pulling away. They were adjusting. I told myself to stay focused. Emotion would only make things worse. By midmorning, the review had expanded. Not officially, but in practice. More departments were asked to submit logs. More people were asked

questions. The pattern was obvious to anyone who understood pack behavior. This was becoming a story. I was the center of it. Daniel called me during a break between meetings. "They're pushing for a temporary oversight committee," he said. "Framing it as support." "For me?" I asked. "For stability," he replied. "Which means you." I closed my eyes for a second. "Do they have anything new?"

"No," he said. "That's the problem. They don't need it." After the call, I went to the executive lounge to get water. Clara was already there. She stood when she saw me. Too quickly. "Amy," she said. "I was just about to come find you." "Why?" I asked. Her expression softened. "I heard things were escalating. I wanted to make sure you were okay." "I'm fine," I replied. She nodded, like she expected that answer. "I know this must feel unfair." I studied her face. Calm. Sympathetic. Perfectly aligned with the version of events spreading through the building. "Unfair implies intention," I said. "This is procedural." Her lips curved slightly. Not a smile. Something else. "Of course," she said. "I only meant... people forget how much weight leadership carries." "Do they?" I asked. She hesitated. Just a fraction. "Sometimes." Silence stretched between us. "I should let you get back," she added. "If there's anything I can do—" "I'll let you know," I said. She inclined her head and left. I stayed where I was, staring at the glass wall long after she was gone. By afternoon, the whispers were louder. Not accusations. Questions. Why had the release gone through Amy's credentials? Why hadn't she noticed? Why was Southern analysis already acting on the data? None of it pointed directly at me. That was the danger. It didn't have to. Sue requested another meeting. This time, Daniel joined us.

"We've identified a secondary access touchpoint," Sue said. "Someone logged in from a proxy routed through internal systems." "That still doesn't explain how my clearance was used," I said. "No," she agreed. "But it narrows the window." "To who?" Daniel asked. Sue looked between us. "Someone with proximity. Physical or administrative." My jaw tightened. Clara's face flickered through my mind again. The timing. The access. The look. "I want to be clear," Sue continued. "I don't believe you intended harm. But belief isn't proof." "And perception is already shifting," Daniel added. "Yes," Sue said. "That's why this needs to be handled carefully." After she left, Daniel stayed behind. "You're being positioned," he said quietly. "I know," I replied. "And you're not reacting," he said. "That worries them." "It's what they want," I said. "Either way." He watched me closely. "You still don't think it's Clara." "I think it's too clean to be careless," I said. "And too quiet to be random." That evening, a minor incident tipped everything further. A logistics delay. Nothing serious. But someone had rerouted a shipment without authorization. The approval trail stopped at my office. Not my signature. Not my instruction. But my department. The council convened an emergency session. I stood before them without notes. "This is the second incident tied to your oversight," one of the elders said. "Even if unintentional, it raises concern." "I agree," I replied. "Which is why I support an internal review." Murmurs spread. That wasn't the response they expected. Clara sat among the observers. She looked worried. Concerned. Invested. And again—when the elder suggested a temporary reduction in my authority—I saw it. That same quiet satisfaction. My stomach tightened. The decision passed. Temporary limits. Oversight imposed. Framed as protection for the pack. Afterward, Addison found me in the corridor. "This is wrong," she said under her breath. "Someone's steering this." "I know," I replied. "Do you know who?" I thought of Clara. Of her timing. Her calm. Her performance. "No," I said. "Not yet." Later that night, alone in my office, I reviewed everything again. Logs. Schedules. Conversations. One thing stood out. Clara had been present at every point of escalation. Not visibly involved. Just close enough to observe. To adjust. She had never defended me. She had never accused me. She had only appeared supportive. That was when it settled. Not certainty. But clarity. Someone didn't want me removed. They wanted me doubted. And Clara was

enjoying it. I didn't know how she'd done it. Or how deep it went. But I knew one thing with absolute certainty. This wasn't over. And the next move wouldn't be quiet.

Chapter 389 Breaking Amy

AMY

I slept less that night than I admitted the next morning. . Not because I was afraid. Because my mind wouldn't slow down. Every decision I had made over the past weeks replayed itself, not as regret, but as audit. I wasn't looking for mistakes. I was looking for fingerprints. By the time I arrived at headquarters, the atmosphere had shifted again. Not louder. Tighter. Oversight had officially begun. Temporary, they kept saying. Temporary always meant flexible. Flexible meant dangerous. Addison met me at the entrance. This time, she didn't joke. She didn't fill the silence. "They reassigned two of your assistants," she said as we walked. "Compliance move." "Did they tell you why?" I asked. "They said it was to reduce pressure on you." I nodded. Pressure was never reduced by removing control. Only redistributed. Inside my office, the first thing I noticed was what was missing. Files I used daily were gone. Replaced with access requests. Waiting approvals. Delays stacked on delays. I sat down and opened my terminal. Three requests denied. Two pending review. One rerouted. None explained. I exhaled slowly and closed the screen. Someone knocked. "Come in," I said. Clara stepped inside. She paused at the door like she was unsure she was welcome. That alone told me she had rehearsed this moment. "I heard you were back in early," she said softly. "I wanted to check on you." I gestured to the chair across from me. "Sit." She did, folding her hands neatly in her lap. "I know things are tense," she continued. "People are talking. I thought maybe it would help if I clarified some things." "Clarified what?" I asked. She looked down. "That you've been fair. That you've given me a chance when you didn't have to." I studied her face. Calm. Earnest. Careful. "And who would you be clarifying that to?" I asked. "The compliance team," she replied. "Some council members. Anyone who's worried this situation reflects poorly on your leadership." There it was. The offer. Help that created obligation. "I don't need advocacy," I said. "I need accuracy." She nodded quickly. "Of course. That's all I meant." Silence settled between us. "I also heard," she added, "that they're reviewing staff connections. Personal ones." "That's correct," I said. Her fingers tightened for a moment. Then relaxed. "If they have questions about me," she said, "I'll answer them." "I expect you would," I replied. She smiled faintly. "I hope you know I wouldn't do anything to make this harder for you." I held her gaze. "I know you want to be seen as cooperative." She blinked. "I want to be." After she left, I didn't move for several minutes. The problem wasn't what she said. It was how early she knew. By midday, the next issue landed. An external inquiry. This time, it wasn't routed through my credentials. It was worse. It came from a subordinate acting under "assumed directive." They had followed verbal guidance. Min. Except I hadn't given it. Daniel called immediately.

"This is escalating faster than expected," he said. "They're going to ask why people are acting in your name." "Because they think it protects them," I replied. "Or because someone wants it to look that way," he said. I closed my eyes. "I didn't instruct anyone." "I know," he said. "But belief is thinning." That afternoon, the council requested my presence again. This time, Clara was there before I arrived. She stood when I entered. Concerned. Respectful. One of the elders spoke first. "We need to discuss the pattern." "I agree," I said. "You understand how this appears," another added. "You remain calm while errors multiply around you." "Calm isn't concealment," I replied. "It's restraint." "Or distance," someone else said. Clara shifted in her seat. "If I may," she said gently, "Amy has always believed in giving people space to act responsibly. That trust might be what's being taken advantage of." Every eye turned to her.

She hadn't accused me. She hadn't defended me. She had reframed me. Trusting. Removed. Naive. I looked at her. She didn't meet my gaze. Not immediately. The elder nodded slowly. "That's a reasonable interpretation." I spoke before the silence settled. "If someone is acting in my name without instruction, that is not trust," I said. "That is manipulation." "Do you know who it is?" another elder asked. "No," I replied honestly. "But I know they want me quiet." The meeting ended without resolution. Again. When I stood to leave, Clara touched my arm lightly. "I hope you don't think I overstepped," she said. "No," I replied. "You spoke carefully." Her eyes flickered. "That matters," she said. It did. Just not the way she meant. Later, Addison found me in the archive room. "People are starting to choose sides," she said. "They're not against you. They're just unsure." "Uncertainty is enough," I replied. "Do you want me to push back harder?" she asked. "No." I said. "Let it breathe." She frowned. "That's risky." "Yes," I agreed. That evening, as I was leaving, I passed Clara in the corridor. She was speaking quietly with two council aides. When she saw me, she stopped mid-sentence. They excused themselves. Clara smiled. Not wide. Not obvious. Just enough. For a moment, I understood something clearly. She wasn't trying to remove me. She was testing how far she could bend the room around me. And she was enjoying the tension. I walked past her without stopping. Inside my car, I finally allowed myself to acknowledge it. I didn't know how she was doing it. But I knew she was doing it on purpose. And whatever came next would not be subtle. I started the engine and drove without turning on the radio. The silence felt deliberate now. This wasn't confusion anymore. It was pressure being shaped. Whoever was pushing it believed I would break quietly. They were wrong. I would stay visible. And I would remember every face that smiled while the ground shifted.

Chapter 390 Falling Pieces

DANIEL

I planned for a dinner date quietly, the way I planned most things now. Not because it needed secrecy, but because silence had become a habit. Noise attracted attention. Attention turned into pressure. Amy had been carrying enough of that for both of us. The idea came to me the night before, after she fell asleep on the couch with her laptop still open. I shut it down for her and covered her with a throw. She didn't wake. That alone told me how exhausted she was. Amy never slept deeply unless she had no choice. I stood there longer than necessary, watching her breathe, steady and shallow. She had been calm in public, measured in private, and rigid everywhere else. That kind of control always came at a cost. So I decided on dinner. Not an event. Not an announcement. Just a meal that belonged to us. I didn't tell anyone why I dismissed the staff for the evening. I only said I would handle it. They looked surprised but didn't question me. Authority makes silence easy. That bothered me more than it used to. I left the house mid-morning and drove myself to the market on the east side of the city. No escorts. No calls. I needed the normal rhythm of choosing food, standing in line, carrying bags with my own hands. It grounded me in a way meetings never did. I bought things Amy liked without overthinking it. Fresh vegetables. Rice. A cut of meat I knew how to cook without checking a recipe. Wine she preferred when she wanted to relax but stay alert. I avoided anything elaborate. The point wasn't effort as performance. It was care as presence. When I got home, the house was quiet. Amy was in her study, door half open. I heard her on a call, voice calm, firm, distant. The tone she used when she was being watched. I didn't interrupt. I started cooking in the kitchen, sleeves rolled up, phone set aside. I worked slowly. There was no rush. The smell carried through the house before I prepping. Amy appeared at the doorway after a while. She leaned against the frame and watched me. "What are you doing?" she asked. "Cooking," I said. She frowned slightly. "You don't cook." "I do," I said. "I just don't usually." She stepped closer, eyes

scanning the counter, the stove, the open bottles. "What's the occasion?" "There isn't one." That made her pause. "That's suspicious." I smiled briefly. "Sit down. Or don't. Just don't take over." She crossed her arms. "I wasn't planning to." "Good." She stayed, watching me work. I felt her attention in the same way I felt the pack's attention during councils. The difference was that hers didn't demand anything from me. "You didn't tell me you were doing this," she said. "I wanted it to be a surprise." Amy nodded once. "That's rare." "So is peace," I said, then stopped myself. I didn't want the evening to drift back to strategy or damage control. She caught it anyway. She always did. "This isn't about fixing something," she said quietly. "Is it?" "No," I said. "It's about sitting still." She exhaled. "I don't remember how to do that." "I do," I said. "I'll remind you." That earned me a look that was half amused, half tired. She pulled out a stool and sat at the counter. "You've been watching me," she said. "I always watch you." "No," she said. "Lately." I stirred the pot, keeping my movements steady. "Yes." "Like you expect me to fall apart." "Like I know you won't," I said. "But you might get tired of holding everything up." She was quiet for a moment. Then, "I can't afford to." "I know," I said. "That's why I can." She looked at me then, really looked, like she was checking whether I meant it. Amy never took reassurance at face value anymore. She tested it.

"You don't feel like I'm making things worse?" she asked. "No." "Even after what happened?" she pressed. I turned the heat down and faced her fully. "After everything that's happened, you're the one thing that's stayed steady." Her jaw tightened. "That's not true." "It is," I said. "You're not loud. You're not reactive. You don't rush to defend yourself. That scares people because they can't predict you." "That's not strength," she said. "That's survival." "It can be both." She didn't answer right away. Instead, she stood and walked around the kitchen, picking up one of the bags I hadn't unpacked yet. "You didn't let anyone help you," she said. "No." "You didn't tell anyone." "No." She nodded slowly. "Thank you." We ate at the small dining table near the window, not the formal one. I served the food without ceremony. Amy tasted it, then nodded. "This is good," she said. "It's acceptable," I said. She smiled, just a little. It was the first unguarded expression I'd seen from her in days. We talked about small things. The market. A book she'd started but hadn't. Mark's last message, which she'd left unread. I didn't push her to open it. That wasn't my place tonight. At one point, she reached for my hand without looking. I didn't comment on it. I just stayed still and let it happen. "I feel like I'm being watched all the time," she said eventually. "I know." "Even when nothing's happening." "I know." She squeezed my fingers once. "I don't know who to trust anymore." "You trust me." "Vec" she said. "But I don't want you to carry everything."

"I'm not," I said. "I'm choosing this." After dinner, we didn't rush to clean up. We left the dishes where they were and moved to the living room. Amy sat beside me, close but not leaning. Comfortable, not withdrawn. "I saw the look on Clara's face today," she said suddenly. I didn't interrupt. "It was quick," she continued. "But it wasn't relief. It wasn't fear. It was satisfaction." I nodded. "That matters."