

Broken 411

Chapter 411 The One In Charge

AMY

Minutes felt like hours as I waited, gauging the room, testing the strength of my restraints, and plotting the first move I could make if they came closer. Whoever orchestrated this underestimated me if they thought fear alone would control me. I could hear footsteps approaching. Each one deliberate. Each one a reminder that someone else's plan was unfolding—at my expense. I drew in a slow, steadying breath, preparing for whatever came next. My mind sharpened. If they wanted leverage, I would make them work for it. If they wanted control, I would find cracks to exploit. And through it all, one thought anchored me: I wasn't helpless. I wasn't defeated. I would survive this. I would turn it to my advantage. The door creaked open, and a figure stepped into the room. The door opened wider, and the light from the hallway cut into the room. I kept my face neutral, even as my pulse picked up. The man who stepped in wasn't someone I recognized. He was tall, broad, dressed in dark clothes that looked chosen for function, not style. "You're awake," he said. "I didn't think you'd bother checking," I replied. My voice sounded steady, which pleased me more than it should have. He shut the door behind him. "You shouldn't waste energy talking." "Then why did you come in alone?" I asked. He paused for half a second. That told me something. He wasn't used to being questioned. He walked closer and stopped just out of reach. "You're not here to negotiate," he said. "Then you picked the wrong person," I answered. "Because that's all I do." He ignored that. "You'll stay calm. You'll cooperate. If you do, nothing unnecessary happens." "Define unnecessary," I said. His jaw tightened. "You're not in control here." "I know," I said. "But neither are you. You're just the one standing closest to me." He didn't respond. Instead, he turned and knocked on the door twice. Another man entered, carrying a tray. Water. Some kind of food. They weren't planning to kill me quickly. That mattered. The second man placed the tray on a small table near the wall. He glanced at me once, then looked away. That also mattered. "Untie one hand," I said. "I can't eat like this." The first man shook his head. "Not happening." "Then you'll be cleaning vomit," I replied. "And your boss won't like delays." That earned me a look. He studied my face, probably deciding if I was bluffing. Finally, he crouched and loosened one restraint enough that I could move my right hand. "Slow," he warned. "I don't do fast when I'm tied up," I said. They stepped back while I drank some water. I didn't rush. I needed my head clear. I needed strength. "Who sent you?" I asked. "Eat," he replied. "So that's a yes," I said. "You were told not to answer that." He didn't deny it. I took a few bites of the food. Simple. High protein. Planned. "Someone wanted me alive," I said. "And intact." "You talk too much," the second man muttered. He looked at him. "You talk too little. That's usually the one who panics first." He stiffened. The first man raised a hand, signaling him to stay quiet. That confirmed it. Different levels of discipline. "Where am I?" I asked. "Finish your food," the first man said. I stopped eating. "You don't actually want me weak. You want me presentable." His eyes narrowed. "Why do you think that?"

"Because if this was about punishment, you wouldn't be feeding me," I said. "And if this was about ransom, someone would have contacted my people already." That got his attention. "You're being moved," he said after a moment. "Soon." "By who?" I asked. He stood. "Get some rest." "You don't want me asleep," I said. "You want me alert enough to listen." He hesitated. Just slightly. That was when I knew this wasn't a random group. This was layered. Someone higher up was giving instructions, and these men were following them without the full picture. "Tell your boss I'm not stupid," I said. "And I

don't forgive easily." He opened the door. "You should save your strength." The door closed again. exhaled slowly and leaned back as far as the restraints allowed. My wolf pressed against my control, Restless and angry. I didn't let it surface. Not yet. replayed everything in my head. The timing. Cole gone. Clara's access. Elias' name hovering in the back of my thoughts like a warning I'd ignored too long. Someone had planned this carefully. And someone close had made it possible. Hours passed. I couldn't tell how many. Eventually, the door opened again. This time, two different men entered. "Stand," one said. "I can't," I replied. "You tied me to a chair." They cut the restraints without another word and pulled me to my feet. My legs protested, but I stayed upright. "We're moving," he said. "Finally," I replied. They guided me down a corridor and into another room. This one was larger, cleaner. A table in the center. Chairs. No windows. A man stood near the far wall, his back to me. He turned slowly. I recognized him. My stomach tightened, but my face didn't change. "So," I said. "This is how you decided to reintroduce yourself." He smiled faintly. "You always did notice patterns faster than most." "Elias," I said. "You're late." "You're early," he replied. "I expected more resistance." "You underestimated my patience," I said. "And overestimated your secrecy." He gestured to the chair. "Sit." I didn't move. "You don't kidnap someone like me unless you think you're winning." "That depends," he said. "On what you think winning looks like." I met his gaze. "You didn't do this alone." His smile widened slightly. "No. I didn't." That confirmed it. I sat down slowly, keeping my movements calm. Whatever his endgame was, this was only the middle of it and I was very much still in the game.

Chapter 412 Paying The Price

DANIEL

I woke up knowing something was wrong. It wasn't instinct or a vision or anything dramatic. It was the quiet. Amy was never unreachable. Even when she needed space, she left a trail—messages unanswered but read, By the second day, I stopped pretending to be calm. I stood in the kitchen holding my phone, staring at the screen like it might explain itself. I had already called her three times. Straight to voicemail. I hadn't left a message. Not yet. Leaving a message felt like admitting fear. Mark came in behind me. "Any word?" I shook my head. "Nothing." "She might still be cooling off," he said carefully. "After everything—" "She doesn't disappear," I cut in. My voice was sharper than I meant. I lowered it. "Not like this." He nodded slowly. "I'll ask around again." "I already did," I said. "Office. Security. Drivers. No one saw her leave. No one logged her departure." That was the problem. Amy didn't move without creating a record. Even when she bent rules, there was structure. This wasn't structure. This was a break. By midday, I stopped waiting and started acting. I called the internal security head first. "Lock down access logs from the last week," I said. "All of them. I want vehicle movement, badge use, door access. Nothing filtered." "That's a lot of data," he replied. "I know," I said. "Start now." Next was pack security. Then corporate compliance, Then every contact who owed me anything. By the third day, panic had settled in fully. It sat in my chest, heavy and constant. I barely slept. When I did, I woke up reaching for my phone. Clara came to me that afternoon. She stood in the doorway of my office, hands folded, face drawn. "Daniel," she said softly. "I heard Amy still hasn't been found." I looked up at her. Really looked. She appeared worried. Too worried, maybe. Or maybe that was just my head. "No." I said. "She hasn't." "I'm so sorry," she said. "I can't imagine how hard this must be." I didn't respond right away. "If there's anything I can do," she continued, "anything at all—" "There is," I said. "Stay out of the way." Her eyes widened slightly. Hurt flashed across her face. "Of course," she said. "I didn't mean to intrude." She turned to leave. "Clara," I added. She paused. "Yes?" "Where were you the night she disappeared?" I asked. She didn't hesitate. "Here. I had dinner with Mark. He can confirm." Mark nodded from the

corner of the room. "She was with me until late." "Thank you," I said. "That's all." She left quietly. Mark frowned. "You think she's involved?" "I think everyone is involved until they're not," I said. That night, I finally left Amy a message. "It's me," I said into the phone, my voice tight. "I don't care where you are. I just need to know you're alive. Call me. Please." I ended the call before my voice could break. On the fourth day, we found something. One of the analysts came running into my office, tablet in hand. "We found an anomaly," he said "Vehicle log. A private transport registered under a shell company. It accessed a service route near Amy's last known location." "Why wasn't this flagged?" I asked. "Because the credentials were valid," he replied. "Perfectly clean."

Too clean. "Track it," I said. "We tried," he answered. "It went dark outside the city limits." I slammed my hand on the desk. "Of course it did." I stood and paced. My wolf was restless, angry, pushing against my control. I let it simmer. I needed my head clear. "Who could authorize something like that?" I asked. "Someone with inside access," he said. "Or someone who had help." Help. Cole's absence came back to me then. I hadn't wanted to think about it, but it was impossible to ignore now. I called his number again. Still unreachable. By the fifth day, the North was whispering. Not loudly. Quietly. Questions about leadership. About stability. About whether Amy's disappearance meant weakness or danger. I shut it down where I could, but rumors moved faster than authority. I stood in front of the council that evening. "Amy Carter has not abandoned her role," I said plainly. "She has been taken. And we are responding accordingly." Murmurs spread through the room. "We will find her," I continued. "Anyone spreading doubt right now is helping whoever did this." After the meeting, Selene pulled me aside. "This feels planned," she said. "Too clean. Too controlled." "I know," I replied. "Do you have a suspect?" I hesitated. Saying Clara's name out loud felt dangerous without proof. "I have theories," I said instead. That night, I sat alone in Amy's office. Her chair was still pushed back the way she left it. A file lay open on the desk. I closed it carefully, like she might come back and want it exactly as it was. "I should have protected you better," I said quietly. My phone buzzed. A message. Unknown number. Still alive. Still watching. Be careful who you trust. I stared at the screen, every muscle in my body going tight. They wanted me afraid. They succeeded. But fear didn't stop me. It focused me. Whoever had Amy thought they were in control. They weren't. Not anymore. I read the message again, then deleted it. I refused to let whoever sent it control my next move. I stood up and called for my security team, my voice steady even though my hands weren't. "We escalate," I said. "Quietly. No announcements. No leaks. I want eyes on every border route, every unofficial holding site, every Southern-linked contact. Start with Elias." When the call ended, I looked around Amy's office one more time. This wasn't just about finding her. It was about dismantling whatever network thought it could take her and survive the fallout. They had crossed a line that could not be negotiated back. I would get my Luna back and who ever was behind her kidnap would pay dearly.

Chapter 413 That's Not The Answer

AMY

I woke up to the sound of breathing that wasn't mine. For a moment, I didn't move. My body felt stiff, not from pain, but from holding itself too tight for too long. I was lying on something firm, not a bed. The smell in the room was clean but unfamiliar. No damp. No rot. That alone told me this wasn't a rushed setup. My wrists were bound in front of me. Not tight enough to cut circulation. Tight enough to remind me not to try anything stupid. My ankles were free, but the space around me was small. One light glowed from the ceiling. No windows. No clocks. I lifted my head slowly. A man sat in a chair

against the far wall. He wasn't watching me closely. He was reading something on a tablet, calm, unhurried. When he noticed I was awake, he set it aside. 'You're conscious,' he said. 'Good.' My throat felt dry. I swallowed once before speaking. 'Where am I?' He stood. He wasn't tall, but he was solid. Wolf. That much was clear in the way he moved, in how little noise he made. 'Safe,' he said. 'That's not an answer.' 'It's the only one you're getting for now.' I tested my wrists. He didn't react. That told me he wasn't worried. Which meant someone else had decided how much risk I posed. 'Who took me?' I asked. He looked at me then, really looked. Not curious. Not angry. Evaluating. 'You ask that like the answer would help you.' 'It would help me understand who I'm dealing with.' 'You're dealing with people who want you alive,' he said. 'That should be enough comfort.' 'It isn't.' He almost smiled. Almost. 'You're not supposed to be comfortable.' I leaned back against the surface beneath me. My heart was still racing, but I forced my breathing to slow. Panic would get me nowhere. I had learned that the hard way. had That's Not The Answer 'How long have I been here?' I asked. 'Not long.' 'Hours or days?' 'Hours.' That matched my body. I wasn't weak. Just shaken. That mattered. 'Why?' I asked. He didn't answer right away. He walked to a small table near the door and poured water into a cup. He brought it to me and held it just out of reach. 'Drink,' he said. 'Untie me.' 'No.' 'Then put it down.' He watched me for a second, then crouched and held the cup to my lips. I hated how vulnerable that made me feel, but I drank anyway. I needed my strength more than my pride. When he pulled the cup away, I said, 'If this is leverage, you're doing it badly.' He straightened. 'This isn't leverage. Not yet.' That sentence stayed with me. I tried another angle. 'Is Daniel looking for me?' 'Yes.' That was the first real answer I'd gotten. 'Does he know where I am?' 'No.' 'Does anyone?' 'Not yet.' My stomach tightened. Not yet meant plans were still moving. I thought of Cole. The absence I hadn't understood. The way Daniel had brushed it aside. The way things had felt wrong for days before this happened. 'Was this planned for me,' I asked, 'or was I convenient?'

The man tilted his head. 'You were selected.' 'For what?' 'For timing.' I closed my eyes briefly. That was worse than randomness. When I opened them, I asked, 'Is Clara involved?' His reaction was small, but I saw it. A pause that lasted half a second too long. 'I didn't say a name,' I pressed. 'You're sharp,' he said. 'That will make this harder for you.' 'So she is.' He didn't confirm it. He didn't deny it either. Anger flared, hot and fast, but fear followed right behind it. If Clara was involved, then this wasn't just about hurting me. It was about breaking something larger. 'What do you want from me?' I asked. 'Nothing,' he said. 'Not yet.' That phrase again. I shifted, trying to get comfortable despite the restraints. 'You keep saying that like I'm waiting for instructions.' 'You are.' 'No,' I said quietly. 'I'm waiting for a mistake.' That earned me a full smile this time. 'You really are her.' 'Her who?' 'The one they warned us about.' 'Who warned you?' He stepped back toward the door. 'Rest,' he said. 'You'll need clarity when the real conversation starts.' 'And when is that?' 'Soon.' The door opened. Another wolf stepped in. Female. She glanced at me once, then at him. 'Change of schedule,' she said. 'He wants her moved.' My chest tightened. 'Moved where?' They didn't answer me. The man crouched again and began untying my wrists. Relief came too fast. I didn't trust it. As soon as my hands were free, he said, 'Don't run.' 'I won't,' I said. 'I know better than that.' He paused. 'Do you?' 'Yes,' I said. 'If I run, you chase. If you chase, you justify force. I don't give people reasons.' That seemed to satisfy him. He gestured for me to stand. My legs held. That was another small win. As they led me down a narrow hall, I paid attention to everything. The turns. The floor texture. The smell of other wolves nearby. This wasn't a single location. It was part of something larger. We stopped at another door. Before it opened, I said, 'You should know something.' The man looked back at me. 'I don't know who planned this,' I said. 'But whoever did has already underestimated Daniel.' His eyes darkened. 'We're counting on his

reaction.” That’s your second mistake,” I said. The door opened, and the light beyond it was brighter. I stepped forward because I had no choice. But as fear tightened around my chest again, one thing became clear. I still didn’t know who had ordered this. And that uncertainty was exactly what they wanted. They moved me again. The room I was taken into was larger, brighter, and deliberately ordinary. A table. Two chairs. A camera in the corner that wasn’t hidden.

Chapter 414 Clear Message

AMY

The message was clear: this was no longer about holding me. It was about watching me react. I was left alone for several minutes. Long enough for my thoughts to start circling. Long enough for fear to try to settle in. I refused to let it. I sat straight, hands folded on the table. My wrists were free now, but that didn’t mean anything. Wolves don’t need ropes to keep control. They need space and timing. The door opened. This time, the person who entered wasn’t a guard. He wore clean clothes. No uniform. No visible weapon. His wolf sat just under the surface, controlled, disciplined. Older than the others. Higher rank. He took the seat across from me without asking. “You’re handling this better than expected,” he said. “I don’t scream for sport,” I replied. A small nod. “Fair.” “Who are you?” I asked. “Someone tasked with making sure this doesn’t go wrong.” “For who?” “For everyone.” That answer irritated me more than silence would have. “You took me from my home,” I said. “From my mate. You disrupted the North. Don’t pretend this is balance.” He studied my face. “You believe this is about you personally.” “I believe I was chosen,” I said. “And I want to know why.” “You were chosen,” he agreed. “But not because you’re weak.” “That’s not comforting.” “It should be. Weak targets break early. You’re meant to last.” That made my stomach tighten. “I want proof of life,” I said. “A message sent to Daniel. Something he can verify.” “No.” “Then you’re gambling,” I said. “Because if he believes I’m dead-” “We don’t intend for him to believe that,” he cut in. “We intend for him to doubt.” There it was. Not power. Not ransom. Doubt. “About what?” I asked. “About his reach,” he said calmly. “About who he can protect. About who he trusts.” * My mind moved fast. Clara’s access. Cole’s absence. The supply routes. The way everything had been timed to look careless, not corrupt. “So this is pressure,” I said. “Slow, controlled pressure.” “Yes.” “And I’m the weight.” “You’re the signal.” I leaned back slightly. “You’re assuming he’ll respond the way you want.” “We’re prepared for resistance.” “Prepared doesn’t mean ready,” I said. His lips pressed together briefly. “You’re very confident for someone in custody.” “I’m calm,” I corrected. “There’s a difference.” He stood. “Rest. You’ll be moved again soon.” “Moved where?” I asked. “A place where you can be seen,” he said. “Eventually.” “Seen by who?” He paused at the door. “That depends on how cooperative things become” The door closed. I was alone again. I let myself exhale, slow and controlled. My wolf was tense, pacing inside me, but she wasn’t panicking. That mattered. Panic meant loss of control. Control was the only thing I still owned. control. They wanted Daniel uncertain. They wanted him reactive. They wanted him second-guessing everyone around him. Including me. I understood then why they hadn’t hurt me. Why they’d fed me water. Why the restraints had been removed. I wasn’t a prisoner. I was bait. And Clara—whether she was directly involved or just adjacent—had helped place me here. The thought hurt more than I wanted to admit. Not because I trusted her. Because I had chosen proximity over distance, and this was the cost. Footsteps approached again, lighter this time. The door opened just enough for a woman to step in. She didn’t look at me right away. She checked the camera, then the door. “You shouldn’t talk too much,” she said quietly. “I didn’t start the conversation,” I replied. Her eyes flicked to mine. “They think you’re calm because you don’t understand the endgame.” And you do?” She hesitated. That was all I needed. “You’re afraid too,” I said. Be careful,”

she warned. "Fear makes people sloppy." So does confidence," I said. She left without another word. I sat there until the light overhead dimmed slightly, signaling time passing without telling me how much they were controlling my sense of it on purpose. Fine. If this was a waiting game, I would wait. But I made one decision very clearly in that quiet room: Whoever planned this believed I was the leverage. They were wrong. I wasn't leverage. I was the variable they hadn't calculated fully yet. They didn't come back for a long time. I measured it by the dull ache in my legs and the dryness in my mouth. I stayed seated, even when standing might have felt better. Wolves notice posture. So do cameras. I wasn't going to give them a single frame that showed weakness I didn't need to show. When the door finally opened again, two guards entered. Different from the earlier ones. Younger. More rigid. Southern wolves, I was sure of it now. Their control wasn't Northern. It was drilled. "Stand," one of them said. I did, slowly, keeping my hands visible. They escorted me down a narrow hallway this time. No windows. Clean floors. Too clean. This place was used often enough to be maintained but not often enough to feel lived in. That told me I wasn't the first, and I wouldn't be the last. They brought me into another room, smaller than the last. A couch. A single chair across from it. No table. The camera was closer. "Sit," the second guard said. The door closed, but this time someone was already inside. He leaned against the wall, arms crossed. He smiled like this was familiar territory. "You're adjusting well," he said. "I don't have a choice," I replied. "You always have a choice." That's what people say when they want credit for cruelty," I said. His smile faded a little. Good. "You're not here to be harmed," he said. "You're here to clarify things." "For who?" "For the North," he answered. "And for your mate." My chest tightened at the mention of Daniel, but I didn't react outwardly. "If you wanted clarity," I said, "you should have asked." "You wouldn't have answered honestly," he replied. I held his gaze. "You don't know that." He studied me for a moment longer, then nodded once, as if confirming something to himself. "Rest," he said. "Tomorrow will be harder."

Chapter 415 Forty Eight Hours

DANIEL

The call came just after midnight. I had been in my office for hours, lights dimmed, screens still on but untouched. Reports blurred together when you stared at them too long. Every route led back to the same answer: Amy was gone, and whoever took her knew exactly how to stay invisible. My phone rang. Not my secure line. Not my pack channel. A private number. I answered it without greeting. "You're running out of time, Alpha." The voice was filtered, flattened, but calm. Too calm. That told me this wasn't a bluff. "Where is she?" I asked. A pause, deliberate. "Alive," the voice said. "For now." My jaw tightened. I didn't shout. Shouting was useless. Wolves like this fed on reaction. "What do you want?" I asked. "The Northern Crest." The words landed clean and sharp. I leaned back in my chair, staring at the wall ahead of me. The Crest wasn't jewelry. It wasn't symbolic fluff. It was authority encoded into law, pack systems, and ancient accords. Whoever held it could move Northern resources, command allied packs, and fracture the balance overnight. "You know I can't do that," I said. "You can," the voice replied. "You just won't." There was a difference. "You have no idea what you're asking for," I said. "I know exactly what I'm asking for," the voice said. "And I know why you won't want to give it up. Which is why the trade is simple." The line clicked, then a video file came through. I opened it. Amy was seated on a couch. Restrained but unharmed. Her posture was controlled, back straight, chin She wasn't crying. She wasn't begging. That hurt more than if she had. She was trying to survive. The video cut after ten seconds. "Proof of life," the voice said. "Next time, it won't be so calm." My hand curled into a fist on the desk. "If you hurt her," I said, my voice low, "there will be nowhere on this continent you can hide."

A quiet laugh. ‘You’re assuming this is about hiding.’ Silence stretched between us. ‘You have forty–eight hours,’ the voice continued. ‘Deliver the Crest to the coordinates I’ll send. No council. No escorts. No tricks.’ ‘And if I refuse?’ I asked. Another pause. Shorter this time. ‘Then you choose the North over your mate,’ the voice said. ‘And we adjust accordingly.’ The line went dead. I stayed still for several seconds, phone pressed to my ear, listening to nothing. Then I stood. The Crest was secured three levels below the estate, behind systems that required not just codes but blood confirmation. My blood. Amy’s blood. Both of us had to authorize its release. That wasn’t a coincidence. It was a safeguard meant to prevent exactly this kind of pressure. I left my office and headed down the hall. Guards straightened as I passed. No one spoke. They could smell it on me. Stress. Anger. Fear held in a tight grip. I stopped outside the secure chamber and dismissed them with a raised hand. The door sealed behind me. The Crest sat inside a reinforced case, silver and black, old and new layered together. I had carried its weight since I took leadership. I had sworn oaths over it. I had buried wolves because of it. And now someone wanted me to trade it like a coin. I paced once, then twice.

“This is a trap,” I said aloud, though no one was there. “If I give it up, she doesn’t come back clean. And the North fractures.” If I didn’t give it up, Amy might not come back at all. I pulled out my secure device and opened a channel. “Trace the call,” I ordered quietly. “Every route. Every delay.” “Already working on it,” came the reply. “They were good.” “I know,” I said. I ended the call and rested my hands on the edge of the case. Amy would tell me not to do it. I could hear her voice clearly in my head. Calm. Steady. She would tell me the North couldn’t survive without structure. That a leader who traded power under threat invited endless threats. She would be right. That didn’t make the choice easier. A soft knock sounded behind me. I turned. Selene stood just inside the doorway. She had been allowed in because I had ordered it earlier that night. At the time, I hadn’t known why. Now I did. “You look like a man being cornered,” she said. “Careful,” I replied. “This isn’t the moment.” “You think I don’t know that?” she asked. “I came because this affects me too.” I studied her. “You know something.” “I know who wants the Crest,” she said. My eyes sharpened. “Then start talking” “It’s not just about Amy,” Selene continued. “She’s leverage, yes. But the Crest is the real prize. Whoever holds it can rewrite what happens after she’s returned.” “You’re assuming she will be returned,” I said. “I’m assuming they need her alive,” Selene replied. “Dead wives don’t make compliant Alphas I hated that she was right. “You give them the Crest,” she said, stepping closer, “and you don’t just lose authority. You legitimize their move. Every wolf watching will learn that kidnapping works.” “And if I don’t,” I said, “Amy pays the price.” Selene met my gaze. “Or you find a third option.” I exhaled slowly. “There isn’t one,” I said. “There is,” she replied. “But it won’t be clean. And you won’t like it.” “I don’t care about clean,” I said. “I care about my mate.” Selene nodded once. “Then listen.” She leaned in and lowered her voice. “They’re forcing you to think in binaries. Crest or Amy. Power or love. That’s a lie. The real choice is whether you act like they expect you to.” I didn’t respond. “You have forty–eight hours,” she continued. “Use them. Make them believe you’re breaking. Let them get comfortable. And then move.” “And if I fail?” I asked. Selene didn’t hesitate. “Then you lose both.” She straightened and stepped back. “I’ll send you what I know,” she said. “Decide fast.” She left without waiting for permission. I turned back to the Crest. The room felt smaller now. “It was either Amy or the North,” the voice had said. They thought that would break me. They were wrong about one thing. I wasn’t choosing between them. I was going to tear apart the game that thought it could force the choice.

Chapter 416 A Deadly Choice

AMY

I woke up to the sound of a door opening. I was on the same bed as before. Same room. No windows. The light above me was dimmer this time, like evening or early morning. I had lost track of time after the second day. My body knew when it was tired or hungry, but my mind had stopped counting hours. Footsteps came closer. I sat up slowly. My wrists were still free. My ankles too. They didn't need restraints anymore. Whoever took me knew I wasn't running. Not without knowing where I was. A man stopped a few steps away. He wasn't masked. I had seen him before. Always quiet. Always watching. "You're awake," he said. "I usually am," I replied. My voice sounded steady. That surprised me. He nodded once. "You'll be moved soon." "Where?" I asked. He didn't answer. I studied his posture instead. He wasn't nervous. That meant something was about to change. People who guard prisoners only get calm when they think the balance has shifted in their favor. "You called Daniel," I said. His eyes flickered. Just for a second. "So you did," I continued. "That's why things feel different." He looked at me properly then. "You're perceptive." "I'm married to an Alpha," I said. "I know what pressure feels like." He didn't deny it. "Am I the pressure," I asked, "or the excuse?" That made him pause. "You're leverage," he said finally. "At least you're honest," I replied. He stepped aside, and another person entered. A woman this time. Older. Calm in a way that felt practiced. She sat across from me without asking. "You've been treated well," she said. "I've been kept alive," I answered. "Let's not confuse the two." A faint smile crossed her face. "Fair." She folded her hands. "Your mate has been contacted." "I assumed so." "He was given a choice." I didn't respond. I already knew what that choice was. I didn't need to hear it out loud to feel the weight of it pressing on my chest. "He hasn't answered yet," the woman continued. "That worries some people." "It shouldn't," I said. "Daniel doesn't rush." "That's exactly the concern," she replied. I leaned back against the headboard. "You think if he takes time, it means he's choosing the North over me." she watched me carefully. "Isn't that what you fear too?" I shook my head. "No. I fear you're underestimating him." Her expression hardened slightly. "You don't sound afraid," she said. "I am," I replied. "But fear doesn't mean confusion." Silence stretched between us. "You know," I added, "if you hurt me, you lose leverage. If you keep me, you give him time. This only works if you believe he's predictable." She stood. "You talk too much for someone in your position." "And you talk too little for someone who thinks she's in control," I said. She left without another word. The door closed again. I let out a slow breath and pressed my hands into the mattress. My heart was beating harder now. Talking always did that. It reminded me I was still myself. Still thinking. Hours later, I was moved. They didn't blindfold me. They didn't drag me. Two guards walked on either side as if I were a guest being escorted somewhere I hadn't agreed to go. The hallway was longer than I expected. Clean. Quiet. This wasn't a warehouse or some abandoned place. This was planned. They led me into another room. Larger. A table. Two chairs.

Someone was already there. Not Daniel. My stomach dropped anyway. It was Clara. She stood when she saw me. Her face showed something like surprise, then concern. Too carefully arranged. "Amy," she said softly. "Oh my God." I stayed where I was. "So this is where you've been disappearing to." Her eyes widened. "What are you talking about? I didn't know you were here." I laughed once. I couldn't stop it. "That's not convincing," I said. She took a step toward me. "Amy, please. I swear, I just came because they told me you needed help." "They?" I asked. She hesitated. Just a beat too long. "They contacted me," she said. "They said you were in danger. I didn't believe them at first." My chest tightened. "You expect me to believe you walked into this blindly," I said. Her voice shook. "I didn't know it was this." "And yet," I replied, "here you are." The guards stayed by the door. Silent. Watching. Clara reached for my hand. I pulled back. "Don't." I said. Her face fell. "I'm trying to help you." "By standing in the room with the people who kidnapped me?" I asked. "I don't have power here," she said quickly. "I'm just like

you.” That was the lie. I could see it now. Clearer than before. The way she stood. The way the guards didn’t move when she spoke. The way no one interrupted her. “You knew,” I said quietly. Her lips parted. For a moment, I thought she might deny it again. Instead, she said, “It’s complicated.” I nodded. “It always is when someone wants to stay clean.” She swallowed. “They’re asking for something from Daniel. Something big.” “I know,” I said. She looked at me, startled. “You do?” “Yes,” I replied. “And you’re here to make sure I stay useful.” Her shoulders sagged, just a little. Enough to tell me I was right. “You’re not supposed to be here,” I added. “Not yet.” She said nothing. That confirmed it. I straightened my back. “If you’re part of this,” I said, “then you should know something.” She met my eyes. “He will not give them what they want easily,” I continued. “And every hour you keep me here makes what comes after worse for you.” Her jaw tightened. “You don’t know that.” “I do,” I said. “Because I know him.” The room felt smaller again. Clara looked away first. A Deadly Choice I watched her carefully then. Not as a victim. Not as someone hoping for rescue. But as someone counting. If Clara was here, then the game had moved into a new phase. . And if she thought I didn’t see her now, fully and clearly, then she was making the same mistake everyone else did. They thought fear made people blind. They were wrong. Fear made me pay attention.

Chapter 417 The Crest

DANIEL

The house felt wrong without Amy. Not quiet—just wrong. Sounds still existed. Footsteps. Voices. The hum of security systems and distant patrol updates. But none of it settled. None of it aligned the way it always did when she was home. It had been days. Not hours stretched thin by worry. Days measured by missed check-ins, unanswered calls, and reports that ended with the same phrase: no confirmed sighting. I sat at the dining table early that morning, staring at a cup of coffee I hadn’t touched. One of the guards stood near the doorway, pretending not to watch me. I waved him off. “Give me ten minutes,” I said. He hesitated. “Alpha-” “Ten minutes,” I repeated. He bowed his head slightly and left. I pressed my palms flat against the table and breathed slowly. Panic helped no one. Reaction was exactly what whoever took Amy wanted from me. They wanted me loud. Desperate. Predictable. I wasn’t going to give them that. The call had come the night before. No face. No name. Just a filtered voice and one clear demand. The Northern Crest. Not money. Not land. Not shares. The Crest. The symbol that bound the pack, recognized by councils, enforced by old law. Whoever held it could Fracture the North without raising a claw. If I handed it over, Amy would be returned. Alive. Unharmd. If I refused, they said, I would be forced to choose later—when the cost was higher. I hadn’t answered. Instead, I called PAC. The Pack Advisory Council met in a secure room beneath the estate. Six wolves. All ranked. All loyal. None of them prone to panic. I entered without ceremony. “We’re closing the doors,” I said. “This meeting doesn’t leave this room.” They nodded. One of them, Rolf, spoke first. “It’s confirmed then. She’s been taken.” “Yes.” Silence followed. Not shock. Calculation. “They want the Crest,” I continued. “I will not give it.” No one argued. “That means we need options,” I said. “Fast ones.” PAC moved immediately into strategy mode. Surveillance expansions. Territory sweeps. Cross-pack intelligence. Every suggestion was solid. None were enough. “They’re not hiding her in the North,” Mara said. “Too many eyes.” “South-adjacent,” another added. “Or neutral zones.” “I’ve already authorized layered searches,” I replied. “Nothing surfaced.” Rolf leaned forward. “Then this isn’t a holding operation. It’s leverage.” “I know.” He met my eyes. “Then you’re being tested.” That much was obvious. After PAC, I met with the rank coders. .. They weren’t wolves in the traditional sense. No patrols. No claws. They controlled data. Pack logistics. Communication encryption. The invisible spine of Northern operations. If Amy was moved,

there would be traces. Timing delays. Traffic reroutes. Access shadows. I stood behind them as they worked. "Anything?" I asked. "One anomaly," the lead coder said. "A blind spot that shouldn't exist." "Where?" He pulled it up. Border-adjacent infrastructure. Not official pack land, but close enough to matter. "Can you breach it?" "Yes," he said. "But it'll alert whoever built it." "Do it quietly," I replied. "Let them think it was noise." He nodded and began rerouting. Hours passed. Nothing concrete surfaced. That was the problem. Whoever planned this knew how I operated. They anticipated brute force. They anticipated panic. They prepared for searches.

This wasn't a kidnapping meant to end quickly. This was pressure. By late afternoon, I met with my inner circle. The ones I trusted not just with orders, but with truth. They knew about the Crest. "Handing it over fractures the North," Cole's second-in-command said. "Even temporarily." "I know." "But refusing risks Amy." "I know that too." Silence again. Finally, I said the thing I hadn't said out loud yet. "If I give them the Crest, I lose the North. If I lose the North, I won't have the power to protect her after." No one challenged that. "They want me to overreach," I continued. "To act like a man choosing love over duty so they can call me weak." "And if you don't?" someone asked. "Then they escalate," I said. "They hurt her. Or threaten to." That was the line I wouldn't cross. "I won't trade the North," I said quietly. "But I won't abandon Amy either." I stood. "So we do this differently." I dismissed them and went to my office. The Crest sat locked behind reinforced glass. Ancient. Untouched. A symbol people thought of as power. I didn't look at it long. Instead, I activated a private channel. "Bring Selene in." I said. "Discreetly." She arrived an hour later. We didn't pretend warmth. We didn't waste time. "They took her," I said. "I know," Selene replied. "The South is restless." "Do you know who's behind it?" She shook her head. "Not fully. But I know this wasn't ordered lightly." "Then help me," I said. "Without demanding allegiance." She studied me. "You're asking for Southern insight without surrender." "I'm asking for balance," I replied. "Because if Amy doesn't come home, this ends badly for everyone." Selene exhaled slowly. "I'll listen." That was all I needed. After she left, I finally allowed myself to sit. The weight settled then. Not panic. Something colder. Heavier. I pictured Amy's face. Her steadiness. The way she always noticed details others ignored. She would be watching. Listening. Surviving. That thought calmed me. I activated another channel. "Find Clara," I said. "Quietly." A pause. "She hasn't been seen today, Alpha." That confirmed a suspicion I had been avoiding. "Don't move on her yet," I added. "Just watch." When the channel closed, I leaned back and stared at the ceiling. They wanted a choice. They wanted me torn. I wouldn't give them that satisfaction. I would get Amy back without breaking the North. And when this was over, whoever thought they could force my hand would learn exactly how patient I could be. I stood up, straightened my jacket, and prepared for another night without sleep, knowing every quiet hour only sharpened my decision to bring her back intact.

Chapter 418 Powerful People's Protection

AMY

I came back to myself in pieces. First, the sound. A low hum that never fully stopped, like machines breathing through walls. Then the feel of fabric pressed tight over my eyes, rough at the edges, tied well enough that I knew struggling would only hurt. My wrists were free, my legs too, which felt deliberate. Whoever took me wanted me awake, aware, and afraid. I sat still and tried to slow my breathing. Panic made mistakes easier. When hands guided me forward, I let them. The air changed as we moved. It grew cooler, cleaner. Every step echoed longer than the last, which told me we were no longer underground. Elevators followed. I felt the lift in my stomach as we rose, high and fast. No music.

No voices. Just that quiet hum and my thoughts stacking on top of each other. By the time we stopped, my jaw hurt from how hard I had been clenching it. They walked me again, longer this time, then stopped. A door opened. The space beyond felt wide. I was placed gently into a chair, the kind that did not creak or shift. Then the blindfold came off. Light flooded my vision, sharp enough that I blinked back tears. When my eyes adjusted, I saw glass. Walls of it. Floor to ceiling windows showing a city spread out beneath me, small and distant. We were high. Very high. A skyscraper, near the center of everything. The room itself was massive. Polished floors. Minimal furniture. Everything clean, ordered, expensive. It felt less like a prison and more like a boardroom that had swallowed a living space. That made my chest tighten more than chains would have. I stood slowly. No one stopped me. I walked to the glass and looked down. Cars crawled far below. People moved like dots. The world went on, loud and busy and unaware that I was here. So this was the plan. Take me somewhere I could see everything and reach nothing. I turned back just as the door opened. He walked in like he belonged there. He wore the same neutral uniform he had worn for years in the Carter estate. Same posture. Same calm steps. Same face I had passed a thousand times without really seeing. The man who served my meals. Who spoke only when spoken to. Who kept his eyes lowered and his hands steady. The Southern alpha. My stomach dropped. I laughed once, sharp and disbelieving. "I knew it," I said, my voice shaking despite myself. "I knew it was you. I knew it couldn't be anyone else." He closed the door behind him and locked it. The sound was soft but final. "You are very observant," he said. His voice was calm, almost gentle. Not the voice he used when he worked. This one had weight to it. Ownership. I backed away until I felt the table behind me. "You did this," I said. "All of it. The timing. The access. You were always around." "Yes," he replied. No denial. No excuse. I searched his face for something familiar, something human. All I found was distance. Calculation. "Why?" I asked. "What did I ever do to you?" He studied me the way one might study a document before signing it. "You exist," he said. "That was enough." The words hit harder than any slap could have. My hands curled into fists. "You won't get away with this. Daniel—" "Daniel is distracted," he interrupted. "And careful. Those are weaknesses when time matters." I swallowed. My heart was racing, but my mind stayed sharp. Fear could wait. "You intend to hurt me," I said. Not a question. "Yes," he answered. Still calm. "But that depends on you." I frowned. "Depends on me doing what?" "Staying exactly where you are," he said. "Following instructions. Being cooperative."

I let out a breath that sounded like a laugh but wasn't. "You kidnap me, drag me across the city, lock me in a glass tower, and now you want cooperation?" He stepped closer. Not threateningly. That somehow made it worse. "You are alive because I need you alive," he said. "Do not confuse that with mercy." Something in his eyes shifted then. A crack. A shadow of something old and ugly. "You know," he continued, "when you were born, you cried too loudly. Would not stop. Your mother begged me to stay. To help. I did not." The room tilted. I stared at him. "What are you saying?" He met my eyes fully now. No shame. No regret. "I am your father," he said. "By blood, at least." The words didn't make sense at first. They floated, unreal, refusing to land. "No," I said. "That's not possible." He nodded once. "I left. I ensured I would not be traced. Later, I made sure you would not be remembered." My throat burned. "You tried to kill me." "Yes." There it was. Simple. Clean. Horrible. My knees weakened, and I sat down without meaning to. My hands trembled, but I didn't look away. "So why now?" I asked. "Why come back?" "Because you grew important," he said. "And powerful people protect important things." Understanding settled in, cold and heavy. "I'm leverage." "You are a key," he corrected. "A pawn, if you prefer honesty." I laughed again, this time bitter. "At least you're consistent." He watched me like he was waiting for something to break. "I did not come here for your approval," he said. "I came to make my position clear. If you try to escape, if you resist, if you force my hand, your pain will increase. If you

stay still, if you listen, you may survive this.” I stood again, slowly. “And after?” “That depends on others,” he said. Daniel. The thought of him made my chest ache. I wondered if he was sleeping. If he was blaming himself. If he was tearing the city apart trying to find me. I straightened my shoulders. Fear was still there, thick and choking, but something else rose with it. Anger. Clarity.

Chapter 419 No Names, No Faces

MARK

I kept my face neutral and that was the hardest part of what I was doing—not the planning, not the risk, not even the lies. It was looking normal while carrying something heavy and sharp inside my head. Everyone around me thought I was processing Amy’s disappearance the same way they were. Worry. Anger. Waiting on Daniel to move first. They were wrong. I was already moving. No one knew where I went after meetings. No one questioned why I stopped sleeping in my own wing of the house. They assumed grief made people strange. I let them believe that. Grief was a convenient cover. I wanted Amy back. Alive. Whole. And I wanted the person who took her to believe, for as long as possible, that I was not a factor. I had learned a long time ago that the loudest people in a crisis rarely solved anything. They only attracted attention. Attention was dangerous when you needed time. I sat in my car outside a closed logistics office on the east side of the city, engine off, phone dark in my hand. The place looked abandoned. It wasn’t. It handled quiet transfers for companies that didn’t want their names attached to movement records. Carter Holdings had used them years ago, before Amy cleaned house and tightened controls. That meant there were still ghosts in the system. I checked my watch. Three minutes late. “Come on,” I muttered. The passenger door opened, and a man slid in without greeting me. He smelled like coffee and metal. His jacket was worn, but his eyes were sharp. “You’re careful,” he said. “I had to be sure this wasn’t a trap.” “It’s not,” I replied. “You wouldn’t be sitting here if it was.” He smiled faintly. “Straight to business. I remember why I liked working with you.” “You liked the pay,” I said. “That too.” I handed him a burner phone. “Everything you find goes here. No names. No faces.” He weighed the phone in his hand. “You’re looking for someone important.” “I’m looking for someone who was kidnapped,” I said. “There’s a difference.” He nodded once. “You’ll get what I can find.” When he left, I didn’t move right away. I sat there and let the silence settle. Every move I made felt like stepping across thin ice. One wrong sound, one wrong ally, and the whole thing would collapse. Daniel couldn’t know. Not yet. That thought sat uneasily in my chest, but I accepted it. Daniel was strong. Loyal. But he was also visible. Everyone watched him now. Every step he took sent ripples. My strength was that no one was watching I drove back just before dawn, slipping into the estate through a service entrance I hadn’t used in years. Familiar halls, familiar faces. They nodded at me. No suspicion. No questions. In my room, I locked the door and pulled out the map I had been building piece by piece. City grids. Corporate towers. Private residences tied to shell companies. Places that matched Amy’s description when she’d spoken about the ride. Elevation. Time. The feel of the air. I circled three possible buildings. “You’re not as hidden as you think,” I murmured. I thought of Amy standing somewhere high above the city, trying to stay calm, trying to stay alive. The image tightened my jaw. I had promised myself years ago that I would never let her be used again. Not by enemies. Not by blood. Not by anyone. A knock came at my door. I folded the map and slid it into a hidden drawer just as I unlocked it. “What do you want?” I asked. One of the junior aides stood there, uneasy. “The alpha is asking for you. Strategy room.”

“I’ll be there.” I said. “Give me a minute.” He nodded and left. I closed the door and leaned against it for a breath. Daniel was holding the line. I respected that. I trusted him. But this—this was something I

needed to do alone. In the strategy room, the air was thick with tension. Screens glowed with data that led nowhere. Daniel stood at the head of the table, eyes rimmed red from lack of sleep. "We're getting nothing," he said. "They're clean. Too clean." "They planned it," I replied. "That means they'll make mistakes eventually." "Eventually might be too late," he snapped, then exhaled. "Sorry." I nodded. "I know." He studied me. "You've been quiet." "I'm thinking," I said truthfully. He looked away. "If you have ideas, say them." I almost did. The urge rose sharp and dangerous. But I swallowed it down. "Right now," I said, "the enemy wants us reacting. That's all I can see." Daniel nodded slowly. "That's what PAC says too." Good, I thought. Let them chase noise. I left the meeting an hour later and went straight to the old security archives. Officially, I was reviewing historical breach patterns. Unofficially, I was cross-checking building access permissions tied to defunct service contracts. It took time. Time I didn't have. But patience had always been my edge. By nightfall, I had a name. Not the one I wanted, but a door. A facilities manager who had been quietly reinstated under a different corporate arm six months ago. Background clean. Too clean. Connected to someone who connected to someone else. I stared at the file, pulse steady. "You're part of this," I said softly. My phone buzzed once. Unknown number. I didn't answer it. I waited. It buzzed again. I picked up. "Talk." "I found something," the voice from the car said. "You're not going to like it." "Tell me," I replied. "A building that doesn't officially exist on any Carter list anymore. Ownership buried under three shells. High elevation. Private service elevators." My grip tightened. "Send me everything." The line went dead. I sat back in my chair and closed my eyes for a moment. Fear pressed in then, real and heavy. Not for myself. For Amy. For what she might be enduring while I traced paper trails and shadows. "I'm coming," I said quietly, though no one could hear me. No one knew what I was doing.

Chapter 420 Unfolding Games

SELENE

The estate was busy, servants moving with quiet speed, guards posted at the usual points. Nothing looked different. I arrived just before sunset. My father insisted on dinner instead of meeting me in his office. That alone told me he wanted control of the setting. The dining hall was formal, with a long table, too much space between us. He sat at the head, relaxed, already eating when I walked in. "You look thin," he said without looking up. "I've been busy," I replied as I took my seat. "Busy people still eat." I picked up my fork. "I do eat." He finally looked at me then. His eyes were sharp, calm, and unreadable. The same eyes that had ruled the South for decades. We ate in silence for a few minutes. I let it stretch. Silence made people careless. My father hated silence when it wasn't on his terms. "So," he said at last, "what brings you home?" "I wanted to see you," I said. "Is that strange?" "Yes." I smiled faintly. "Fair." He drank from his glass. "You don't travel without reason." "I heard things," I said carefully. "About the North." His hand did not. "The North is always dramatic." "Amy Carter has been missing for days," I said. That did it. Not much. Just a small shift in his eyes. A flicker. He hid it quickly, but I saw it. "So," he said, "you've chosen your side." "I haven't chosen anything," I replied. "I'm asking questions." He leaned back. "You always were curious. It made you difficult." "It keeps me alive." He gave a short laugh. "You think this has something to do with us?" "I think nothing that happens in the North stays in the North," I said. "Especially not something like this." He studied me for a moment. "Careful, Selene." "I am being careful." He waved a hand. "Amy Carter is strong. If she's missing, there are many possible reasons." "Kidnapping is not a small reason," I said. "Neither is treachery," he replied. I held his gaze. "Are you saying she was betrayed?" "I'm saying leaders fall when they trust the wrong people." That line felt rehearsed. I noted it and moved on. "Daniel is tearing the North apart looking for her," I said. "He's not

thinking straight.” “That’s expected,” my father said. “Emotion weakens judgment.” “She’s his mate,” I said. He shrugged. “Even worse.” I set my fork down. “Did you order it?” His eyes hardened. “You’re accusing me now?” “I’m asking,” I said calmly. “Because if you did, it changes things.” “Changes what?” “Everything,” I said. He leaned forward. “Listen carefully. I did not give an order to take Amy Carter.” I watched his face as he spoke. He was good. Too good. His voice was steady. His pulse did not jump. If he was lying, it wasn’t a simple one. “But,” he continued, “that doesn’t mean I don’t benefit from the chaos.” There it was. “So you knew,” I said. “I know many things,” he replied. “People talk.” “About the kidnapping?” “About unrest. About power shifting.” “Names,” I said. “Do you know names?” He smiled, “You ask like a spy.” “I learned from the best.” His smile faded. “If I had names, do you think I would share them with you?”

“You might,” I said. “If you want Daniel distracted.” He laughed. “Daniel doesn’t need help being distracted.” I forced myself to stay calm. “If someone in the South acted without your approval-” “They wouldn’t survive,” he said flatly. That answered something. Not everything, but something. “So you’re saying no one here touched her,” I said. “I’m saying no one with my blessing did,” he replied. After a moment, he said, “Why do you care so much?” I met his gaze. “Because if the North collapses, the South bleeds next.” He studied me again. “Or because you’ve grown attached.” “That’s irrelevant.” “Attachment always is,” he said. “Until it ruins you.” I pushed a little more. “Have you heard the name Elias lately?” His eyes sharpened again. This time he did not hide it fast enough. “So,” he said slowly, “that’s where you’re digging.” “You know him,” I said. “I know of him,” my father replied. “A useful man. Dangerous if unchecked.” “Is he working for you?” I asked. “No,” he said immediately. Too quickly. “Is he working against you?” He paused. “He’s ambitious.” That was not an answer. “Ambitious people don’t kidnap Alpha mates without backing,” I said. “Unless they think they have leverage,” he replied. “Leverage like information,” I said. “Or access,” he added. My stomach tightened, but I kept my face neutral. “You’re not denying he could be involved,” I said. “I’m not confirming anything,” he said. “Which is more than you deserve.” I leaned back. “Daniel will not stop.” “He shouldn’t,” my father said. “A man who stops searching for his mate isn’t worth ruling.” That surprised me. “You admire him,” I said. “I respect strength,” he replied. “Even when it opposes me.” Dinner dragged on after that. Small talk. Controlled words. Nothing useful. When dessert arrived, my father finally said, “You should return to the North.” “Why?” “Because whatever is happening there will end soon,” he said. “One way or another.” “Do you know how?” I asked. “No,” he said. “But storms don’t linger forever.” I stood. “If I find out you lied-” He cut me off. “You won’t.” I looked at him. “Because you didn’t do it?” “Because you won’t survive proving it,” he said calmly. I nodded. “Good to know.” As I left the hall, my chest felt tight. I had answers, but no proof. Suspicion, but nothing solid. On the drive back to my quarters, I replayed every word. Every pause. Every look. I sent a short message to Daniel before midnight. No confirmation. No denial. South aware. Elias likely involved. Be careful. But the truth was still buried. And until it surfaced, Amy remained a pawn on someone else’s board. I didn’t know yet if my father was the hand moving her—or just watching the game unfold.