

The Alpha's Forbidden Bite #Chapter 4: The Forbidden Territory - Read The Alpha's Forbidden Bite Chapter 4: The Forbidden Territory

There were rules about the Dead Corridor.

Not laws, exactly, nothing written down in the pack charter or formally agreed to in treaty language. More like an accumulated understanding, passed from Alpha to Beta to senior warrior the way certain kinds of knowledge were passed, orally and seriously and with the weight of consequences behind every word. You didn't cross the corridor. You didn't send scouts through it without specific authorization. You didn't push your border markers eastward in that direction, and you didn't respond to provocations from the other side by advancing.

The corridor was a space between worlds.

Axel's father had explained it to him when he was twelve, sitting at this same map, pointing with one thick finger at the stretch of terrain between the eastern border and the area the old maps labeled simply as Voss Territory. That space keeps us sane, the old man had said. It's not weakness that built it. It's intelligence. You keep a distance from something that dangerous because getting close costs more than you can afford.

Axel had been twelve. He had pushed, the way twelve-year-olds push. But we're stronger, he'd said. Pack against clan, wolf against vampire.

His father had looked at him with an expression that had taken years to fully understand. Strength is one thing, the old Alpha had said. Age is another. The Voss Clan has been here for four centuries. We've been here for three. They remember things we don't have history for yet, and they do things our blood doesn't have answers to. Keep the corridor.

He had kept it.

Until now, keeping it had been enough.

He went to see the corridor himself that afternoon. Alone, which Daren objected to with more visible agitation than Axel had seen from him in years.

"You just got back," Daren said. "You're telling me the first thing you're going to do is walk up to the boundary alone after we found a body this morning?"

"I'm not going past the boundary." Axel was pulling on a jacket in the hallway outside the war room, and he said it with the mild patience of a man who had already decided and was simply letting the objection complete itself. "I'm going to look at it."

"Then let me come."

"I need you here. If something moves on the southern line while I'm out, I need you positioned to respond." He met Daren's eyes. "I'll be back before dark."

Daren looked like he wanted to say several more things. He said none of them. That was, Axel had always thought, the mark of a genuinely good Beta, the ability to know

which arguments had already been lost and not waste breath on them.

He went alone.

The walk to the corridor took forty minutes at an easy pace, following the eastern patrol trail through forest that thinned gradually from the thick pine and oak of the pack's core territory to the stranger, quieter growth that characterized the neutral zone. The trees changed here. Axel had noticed it as a young man and had never quite been able to explain it in terms that satisfied him, it wasn't that the species were different, exactly, but they grew differently. Taller than they should have been, given the soil composition. Darker in the bark. The canopy closed tighter overhead, and the light that came through had a different quality, filtering down in narrower shafts that moved less in the wind.

Sound changed too. The background noise of the pack's territory, birds, wind in leaves, the distant sounds of the pack going about its business, fell away, replaced by a silence that wasn't empty but occupied. A silence that had weight and direction, the way water had current.

He reached the boundary markers at mid-afternoon. The markers were old, stone posts his grandfather had placed, weathered and moss-covered, spaced forty meters apart along the line where pack territory officially ended and the corridor began. There had once been carvings on them, he knew, warning sigils in the old pack tradition. The carvings were worn to near-invisibility now, but the stone still stood.

He stopped at the first marker and looked into the corridor.

It was, in the neutral physical sense, just forest. Trees. Undergrowth. A floor of dead leaves and exposed root. There was no visible demarcation between where he stood and what lay ahead, no wall, no fence, no line in the earth. Nothing that a person without context would identify as a boundary at all.

But Axel had context.

And standing there, in the silence that occupied this place, he felt it. Not fear, he had made certain accommodations with fear over the years and this did not qualify. Something adjacent to it, though. A biological alertness, the deep-body recognition of an apex predator standing at the edge of another predator's territory. Every instinct in him that had been honed by twenty-nine years of being what he was said the same thing in the same quiet, certain voice.

Something is here.

Not at the boundary. Further in. But aware of him the way he was aware of it — that mutual, charged consciousness of two things that know each other exists.

He stood there for a long time.

He studied the shadows between the trees as the afternoon light shifted. He breathed in, slow and deliberate, cataloguing what the air told him. Cold, the same clean cold that Eli Farrow had described. Not animal cold, not the smell of another wolf pack or a predator species he could name. Something else entirely. Something that moved at the cold end of the living world, where warmth was a choice rather than a default.

He found the spot, eventually, where Otto had almost certainly been taken.

It was thirty meters inside the corridor boundary, he identified it not by any visible evidence but by the particular organization of the shadows and the way the ground cover had been disturbed in a pattern too regular to be natural. Something had stood there, still and patient, and waited. And what it had waited for had come to it willingly or unknowingly, which didn't matter. What mattered was the efficiency of it. The confidence.

Whatever was operating in this corridor was not hiding.

It was announcing itself.

He pulled back from the boundary before the light dropped any further. He didn't run. He walked the same measured pace back through the thinning forest, through the transitional zone, back into the full sound and smell of pack territory.

He thought about his father's words the entire way back.

The Voss Clan has been here for four centuries.

He thought about a message left in the form of a placed body. About three hours of missing time in the memories of two young wolves. About a silence that occupied empty space with intention.

He thought about the fact that something was out there that was confident enough to operate within forty meters of a pack boundary without concealing its presence.

And when the packhouse came into sight through the trees, and the smells of his pack reached him, smoke and food and the living warmth of dozens of wolves going about an ordinary evening, he felt the weight of what he was walking back to more clearly than he had all day.

These were his people.

Whatever came out of the corridor, whatever the Voss Clan was preparing or permitting or directing, it would meet him before it reached them.

He would make sure of it.

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.