

The Alpha's Forbidden Bite #Chapter 7: Eyes Like Midnight - Read The Alpha's Forbidden Bite Chapter 7: Eyes Like Midnight

The conversation lasted two hours.

Axel did not offer her food or drink, which would have been a hollow gesture given what she was, and he suspected she would have found it condescending rather than hospitable. He offered water, which she declined without offense, and then they got to the substance of it because the substance was considerable and the time available to address it was uncertain.

She spoke with the same directness she had opened with. No preamble, no circling, no diplomatic softening of things that didn't benefit from softness. She laid out the situation inside the Voss Clan with the precision of someone who had been watching it develop for long enough to have mapped its architecture.

The faction she called them the Hollow, which was apparently their own chosen name had been consolidating within the clan for approximately three years. They operated under the nominal authority of the clan's existing structure but had been quietly building a parallel power base, recruiting members who shared a specific ideology. The ideology was not complicated. It held that the truce between the vampire clans, and the wolf packs of this region was a historical mistake made by weak predecessors, and that the natural order of things a phrase they used with the frequency and confidence of people who had decided what the natural order was and hadn't sought outside input, placed vampires above wolves in the hierarchy of supernatural authority.

"That's not a new ideology," Axel said.

"No," Reyna agreed. "What's new is the organization behind it. And the timeline." She had her hands flat on the table, which he had noted early, an open posture, nothing concealed, deliberate. "The Hollow has been acquiring resources. Specific kinds of resources. There are artifacts from the pre-truce period objects of ritual significance that were supposed to have been destroyed as a condition of the original agreement. They've been collecting them."

"What kind of ritual significance?"

"The kind that amplifies." She looked at him steadily. "The truce was built on a rough equivalence of power. Two sides that could damage each other badly enough to make conflict economically irrational. The artifacts, if activated correctly, shift that equivalence. Not permanently, but long enough."

"Long enough for what?"

"Long enough to end the pack as a functioning entity. Scatter your people. Take the territory."

The room was very still.

Axel looked at her for a long moment. He was thinking several things simultaneously

the way he tended to think in situations that required parallel processing rather than sequential. He was thinking about the body in the ravine and what it had cost Otto Reld and what it had been meant to announce. He was thinking about the shape at his treeline the previous night and the cold that had come through the window. He was thinking about his father's words and about four centuries of clan history he didn't have access to and about the distinction between a person who brought information and a person who used the delivery of information as a mechanism for something else.

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked. Again. He had asked it once already and she had given him an answer about factions and timelines and consequences. He was asking it differently now.

She understood the difference.

Something shifted in her expression, not softness exactly, but a reduction of the controlled distance she had been maintaining. "Because the Hollow doesn't represent what the clan is," she said. "And because if they succeed in breaking the truce by forcing a conflict, what comes after doesn't look better for either side. It looks like a war that consumes everything in a region that took centuries to build into something functional." A pause that had weight in it. "And because I'm not willing to watch that happen if there's an alternative."

"What's the alternative?"

"Information exchange. You know your border. I know the clan. Between those two things, we can identify the Hollow's operational pattern before they move to the next phase."

"The next phase being."

"An incident significant enough to make a response from your pack unavoidable. Something that crosses the line between harassment and act of war." She held his eyes. "They want you to retaliate. A retaliatory strike against the corridor gives the Hollow the justification they need to bring the full clan in behind them. Right now, a significant portion of the clan doesn't support them. A wolf attack on vampire territory changes that math very quickly."

Axel was quiet for a long moment. He turned this over with the careful hands of someone checking a structure for load-bearing points.

"You're asking me not to retaliate to a provocation specifically designed to provoke me."

"I'm asking you to hold your response until we understand the full shape of what we're dealing with."

"And in exchange."

"In exchange I give you everything I know about the Hollow's structure, their assets, their timeline, and their weaknesses." She said it without drama. "Which is considerable."

Daren was waiting outside when the meeting ended.

He fell into step beside Axel as they moved down the corridor toward the war room, and he waited a full thirty seconds before he said anything, which was a sign of how much

he wanted to say it.

"She's still here," he said finally.

"I told the gate to hold her vehicle." Axel didn't slow his pace. "She stays tonight."

Daren stopped walking.

Axel stopped too, and turned.

"She stays tonight," he repeated. "East wing. Two guards on the corridor, no contact without my authorization. She eats if she asks, we figure out what that looks like. She's treated with the same courtesy we extend to any guest and the same caution we extend to any unknown quantity." He paused. "She came here alone, Daren. Whatever she is, she came here without backup and without weapons visible and told us things that are worth more than the risk she took to tell them. That earns her a night."

Daren's jaw worked briefly. "The pack is going to feel her presence."

"Yes."

"A vampire, Axel. Inside the packhouse."

"I know what she is." His voice was even. "I also know she sat across a table from me for two hours and didn't once try to use whatever she is against me, which means she has more discipline than most people I deal with who are nominally on my side." He held Daren's eyes. "Two guards. East wing. And brief the elders before they hear it from someone else."

Daren looked at him for a moment with an expression that was complicated enough to have several things inside it at once. Then he nodded, once, and they walked on.

Axel went back to the east wing before the evening meal.

He told himself it was operational, there were specific details in Reyna's account of the Hollow that he needed to follow up on, points where the information had been general in ways that could be made more specific with the right questions. This was true. It was also not the complete truth, which he acknowledged to himself without excessive commentary and moved past.

She was standing at the window when he came in. Not looking at anything in particular or looking at everything, the way people looked when they were thinking rather than observing. She turned when he entered, and he noticed that she had registered the sound of his approach well before he reached the door, which meant her awareness of him in the building had been continuous, which was information.

"I have questions," he said.

"I assumed you would."

He sat down and she sat across from him and they went back into it, and this time the conversation was more technical and more granular and lasted another ninety minutes. He asked about specific incidents and she gave him specific answers. He pushed on points where the information was thinner and she pushed back on points where his questions revealed assumptions that she considered incorrect.

He didn't find the pushback irritating.

He found it useful. There was a particular kind of intelligence that sharpened when it met resistance rather than folding or deflecting, and hers was that kind. She thought in straight lines and she corrected her own trajectory when she was shown better data, which was rarer than it should have been in people with significant power.

At one point he asked her how old she was, which was not a question he had planned to ask and which came out of a moment where something in her framing of early truce history had the particular intimacy of firsthand knowledge.

She looked at him for a beat. "Old enough to have known the wolves who signed the original truce."

"That was a hundred and twelve years ago."

"Yes."

He looked at her with new geometry. A hundred and twelve years old and she moved like someone in their twenties and spoke with the directness of someone who had stopped performing patience for other people's comfort a long time ago. There was something vertiginous about it, briefly. He let the vertigo pass and filed the information.

"The shape at my treeline last night," he said. "That was you."

She didn't confirm it immediately. She looked at him with those deep-water eyes, and something moved in them that might have been assessment, might have been something else.

"I wanted to see you before the meeting," she said. "Before you had time to construct a response."

"And what did you see?"

A pause. "Someone who doesn't look away," she said. "That matters more than most people think it does."

He held her gaze for a moment longer than was strictly necessary.

Then he stood up, told her the guards would remain but wouldn't be intrusive, and walked out of the east wing with the particular deliberate pace of a man who has decided that whatever is happening behind him is something he will address tomorrow.

Behind him, in the east wing room, Reyna Voss looked out the window at the dark forest and said nothing at all.

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