

Chapter 690 No-man's-land

Just as Cole had predicted, the call came half an hour later. It was a video call from Taylor's phone—the mastermind was on the line.

Cole did not hesitate. He tapped to answer. The phone's screen lit up with a bleak, haunting image. Taylor stood motionless, framed by the unsteady camera. The wind howled so fiercely that it almost drowned out his voice. He was teetering at the very edge of a cliff, the world behind him swallowed by darkness. The drop below was endless, and one careless move would send him straight into oblivion.

"That's Beakcliff!" Jason exclaimed, his voice sharp with recognition.

There was no mistaking it. Beakcliff marked the most treacherous spot in the entire Stone Forest Scenic Area. Towering over five hundred meters high, its jagged edges looked like the hooked tip of an eagle's beak.

Beneath the precipice, an ancient forest stretched out, wild and forbidden. No one was allowed inside. Legends and warnings clung to the place like shadows.

Time after time, geological survey teams tried their luck, but none ever came back. Authorities wrote off the land as impossible to develop, leaving it an untouched no-man's-land.

The trees in that forest locked together overhead, weaving a canopy so thick that sunlight never reached the ground. Even satellites could barely make out what lay underneath. People called it gloomy, menacing, even cursed, but none of those words could capture the dread it inspired. Whatever entered those woods never came out. People only had to mention its name to feel their skin crawl.

Now, Taylor faced that nightmare, his feet perched on the brink. One slip, and he would be gone. Surviving the 500-meter fall was out of the question, but even if he did, the forest was waiting. It hid venomous snakes, unseen creatures, clouds of toxic mist, and who knew what other horrors that had never seen the light. A single misstep meant there

was no coming back.

Panic swept through the room like a sudden storm when Jason finally spoke. Nobody could shake the feeling of dread that coiled tight in their chests.

The sight was too much for Emmanuel. His legs gave way, and he swayed, nearly collapsing.

"Dad!" Lance rushed to Emmanuel's side and caught him before he fell. He tried to sound steady, but desperation colored every word. "You can't lose it now. Cole and Jason won't stop until they get Taylor back. He's coming home. I promise, we're not losing him."

His reassurance didn't make the fear any less real.

Emmanuel knew Cole and Jason would tear the world apart to bring Taylor back, but nothing could erase the sight of Taylor trapped on that ledge. That image would haunt him for the rest of his life.

All the strength drained from Emmanuel's body after just one look at the screen. His heart raced so violently that it nearly burst, his face turned as pale as paper, and he struggled to catch his breath.

Noticing how frail he looked, Elliana stepped up and pressed a heart pill to his lips before turning to Lance. "Get your dad out of here and let him rest. The rescue's on us now."

Lance nodded, not hesitating for a second. He put his faith in Elliana and his cousins. Right now, his father was his only concern. Without looking back, he led Emmanuel away from the chaos.

Standing beside Cole, Jason glared at the phone screen, his fists clenched so tight that his knuckles went white. There was no warmth in his stare, only an icy resolve that showed in the sharp, dangerous glint of his eyes.

Suddenly, a man's chilling voice crackled through the phone, dripping with cruel amusement. "Cole, do you see that? Your cousin is hanging on our every word. Tell him to move, and he moves. Tell him to stop, and he obeys. He's got more loyalty than a dog."

The man kept himself hidden, never once letting his face slip into view.

Whether he stood alone or not, nobody could tell. Only Taylor appeared in the frame, caught in the spotlight.

Frozen in place, Taylor resembled a puppet whose strings had been cut. His eyes, flat and empty, stared right through everything in front of him.

As if to prove his point, the man issued an order. "Taylor, take half a step forward."

No hesitation showed in Taylor's face as he slid a half step closer to the edge, oblivious to the danger waiting for him.

That single movement sent a jolt of panic through Cole and the others.

"Don't move!" Cole shouted, his voice cracking with urgency.

A low, taunting laugh rolled out from the speaker. "Nervous now, aren't you? Look at him—just a hair away from falling. How badly do you want to keep him alive?"

Cole's face burned with fury. Every muscle in his jaw tensed as he growled, "Say what you want, and leave my cousin out of it?"

The man on the line sounded utterly relaxed, as if everything happening was just a game. "Taylor's fate tonight? That's all in your hands, Cole. Make your choices wisely."

Cole spat out his reply, not bothering to hide his anger, "Enough of this crap. Tell me what you want, and stop playing these games!"

Slow applause echoed through the call, unhurried and cold. "That's what I like to hear," the man said, letting his words hang in the air. "You want direct answers, so I'll give you one. We just want to discuss a business proposition. We were afraid you wouldn't give us the time of day, so we took the liberty of inviting Taylor to ensure your cooperation. As long as you come, we guarantee he'll be perfectly safe."