

Chapter 704 Relief

Just as fear began to close in on Jason, Taylor stirred. "Cut it out," he muttered, irritation sharp in his tone. "I'm trying to sleep."

Taylor's voice was firm, stronger than Jason expected, proof that he wasn't nearly as battered. Jason surmised that Taylor must have landed right on the soft bed of leaves, missing every branch on the way down.

Relief swept through Jason, loosening the knot in his chest. A smile broke across his face, light chasing away his fear. The sole thought that Taylor was alive kept him from crumbling. He hadn't lost his cousin. His mother's hands weren't stained with the family's blood. And he himself still had a pulse.

Jason never truly wanted to die. No matter how dark life had grown, surrender had never been in him. The reckless choice of leaping down the cliff had been only to make amends for his mother's sins. And in a cruel twist, it had been the right choice. If not for him, Taylor would have been left to die in this forest alone.

Taylor slipped back into sleep, impossible to wake. Jason gave up trying, lying still as strength slowly crept back into his aching body. When he finally felt steady, he forced himself upright.

From his new view, the clearing unfolded before him, and his breath caught. His gaze swept the ground, and dread settled like ice in his stomach. The huge mound of leaves wasn't natural—it had been made by human hands. And around it lay a grim ring of bones. Human bones.

Among the skeletons were fresh, severed limbs, and pools of blood still dark and wet. The gore could only belong to Michael's men from the night before. They must have jumped from the wrong ledge, missed the hidden cushion of leaves, and shattered on the merciless ground.

The sight brought a chilling realization to Jason. Everyone online claimed the eagle-shaped cliff was Beakcliff's deadliest spot, a certain death drop. But the truth was the opposite. What looked like a deathtrap was really an entrance. A safe landing. He and Taylor had stumbled onto it

by blind luck. If the mound was man-made, then this forest hid something. But what? And why was their landing zone surrounded by the dead?

Lost in thought, Jason frowned at the grisly tableau.

Just then, Taylor rolled over, his eyes flickering open and settling on Jason. Still half-asleep, he let out a groggy chuckle. He teased, his voice hoarse, "Well, couldn't resist sneaking into my bed? I know I'm handsome, but at least wait until I'm awake before you make your move."

The ridiculous comment snapped Jason back to reality. He turned, smiling with real relief this time. "Finally up?"

Taylor, still heavy with sleep, stretched like a cat. But halfway through, his eyes caught the clearing. The color drained from his face. A strangled cry burst from him. He scrambled to Jason's side, clutching his leg as though it was the only thing keeping him alive, his body trembling.

"Where are we? What is this place?" Taylor's voice cracked as he stammered. "Why are there so many bodies?" He squeezed his eyes shut, shaking. "This has to be a nightmare. Tell me I'm dreaming. Please."

The night before, under Miguel's control, Taylor had been nothing but a puppet. He hadn't seen the horrors. To him, this was waking straight into hell. No wonder he was terrified.

The weight of Irene's involvement hit Jason again, sympathy for Taylor pressing hard against his chest. He placed a steady hand on Taylor's shoulder. "It's okay. Don't be scared. I'll take you home. I promise."

As always, Jason's steady presence was an anchor for Taylor, and his words managed to cut through the panic.

Taylor drew in a shaky breath, cracking his eyes open. But the scene hadn't changed. The bones, the blood—it was all still there. He snapped his eyes shut again. "What is this place? How did we even get here?"

Jason told him everything about the chip.

Taylor's eyes flew wide, realization dawning. "So that's why I felt like I wasn't myself sometimes... I was being controlled this whole time?" He touched his head as though trying to feel it. "What now? Can they take

this thing out of me?"

Jason patted his head gently, voice soft. "Don't worry. Cole and Elliana will figure it out."

"Alright," Taylor breathed, nodding, faith in them unshaken.

Suddenly, Taylor remembered his duet with Stellara the night before, and the memory clawed its way out in laughter. The sound rang strange in the graveyard of bones. When it faded, he asked, "So, what now? How do we get out of this forest? How do we go home?"

Jason had no answer. Surviving the fall was only step one. Escaping these woods alive was another battle altogether, and who knew what waited in the shadows.

As his thoughts spiraled, the thrum of helicopter blades cut through the silence.

Both men snapped their heads upward. Through the thin gaps in the canopy, they saw two rescue helicopters circling overhead.

