

Chapter 707 The Hidden Entrance

Elliana's voice rang out through the ancient trees. "Show yourself! Who are you, and why did you change your mind the moment you saw those bracelets?"

The forest responded with nothing but empty silence.

After waiting for what felt like an eternity, Elliana finally turned her attention to Cole. "Have someone escort Taylor back to safety. I want to stay here and track down whoever that man is."

Cole felt torn between two equally powerful desires—his burning need for clarity of the situation and his deep concern about Elliana's physical condition.

Reading the conflict written across his face, Elliana locked eyes with him and gave him a warm, confident smile. "Don't forget that I'm a trained physician, Cole. I understand my body's limitations better than anyone. Trust me when I tell you I'm perfectly capable of continuing."

Against his better judgment, Cole eventually gave in to her determination. He signaled to the rescue team members to prepare the cable system that lifted Taylor to the hovering helicopter.

After Taylor had been safely hauled up and away from danger, Cole shifted his focus to Jason. "That injury on your back needs proper medical attention. You should return with them."

Jason's response was immediate and firm as he shook his head in refusal. "Just superficial wounds, nothing that requires urgent care. I'm not leaving until I discover what secrets this forest has been protecting all these years."

With that settled, the three of them, accompanied by a handful of remaining rescuers, pushed deeper into the wilderness, trailing the same path the wolf pack had taken during their retreat.

Every few minutes, Elliana glanced down at the pair of bracelets clutched in her palm. "We've spent so much time searching for the truth about these objects," she said quietly to Cole. "Something tells me we're finally about to discover what they really mean."

Cole felt the same intuition stirring in his gut and responded with a nod of agreement.

True to the mysterious man's word, their journey remained surprisingly peaceful. The route ahead stayed completely clear of danger, and at one point, they even spotted a small herd of deer peacefully grazing in a sunlit meadow, providing a brief moment of natural beauty amidst the tension.

This peaceful passage led everyone to reach the same disturbing conclusion. The forest itself wasn't the deadly trap that rumors had painted it to be. The real danger were man-made. All those people who had ventured into these woods over the decades and never returned might have fallen victim to natural hazards, but it seemed far more probable that they had been deliberately eliminated by that mysterious guardian. He was clearly guarding a great secret, something that was almost certainly connected to the bracelets Elliana now carried.

After approximately an hour of steady walking, they came upon an absolutely massive tree that dwarfed everything around it, unlike anything any of them had encountered before.

The trunk was so impossibly thick that thirty adults standing side by side with arms outstretched would barely be able to encircle its circumference. The deeply grooved, weathered bark told the story of countless centuries of survival.

While this ancient forest was filled with old-growth trees, this particular giant stood apart from all the others. It bore the battle scars of a thousand years' worth of lightning strikes and storms, but its most remarkable feature was an enormous cavity at ground level, spacious enough to function as a small room.

The group moved forward cautiously, examining the hollow opening.

"This has to be some kind of entrance," Elliana whispered with growing excitement, her eyes tracing the complex patterns carved into the trunk before settling on one particular knot in the wood.

She walked completely around the enormous tree once, studying it from every angle before finally stopping at a specific spot and rapping her knuckles hard against the bark.

Exactly as she had predicted, a deep rumbling sound emanated from somewhere within the hollow cavity—the unmistakable noise of ancient mechanical gears and levers awakening after years of dormancy, triggered by the precise location where her fist had struck.

Everyone's attention immediately snapped toward the hollow opening, where the earth at the bottom of the cavity began moving, slowly revealing a concealed doorway.

As the hidden panel slid aside, it exposed a pitch-black tunnel entrance that descended into mysterious darkness below.

"I'm going down there to investigate," Elliana declared, her voice leaving no room for debate.

Cole moved first, dropping smoothly through the opening and landing in the passage below. After a quick but thorough security check to ensure no immediate threats were present, he reached upward for Elliana, carefully guiding her descent.

Jason and the remaining rescue team members climbed down one by one behind them.

The instant the final person had entered the underground passage, the concealed door automatically sealed itself shut with a heavy, ominous thud.

Above ground, a man stepped out from behind the tree line where he had been watching everything unfold. He extracted a mobile phone from his pocket and quickly dialed a specific number. When someone answered on the other end, he spoke with respectful formality. "Ms. Griffiths, just now, Elliana and Cole have successfully located the hidden entrance. The two of them and their entourage have descended into the passage."

Maxine's voice drifted through the phone line, carrying a tone of genuine amusement. "They've certainly proven themselves worthy of my interest. The fact that they managed to locate it at all can only be destiny at work. Since they've made it this far, allow them to discover the truth on their own terms. Stay out of their way."

"Understood," the man responded before ending the call.

Far below the surface of the earth, Elliana and her companions had no idea that anyone was monitoring their progress. They advanced through a tight passageway that suddenly expanded into an enormous underground chamber.

The chamber was breathtaking not only because of its massive scale, but also because a series of light fixtures had been mounted along the walls, bathing the entire space in a soft, consistent glow that revealed every corner.

"Someone built all of this," Jason remarked, his words bouncing slightly off the distant walls. "And it was constructed a very long time ago."

Cole gave a confirming nod. "Calling it ancient hardly does it justice. Based on the construction methods, this place could easily date back hundreds of years. Perhaps even a full millennium."

Elliana stood quietly, her attention completely captured by an imposing stone barrier embedded in the far wall of the chamber. After examining it carefully for several long moments, she finally broke her silence. "Whatever secret we've been searching for, it's sealed behind that entrance."

The entire group moved forward to get a closer look at the stone barrier.

The barrier consisted of a single enormous block of solid stone, so incredibly heavy that no amount of physical strength could possibly budge it. It became obvious that the door must be controlled by some kind of hidden mechanism.

As Elliana's fingers traced across the smooth, cold surface of the stone, she discovered what she'd been searching for—a perfectly round depression carved into each side of the doorway, its dimensions exactly matching the circumference and contours of the two bracelets she carried. Could these pieces of jewelry actually serve as keys to unlock this door?

Her pulse began racing with anticipation as she retrieved the bracelets from where she'd been keeping them safe.

One bracelet had been fashioned to represent a male serpent, while its

companion depicted a female. Following an unexplainable impulse—perhaps the echo of some long-forgotten ceremony—Elliana carefully positioned the male serpent bracelet into the depression on the left side and the female into the one on the right.

A profound, grinding noise that seemed to vibrate through the very bones of the earth began emanating from the stone barrier. The massive door started sliding aside, and as it moved, an explosion of dazzling, almost blinding radiance came flooding through the widening gap, forcing everyone to raise their hands to protect their vision.

When the overwhelming brightness finally diminished enough for the group to lower their arms and look again, they could only stand frozen in place, completely unable to form words as they tried to comprehend the incredible sight that had been revealed before them.