

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

1507-1510

Axel's face had gone pale, his voice rising in anger. "I warned them repeatedly not to enter the mountains after dark, but they didn't listen. And now look what's

happened."

The Patoajo warrior, Buzz, spoke in a deep, rumbling tone. "Chief Flintspire, we found the bodies right outside the forbidden zone. I think those city folks may have entered the sacred area."

His voice grew quieter with each word as if even speaking of it filled him with fear. By the end, he was barely audible, and he cast a wary, guarded glance at Andrew and the others, suspicion clear in his eyes.

The moment the word "forbidden" was mentioned, Axel visibly flinched. His whole body tensed with dread. He muttered, "This is bad. Really bad. Buzz, take our best warriors and head into the mountain immediately.

"If you find that group, bring them out by force if necessary. We cannot allow these reckless outsiders to disturb the resting souls of our ancestors."

Buzz hesitated, eyes darting anxiously. "Chief Flintspire, the sun's gone. It's pitch black now. If those people really did enter the forbidden grounds... Our men won't go. Not at night. Even if we made it there now, there's no telling if anyone's still alive."

Axel started pacing in frustration, his expression dark and stormy.

Andrew and Tiana exchanged a look. They were just about to speak when Ralph suddenly stepped forward.

The ex-special forces soldier puffed out his chest and said with contempt, "Seriously? You Patoajo warriors sure get scared easily. Where's this so-called forbidden ground? Just point the way. Whatever bogeymen you've got in there, I'll take care of them."

Axel stared at him, clearly unsettled. "Sir, I wouldn't joke about this. The forest is already dangerous enough at night, but our village's sacred ground is a death trap. I strongly advise against such recklessness."

Ralph planted his hands on his hips, looking eager for action. "If there's no danger, then there's no point in exploring it. Lead the way to mysterious sacred grounds.

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Then, he turned to Chantelle, his face lit with pride. "Ms. Garcia, leave this to me. Nighttime mountain treks? That's light work for a survival expert like me."

Chantelle frowned. "Mr. Sutton, are you absolutely sure about this?"

With a dramatic flair, Ralph drew a curved blade from his hip and licked the edge with his tongue. "This baby has drawn real blood. Even if a bear shows up, I'll gut it clean. Besides, I'm fully loaded-armed and ready."

He proceeded to show off his grenades, night vision goggles, and sidearm, all strapped around his belt like a walking armory. Then, he swept his gaze across the group, wearing a smug grin.

"Remember this-fear only exists when you're under-armed. With enough firepower? Hell, anyone would drop to his knees and beg for mercy!"

However, Axel still looked deeply troubled. He shook his head and said, "Sir, conventional weapons won't help you in the sacred ground."

Ralph sneered. "Unless your sacred ground is crawling with literal ghosts, I guarantee one high-explosive grenade will turn whatever's in there into ash."

He burst into loud, conceited laughter-only to realize none of the village warriors were laughing with him. In fact, they were all staring at him like he was an absolute idiot.

Buzz, the warrior captain, stepped forward and saluted Axel. "Chief Flintspire. I take a team into the mountains. But we're only going as far as the perimeter. If you want to go deeper... I'm sorry, Chief. won't let my men risk their lives like that." Cóntent

Axel nodded solemnly. "Understood, Buzz. But you must be cautious."

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

"If you find that those city folks have already entered the village grounds, just

bring your men back-I won't blame you for it," Axel said.

Buzz immediately turned with a dozen armed Patoajo warriors and headed toward the dark, imposing forest behind the village.

Tiana nudged Andrew's arm. "Andy, we should go too."

Andrew did not move but instead smiled at Axel, the village chief. "Chief, would it be possible for us outsiders to tag along and help? Lives are at stake, and it's pitch black out there. We have good equipment and could assist the Patoajo men."

Axel waved his hand dismissively. "Mr. Lloyd, you don't need to be so polite about it. I know you outsiders won't rest until you've seen what's in those mountains for yourselves. Go ahead with Buzz leading the way, you should be safe enough."

"But remember, strange things happen in those mountains, and there are certain areas you absolutely must not enter. Go there, and you'll end up with no remains left to bury!"

Since his true intentions had been exposed, Andrew felt no embarrassment and simply nodded. "In that case, we'll take our leave!"

After leaving the stilt house, Andrew took the lead and caught up with Buzz and the Patoajo warriors.

Chantelle spoke uneasily. "Mr. Lloyd, Chief Flintspire seemed very secretive about that forbidden zone earlier. And when ghosts were mentioned, every single Patoajo warrior looked uncomfortable-you don't think there really are ghosts, do you?"

Andrew walked ahead, speaking calmly. "Whether there are ghosts or not, I don't know, but it's better to believe they exist than to dismiss them entirely!"

Chantelle's face paled noticeably.

Tiana scolded him. "Andy, don't talk nonsense and scare Ms. Garcia. In modern society, there's no such thing as ghosts or monsters-this Patoajo village is just too backward, so they create these weird superstitions that aren't credible at all." Andrew remained silent. Axel's earlier expression of terror had not seemed fake- he had seen it clearly, and the chief was genuinely frightened.

Even if there were no ghosts in the mountains behind this village, there was probably something unusual there. Considering that the treasure they were searching for was supposedly located somewhere in this village, there might actually be a connection between the two.

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This was Andrew's real reason for volunteering to follow Buzz and his men into the mountains at night. Of course, he could not admit he was here for the treasure —it would only make the Patoajo people feel used or disrespected.

Showing up on someone else's land and openly digging for treasure was not the best way to make friends.

When it came to the superstitions or spiritual beliefs of tribal

communities, Andrew had always taken a "respect from a distance approach. This world was vast, and there were many strange, inexplicable things out there. You did not have to believe in all of them, but you absolutely had to respect them.

Meanwhile, Ralph had started twirling his curved blade around. He quickened his pace and strutted up next to Chantelle, grinning like a showoff. "Ms. Garcia, you'll want to stick close to me. If anything happens, I'll make sure you're protected."

Chantelle responded with a calm but firm tone. "Mr. Sutton, you're the survival expert here, but don't just watch over me. You're also responsible for Mr. Lloyd, Mrs. Rhodes, and the others. Got that?"

Ralph cast a glance at Tiana. A flash of something wicked flickered in his eyes. She might not be young, but the seductive aura she carried easily rivaled, if not surpassed, Chantelle's.

"Ms. Garcia... and Mrs. Rhodes... you're both stunning, important women. protect you both with my life. As for the rest... If I can help, will. But don't expect miracles, Let's be honest-this group's got a few too many deadweights. I'm good, but I'm not a miracle worker."

He cleared his throat and muttered under his breath, sarcasm dripping from every word.

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Logan snorted with contempt. "Mr. Sutton, just worry about taking care of yourself. As for everyone else, they don't need your protection, and you don't have the ability to protect them anyway."

Ralph's face flushed red with anger. "Mr. Keller, I know you're skilled in martial arts, but that certain someone beside you is probably just a weakling, and without my protection in this pitch-black mountain forest, he could drop dead and no one would even know it."

Logan's brow furrowed dangerously. "Ralph, am I being too nice to you or something? You keep trying to show off every damn day-believe it or not, I'll slap you silly right here and now."

Andrew spoke up, voice calm but firm. "Enough. No more talking. Keep moving. Once we get deeper, men take the outside, women stay in the center-everyone has a role to play."

Logan nodded with a grin. "No problem, Andy. Your call-I'll follow your lead."

Ralph, however, cast a dark glance through the shadows. There was no way he was following Andrew's lead. That guy was a nobody, so who the hell did he think he was?

Ralph had no intention of playing by Andrew's rules. His real goal was to stay close to Chantelle, waiting for that perfect "hero saves the lady" moment. This was his big shot at winning over a stunning, high-profile woman.

As for taking orders from Andrew? Ralph sneered inwardly at the thought.

What right did some worthless loser have to command a survival expert like him?

What made him secretly pleased was that this treasure hunt included more than just Chantelle as eye candy. The mature Tiana maintained a cold demeanor, but as she walked, her hips swayed enticingly.

Ralph loved this type of older woman-they knew how to take care of a man in bed. Out here in the wilderness, if Tiana happened to twist her ankle or something, that would be perfect.

He might get the chance to have his way with this beautiful woman, and just thinking about it made Ralph's bones tingle with anticipation.

The last one, Natasha, would be harder to handle. She clearly had combat training, so his chances with her were probably slim.

Still, Ralph figured two out of three was not bad. Whether it was Tiana or Chantelle, winning the favor of either woman would make him a winner in life.

After entering the mountain forest, the path became increasingly difficult to navigate. The lighting among the trees was extremely dim. They had to rely on flashlights and torches to make their way forward with great difficulty.

Buzz and his Patoajo warriors moved incredibly fast, seemingly unaffected by the terrain.

Andrew kept pace right behind them without any sign of falling back. Meanwhile, Tiana positioned herself behind Natasha and Jerry, appearing to struggle with the trek. In reality, she was protecting them from the side, guarding against any sudden attacks.

Logan, being a martial arts expert and a well-trained heir from a prominent family, along with his two skilled companions, showed no signs of being unable to keep up throughout the journey.

Chantelle, however, while not weak in martial arts, was from a big city and had lived a comfortable urban lifestyle for years. Walking through mountain forests at night proved challenging for her, and she kept slipping.

Ralph was overjoyed and tried to take advantage by offering help, but Chantelle rejected all his advances, which infuriated him.

The last member of their group was Magnus, the geomancy specialist, who was already out of breath from lack of stamina. Andrew had originally suggested that since he

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was getting on in years, he should just stay in the village.

Who knew that this usually lazy old fraud would break character and insist on following them into the mountains?

Since Chantelle had no objections, Andrew naturally would not meddle unnecessarily. With a sudden thud, one of the Patoajo warriors ahead of Andrew

lost his footing and started falling toward the cliff's edge.

Below the cliff was a patch of shrubs-not very high, but falling down there at night would definitely cause serious injury. Fortunately, Andrew reacted quickly, pushing the warrior's back to help him regain his balance.

"Thank you, Mr. Lloyd!" The young Patoajo warrior looked both grateful and somewhat ashamed.

As a proud Patoajo warrior on his own turf, nearly falling due to carelessness made the young man furious with himself—he felt like he had disgraced his people.

Andrew smiled. "No big deal by the way, what's your name?"

The Patoajo boy looked to be around 15, still just a teenager. He glanced toward Buzz, the team leader up front, and seeing that he was not paying attention, lowered his voice.

"My Patoajo name is Mohave, but my Holtrien name is Lucas Mainse."

Andrew could not help but chuckle. "So one of your parents is Patoajo and the other is Holtrien? And who gave you your Holtrien name?"

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The young man Mohave blushed with embarrassment. "My mother is from our tribe, and my father is Holtrien he's highly educated and went to elementary school. As soon as I was born, he said the name Lucas Mainse sounded cool and handsome. He said it fit me."

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Mohave said, "So I've been called Lucas ever since, though I've always lived in the tribal village, so nobody actually uses my Holtrien name. Captain Buzz and Chief Flintspire all call me Mohave."

Andrew nodded approvingly. "Mohave, your father actually went to elementary school—that's quite an impressive education level, especially that name he gave you, Lucas Mainse—it's incredibly cool!"

Mohave beamed with pride. "Of course! If my father hadn't had such a high education, my mother would never have fallen for him. And Mr. Lloyd, you might not know this, but our village of Gallow's End just got road access, so after the New Year, I'm going down the mountain to attend school!"

Seeing the boy's eager anticipation, Andrew felt a pang in his heart. These kids from remote mountain areas were just too innocent and trusting. This ancient village called Gallow's End had been isolated from the world and had only recently gotten road access.

When he returned to Blumedale, he would reach out to those wealthy contacts at the Chamber of Commerce to establish a foundation. The funds would specifically help mountain children like Mohave get out and see the wider world. Of course, that was a plan for later.

Andrew had struck up this conversation with the young man for another purpose entirely. "Mohave, let me ask you something—Chief Flintspire and Buzz seem really wary of that forbidden zone."

Trying to sound casual and conversational, Andrew chuckled. "Could you give me a little insight into what's so special about Gallow's End's forbidden area?"

Mohave's expression immediately became guarded, and he fell silent. Andrew smiled. "No worries—if it involves your village's secrets, just pretend I never asked!"

After a long pause, Mohave spoke hesitantly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Lloyd, I shouldn't be suspicious of you. You just saved me, and I can tell you're a kind, good person— not like those other city folks who came before, pressuring our chief and randomly hitting our tribal people.

"Since you're curious about our village's forbidden zone, I'll share what I know, but only what I know. Captain Buzz and Chief Flintspire are the only ones who know the rest!"

Andrew nodded, though a chill ran through him. So, Kevin and his people arrived at this village first. It seemed that in their search for treasure, they had used some harsh methods against Mohave and the other tribal people.

Treasure hunting was one thing, but if they were intimidating or even physically harming the villagers, Andrew could not just stand by and

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watch. "Actually, our village wasn't always located where it is now."

Mohave spoke in hushed tones. "After the fall of the old dynasty and the establishment of New Holtrien, our village of Gallow's End lost many people in a massive natural disaster.

"From that point on, our entire village migrated out of the mountains to our current location. Mr. Lloyd, the forbidden zone you're asking about is actually the old site of Gallow's End village."

Andrew's heart skipped a beat as the puzzle pieces suddenly clicked into place. The treasure map showed

that the treasure's entrance was

located in Gallow's End village. However, they found nothing when they arrived at this isolated ancient village during the day.

The Wrights' people had arrived first but found nothing. At the time, Andrew had been confused, wondering if the treasure map was wrong or if he had gotten the location wrong.

But now it was clear that the treasure map was correct, and he had not made a mistake either. The only error was assuming that the current Gallow's End village was the same one marked on the treasure map.

The real entrance to the treasure had to be at the original village site-the forbidden zone that Axel and the others feared so deeply.

That meant Andrew absolutely had to enter that forbidden area, no matter what. Just as he was lost in thought, the tribal warriors ahead suddenly became agitated.

Buzz's voice carried through the darkness, tense and suppressed. "Everyone, be careful-something's moving!"

Andrew stopped in his tracks and signaled for his people not to make any sudden moves. Ralph, however, strode forward arrogantly. "Bunch of cowards, get out of the way and let me see what we're dealing with!"

He pushed to the very front, raising his curved blade halfway before freezing completely. His face turned deathly pale with terror as he stammered, "W-What the hell is that thing? Run, everyone!"

He spun around and fled in panic, abandoning his blade and running for his life like his pants were on fire.