

# Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

## 1511-1515

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A ferocious roar echoed through the dark mountain forest. In the pitch-black wilderness under the moonless night, the sound was particularly bone-chilling.

With the dim light from the torch ahead, Andrew could finally see what it was. It was a massive black shadow leaping high into the air, its long tail whipping through the surrounding brush and snapping branches left and right.

At first, Andrew thought it was a bear. On land, when it came to predators of this size, bears were the only thing he could think of. However, he quickly realized he was wrong-it was not a bear.

With two powerful leaps, the enormous black shadow caught up to Ralph and raised its claws, slashing viciously across the survival expert's back.

"Help me, Mr. Keller! And you brave men from Patoajo, help me! Save me!" His terrified cries for help echoed through the forest, absolutely blood-curdling.

A series of musket shots rang out at that moment, and bursts of sparks exploded in the dark. No one knew how many shots hit the creature, but the giant shadow crashed into the trees from the impact.

After two weak growls, the ground trembled slightly. Incredibly, after taking about eight bullets, the creature was not dead. Instead, it had escaped.

Buzz commanded the Patoajo warriors, "Reload now! That beast could come back any moment. Stay alert!"

Some of the warriors quickly and calmly cleared the residue from their muskets and refilled them with gunpowder.

Mohave was the youngest and most inexperienced among the group of Patoajo warriors. Andrew watched as he fumbled with the reload, his hands trembling, clearly rattled by the earlier attack.

The weapons these tribal men carried were extremely primitive gunpowder firearms, and these things could not even really be called guns. In fact, they were more like gunpowder launchers.

They fired lead shots, iron pellets, or iron balls with limited power and terrible accuracy. If they had modern submachine guns or assault rifles instead, that monster would have been killed on the spot.

Then again, it depended on the shooter. If Andrew had been the one holding a musket just now, and at that distance, he would have blown the thing's head wide open.

Chantelle rushed forward with a grave expression and knelt down to examine him. "Mr. Sutton, are you okay?"

Ralph lay sprawled on the ground, screaming in agony. When Chantelle lifted his skirt to check his back under the flashlight, they saw that the half-inch-thick bulletproof steel plate had actually been torn through, leaving five massive claw marks.

Logan exclaimed in shock, "Holy crap! That thing's claws were brutal. What kind of creature was that beast? Nowadays, there's no way any wild predators of that size still exist in Etharia."

No one answered his question because everyone else was still reeling from the shock of what had just happened.

Magnus, the geomancy specialist, was mumbling prayers nonstop, barely able to stay standing. "A Dire Tiger! That had to be a Dire Tiger-one of those legendary beasts."

Tiana snorted. "Ridiculous. Even the Etharian mountain lions couldn't possibly be that size. It looked more like a massive bear."

Andrew shook his head. "It wasn't a bear. Bears don't have that kind of agility." As he spoke, he looked toward Buzz, the leader of the Patoajo warriors. Buzz was also staring intently back at Andrew. "You've got nerves of steel, sir. When that beast was attacking, everyone else was hiding and scared stiff."

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"But you didn't run or freeze. You stepped forward and squared up like you were ready to fight," Buzz said, locking eyes with Andrew, his tone unreadable.

He added, "I've seen plenty of tough guys among outsiders, but someone like you, Mr. Lloyd, this is a first for me."

Andrew smiled. "Like you said, it's just a beast. And beasts aren't anything to be afraid of."

Buzz shook his head, his face looking ominous and uncertain in the flickering torchlight. "That's no ordinary beast—it's a man-eating monster. We lose at least three hunters or children every year to that creature's bloody jaws."

Ralph stood up shakily with help from Logan's two men, gritting his teeth as he roared, "That damn beast better not let me catch it. When I get back, I'm bringing people to level this entire forest and skin it alive!"

Buzz sneered. "This primitive mountain forest backs up against an entire mountain range, stretching thousands of miles. Do you seriously think you can level this place? Dream on. Besides, we have tried everything by now, and we still haven't been able to kill it."

He scoffed. "You outsiders come in with a few fancy gadgets and suddenly think you're invincible. In the end, you'll just wind up as that thing's next meal."

That contemptuous tone hit Ralph like a slap, and his face flushed red with rage. "You hillbilly bastard, are you seriously looking down on me? The reason you haven't killed that freak is because you Patoajo bumpkins are useless!"

"Look at those pieces of junk you call weapons. They're nothing more than sparklers! When I get back to the city, I'll bring submachine guns and grenade launchers. Hell, I'll blow that freak sky high, ghost or not!"

Buzz's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure you want to run your mouth like that in our territory? Do you really think ticking off the locals here is a smart move?"

Behind him, the Patoajo warriors exchanged dark, menacing looks.

Ralph swallowed hard, realizing he had gone too far. However, his pride would not let him back down.

He opened his mouth, about to say something more, when Andrew coldly called out, "Logan!"

Without needing further explanation, Logan stepped in front of Ralph and delivered a massive slap that made the latter cry out in pain, blood gushing out from his mouth.

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"You bastards..." Ralph, who'd just taken a brutal hit, was furious beyond reason.

He raised the blade in his hand with bloodshot eyes, pointing it straight at Andrew.

Andrew remained expressionless

and took two steps forward,

deliberately putting his head right up against the blade. "What? You want to take a swing at me? Go ahead. I'm not moving. Try it and see what happens."

His voice was ice-cold and deadly calm.

Ralph gritted his teeth, and his hand holding the blade trembled twice before he ultimately could not bring himself to strike, reluctantly lowering the blade.

"Andrew, you son of a bitch, just

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wait. I don't know why the hell you're kissing up to these Patoajo hillbillies and tribal folk. This journey's full of

dangers, and now that you've

crossed me, you better watch your back."

After that outburst, Ralph stormed off to the rear and started tending to his wounds. The hatred burning in his eyes was thick enough to cut through the dark.

Andrew turned to Buzz. "Buzz, I'm sorry. He crossed the line."

Buzz gave a curt nod. "For your sake, Mr. Lloyd, I'll let it slide-just this once."

With that, he turned and led the Patoajo warriors forward, continuing their advance.

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Andrew did not move. Instead, he turned to Chantelle and warned her coldly, "Same goes for you. This can't happen again."

Chantelle hesitated, guilt flickering across her face. "It was my guy who screwed up, Mr. Lloyd. Please don't be angry."

Andrew was furious. "Isn't the idiot you hired supposed to be some survival expert? Did you see how pathetic and cowardly he was just now? And he had the nerve to provoke Buzz and the Patoajo people.

"Ms. Garcia, you're with the government, and you should know damn well how fierce and proud these mountain tribes can be. If he really pisses them off, not only will this moron of a survival expert be finished, but we might all end up eating bullets too."

Chantelle sighed and changed the subject. "Alright, Mr. Lloyd, I know he screwed up, but now's not the time to start pointing fingers. What the hell was that thing that attacked us?"

Andrew said coldly, "A rare black tiger-in remote areas, they're also called mountain tigers. This type of large cat hasn't been heard of for many years."

Andrew replied coolly, "A rare black tiger. In remote areas, they're sometimes called Dire Tiger. This type of large cat hasn't been heard of for many years. Back in the last century in our country's northeastern regions, these things were as notorious as black bears.

"And when it came to eating people, Dire Tigers were even more feared than bears."

Chantelle let out a shaky breath. "Goodness. So that really was a tiger? It's hard to imagine tigers ever getting that huge."

Andrew nodded. "You're right. Normally, even the biggest tigers don't grow anywhere near that size. Even the Tiger Kings of the northeast don't come close to what we just saw. But..."

He suddenly stopped talking.

Chantelle instinctively pressed, "But what?"

Before Andrew could answer, Magnus, who was trembling in the back, ran forward urgently. "But if certain special circumstances align, tigers really can evolve into man-eating beasts-what we call tiger spirits!"

Even Tiana frowned. "Tiger spirit? You're talking about a tiger turning into a magical beast? Stop spouting nonsense if you don't know what you're talking about."

Magnus shot her a smug look, clearly unfazed. "There's nothing I don't know, and that black tiger back there? Yeah, it was a tiger spirit. Otherwise, it could've never grown that big. Right, Mr. Lloyd? I'm not wrong, am I?"

Andrew ignored him and answered calmly, "A tiger spirit is a creature from legend-supposedly a tiger that becomes sentient, almost human in its intelligence. But legend or not, there's no such thing as a real 'magical' tiger. At least, not in the way stories tell it.

"Still, there are rare cases of tiger evolution. Some grow unusually large and become far more aggressive. They would grow bloodthirsty and dangerously smart. In that sense, calling them 'tiger spirits' isn't that far off."

He added, "Tiger spirits have a particular obsession with human flesh, especially elderly people and children. This is also why in ancient times old people and children couldn't be outside after dark-they were easily targeted by man-eating tigers."

Magnus swallowed hard twice, looking horrified. "And regarding these tiger spirits, whenever one is spotted, it must be hunted down and killed. Otherwise, it will fixate on the humans who saw it, stalking and ambushing them until it devours them.

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"People who have been tasted by it-whose blood and flesh it has sampled need to be especially careful. Tiger spirits have an unimaginable fondness and obsession with human meat only by killing it can you eliminate future trouble and prevent being hunted!"

His eyes gleamed with a strange light as he turned to glare at Ralph.

Ralph felt a chill run down his spine, but he forced himself to laugh it off. "Mr.

Veyne, there you go again with your horror stories. What tiger spirit? As long as I'm properly prepared, I'll blow it to pieces."

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Magnus shook his head. "Young man, ignorance can cost you your life. You're putting too much faith in modern weapons and treating a tiger spirit like an ordinary tiger. In the end, all you'll get is having your bones sucked dry and being devoured alive in agony!"

Ralph sneered. "Is that so? Well, I'm looking forward to that beast coming back to try me again."

Logan suddenly shouted, "There's something in those bushes over there."

Andrew quickly walked over and pushed the brush aside to look. Immediately, a corpse with its face gnawed beyond recognition appeared before everyone. Besides the face, this body's chest and abdomen had been completely hollowed out, all the organs eaten clean.

Magnus turned deathly pale as he exclaimed, "Tiger spirit! That beast from earlier wasn't an ordinary tiger at all! It was a man-eating tiger spirit, I'm sure of it..."

He mumbled, "It's over, Ralph, you're really done for now! Once it's marked you, if you keep staying here, you'll definitely die a horrible death."

Ralph's heart was already racing with fear. Seeing this mutilated corpse made him even more terrified, his whole body shuddering.

"Damn it, if that beast dares come back, just watch me blow it to hell," he yelled to bolster his courage as he grabbed a grenade with one hand.

However, his voice had already changed pitch, betraying how scared he really was inside.

Tiana looked at the rotting corpse and said grimly, "Another one from the Wright family's security detail. Kevin was leading the team, and the Wright family had plenty of skilled fighters. How could someone still die?"

Logan turned to look at everyone. "Folks, maybe we should get out of these mountains tonight?"

Magnus nodded repeatedly. "Yes, yes, yes! Mr. Keller's got the right idea-I agree. Let's get out of here right now."

No one paid attention to him, as all eyes focused on Andrew, waiting for his decision.

Andrew shook his head, saying, "Buzz and his men have already gone up. If we retreat now, getting back into the mountains will be troublesome. Besides, if I'm not mistaken, the forbidden area at Gallow's End heritage hamlet should be our destination for this trip."

Chantelle gasped. "What? Mr. Lloyd, are you saying the treasure location is inside the forbidden area of Gallow's End heritage hamlet?"

Andrew nodded with a dark expression "That's right, it should be

in the forbidden area. The Gallow's End heritage hamlet down the mountain isn't the same Gallow's End from the dynasties recorded on the treasure map. It's a heritage hamlet that was relocated from the mountains after a disaster."

Tiana picked up the thread. "So you're saying the original Gallow's End heritage hamlet was actually in the mountains-what the Patoajo call the forbidden area. That would mean the treasure must be there!"

Andrew said, "Exactly! What we're looking for should be in that forbidden area."

Logan impatiently said, "Then what are we waiting for? Let's go catch up with Buzz and his men-we can be the first to find the treasure!"

Everyone fell silent. They all felt uneasy, remembering how, when they first entered the mountains, Axel, the village chief, and Buzz's warriors had avoided that forbidden area like the plague.

Now here they were, in the dead of night, actually planning to head into the very heart of it. It just seemed suicidal.

The treasure was certainly tempting, but no one had expected Gallow's End to be so terrifying and sinister.

They had not even seen the treasure yet, and several people were already dead. Moreover, in these dark, remote mountains, there was a man-eating Dire Tiger lurking about.

No matter how they looked at it, this mission was a death trap. Whether or not they would actually find the treasure, no one could say for sure. However, if they pushed forward, getting torn apart by that tiger or running into something even worse was very much on the table.

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At that moment, Andrew casually reminded them, "Buzz and his men's torches are almost out of our sight. If we're going into the mountains, we need to leave right now. Following them gives us backup. If you're all scared, then let's head back home."

Chantelle quickly made up her mind and said, "I think we can't turn back now. Kevin and Rafael are already ahead of us. Right now, they've probably already entered the forbidden area. If we go back home, then when we try again tomorrow, everything might be over."

Tiana gritted her teeth. "Andy, you lead the way. Let's hurry and catch up. Anyone who wants to go home can do as they please, but I'm not going back."

Logan said, "Andy, let's go. We came all this way, so we might as well see what's there."

Andrew nodded. "Alright, since none of you object, we'll keep moving forward."

After taking two steps, he suddenly turned back and looked at Ralph with a mocking smile. "Mr. Sutton, you're supposed to be the most impressive survival expert in our group. Seems like you'd be the perfect guy to take point."

Ralph laughed dryly. "What are you saying, Mr. Lloyd? I'm injured, so I'll just walk in the middle of the group. Leading is more suitable for capable people like you, Mr. Lloyd."

Andrew rolled his eyes. "Coward."

Ralph was furious, his face burning with humiliation. In his heart, he thought bitterly, 'I may be a coward, but you, Andrew, will soon be a corpse. Let's see how much longer you can act smug!'

In the darkness of the mountain forest, where rocks and trees intertwined, Andrew led his group forward quickly and caught up with Buzz and the other Patoajo warriors.



"Two more miles and we'll reach the edge of the forbidden area," Buzz informed Andrew directly.

After everything that had happened, his attitude toward the outsiders had softened quite a bit. Or rather, his respect for Andrew had grown.

Courage meant everything among the Patoajo, and in Buzz's eyes, Andrew had proved himself a true warrior.

Andrew struck up a casual tone. "Buzz, when we reach the boundary, and if there's no one there, are you planning to enter the restricted area yourselves?"

Buzz's face turned deadly serious. "Mr. Lloyd, don't even think about going in. Trust me—curiosity kills more than just cats. And if curiosity doesn't get you, greed will. I'd hate to see someone as bold and capable as you end up dead in that place."

Andrew nodded in agreement. "Fair point, Buzz. I was just asking. If it's really that dangerous, I don't care if there's a mountain of treasure in there—I'm not walking into my own grave."

Buzz nodded. "It's best that you think that way. Finding the edge of the forbidden area is the limit of what my men and I can do. If those city folks are still alive, we'll rescue them and bring them back. If not, then I'm sorry, but I'll take my Patoajo warriors and head straight back to the heritage hamlet down the mountain."

Logan could not help asking, "Buzz, the Patoajo people always seem terrified of that forbidden area. I'm really curious if there are ghosts in there. Or are there wild beasts? Or something worse?"

Buzz's voice trembled. "There are no ghosts in there, and no wild beasts either. What's in there is something more terrifying than ghosts or wild beasts."

Logan pressed on, "What is it?"

Buzz waved his hand, put his head down, and kept walking without saying another word. No matter how much Logan pestered him for information, he would not say another sentence.

Mohave, who was walking behind the other Patoajo warriors, glanced at Andrew with hesitation, then finally could not help saying, "Mr. Lloyd, actually, what's really dangerous in the forbidden area is—"

Just as he was about to reveal the

truth, Buzz shouted, "Shut up,

Mohave! Have you forgotten the Chief Flintspire's instructions?

Nothing about what's inside

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Gallow's End's forbidden area can be

told to outsiders, understand?"

Mohave immediately dropped his head. "Yes, Captain Buzz. I-I won't say another word!"