

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

1516-1520

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Mohave glanced at Andrew, looking apologetic.

Andrew chuckled. "It's alright, Mohave. If you're not allowed to talk about it, don't worry about it."

After that, silence fell over the group as they continued their trek. A string of torches and flashlights flickered through the dense forest.

Andrew glanced back and saw that the lights from Gallow's End heritage hamlet below had dwindled to just two or three tiny specks-probably the last streetlamps still glowing in the village.

They were deep in the wilderness now, far removed from any trace of civilization.

They passed through a rugged canyon between two massive peaks, and over three hours later, Andrew finally spotted something up ahead.

Beneath the starlit sky, nestled between towering cliffs, was a hidden mountain valley. It was not large, maybe the size of a small village, but its sudden appearance in this remote terrain took everyone's breath away.

"Who could have imagined there'd be a place like this in these endless mountains?" Chantelle murmured in awe.

Tiana whispered, "This must be it... the forbidden zone. The old site of Gallow's End heritage hamlet."

Buzz's voice was quiet. "The original Gallow's End stood right here. Back during the Fallen Crimson Dynasty, when the world outside was wrapped in chaos- foreign invaders, warlords ravaging Etharia-we lived in peace. Our village stayed untouched, calm, and content."

He hissed, "But then... everything changed. It was all taken from us."

Suddenly, a burst of gunfire erupted from the valley below. The shots were frantic and chaotic-like a group caught off guard and desperate to survive.

Buzz's expression changed as he ordered, "Patoajo warriors, enter the valley immediately. But remember-absolutely do not set foot inside the forbidden area!" Andrew said quickly, "Follow Buzz and his men, use their firepower for cover. Before we figure out what dangerous things are in this Gallow's End forbidden area, we absolutely cannot rush in recklessly!"

Chantelle chimed in, "Mr. Lloyd, judging by these gunshots, it seems the Wright family's group has run into serious trouble. Should we lend them a hand?"

Andrew remained expressionless. "Their survival isn't our responsibility. We focus on keeping ourselves alive."

Chantelle shuddered and frowned but did not say much more. However, it was clear she did not entirely agree with Andrew's order.

The valley was right in front of them, but the path down was treacherous and steep. It was just a narrow mountain trail.

It took Andrew's group a full 20 minutes to reach the valley floor. During the descent, Chantelle even twisted her ankle and had to lean on Logan to keep pace. At the base, they saw the crumbling shelter of a long-abandoned village. In the darkness, everything was pitch black, making it impossible to see many details.

Andrew did not rush ahead but stayed close behind Buzz and his men. The Patoajo warriors were familiar with this place, so following them could not be wrong. He was not taking any chances.

As soon as the group stepped into the village outskirts, the thundering gunfire suddenly went dead silent as if it had never happened at all. However, the echoes lingering in their ears and the sharp gunshots they had just heard made everyone certain it was not an illusion.

"What's going on? Why did the gunfire suddenly stop?" Magnus croaked, throat dry.

Ralph, the survival expert, was already pale with fear and answered pathetically, "Could it be that they were all wiped out?"

No one paid attention to him, but undoubtedly, everyone was thinking the same thing, including Andrew.

The Wright family people were probably all wiped out.

Just as that grim idea took hold,

several figures came stumbling out of the village's front gate-tripping, falling, running like hell. They looked like men fleeing from the devil himself.

"Ghosts!"

"There are ghosts in there-run! The whole place is full of ghosts! You can't kill them!"

The screams came from every direction, raw and filled with absolute terror.

Andrew looked and saw the person in front was covered in blood and deathly pale —it was unmistakably Kevin, the head of the Wright family.

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

"Mr. Wright Senior, what happened?" Logan rushed forward to steady Kevin and asked urgently, "Where's the rest of your security team? Why are there only a few of you left?"

Kevin was still clutching a pistol, completely out of ammo. Blood covered his face, arms, and chest. No one could tell whether it was his or someone else's.

"Logan? Andrew? It's you..." Kevin exhaled heavily, his voice shaky. "We need to go now. Get the hell away from this cursed place."

He wiped the blood from his face, visibly rattled. "Leave now. I'm serious. Without heavy firepower, this place is a goddamn nightmare."

Andrew frowned. "What exactly did you run into?"

Kevin's mouth was dry as he swallowed hard. His voice trembled. "We don't even know what the hell they were. They were insanely fast and extremely bloodthirsty, and they seemed to be able to smell the living.

"Most importantly, they weren't afraid of death. Regular pistols can't kill them unless you get a headshot."

Kevin was a martial king, yet he was visibly traumatized.

Chantelle, Natasha, and Ralph had not even seen what had attacked them, yet their faces had already gone pale. Even Tiana, who had been obsessively focused on the treasure, was starting to second-guess everything. Her expression turned ghost-white.

"Fast and bulletproof? Is it a zombie? Did something crawl out of a grave?" Logan suddenly blurted out.

This scared the others even more, making their faces turn white.

Chantelle gritted her teeth and hissed. "Mr. Keller, don't talk nonsense. I think you've been reading too many tomb-raiding novels. Where would zombies come from? Don't be superstitious."

Logan shook his head. "I'm not talking nonsense—I'm making a logical deduction. They can't be killed and move very fast—if they're not zombies, what are they?"

Andrew waved his hand. "Creatures that can't be killed and move very fast aren't unheard of. For instance, that black tiger from earlier."

Looking at Kevin, Andrew asked, "So you're saying your people didn't get a clear look at what attacked you, right?"

As Kevin recalled, his face was full of lingering fear. "It's too dark inside that abandoned village, and we weren't paying attention at the time. Plus, the attack came so fast that everyone scattered and ran as soon as trouble started. We really didn't see clearly what those things were."

Andrew frowned. Kevin was supposed to be a martial king and head of a family, yet he had escaped like a broken man. Moreover, they had lost more than ten guards without even identifying the threat. It was completely pathetic.

Before Andrew could say anything more, one of the remaining Wright family guards suddenly spoke up, his voice shaking. "I know what they were..."

Everyone was shocked and immediately looked toward the speaker. Like Kevin, this person was also covered in blood and had a terrifying complexion.

However, his face was not filled with fear—it was filled with disbelief as if he had seen something that shattered his understanding of the world.

Andrew asked, "Captain Tora, you know what they were?"

Tora was the captain of the Wright family's security team. He was the second strongest fighter after Kevin and also one of the Wright family's survivors.

"That's right, I know what they were." Tora nodded, looked at the others, and his Adam's apple bobbed: "Those should be evil creatures recorded in ancient books -Blood Ghouls."

Hearing the name, everyone froze. Mouths fell open in disbelief and horror.

Chantelle could not help herself. "Captain Tora, please. That's impossible. Creatures like that are myths, just legends. They don't actually exist."

Tora's face darkened. "Ms. Garcia, I've lived through hell tonight. Do I look like I'm in the mood to joke?"

With that, he stormed up to her, yanked open his bloodstained shirt, and revealed the gaping wound across his chest. The flesh was torn wide, bloody and mangled, and the skin around the gash had gone a sickly, rotting green.

The sight alone made several people recoil.

Tora gritted his teeth as he

explained, "This was from the Blood Ghoul. And in return, I drove my blade straight into its chest. But it didn't flinch-not even a little. If

hadn't dodged fast enough, that thing would've ripped my heart out."

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Tora was truly tough, enduring the excruciating pain as he pulled his shirt back to cover the wound.

In the crowd, Magnus suddenly shrieked in a high-pitched voice, "You're done for, absolutely finished. Once you're injured by a Blood Ghoul, there's only one way out-death."

He added, "No, it's not just as simple as dying. Your body will rot by necrotic venom, and you'll eventually suffer a fate worse than death until you become a mindless walking corpse that only knows bloodthirst and killing..."

As he spoke, he backed away, his eyes bulging with terror as he put distance between himself and Tora.

Ralph called out, "Mr. Veyne, are you serious?"

Magnus cursed, "Of course, I'm serious! It's 100% real! Have you forgotten what my profession is? I'm a geomancy specialist. Dragon-seeking, gold-parting, tomb-tracking, crypt-delving-omens, astronomy, terrain-there's nothing I don't know."

He continued, "Blood Ghouls are rare, sure. But they're real. They've been born out of ancient, cursed tombs sealed for centuries. If one bites you, it doesn't matter who you are. Even an immortal would rot from the inside and turn into one of them."

By the end of his rant, Magnus' voice was shaking uncontrollably, and he stumbled back even farther from Tora.

After some rustling among the group, a musket after musket was pointed at Tora. Kevin exploded. "You damn Patoajo. What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

This sudden move also stunned Andrew and the others.

Buzz looked at Tora and said grimly, "Sorry, but that old man's right. You're indeed beyond saving. There's no way out once you're infected by necrotic venom."

Tora's face darkened. "Put the guns down. I'll leave. I'll go back to the city and get treated."

Buzz shook his head. "Like I said, it's useless. In less than an hour, you'll turn. The necrotic venom will spread through you until you're neither alive nor dead, just another rotting monster. So I'm sorry. But we have to put you down now before it's too late."

Kevin exploded with rage, "He's one of my people. I dare any of you to touch him!"

Chantelle shouted, "Captain Buzz, you can't just kill someone! That's against the law!"

The torchlight flickered across Buzz's grim face as he chuckled. Then, he replied with a chilling calmness, "Against the law? Ma'am, your laws don't reach out here. If we don't stop him now, once he turns... he'll tear through every last one of us." śwnovel

Kevin spat, his voice full of rage. "Bullshit! That's just superstition-quit trying to scare people here. Could this venom really be more frightening than rabies or infectious diseases?"

In this tense standoff between both sides, Andrew spoke up. "That's right, necrotic venom is indeed more frightening than rabies or infectious diseases. To a certain extent, it is incurable."

Everyone suddenly turned their heads and stared at Andrew in shock.

Kevin growled, "Andrew, when did you become a lapdog for these Patoajo?"

Chantelle gritted her teeth. "Mr. Lloyd-are you really siding with them? Are you seriously okay with Buzz executing someone in cold blood?"

Andrew replied coldly, "I'm not picking sides. I'm just telling you the truth-necrotic venom doesn't give second chances. Sometimes, ignorance clouds your judgment. That's all."

Chantelle snapped, "I don't believe it. And I won't allow this kind of barbarism to happen in front of me. Mr. Wright Senior, your people have already died for this treasure. Take your team and leave now!"

Kevin's face twisted with indecision. However, before he could say a word, Tora let out a guttural moan.

His whole body seized violently, convulsing as a grotesque cracking sound echoed from within. Then, his eyes began to cloud over before turning blood-red and glowing like a feral beast.

"Oh no! He's turning! Everyone, get back!" Magnus roared, his voice shrill with panic.

Chaos broke loose, and everyone scattered in every direction.

Chapter 1519

"Take him down!" Buzz barked.

To everyone's surprise, Kevin also shouted, "Blood Ghoul! Yes-that's exactly what it looks like! Quick! Kill him now, before it's too late!"

Chantelle yelled, horrified, "Mr. Wright, are you insane? He's one of your own men!"

Kevin roared back, "I couldn't care less about that now! Even if he is from the Wright family, we can't take any chances! Kill him now, damn it! Do it!"

Chantelle felt a chill crawl up her spine. She never had any deep ties to the Wright family, but her years under Derek's guidance in the government had instilled a strict line when it came to taking a human life.

To see Kevin, the head of the Wright family, so quick to sacrifice one of his own, rattled her to the core.

"No... please... don't kill me..." Tora had dropped to his knees, holding his head, his voice ragged and confused. "I don't want to die..."

Kevin snarled. "Tora, don't blame me for this. Blame your bad luck. You know what Blood Ghouls are, and you know how terrifying Blood Ghouls are we can't keep you around."

The Patoajo warriors aimed at Tora's head, about to shoot.

"Wait!" Andrew's voice cracked through the air, sharp with frustration.

Buzz's brow furrowed. "Mr. Lloyd, what is it?"

Andrew stepped forward, standing right in front of Tora without hesitation. "I might still be able to save him."

Buzz froze, stunned. "Mr. Lloyd, get back! If he turns, he'll drag you down with him!"

The rest of the group stared in disbelief as Andrew walked up to Tora. Moreover, he actually wanted to heal him.

"Andrew, step away! He's a Wright family person. If he dies, that's their problem!"

Magnus snapped, "You're out of mind. No one survives necrotic your e

venom it can only be eliminated by killing Andrew, you're courting death-get away while he hasn't completely turned!"

Ralph scoffed from the back. "Let him he likes to show off and play hero. Even the Patoajo people can't do anything, so let's see what he can do!"

Andrew ignored them, and with two silver needles in his hand, he stabbed them straight into the sides of Tora's head.

Tora trembled, his face full of pain, grabbing Andrew's hand. "Mr. Lloyd, please, save my life!"

Andrew looked into his eyes and said, "I'll do my best, but whether you can survive depends on your willpower and luck."

Tora was moved to tears. "I know your medical skills are extraordinary, Mr. Lloyd. It's fine as long as you try your best, I'll be eternally grateful!"

Andrew said no more, took out all his

into all the meridians around Tora's body? Then, using a sharp fingernail like a blade, he slit open Tora's wrist.

cales, and inserted them

"Necrotic venom attacks through the bloodstream first," Andrew said as he worked. "Then it moves to the gut, and finally, the brain."

He slipped a detox pill between Tora's lips, forcing him to swallow. After that, he

had Buzz use hemp rope to tie Tora up and bind him to a large tree.

"Mr. Lloyd, this is really too risky!" Buzz was still worried, his expression very serious.

Andrew said flatly, "I wouldn't have stepped in if I didn't have a backup plan."

"What backup plan?"

Andrew glanced at him. "If he turns and becomes a full Blood Ghoul, I can kill him instantly."

Buzz fell silent, staring at Andrew with suspicion and uncertainty. He could not help but wonder if Andrew actually had exceptional fighting skills.

"Logan, go get a fire going. Whether it's wild beasts or Blood Ghouls, they all fear light and heat. Natasha get out the rations-we're making camp and having a meal."

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

After dealing with Tora's situation, Andrew began giving orders to his own people. As for the others, he could not be bothered with them.

Chantelle followed suit and said, "Mr. Sutton, Mr. Veyne, go start a fire too and prepare food."

After speaking, she walked over to Andrew. "Mr. Lloyd, I thought you—"

Andrew cut her off with a cold smirk. "You thought I'd turn a blind eye and let him die, didn't you?"

Chantelle gave a sheepish smile. "No, not exactly. I just assumed you believed Tora was beyond saving."

Andrew said flatly, "Right now, there's still no solid cure for necrotic venom. But at the end of the day, he's still a living, breathing man. And Tora? He earned my respect—loyal, fearless, no nonsense. So if there's even a sliver of a chance, I'll take it."

Chantelle smiled softly. "Governor McCormick always said you were a man of principle, and he wasn't wrong."

Andrew snorted. "Now that I've stepped in to save someone, you're full of praise, Ms. Garcia. But if I'd kept quiet, you probably would've lumped me in with Kevin and Buzz—cold-blooded and selfish."

Chantelle shook her head, firm. "Mr. Lloyd, I've never thought that about you. I've always known you're not cut from the same cloth as Kevin."

Andrew waved her off. "Enough talk—go handle your team. We move at first light. Until then, nobody's going anywhere near that cursed place."

He took the dried meat Natasha had handed over and dropped down to sit on the cold earth, tearing into it hungrily.

They had not had a proper meal since entering Gallow's End heritage hamlet, and after a full night of hiking and danger, Andrew was starving.

Kevin wandered over, arms crossed, letting out a gruff snort. "Andy, when the sun comes up, my family's team moves with yours. This cursed dump killed so many of my people. I'm not leaving until it's wiped off the map."

Andrew did not respond. He just tore off another hunk of meat and chewed it slowly.

Kevin had nothing with him, and he was starving. He shamelessly said, "Hey, throw me some of that! I'm starving here."

Without missing a beat, Andrew moved the dried meat away and gave him a crooked smile. "Kevin, freeloading like that's a no-go."

Kevin was stunned. Then, his face darkened. "Andrew, what the hell is that supposed to mean? I'm the head of the Wright family and your sworn brother. You really won't even spare me a bite?"

Andrew sneered. "Of course not. Or have you forgotten, dear 'brother'? You're the one who severed that bond not too long ago."

Kevin's face twisted with anger. "Fine! Don't feed me. You're petty as hell, you know that?"

Andrew shrugged. "You're not wrong. I am petty. And I've got a list of people who crossed me. Also, when the sun's up, you can lead your team wherever you want, but you're not joining us."

Kevin's eyes narrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Andrew gave him a cold stare. "Don't act clueless now. Your men are nearly wiped out. Do you think gonna let you piggyback on my

team after everything? You mor

me

to carry your losses and hand you the prize? Not happening."

Kevin clenched his jaw. "Andrew, if you're planning to cut us out and hog the treasure for yourself, think again. You don't want to team up? Fine. I'll take the last of my men and search for the entrance ourselves!"

Andrew raised an eyebrow, then gave a mocking wave. "Be my guest."

Kevin stormed off, face dark with fury. He regrouped with the last three survivors of his security team. They huddled together, without fire, without food, trembling in the cold, and were clearly having a miserable time.

ŝnovel

whe