

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

1521-1525

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The valley was surrounded on all sides by steep cliffs. The night was dark, the wind was howling, and of course, there was no cell signal. Even if they wanted to call for a food delivery guy to save the day, there was no chance of that happening.

Buzz walked up to Andrew and said, "Mr. Lloyd, once the sun comes up, we're heading straight back to the village down the mountain."

Andrew smiled and replied, "Buzz, once it's light out, I want to head inside and take a look."

Buzz's face changed. "Mr. Lloyd, you're planning to go into the forbidden area? Have you lost your mind?"

Andrew's smile did not waver. "Fortune favors the bold, and I want to give it a try."

Buzz shook his head hard. "Mr. Lloyd, why won't you understand? There's no treasure in there no hidden vault, no gold mine, nothing. You city folks have all been deceived. Chief Flintspire already explained it clearly. If Gallow's End really had a secret stash, do you think it'd be waiting around for you to find it?"

Andrew replied calmly, "Buzz, you make a good point, but since we've already come this far, I'll regret it if I don't go in and see for myself."

Buzz stared at Andrew for a long moment. Then, he sighed and said, "It seems no matter how much I try to persuade you, Mr. Lloyd, you won't listen. Fine, if you want to go in and look, then go ahead. But if anything happens to you in there, I'm sorry, my people can't help you."

Andrew gave a small nod. "Buzz, when the sun rises, take Mohave and the rest back down. I don't want the Patoaja to get involved in this any further."

Buzz got up and was about to head back to his people.

Suddenly, he stopped and turned around. He looked puzzled as he said, "Mr. Lloyd, there's something I just can't figure out. You don't strike me as someone greedy, reckless, or impulsive. On the contrary, you seem sharp. Calm, thoughtful, and always in control."

"So why would someone like you walk straight into danger, knowing the odds are stacked against you?"

Andrew gave him a dazzling smile. "Buzz, let me ask you a question. Has the heritage hamlet of Gallow's End always been dangerous throughout its entire history?"

Buzz blinked, then shook his head. "Of course not. Once upon a time, this place was a real paradise. My ancestors hid out here during wartime. They lived in peace totally off the grid."

Andrew replied, "Exactly. It was a peaceful, secluded little town, like something out of a storybook. Everyone lived quiet, happy lives. So what happened? Why did it suddenly turn into a cursed place? Why did people flee and never dare come back?"

Buzz seemed stumped, and his face went blank for a moment. Eventually, he spoke up again. "Didn't Chief Flintspire already tell you? Our village was hit by a huge disaster. A lot of people died, so we had no choice but to relocate."

Andrew chuckled lightly. "Let's hope that's the whole truth."

Buzz just shook his head. He figured there was no point in arguing with Andrew anymore, and he walked off.

In the darkness, Andrew's eyes clouded over. The waters of this Gallow's End heritage hamlet ran deeper than he had imagined.

First of all, where were Rafael and the others? They still had not shown a single trace.

Second, Andrew was certain that there was definitely something off about Axel.

Suddenly, a panicked scream rang out from the distance. "Oh no! Oh god! Mr. Veyne... he's gone! He's disappeared!"

Everyone froze, wide-eyed in shock.

Andrew shot up to his feet and barked, "Spread out now and start searching immediately!"

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Ten minutes later, every inch of ground outside the ruined heritage hamlet had been turned upside down. But still, there was no sign of Magnus.

It was that eerie hour just before dawn, the darkest stretch of night. In this isolated valley, the only light sources were three campfires and a few scattered flashlights everything else was swallowed by pitch black.

Chantelle's face was twisted with frustration. "Mr. Sutton, weren't you just with Mr. Veyne the whole time? How the hell did he disappear like that? What the hell were you even doing?"

Ralph looked panicked. "Ms. Garcia, that's unfair! How am I supposed to know?"

Chantelle was fuming. For the first time, she had to admit that Andrew had been right all along. This so-called survival expert really was a useless joke.

Andrew snapped, clearly out of patience. "Ralph, answer me—were you with Magnus before he went missing or not?"

Ralph showed a thoughtful expression and said, "When Ms. Garcia told us to start the fire and eat, Mr. Veyne said he wanted to go relieve himself. I didn't think much of it at the time and just told him to be careful.

"Then I saw him walk behind that big rock over there. After waiting a few minutes and seeing no movement, I figured he was probably taking a dump. So, I waited a few more minutes, but he still hadn't come out.

"As a wilderness survival expert, I immediately realized something was wrong. Sure enough, when I ran behind the big rock to check, there wasn't a trace of him anywhere."

Logan said mockingly, "Wow, some survivalist you are! You waited a few minutes and then waited some more. Calling yourself a survival expert is a joke! For all we know, Mr. Veyne is dead because of you!"

Ralph's face turned bright red with embarrassment. He wanted to argue back, but could not find the words to defend himself.

Chantelle turned toward Andrew. "Mr. Lloyd, what now?"

Andrew scoffed. "What do you mean 'what now'? We've already searched everything we could. We've done what we can. This just means Mr Veyne had terrible luck. I warned you not to bring those two along but you didn't listen. And now he's gone, and you're asking me what to do? Too late for that."

Chantelle was speechless. She had been hit hard by his words and had nothing to say in return.

Just then, a timid voice cut through the silence. "I actually think there's a chance Mr. Veyne is still alive. It's just that we'd probably have to search inside the forbidden area—there might still be a chance to save him."

Everyone turned, stunned, and looked in the direction of the voice.

Mohave, the young Patoaja boy, looked visibly nervous. It was as if even suggesting this had put him in a very difficult position.

Buzz roared angrily, "Mohave, shut your mouth! Who told you to butt in? Mr. Veyne has obviously been

dragged into the forbidden area net

He's as good as dead. Whatever could drag away a full-grown man like that would either be a Blood Ghoul or that beast."

He added, "But regardless of which one it was, he's as good as dead."

Andrew frowned. "Buzz, didn't you say the Blood Ghouls won't leave the forbidden area?"

Buzz's expression darkened. He

grunted, "The Blood Ghouls won't step outside, but that doesn't mean other creatures won't. And Mr. Lloyd, don't forget—there's also a massive black tiger out there. That beast has slaughtered just as many of the Patoaja as the Blood Ghouls have."

Andrew did not say anything, deep in thought.

However, Kevin gasped. "Buzz, are you saying this cursed place has more than

just the Blood Ghouls roaming around?"

Buzz's expression went stiff. His lips moved slowly as he muttered, "Yeah... there are definitely other evil things here."

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"If it were just the Blood Ghouls, my men wouldn't be afraid to step into the forbidden area," Buzz muttered.

As he spoke, his face turned pale, as if he remembered something horrifying.

Tiana pressed him aggressively, "Tell us what other evil creatures are hiding in this cursed place?"

Buzz shook his head weakly. "Stop asking. Even if you keep pushing, I won't say another word. This is the misfortune of our Gallow's End heritage hamlet... a punishment from above.

"The only thing I can do for you is urge you to return to the village below with me at daybreak, then leave this place forever. If you don't, what's waiting for you won't even leave you a body to bury. Trust me, what's inside will break you. You'll suffer pain and fear far worse than death itself."

He finished speaking, but his hands trembled around the grip of his musket. Without another word, he turned and walked back to the fire pit, sitting alone, dazed and silent.

Logan gritted his teeth and said, "Would it kill these dim-witted Patoaja to spill the truth? Since they know there's danger inside this ancient site, why won't they just tell us what it is?"

Kevin grinned. "Mr. Keller, how about we work together? If these backward

Patoaja won't cooperate, then maybe they'll start talking with a gun barrel shoved down their throats."

Logan glanced toward Andrew and shook his head. "Mr. Wright Senior, your offer's tempting, I'll admit that. But no. That's not a line I'm willing to cross."

Kevin laughed coldly, "You want treasure but won't get your hands dirty. You need to be ruthless to be a real man-you're all just a bunch of cowards."

Andrew shot him a cold look. "If you so much as think about harming the Patoaja, I'll cripple you right here and now. We're in the middle of nowhere no one would stop me."

Kevin gritted his teeth, his face dark with anger, "Andrew, don't think that just because most of my men are dead, a small-time nobody like you can act tough with me."

Andrew did not even bother replying. He had no time to waste on a barking dog. If he wanted to, he could take Kevin out right now, and no one would bat an eye.

However, with daylight approaching, entering the forbidden area was the top priority. He did not want to waste his energy on irrelevant people.

Magnus had just disappeared like that, and no one knew if he was dead or alive. Truth be told, that old man had been a jittery mess from the start-nervous, frail, and Shaking with every step.

Whatever had taken him, Andrew was certain that Magnus' chances were close to zero.

Chantelle returned to her fire pit and sat down with a huff, shooting Ralph a glare. "Mr. Sutton, your so-called survival skills are just flat-out disappointing. I remember how you hyped yourself up like you were the best of the best."

Ralph gripped his curved knife tightly, his face red with anger. "Ms. Garcia, that's not fair. Everyone was on edge out there. I didn't think Mr. Veyne would just vanish into thin air while taking a piss!"

Chantelle scoffed. "Spare me. The bottom line is that you failed horribly this time. When we get back to Blumedale, I'll be formally requesting your company to halve your compensation."

Ralph's eyes flashed with a malicious glint. However, he held back and remained silent.

Around another campfire, Logan, Natasha, Jerry, Tiana, and Andrew sat in a circle.

Tiana suddenly said, "Andy, what are you thinking about?"

Under the firelight's glow, Andrew's face showed a calm smile. "I'm just wondering where the Blood Ghouls on this site came from in the first place."

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Jerry frowned and said, "I heard a Torasesy master talk about Blood Ghouls several years ago. Only places with extreme negative energy and great evil can breed such creatures."

He continued, "Usually, you'd find them in ancient burial pits or sealed underground catacombs. But this valley was once home to the ancestors of Gallow's End. By all logic, it should've been a place of peace, not a breeding ground for something like a Blood Ghoul."

Tiana snorted coldly, "If you ask me, it's all just supernatural nonsense. We should just prepare properly and level this entire valley. Then, whatever Blood Ghouls or zombies are here will all be dead."

Andrew shook his head and replied, "Violence and brute force won't solve

anything. If we use high-powered explosives to flatten this valley, we might never find the entrance to the treasure."

Logan speculated, "What if the Blood Ghouls that attacked the Wright family... were the corpses of the original Gallow's End settlers? Think about it didn't Chief Flintspire say that Gallow's End suffered a great disaster, and that's why they relocated to the current village?"

"Maybe a lot of people died during that event. All that death and resentment built up... and eventually turned the forbidden area into a nest of Blood Ghouls?"

Natasha's face turned pale as she edged closer to Andrew. "I think that's exactly what happened..."

Andrew gently patted her back in reassurance. "Don't be afraid. It's not like what Logan described."

Logan narrowed his eyes. "Andy, you saying I'm wrong?"

Andrew snorted. "Absolutely. Blood Ghouls don't form just from resentment or death. Those kinds of energies might create other dark creatures, but not a Blood Ghoul.

"A Blood Ghoul is mindless-all it does is kill. And for one to form, it needs incredibly rare conditions like a sealed tomb that hasn't seen sunlight for over 1000 years, or a mass grave that's had corpses piled up for centuries.

"But the most important thing is this: Blood Ghouls fear sunlight. They don't appear above ground. This valley was once a thriving settlement. There's no way

a Blood Ghoul would just be roaming around on the surface."

Logan crossed his arms stubbornly. "That's easy to explain. Someone controlled it. Think about it, the Wright family members were killed last night, right? It was nighttime with no sunlight, so of course the Blood Ghouls wouldn't be afraid!"

Tiana snorted. "Controlled by someone? Mr. Keller, are you seriously suggesting

Blood Ghouls take commands? That's ridiculous."

Logan chuckled awkwardly, realizing he had gone too far with that one.

However, Andrew spoke again.

"Actually, Logan's not completely wrong. The Blood Ghoul that

attacked last night might've actually been summoned to kill on purpose."

The others all froze, staring at Andrew in disbelief.

"Andy, I was just talking nonsense. Y-You're not actually buying into that, are you?" Logan stammered.

Andrew gave the group a long,

steady look. His voice was calm, but

his eyes were sharp. "I'm not buying into it I'm analyzing it. And my theory is getting very close to the truth."

Tiana leaned in. "Stop with the suspense, Andy. Just tell us who you think is behind the Blood Ghoul?"

Andrew shook his head. "Right now, I don't have solid proof. So, I'm not naming names yet."

Tiana looked frustrated. "No, I want to know. I want to know right now, Andrew, you need to tell-"

Before she could finish her sentence, she froze and stared behind Andrew.

Through the gap between the two mountains, a bright ray of sunlight was streaming directly into the valley.

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On the other side of the camp, Chantelle suddenly exclaimed, "Everyone, pull yourself together! Look, it's sunrise!"

The sun rose from the east, casting a golden blaze across the valley and washing away the last traces of darkness. Bathed in daylight, the valley cradled between the mountains finally revealed its true face.

Andrew climbed to a platform with a good view and looked down.

The Gallow's End heritage hamlet ruins were completely dilapidated. Now fully exposed under the sun, he could easily see that this place, which Buzz and his people feared so much, was actually just a small area of stone buildings.

Building houses with stone in ancient times made perfect sense since they were durable and weatherproof.

In the center of these mountains, there was nothing but plenty of stone. Still, stone houses were hardly comfortable. They were freezing in winter, stifling in summer, and terrible at keeping out moisture.

From this, one could tell that although the Gallow's End ancestors had hidden here to escape wars and lived peaceful lives, their living conditions had been anything but easy.

And there had always been a saying-wherever poverty and hardship lingered, strange things tended to take root.

Strange things like monsters, curses, and phenomena that defied reason or science.

Why the treasure of the Fallen Crimson Dynasty would be connected to such a secluded place was a question that had always puzzled Andrew. Since he could not figure it out, he chose not to dwell on it.

Back in the valley, Andrew told Natasha, Jerry, and Logan to start packing up. It was time to head into the heritage hamlet and uncover the truth for themselves.

Buzz, along with Mohave and the other Patoaja warriors, slung their muskets over their shoulders, kicked out their fire, and picked up their canteens and rations to begin the journey down the mountain.

Buzz said solemnly, "Mr. Lloyd, my religion teaches that all human troubles stem from greed, anger, ignorance, and resentment. The root of human suffering, aside from birth, aging, sickness, and death, is nothing but greed and desire!

"You're a man of wisdom and courage, Mr. Lloyd. That's why I just don't understand why you'd still be clinging to something like this."

Andrew thought Buzz was going to try persuading him to go down the untain. Unexpectedly, after, his words of advice, Buzz handed over his canteen and some dried food.

Besides that, he also left several torches and muskets. These

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supplies would be completely

useless in a big city, but they were absolutely crucial in this wilderness.

Moreover, the Patoaja were poor, and muskets were the weapons they depended on for survival. Yet, they had left two of them for Andrew.

It said everything about who Buzz and his people truly were good, kind-hearted souls.

"Take care, Mr. Lloyd!" Buzz said.

Andrew nodded with genuine gratitude. "You too, Buzz. And don't worry if it gets too dangerous, we'll turn back and return to the village."

Buzz simply waved him off and walked away without another word.

Mohave stepped up to Andrew's side. After glancing around to make sure no one was paying attention, he whispered, "Mr. Lloyd, there's something I've been meaning to

you wanted to say it last night, but Captain Buzz got so angry, I didn't dare."

Andrew smiled gently. "It's okay, Mohave. Go ahead."

This kid had a good heart, and Andrew had already made up his mind that when

all this was over, he would sponsor him to go study in the city.

"Mr. Lloyd, that Mr. Veyne you were looking for yesterday he wasn't actually dragged away. It looked more like he ran into the forbidden zone on his own."

The moment those words left Mohave's mouth, Andrew's eyes narrowed sharply.