

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

1526-1530

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Mohave scratched his head, seeming a bit confused himself. "Last night, when everyone was eating, it was very dark, so no one noticed Mr. Veyne. But I've always had sharp eyesight since I was a kid. Even in the dark, I can still see pretty well.

"Mr. Veyne didn't actually stop to relieve himself behind that boulder. He just pretended to. He kept sneaking glances back toward your group like he was checking if anyone was watching. Once he was sure no one saw him, he slipped away, heading straight into the forbidden area."

Andrew's heart skipped a beat as he pressed further, "Mohave, are you certain that he voluntarily snuck into the forbidden zone?"

Mohave nodded confidently, "Mr. Lloyd, you have to believe me. Mr. Veyne definitely ran into the forbidden area on his own. He looked panicked-tripped a few times on the way in, but didn't care. He just kept running like crazy and kept looking over his shoulder like he was terrified someone might catch him."

Andrew took a deep breath and patted the boy's head. "Mohave, go on back with Captain Buzz and the others. Thank you. I know everything I need now. If I make it out of the forbidden area alive, I'll come find you in the village. When that happens, I'll send you to school in the city."

Mohave's eyes lit up, and his voice cracked with excitement. "Mr. Lloyd, are you serious?"

Andrew chuckled. "Mohave, I couldn't be more serious. Now go. Time to head down the mountain. Oh, and when you find your dad, tell him to change that ridiculous Holtrien name of yours."

Mohave turned to go but kept glancing back. "Change my Holtrien name? Lucas Mainse... I kind of like it... It sounds cool."

Andrew looked stern. "Mohave, you've got a decent face, but you're not quite handsome enough to carry that name. Honestly, I don't want you using it. Just in case you grow up to be the type that breaks girls' hearts."

Mohave did not really get it, but he nodded and jogged off. "Alright, I'll talk to my dad about it. But Mr. Lloyd-it's just a name. What's it got to do with girls anyway?"

Andrew let out a long sigh. "Mohave, once you get to the city and start browsing the internet, you'll understand the damage that name can do. People are still trying to figure out how many girls were involved... and it's still an unsolved mystery."

He did not outright tell Mohave that Lucas Mainse was a handsome celebrity who became embroiled in a notorious leaked nude photo scandal involving multiple celebrities.

Nearby, the sound of Kevin and Buzz arguing could be heard. Finally, Buzz snorted coldly and left the valley completely with the Patoaja warriors.

Tiana sneered. "The Wright family just lost a bunch of men, and they still don't want to leave. Human greed really knows no bounds."

Andrew shrugged. "Kevin's greed won't change just because a few bodies hit the ground. He doesn't want to leave with Buzz and his people because he wants to follow us."

Logan said coldly, "Then I'll tell them to get lost."

Andrew raised a hand. "Let them be As long as they don't get in our way, we don't need to deal with them. Alright, this is it. We're entering the ruins now-the truth is waiting."

At Andrew's command, Logan's team, Chantelle's people, and Andrew's group began moving forward, stepping into the derelict hamlet Meanwhile, Kevin and Ris remaining men followed at a distance.

Suddenly, Andrew halted and called out, "Mr. Sutton, if you would, please lead the way and show us your legendary survival skills."

Ralph hunched his shoulders and slinked into the center of the group, his face gloomy and embarrassed.

Andrew glanced sideways at Chantelle. "Ms. Garcia, your so-called survival expert really is something else."

Chantelle's face flushed red with

face

embarrassment. As soon as they entered the abandoned village area, Andrew could not help but feel.

it-maybe it was just his

imagination, but the sunlight overhead seemed to dim..

He still had not mentioned what Mohave told him about Magnus.

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Andrew had not told anyone about Magnus, partly because he still could not figure out what the old man was trying to do by sneaking into the ruins alone.

And partly because, truth be told, he did not really care whether Magnus lived or died.

Since the old man had chosen to go solo, Andrew couldn't be bothered to waste energy worrying about him. More importantly, he did not want to disrupt the group's focus. After all, everyone was already worn down by fear and tension on this journey.

The treasure of the Fallen Crimson Dynasty, just like the map said, truly was a hell for the living. Although calling it hell was somewhat exaggerated, there were definitely plenty of strange and dangerous threats,

"This place is a damn wreck," Logan muttered.

The group moved slowly, scanning their surroundings. Aside from a few collapsed wooden huts, most of the structures were made of stone.

The early settlers of Gallow's End were certainly industrious. The stone houses were surprisingly tall-many of them three stories, built close side by side. Some were still standing and looked like they could be lived in.

Only a handful had crumbled over time or been damaged by something else.

Andrew walked in the front, silent, eyes sharp and alert as his gaze swept across the ruins. The moment anything stirred, the hunting knife in his hand would be ready to strike.

The knife was one Buzz had given him, the kind of brutal tool the Patoaja warriors used. Just the blood groove alone was half a finger deep.

The group of about 20 people had walked about 300 feet into the eerily quiet village in complete silence, and none of them spoke.

Being in an absolutely quiet, oppressive environment would make anyone instinctively not want to talk. Even if they wanted to communicate, they would hold back or keep their voices extremely low.

After exploring another 150 feet inward, Andrew stopped because the path ahead had split into several branches going left, right, and in other directions.

Logan whispered, "What should we do? Should we split up and search?"

Andrew pondered for a moment and decided, "It'll be faster if we split up. Let's do that."

Tiana immediately turned left with Jerry. "We'll take this side."

Chantelle looked like she wanted to follow Andrew, but she could not bring herself to ask. Frustrated, she ended up dragging Ralph with her down the right path.

Logan chuckled. "Andy, my team and I will take this lane."

Andrew nodded and turned to the remaining path. "Natasha, let's move."

Natasha had already been thoroughly frightened on this expedition. She immediately pressed close to Andrew, not leaving his side for a moment.

As Andrew walked forward, he said with amusement, "You're going to have to give me a little space. You're glued to me, and I can barely move."

Natasha's face was deathly pale as she pleaded, "Darling, I'm terrified don't want to move an inch away from you. Honestly, if I could I'd have you carry me."

Feeling the warmth and softness pressing against his back, Andrew sighed. The widow was not making it easy, but he did not have the heart to push her off. He had already surveyed this ruined village from higher ground earlier, and this ancient village site was not very large, surrounded by tall mountain ranges.

So, the treasure entrance had to be either on the mountain walls or inside this ancient village.

At first, Andrew suspected the treasure might be hidden within the mountains. But the more he thought about it, the less sense that made.

The mountain terrain was

dangerously steep, like a fortress of natural stone. Given the Fallen Crimson Dynasty's technological limits Opening an entrance on the mountain wall was not just difficult, but a staggering expenditure of time and labor.

Moreover, the excavation noise would have been enormous, easily attracting the attention of interested parties.

Hence, Andrew ultimately concluded that the treasure entrance must be within

this ancient village.

The most dangerous place was often the safest hiding spot, and the ancients had understood that game well.

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Andrew and Natasha moved forward cautiously, staying close and alert as they explored the area. Eventually, they reached the far end of the ancient village, only to be met with a towering cliff wall rising right above them.

Yet, there was nothing ahead.

"Looks like this direction was a dead end," he said, turning back. "Come on, let's head back and regroup with Logan and the others."

However, the moment he turned around, he was suddenly met with the soft warmth of Natasha crashing into his chest.

She clung tightly to his waist, her voice trembling. "Darling, I'm really scared of ghosts... like, really scared. I don't even have the strength to keep walking right now. Can you hold me? Please, just hug me."

Hearing the quiver in her voice, Andrew's heart softened. He wrapped his arms tightly around the beautiful widow and said, "You're safe. As long as I'm here, nothing will happen to you."

Natasha's face had gone pale, and her body continued to tremble uncontrollably. She mumbled, "Ever since I was a kid, I've been terrified of ghosts and the dark. I never imagined we'd run into stuff like this just trying to find a treasure."

"Darling, could you kiss me? Hold me tight and kiss me... I'm so scared. I don't trust anyone else—only you."

Andrew frowned as he noticed Natasha's voice breaking and her body feeling unnaturally cold. It was a clear sign of extreme shock—her body was no longer regulating its temperature properly.

When he touched her forehead, he realized she must have caught a chill the night before.

Out here in the middle of nowhere, illness was far more dangerous than hunger. Without proper medical care, even something as simple as a cold or an infection could be fatal.

Without hesitation, Andrew unbuttoned the outer layer of her coat and pulled her close, holding her tightly against his body. Using his own warmth, he tried to bring feeling back into her freezing limbs.

Natasha was still trembling, her lips nearly white. "Darling, I feel so cold! My head... is starting to spin..."

Cursing under his breath, Andrew quickly pulled out two medicinal pills he had prepared in advance and fed them to her. At the same time, his warm hand slipped inside her clothes, pressing against her bare back and rubbing rapidly.

It was a primitive but effective method using friction to generate heat. In situations like this, it was often the only way to quickly raise body temperature. However, even after a while, her condition barely improved.

Moreover, Natasha kept pressing deeper into his arms, and Andrew realized he needed to take more drastic action. He quickly said, "Natasha, forgive me!"

Then, he withdrew his hand from her back and reached under her coat again—but this time, his hand slid to her chest area.

Almost immediately, his hand was blocked by the soft curves of her chest.

Natasha let out a soft moan, her half-opened eyes filled with a sultry daze. "Darling, touch me... Please, touch me..."

Even though she could barely keep her eyes open, the widow was still trying to seduce Andrew. He did not hesitate, his hand moving quickly across her chest in steady strokes.

And as much as he tried to stay focused, his fingers inevitably wandered, giving her breasts a few firm squeezes.

Here they were in the wilderness of an abandoned village, surrounded by danger on all sides. Yet, in this situation, he had a beautiful woman lying in his arms, letting him touch her however he wanted.

Suddenly, Andrew's mind drifted to a wicked thought.

What if he just thoroughly enjoyed her right here and now?

However, as soon as that sinful impulse appeared, Andrew firmly crushed it. This was not some luxury hotel suite. They were in a cold, eerie ancient village where danger could emerge at any moment, and here he was thinking about getting intimate with Natasha.

Andrew chuckled bitterly, wondering if his recent experiences with Lauren and the other two women had made his needs grow stronger.

As he continued the rubbing and the pills took effect, Natasha's cold body gradually began to warm up and grow hot. With a soft whimper, she opened her eyes and kissed Andrew before he could react.

He instinctively thought to push her away, but something in him faltered, and he let her kiss him. After all, he had always carried guilt when it came to her, and in her terrified, vulnerable state, maybe a little affection would calm her down.

His hands pressed more firmly, cupping her soft breasts. She gasped and broke the kiss, panting.

"Do you still feel weak?" Andrew asked with concern.

Her flushed face glowed with sensual warmth as she gave a breathless laugh. "Much better now, darling. Kiss me again."

Andrew looked at her parted lips, full and red, but held back the growing urge. He quickly said, "If you're feeling better, then get up. This isn't the time for this. Let's find the others and see what's going on."

Natasha stood up with obvious disappointment but did not make a fuss about it. She knew this was a critical time. Besides, Andrew's touches had been quite stimulating for her, and she had gotten some satisfaction from it.

"That pill of yours is amazing. I feel all warm inside now-no more dizziness, and I'm not even scared anymore!"

Andrew laughed, "That was a Revitalization Elixir, a high-grade sixth-level elixir. Of course it's amazing."

The two of them retraced their steps back to the intersection where they had split up earlier. They found that Logan and Tiana had also returned.

"Any luck on your end?" Logan asked urgently.

Andrew shook his head, "Didn't find any clues whatsoever."

Tiana did not speak but gave Natasha a suspicious look. As a naturally cautious woman, her intuition told her something was off about Natasha's condition, but she could not quite pinpoint what it was.

"Same here—no leads on my side either. This place isn't very big, but searching it is incredibly complicated with all these massive rocks everywhere, making it hard to look around," she said flatly.

Andrew glanced around and asked, "Where are Ms. Garcia and Mr. Sutton?"

Logan shook his head, "They're not back yet, but they should be soon-"

Just as he finished speaking, a fierce roar suddenly echoed from nearby, accompanied by two terrified screams.

Tiana's expression changed dramatically as she exclaimed, "It's that beast we encountered on the way up the mountain!"

Andrew did not hesitate and shot off in the direction of the roar. That was exactly where Chantelle and Ralph had gone to explore.

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

It did not take long-just about ten seconds before Andrew spotted Chantelle. He also saw a massive black Dire Tiger, and the beast currently had someone clamped in its enormous jaws it was Ralph.

Ralph was still gripping his curved blade, which had carved two gashes across the black tiger's head, causing blood to stream down. However, it had no effect whatsoever. If anything, the attack had only enraged it more.

The giant jaws crushed down harder on Ralph's shoulder, and in two powerful leaps, the Dire Tiger landed on the rooftop of a nearby stone building. At such close range, and now in broad daylight, Andrew could see just how incredibly massive this beast truly was.

From an ecological standpoint, it made no sense. There was no way a beast of this size could naturally exist in these mountain forests as it would need to devour a whole ridge's worth of prey just to survive.

However, this was not the time to question how a place like Gallow's End could produce such a monster.

Ralph's screams pierced the air, rising into a howl of raw agony. Even if they managed to save him, Andrew could already tell half his body was as good as lost.

And worse still, the so-called survival expert had taken a swipe across the face. One side of it was torn to shreds, the flesh peeled back so far that Andrew could see raw gums and exposed red muscle.

With every ragged breath, blood gushed out from the gaps in his face like a gruesome fountain.

Chantelle had collapsed to the ground, scrambling backward, trembling all over. Only when Andrew reached her did she manage to rise.

"Mr. Lloyd, please save him, you have to save him! That Dire Tiger came out of nowhere, and he had no warning at all! Mr. Sutton, just hold on-we're coming for you."

Her voice had become completely incoherent and was now tinged with sobs. Andrew glanced at her and noticed that this government insider actually had tears in her eyes. She was scared out of her mind.

"Hey, you brainless beast, you black devil, over here come at me!"

Logan had rushed over from a distance, shouting and waving his arms frantically. Meanwhile, Tiana was fierce as always, holding a Patoajo musket and aiming it at the black Dire Tiger.

Andrew quickly raised his hand, "Mrs. Rhodes, don't shoot! At this distance, you won't be able to kill this beast. You'll just startle it instead, and then Ralph will definitely die."

Lowering her musket, Tiana snapped angrily, "What do you suggest we do?"

Andrew signaled to Logan. "Keep provoking it and drawing its attention."

As he spoke, he crouched low and began stealthily approaching the stone building. If he could get close enough for an attack, his hunting knife would be sufficient to split this beast's skull wide open.

Logan continued waving his arms and cursing nonstop, "Black freak! You big, ugly bastard-come on over here if you've got the guts! You think you're tough? Come over here and let me skin you alive, you damn beast!"

While shouting, he also banged his weapon against the surrounding stones.

Sure enough, the Dire Tiger turned its attention. Its face twisted into a snarl, teeth

flashing as it began prowling toward Logan, one slow step at a time.

Andrew had already reached the

base of the stone building and could not help but feel pleased at the sight. He easily scaled the

three-story stone structure with one hand, silent as a ghost.

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

Ralph, barely able to move and covered in blood, suddenly cried out, his voice cracking. "Mr. Lloyd! You're here! Please, help me—I don't wanna die!"

He screamed with desperate joy and tried to crawl toward Andrew.

Andrew cursed under his breath, "Shut up, you idiot! Don't make a sound!"

However, it was too late. The Dire Tiger, though momentarily distracted, let out a thunderous roar and snapped its head around.

In an instant, it lunged and clamped its massive jaws down on Ralph's skull.

A loud crunch echoed, and the survival expert Chantelle had paid a fortune to bring along was killed on the spot, his eyes wide in disbelief, even in death.

Rage surged through Andrew like an explosion. With a roar, his muscles tensed, and his left arm gripped the rooftop edge so hard that it bulged as his strength erupted to its absolute limit.

In the shocked and disbelieving gazes of the others, Andrew leaped high into the air. In mid-air, his grip on the knife shifted from one hand to both, and he brought the blade down from above, slashing wildly at the black tiger's massive head.

At this life-or-death moment, the beast seemed to sense the deadly threat this man posed. It twisted its head mid-pounce, dodging Andrew's blade by a hair's breadth.

Andrew's hunting knife struck deep into the creature's chest instead. Instantly, a massive spray of blood erupted, covering Andrew's entire face and body in crimson.

The Dire Tiger howled in pure agony, stumbling back across the rooftop. It nearly slipped, barely holding its balance.

Andrew landed and immediately rolled, reversing his knife's grip and carving a graceful arc through the air before continuing his assault on the tiger with lethal intent.

For the first time, the beast's vicious eyes flashed with confusion and fear. Its primitive mind could not comprehend how a mere human dared to go toe-to-toe with it.

Humans had always been prey-soft, screaming prey.

But fear, the universal instinct, gripped the Dire Tiger's heart. It roared furiously at Andrew before grabbing Ralph's mangled corpse in its jaws and leaped off the rooftop. In just a few bounding strides, it vanished from sight, racing up the mountain path like a black whirlwind.

No human could ever outrun something like that, especially given its speed and agility in traversing the mountainous terrain.

Wiping the blood from his face, Andrew picked up his hunting knife to examine it. He silently cursed, 'Damn it!'

The steel blade, which had been perfectly tempered, now had a chunk broken off the edge.

That beast's bones were incredibly hard.

Chantelle climbed onto the rooftop, her face pale with lingering fear. "Mr. Lloyd, are you okay?"

Andrew shook his head, "I'm fine!"

With a loud wail, the normally frigid woman threw herself into Andrew's arms and burst into tears.

Andrew winced slightly. "You can borrow my shoulder for a bit, but don't get too comfortable."

He had not expected Chantelle to be scared to tears. But thinking about it, he could understand her reaction. In this desolate and dangerous place, a man-eating tiger had appeared and claimed multiple victims. Content

Chantelle might act cold, but at the end of the day, she was still just a woman. Moreover, she was a pampered official's daughter, raised in privilege. Facing death multiple times would naturally reduce anyone to tears.

They had not found the entrance to the treasure, yet they had already lost Ralph.

The entire group felt somewhat disheartened as they retreated from the ancient village.