

RISING FROM THE ASHES (ANDREW AND LAUREN)

Chapter 1721

Andrew had no idea that Leslie's words had actually done him a huge favor.

Ryder, pushed to his limits and humiliated repeatedly, had made up his mind that he would take over as head of the Ulrich family to prove his worth. When the time came, he would make sure Leslie paid for it, hard.

The late autumn wind was cold and biting as it swept across the lawn behind the Serenity Villa.

Training continued as usual, but today there was a new face among them—Lauren.

Since she had just recovered, Andrew did not have the heart to throw her into intense drills. Instead, he had her jog around to get her blood flowing and her energy circulating again.

Tiana dropped by, clearly pleased with what she saw.

"I really like your training methods. Honestly, Andy, I admire it," she said with a sly smile.

Her voice dipped into that usual flirtatious tone. "You're just as capable as your dad was back in the day."

Andrew's face darkened slightly, unable to tell whether this unpredictable mother-in-law was being suggestive or serious.

Tiana continued, "You currently have three women by your side. Among them, Lauren has the weakest physique and abilities. Train her well; trust me, you'll be surprised someday."

Andrew frowned again, unsure what "surprise" Tiana meant.

Then, Tiana got straight to the point, smirking, "Victoria asked me to set up a meeting between you two."

Andrew frowned. "Who's Victoria? I don't know her."

Tiana let out a cold chuckle. "Sure, you don't. But I've told you about her before. The matriarch of the Peck family. The number one bitch in Blumedale."

That jogged Andrew's memory. The matriarch of the Peck family was none other than Liliana's mother, Calvin's wife.

She was also Tiana's old enemy and her biggest rival in love; another one of Reginald's 'special lady' back in Gabo Creek.

The web of messy, tangled relationships gave Andrew a headache.

"I'm not meeting her. Absolutely not," he said flatly, waving it off.

Tiana gritted her teeth. "Andy, I gave her a firm no, too! But this bitch is extremely aggressive. If you don't go meet her, she's threatening to level your Serenity Villa! So you'd better go and meet with this old hag!"

Andrew was surprised. He rarely saw Tiana submit to anyone, which could only mean that the matriarch of the Peck family was quite a formidable character.

Tiana said, "Don't worry, she doesn't

know your father is Reginald Lloyd. Ever since the Peck family suffered losses at your hands last time, Victoria has been quiet. It means

BUT

she doesn't hold much of a grudge against you, at least not openly. So, bring a few nice gifts, be polite, act humble, and you'll probably walk out just fine."

Andrew scoffed. "I'm not scared of her. And even if she did find out I'm Reginald's son, so what?"

Tiana sighed. "You stubborn boy, you're exactly like your father! Listen to me... when it comes to her, you really do have to humble yourself. This lunatic only got scarier with age, and her martial skills are second to none."

She added, "Rumor is, Victoria has already reached the level of martial saint. She commands the entire Peck family now. Even George, a dare seasoned powerhouse, doesn't net

get cocky around her. The Three Titans of Blumedale-the Driscoll family, the Phelan family, and the Fischer family-all tread carefully around the Peck family, because of this bitch Victoria."

Andrew was genuinely surprised by this revelation. "The Peck family actually has a martial saint protecting them? That's quite rare. And she's the family matriarch,

not even a blood member of the Peck family. Mrs. Peck is truly a remarkable woman!"

Tiana's eyebrows shot up angrily as she cursed, "The hell she is! Back then, if I hadn't been blinded by love and hadn't been as ruthless as her! My current strength wouldn't be any weaker than hers. Listen upedon't you dare praise this woman in front of me!"

Andrew gave a wry smile. He had no idea how to deal with this.

Tiana warned him again. "Remember not to let her find out you're Reginald's son. Otherwise, you won't make it out of the Peck residence alive. That crazy woman will definitely kill you!"

Andrew snorted coldly. "What's the reasoning behind that? Last time I spared the Peck family and didn't wipe them out!"

Andrew said, "If Mrs. Peck wants to kill me, I won't just stand there and let her!"

Tiana sneered coldly, "If it really comes to a fight, you might not be able to handle this bitch! The main issue is that Reginald broke her heart back in the day, so all these years, Victoria has hated him to the bone."

She added, "Forget about Reginald... In Blumedale, anyone with the last name Lloyd who runs into this bitch gets slapped and beaten up by her!"

Andrew found this absurd and asked, "Is she really that lawless?"

Tiana replied, "You'll understand when you meet her! Remember, Andrew, there's nothing scarier than a woman who turns her love into hatred."

Andrew asked without thinking, "What about you, Mrs. Rhodes? Are you the same way?"

Tiana smiled and glanced at him sideways, "No, I'm the exception! Even though Reginald abandoned me, his son ended up in my hands! Andy, if you hadn't gotten together with Lauren, how do you think I would have tortured you?"

She giggled wickedly, then stood up and strutted off, hips swaying and perfume trailing behind.

Andrew grimaced. Tortured by her? No, thank you.

"Look! Mr. Driscoll shows up right on time again," Francesca muttered as she practiced her strikes.

Still working on her flexibility routine, Aspen chimed in, "Yeah. He's never even a minute late. Shows up like clockwork every day."

Lauren had only jogged two laps and was already complaining about her back and hips, claiming she could not take it anymore.

Now that gossip was in the air, she perked up and rushed over. "Fran, Aspen, Joe's not here to watch you two, is he?"

Francesca shook her head. "Of course not."

Aspen added, "He's been showing up ever since we started training out here. He comes every day and just watches. I think he's here for Andrew."

Lauren ran up to Andrew, smiling like she had just uncovered a secret.

"Andrew, Joe's here to see you! Since when did the two of you become so close?"

Andrew shot her a glance. "Go run. You've been talking nonstop, so add two more laps."

Lauren gritted her teeth and hurried off to run.

Meanwhile, Francesca and Aspen both let out a quiet sigh of relief. Thankfully, their man was not playing favorites. Even the 'main' wife' got punished too, and fair

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treatment made them feel a little better.

Andrew glanced over to where Joe was standing by the lake. He was getting annoyed and strode over.

"Don't you have anything better to do? Sneaking around every day to spy on us. Do you seriously find this fun?"

Joe shot him a cold look. "Don't flatter yourself. I'm not here to watch you guys."

Andrew smirked. "Of course, I know you're not here for us. But Shiloh is out working every morning, so you're not going to catch her around here."

Joe frowned. "Someone like her still needs to work?"

Andrew replied, "Of course she does. She's got to earn her own living. What, are you going to support her?"

Joe clenched his jaw. "I could support her anytime! Wait... Why should I? Don't talk nonsense!"

He caught himself and quickly backpedaled, but his face had already gone red.

Andrew found it hilarious. He rubbed his chin and laughed. "Tell you what'll give you the name of the place where she's working. Whether or not you go see her is up to you."

Joe scoffed. "Why are you telling me this? I'm not that desperate."

Andrew grinned. "Sure, sure. You're way too classy to be desperate. Just don't let me catch you sneaking around to see her. If I do, I'm reporting you for stalking"

Joe nearly choked, clenching his teeth. "I swear, there's one more thing you've got

that I clearly lack!"

Andrew raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? What's that?"

Joe glared. "Shamelessness."

With that, he turned and stormed off.

Andrew burst out laughing, totally unbothered.

After Cillian's death, unrest spread throughout the Gabo Creek Chamber of Commerce. Many members had grown increasingly hostile and resistant toward Andrew.

"He's nothing but a killer, a thug!"

"Putting him in charge was a mistake from the start!"

"We need to elect a new chairman. We refuse to be led by someone so ruthless!" Several members had already stepped forward, openly attacking Andrew.

Left with no choice, Andrew called for another internal meeting with the Chamber of Commerce members.

"Everyone suspects I'm the one who killed Cillian," Andrew said calmly from his seat at the head of the table. "So where's the evidence? Where's the proof?"

An elderly member wearing reading glasses angrily replied, "Cillian is dead, and you're still alive! That's evidence enough! Mr. Lloyd, do you plan to eliminate everyone who displeases you? Are you our Chamber of Commerce chairman or a tyrant?"

Duncan slammed the table. "Mr. Benson, watch your language!"

The elderly Tyrell Benson chuckled with disdain. "Cillian and I are from the same generation, and I've lived long enough anyway! I'm not afraid to die, Duncan. Mr. Lloyds, if you two have the guts, come to my company and finish me off!"

With that, he left the meeting directly, showing Andrew no respect whatsoever.

Mason, sitting at the far end, had a mocking smile on his face. The effect he wanted was being achieved step by step, and Andrew definitely would not be able to hold onto the chairman position much longer!

The only problem was that he had lost contact with Nathan, his handler, and did not know what had happened.

Rachel looked grim. "Let's bring Mr. Benson back. Even though he's a senior member, it's too much for him to disrespect the chairman like that!"

Andrew waved it off. "No need. If Mr. Benson wants to leave, let him go."

Rachel looked surprised. "Mr. Lloyd, if we let this slide, others might follow. Things could spiral fast."

Andrew remained calm. "So what if one old guy walks out? Even if the entire Gabo Creek Chamber flips upside down, I still won't be fazed."

Mason sneered quietly. He thought Andrew was clearly panicking inside, yet trying

to play it cool. He wondered just how long he could keep that act going.

"Mr. Ulrich!" Andrew's voice suddenly rang out.

Mason flinched, quickly clearing his throat and switching to a respectful tone. "Mr. Lloyd, you called?"

Andrew leaned forward, gazing at

him across the table with a smile. "Mr. Ulrich, you seemed a little distracted there. What were you thinking about? You're not hoping that karma will catch up with me as chairman and drag the Ulrich family down with me, are you?"

Mason almost blurted out, "How did you know that?"

Thankfully, he caught himself in time and put on a frightened, trembling act. "Mr. Lloyd, please don't wrongly accuse me! I'm your supporter, so how could I think such things about you?"

He added, "As for my father, I already explained-it was sudden, a complete accident. It had nothing to do with you, Mr. Lloyd. Anyone who says otherwise is just making things up, and if I hear anyone slandering you, the Ulrich family will speak up and clear the air!"

Andrew nodded. "I appreciate that. Your father's burial should be soon, right?"

Mason put on a solemn face and shook his head. "Not just yet. I plan to hold an extended memorial service for another two weeks. He contributed a lot to the Chamber of Commerce during his lifetime, so I have to honor him properly."

Andrew nodded. "You're quite the devoted son."

However, Rachel and the others exchanged cold, amused glances. This shameless Mason was really milking Cillian's death for all it was worth.

"By the way, Mr. Ulrich—and everyone else," Andrew said, clapping his hands with a smile. "I'd like to introduce someone new to the group. Please welcome Mr. Ryder Ulrich!"

Ryder, dressed in a sharp suit, strode into the room. "Mr. Lloyd, good day. Greetings to all the board members."

His tone was polite and well-mannered.

Mason frowned. "Ryder, what are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be at

the base? And where's your uniform?"

Ryder grinned. "Dad, I took some leave to come back for Grandpa's funeral."

Andrew stepped in. "He's so thoughtful. He knows you're under a lot of stress, so he came back to help. Besides, I could use someone like him by my side, so I've ask him to help out with some Chamber business. It'll be a great opportunity for him to gain some experience."

Many members turned their heads in surprise.

A seat at Andrew's side was like gold. After all, anyone positioned close to the chairman was seen as one of his trusted few.

Chapter 1724

All the board members' sons and daughters who had returned from their studies were dying for Andrew to notice them and call them to work by his side. But now, such a coveted position had fallen into Ryder's hands.

This was unexpected for many people, including Mason himself. He was somewhat puzzled but ultimately expressed his gratitude, "Thank you, Mr. Lloyd, for thinking so highly of my son! I'm grateful for your mentorship!"

Andrew waved his hand dismissively, "It's nothing. Well, that concludes today's meeting!"

The meeting ended, and everyone went their separate ways.

Mason walked silently with Ryder, hurrying into the underground parking garage. Only when they were alone did he turn around and slap Ryder across the face.

"You bastard, who told you to leave the military? Not only are you skipping out on your job, but you're even running around without my permission!"

Looking at his father's furious expression, Ryder sneered inwardly but appeared terrified on the surface. "I was only worried about you, Dad, so I took leave without permission. Our family is going through turbulent times right now, and I wanted to help you manage family affairs!"

Mason sneered, "Helping with family affairs is just an excuse. You're really after my position as family head, aren't you?"

Ryder put on a wounded look, his eyes glassy with fake tears. "I didn't think my good intentions would make you so suspicious of me, like I'm some kind of threat. How could I have the qualifications or ability to challenge your position as family head? If you just think about it, you'd realize this makes no sense!"

He added, "Besides, my brothers are still too young to help the family at all. That's why I took it upon myself to come and assist you, Dad!"

Mason frowned deeply, staring at Ryder.

Was he overthinking things?

He shook his head, thinking he needed more rest lately. His nerves had been on edge for so long that he was becoming paranoid. He could suspect anyone, but not his own son.

"Fine, since you're already here, do your job well! But there's one thing I don't understand... How did Andrew approach you?" Mason pressed again.

Ryder lowered his head, hiding the cold gleam that flashed in his eyes. Then, he gave the explanation he had prepared in advance.

"When Mr. Lloyd reached out to me, he seemed really guilty. He said he felt he owed the Ulrich family, and offering me a position was his way of making up for what happened to Grandpa."

Mason finally relaxed and dropped his guard. He warned his son, "Don't

believe a word that monster says.t

He's the one who killed your grandfather. Back in that meeting, I had no choice but to play along because his influence is too strong right now."

He added, "But don't worry, Ryder. That arrogance of his won't last long."

Ryder clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. "I knew it. I knew he was the one who killed Grandpa. Don't worry, Dad. As long as we work together, we'll bring him down."

Mason nodded, clearly pleased. "Good. Come home with me. And since you're working under Andrew now, you can keep me posted on his every move."

Ryder climbed into the car and casually pulled out his phone, sending a quick message. [All set.]

The message went straight to Rachel since Ryder was under her supervision, per Andrew's instructions.

"Mr. Lloyd, Mason took the bait!" Rachel reported immediately after receiving the message.

Andrew was still lounging in the now-empty conference room, legs kicked up on the table. He let out a nonchalant grunt, clearly unfazed. Just then, a message from Yara popped up on his phone.

[Yara: Uncle Andy, dinner's on me tonight!]

[Andrew: Not going. And stop calling me Uncle.]

[Yara: Then I'll call you Daddy!]

[Andrew: Will you stop with all the flirting?]

Yara responded with an angry emoji, but Andrew did not even bother replying.

Ever since taking over the Wright family, Yara had grown bolder and more

reckless.

Honestly, if Andrew wanted to have her, it would not even take effort. However, he truly had no interest in her that way.

He simply told Rachel to prepare the gifts.

Since it was still early in the day, he drove straight to the Peck residence in Blumedale. Tiana had asked him

to pay a visit, so he figured he might as well see what was up.

Chapter 1725

Among the Five Apex Families, the Peck family ranked squarely in the middle. They were not the most dominant, but they were not lagging behind either.

However, this would only be the case if they did not count the matriarch, Victoria Sanchez.

Once they factored in the woman, even the Three Titans would tread carefully around. Then, the Peck family might as well be a power to be reckoned with in Blumedale.

However, when it came to financial strength and overall influence, the Peck family was still lacking.

That meant Victoria could keep the wolves at bay. But expansion? That was another story entirely.

Andrew had previously crossed paths with members of the Peck family back in Jayrodale. Specifically, Ernest Peck-the guy who had a stash of rare elixirs and ended up clashing hard with Andrew. It had not ended well for him.

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Andrew's Porsche 911 pulled discreetly into the Peck residence. The moment he stepped out, he was spotted.

"Are you Mr. Andrew Lloyd from the Gabo Creek Chamber of Commerce? You think you can just show up at our home unannounced whenever you want? What are you trying to pull here?"

The tension inside the estate snapped instantly. Security mobilized, and dozens of fully armed guards rushed out in formation.

Miles and Liliana showed up quickly after hearing the commotion.

The moment Liliana laid eyes on Andrew, her heart churned with mixed emotions of bitterness, hatred, and fear.

"Andrew, you've got guts coming here alone like this! You know the last time isn't settled yet, right? My dad just got out of bed and is ready to deal with you!"

She clenched her fists, seething.

Miles, on the other hand, was more composed. He barked, "Liliana, that's enough! Step aside. Show Mr. Lloyd some respect."

Andrew smoothed his suit and gave a calm smile. "You've always been the more reasonable one, Mr. Peck. Whatever happened was just a misunderstanding, wasn't it?"

Miles' jaw twitched.

Misunderstanding? Only Andrew could say that with a straight face.

His father, Calvin, had suffered internal injuries from sheer stress and still had not fully recovered.

His aunt, Caroline, had all four limbs broken. Even with a miracle doctor on site, she still could not get out of bed.

And Liliana, the one who started it all by kidnapping Lauren, had nearly paid the ultimate price for it. She took a brutal beating and almost got permanently scarred.

In short, the feud between the Peck family and Andrew ran deep.

Hence, when Andrew walked in on his own, Miles could not figure out what game he was playing. He was about to ask why Andrew was here when the family butler, Otis O Hutcherson, ran out.

"Mr. Peck, Mrs. Peck requests to meet with Mr. Lloyd immediately."

Both Miles and Liliana froze in shock.

Liliana blurted out, "How did Mom know Andrew was here?"

Otis replied, "She didn't. But she left specific instructions beforehand. If Mr. Lloyd

ever came to visit, we were to bring him to her immediately."

Liliana looked skeptical and turned to her brother. "Miles, do you think Mom knows Andrew?"

Miles looked equally puzzled and shook his head. "No clue. But I doubt it."

Their mother, the elusive matriarch of the Peck family, rarely showed her face. She had long lived in the inner estate, hidden from the public eye.

No one even knew the current extent of her martial prowess.

Of course, the less people knew, the more they feared her.

Now, this woman, whose words held more weight than Calvin's, was inviting Andrew to a private meeting.

Miles and Liliana could not make sense of it, though something about it felt off. Normally, their mother never met with outsiders, and definitely not with men.

Unless it was one of the Three Titans' family heads or someone like George, those rare few at the top of the food chain.

Anyone else? Victoria never gave them the time of day.

"Mr. Lloyd, please come with me," Otis said, gesturing respectfully.

Andrew gave Miles a glance and smiled. "See you around, Mr. Peck."

Miles forced a polite smile. "Right. Before you meet my mother, Mr. Lloyd, there are a few things you should know."

Andrew nodded. "Go ahead."

Miles grew serious. "How do I put this... My mother can be a bit withdrawn. To be blunt, she has a temper. When you speak with her, it's best to keep your tone calm and

respectful. Go along w

can."

her if you

Andrew raised an eyebrow. "I've never crossed paths with the Peck family matriarch before. There's no bad blood between us. So, whether I go along with her really depends, because I'm not exactly known for having a good temper either."

Liliana snorted. "You may be hot-tempered, but in front of my mom, you'd better learn to behave. Otherwise, she'll teach you real quick how to keep that attitude in check."