

RISING FROM THE ASHES (ANDREW AND LAUREN)

Chapter 1726

Andrew replied dismissively, "Oh really? And what if I don't tone it down?"

Liliana sneered. "If you don't behave yourself, you'll be the only one who suffers in the end!"

Miles frowned. "Liliana, don't exaggerate. You make it sound like Mom's a monster."

Then, he turned to Andrew and said, "Mr. Lloyd, I'm just giving you a heads-up. That's all. Nothing more."

Without another word, Andrew followed Otis deeper into the estate to meet Victoria.

Liliana watched his back disappear and stomped her foot. "Miles, why would you warn that bastard? Let him mouth off in front of Mom and get wrecked. He deserves it!"

Miles replied, "How many times do I have to tell you not to provoke him? Did you already forget what happened last time?"

Liliana sneered. "Of course I didn't forget! But to say the Peck family can't handle someone like Andrew? That's laughable. Last time, Mom didn't get involved. If she had, Andrew would probably be dead already."

Miles shook his head. Clearly, Liliana still had not learned her lesson.

Andrew had grown into a serious force who could stand toe-to-toe with the Five Apex Families. Even with Victoria around, the Peck family could not actually do much to him.

If they did, the people backing Andrew would probably come knocking, and they would not be polite.

Still, a part of Miles was frustrated. The Peck family was a well-established household with real influence. Yet, even their patriarch had been forced into retreat after crossing paths with Andrew.

Now that Victoria had asked for this meeting, Miles had a strong feeling that she planned to put Andrew in his place behind closed doors to reassert the family's authority.

Miles turned to Liliana and smirked. "She probably won't kill him. But a good beating? That seems very likely."

After passing through multiple buildings and winding around for quite a while, they finally arrived at a small villa.

Andrew could not help but comment, "Mrs. Peck certainly lives in a secluded place!"

Otis smiled. "Mrs. Peck likes quiet. Usually, only those of us who serve her are around. Even her children can't come to disturb her without being summoned."

Andrew nodded. That lined up with what he had pictured.

She stayed behind closed doors, completely inaccessible to ordinary people. But when she did appear, the world trembled.

Tiana was already a difficult woman to deal with, and Victoria was probably even worse.

What puzzled Andrew the most was why Reginald always ended up with such terrifying women.

It would be nicer to be with someone soft-spoken and sweet like Francesca or Aspen. Someone you could rest your head on,

snuggled up against her plush thighs or warm tummy.

Now that was peace.

Andrew silently grumbled, 'Dad, you were such a player. You've left quite a mess for me to clean!'

With a creaking sound, the sandalwood door painted with gold dust slowly opened.

Otis stood outside the door and said to Andrew, "Mr. Lloyd, please go in. Mrs. Peck is waiting for you inside!"

Andrew hesitated. "You're not coming with me? Seems a little off, going in alone."

Otis smiled and shook his head.

"Mrs. Peck specifically asked to see you alone. No one else is allowed to enter. Anyone who crosses that line without permission, no matter who they are, will face serious consequences."

Andrew chuckled. "What if Mr. Peck Senior wants to come in?"

Otis still smiled. "No exceptions. If Mrs. Peck decides to act, she will-without hesitation."

Andrew laughed again. "What, is she planning to conquer the world single-handedly?"

With that, he stepped through the door. Behind him, the door slammed shut with a bang and locked tight.

Andrew's heart skipped a beat. 'Damn it, is Otis working with Mrs. Peck to set me up?'

If they were planning to corner him and attack, given how terrifying Victoria was,

he really needed to be extra careful.

Just as he was secretly on guard, a

soft, pleasant voice came from behind the screen. "Mr. Lloyd, is that you? Please come to the back. I'm feeling a bit unwell, so I won't get up to greet you. Please forgive me."

Her tone was very polite, and her voice gave no indication of her age. She could

be a sultry woman in her late 30s or a young lady in her late teens or early 20s.

Andrew could not tell for sure, and that made it trickier.

It was one thing for Victoria to request a private meeting, but to do it while lying in bed?

Was this some kind of trap?

Chapter 1727

Rounding the screen, Andrew stepped into a room that oozed classic elegance and femininity.

Everything inside, from the painting to the curated instruments and decor, spoke of refined taste and artistry.

A soft purple veil hung from the canopy over the bed, trailing to the plush carpet below, completely obscuring what lay behind it.

Victoria's voice came from inside again. "Mr. Lloyd, please find yourself a place to sit!"

Andrew replied, "Mrs. Peck, this is your private chamber, and I think it's best I remain standing. I only came by to pay my respects. If you're feeling unwell, I can always return another day."

A melodious laugh rang out, and Victoria's voice turned teasing from behind the veil. "Aren't you being all respectful? I'm guessing that bitch Tiana taught you to do this, right? Let me guess... She not only taught you to be well-behaved and keep a low profile in front of me!

"She also told you that I'm a shameless flirt, a woman who only knows violence and nothing else, right?"

Andrew could not help but feel his scalp tingle. Victoria was definitely not someone to underestimate. After all, Tiana indeed said those things to him.

What made it worse was how soft and sweet her voice was, like she was a gentle, lovesick woman rather than someone terrifying enough to make the entire city tread carefully.

Anyone who did not know better might be fooled into thinking she was just an elegant, tender noblewoman.

Nonetheless, Andrew had been warned by Tiana. He knew that behind that curtain was not some fragile beauty. Instead, there lay a terrifying figure who was nearly a martial saint.

Victoria added, "I caught a cold these past few days and have been feeling quite unwell. I've heard that you have amazing medical skills and great talent, and are now Blumedale's renowned Grand Physician. Since you're here, why don't you take a look at my conditions?"

Clearly, she didn't care how suspicious it looked or what Andrew might think.

After hesitating briefly, Andrew stepped forward and sat by the curtain's edge. From behind it, a pale, slender arm slipped out-delicate fingers, painted in a soft pink polish, nails filed to perfection.

It was almost impossibly beautiful.

"Excuse me," Andrew said, reaching for her wrist to take her pulse.

However, the moment his fingers touched her skin, that graceful hand suddenly twisted and locked down on his with lightning speed.

Andrew did not react. He simply asked in a low voice, "Mrs. Peck, what is the meaning of this?"

Victoria's tone turned cold. "What do you think it means? Mr. Lloyd, someone as clever as you should've figured it out by now."

Andrew tried to pull his hand free, but her grip held tight. Her fingers, while slim and smooth, carried a

crushing strength that pinned him in place like an iron vise.

"I truly have no idea what you're trying to say," Andrew said flatly. "But if you don't

let go, I'll be forced to respond in kind."

His voice had gone cold, too.

From behind the veil, Victoria answered without concern. "Don't be foolish. If you

go head-to-head with me, you'll be the one paying the price."

Andrew's smile turned sharp. "Is that

so? I've heard Mrs. Peck is a martial

master, feared across

may not be much, but I wouldn't mind testing the rumors myself."

So, she had baited him with an excuse about her health, just to trap him the moment he let down his guard.

However, Andrew was not one to play nice when someone tried to ambush him. If words would not work, then fists would have to do.

With a subtle flick of his arm, he activated his inner energy, causing his meridians to pulse and vibrate violently.

Victoria let out a surprised breath, followed by a soft, amused laugh. "No wonder you were able to injure my pathetic husband. You really are something special. Judging by the power I'm sensing... you've likely surpassed the level of a martial king, haven't you?"

Her tone remained calm, but the strength behind her grip surged even higher.

With just a sheer curtain between them, Andrew found himself locked in a hidden clash of force with this unpredictable woman.

Chapter 1728

If the person behind the curtain had been just some ordinary woman or a man, Andrew would have shattered that veil and gone straight into a full-blown fight.

Yet, this was different. This was Reginald's former lover, the matriarch of the Peck family.

Andrew was not some ill-mannered person, and he could not just pounce on her. That would mean he really needed to see a doctor about having some kind of complex.

Suddenly, a loud bang echoed. With both of them being top-tier fighters, their clashing energies created a surge of force that blasted through the room. The

silk curtains between them could no longer withstand the pressure and were ripped to shreds.

Victoria shouted urgently, "You little bastard, turn around. I'm not dressed!"

Andrew sneered. "After all that? Mrs. Peck, do you really think I'm going to fall for that?"

Without even glancing at the bed, he thrust his palm forward and kicked off the edge of the bed, dragging the chair he sat on backward across the floor in one smooth motion.

Both of them pulled back at the same time, and the turbulent energy in the room slowly settled.

On the bed, Victoria now sat fully clothed in a sleek black gown, her hair swept up into a high bun. She looked poised and regal.

Like Tiana's, her looks carried a sharp, cold beauty-flawless and composed. However, unlike Tiana's flirtatious charm, Victoria had a piercing edge in her eyes that made her seem more dangerous.

Even when she said nothing, her presence exuded authority. She looked at Andrew with a half-smile. "You reacted fast. It's a pity you didn't fall for it. If you'd been dumb enough to actually turn around, completely off guard... then you'd be on the floor right now, coughing up blood and barely breathing."

Andrew stared at her coldly. "So this was your way of settling the score for the Peck family?"

Victoria rose slowly. Though not particularly tall, she moved with a subtle allure. With every step, the slit in her dress revealed glimpses of her pale skin.

"If anyone was going to avenge the Peck family, it should've been my useless husband. You can relax. I don't care about your feud with them. I won't be getting involved."

Andrew frowned. "If that's the case, then why attack me just now?"

Victoria gave a casual shrug. "No reason. Just wanted to see what you were made of. Also, I don't like how close you are with Tiana. Giving you a little scare might make that bitch ache with worry, and the thought of her hurting makes me feel good."

Andrew rubbed his temples. So this was all about jealousy, again. And naturally,

he was the one they all took it out on.

"Come closer. Let me get a better look at you," Victoria ordered.

Andrew snorted but stepped forward anyway.

She studied him for a long moment before murmuring, "Wow... You really do look like him."

Andrew raised a brow. "Mrs. Peck, what did you say?"

Victoria shook her head. "Nothing. Let's get to business. Your talent and what you've already accomplished have impressed the Peck family. From now on, I want you to be our representative. Our voice, so to speak."

Andrew shut it down immediately. "That's not happening."

He was not stupid enough to let the Peck family slap a label on him and hitch a free ride on his success.

Victoria's eyes darkened. "You're turning me down?"

Andrew snorted. "That's right. I'm turning you down. I came here today out of respect, nothing more. I didn't come prepared to make deals, and I have no intention of committing to anything. My conflict with the Peck family was minor. Since you've said you're letting it go, I'll take my leave."

With that, he turned and walked away.

Victoria let out a furious laugh, her hand twitching like she was about to strike. However, she forced herself to stop and shouted, "Andrew! If I give the order, you won't even make it out of the front gate! Fine. Wait. Let's talk terms. Getting the Peck family's support and alliance isn't exactly a bad deal for you." Andrew finally paused, turned, and smiled. "See? If you'd started with something sincere, I wouldn't have had to be so rude."

Chapter 1729

Victoria gave a mocking laugh. "No wonder Tiana's into you! You really are a smooth-talking, cunning little thing. Tell me, did she give herself to you yet?"

Andrew frowned. "Mrs. Peck, what exactly are you implying?"

Victoria smirked. "Exactly what it sounds like. Has that bitch Tiana been keeping you as her little boy toy? All that talk about treating you like a beloved son-in-law -I don't buy it for a second. Knowing her and how shameless she is, I'd bet anything she made you her personal plaything."

Andrew's face darkened. "Mrs. Peck, I suggest you watch what you say. Mrs. Rhodes is my mother-in-law-nothing more, nothing less. And let's be clear, I'm not some plaything you women can toy with on a whim.

"I don't care if it's my mother-in-law or you, if either of you push me too far, I'll push right back. I don't care if you're older or a woman."

Victoria froze for a second. The sudden burst of defiance and raw presence in Andrew reminded her of someone from long ago, someone she had loved yet hated.

Her expression softened as she waved a hand. "That was out of line. I take it back. Andrew, since Tiana's now officially your mother-in-law... I actually have a proposition for you. Something worth thinking about."

Andrew snorted. "Go on. I'm listening."

Victoria smiled. It was a rare, glowing smile that melted her frost into something dangerously soft and alluring.

She said, "Become my male companion and serve me! From now on, I'll give you my full support to become the King of Gabo Creek!"

She chuckled. "You probably don't understand what King of Gabo Creek means! As the name suggests, you'd rule over all of Gabo Creek province, in open public and also its underworld, as the sole king!"

Andrew looked at this woman in disbelief.

Victoria smiled proudly and said with confidence, "What? Don't you believe in my abilities? With the Peck family as a stepping stone, plus my combat power, your intelligence, and current foundation, we could sweep away the Three Titans and overpower Governor McCormick!"

She added, "And you? You'd rule Gabo Creek like a goddamn king."

Andrew rubbed his temple. "Okay, wait. Hold up. My head's spinning. This whole King of Gabo Creek thing? I'm not interested. What I do want to know is... What the hell did you just say before that?"

Victoria exhaled slowly, her breath

like perfume, and flashed him a sultry smile: "I said I want you to be my male companion. Powerful men have mistresses and women all over their arms. Powerful women? We get the same thing."

"A man keeping a woman is normal. But a woman keeping a man? That's just balance. And I, Victoria Sanchez, am the most dominant woman in all of Gabo Creek, maybe even southern Holtrien.

"You're young, brilliant, and easy on

the eyes. More importantly, you remind me of someone I once knew, and that makes you very, very appealing to me. So be mine. Let me

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enjoy you, give you the world and

watch as everyone around you

burns with envy."

Andrew blurted out, "Does Mr. Peck Senior know you're this unhinged? Won't he divorce you or kill you for this?"

Victoria snorted. "Calvin? Please. If I told him to lick my toes, he'd do it without a second thought. And maybe Tiana didn't tell you this, but I'm the reason the Peck family holds power in Blumedale today.

"When I was young, I didn't marry into the Peck family. Calvin married into my family—the Sanchez family. That's how this empire was built."

Andrew felt a chill crawl down his spine.

So the entire Peck family had been built by this woman, and their 'patriarch' was just a glorified house husband?

He stared at Victoria, realizing that this woman was absolutely unhinged and terrifying.

After a brief moment of stunned silence, Andrew firmly declined, "Thank you for your kind offer, Mrs. Peck, but I find your proposal absolutely ridiculous!"

He could already see the same madness in Victoria that Tiana had shown before. No doubt, her outrageous request stemmed from two things.

First, like Tiana, if not worse, Victoria was the kind of woman who wielded power without caring about norms or taboos. Keeping a man like a pet was something she did without a second thought.

Second, she clearly saw Andrew as a replacement for his father.

And that was both understandable and utterly twisted.

"So you're saying no to me?" Victoria asked coldly, her smile vanishing.

Andrew's tone remained steady. "Yes, I'm saying no. Mrs. Peck, I'm not the kind of man who does things casually. What you proposed wasn't just inappropriate, but it crossed a line."

He added, "You're a senior. I'm the younger one here. We're generations apart, and we have no emotional connection whatsoever. So with all due respect, I found your suggestion ridiculous."

Victoria scoffed. "Ridiculous? Are you saying I'm too old for you, or is it my looks you find lacking? Or maybe you don't think my power or position is enough to tempt you? You do realize this is the modern world, right?

Traditional gender roles don't mean anything anymore."

He added, "Those pretty boys you see on the streets driving luxury cars, wearing designer suits... Well, half of them are being kept by some sugar mommy. Most of the time, they're dating women who are old enough to celebrate their 60th birthdays. You're not that naive... are you?"

Andrew was speechless. He had not expected her to be so persuasive. Her logic, as wild as it sounded, was disturbingly sound.

He finally sighed. "Mrs. Peck, maybe everything you said is true. Men with power keep mistresses. Women with power keep male companions, boy toys, or whatever. But I'm not that kind of man. I don't enjoy being 'kept'; I prefer to conquer."

He continued, "Besides, you're already a mother of two. Miles is someone I actually consider a friend. The last thing I want is for him to confront me one day and say, 'I thought you were my friend, and you tried to sleep with my mom?'"

Victoria froze. Then, for the first time, color rushed to her face. "You little punk! You wish! You think being my male companion means sleeping with me? Please. I've had two kids already. You think that's even possible?"

Andrew blinked. "Then why ask me to be your male companion in the first place?"

Victoria let out a laugh, both furious and amused. "Why? To kill time and build influence. I think all men are disgusting, you included. If it weren't for some special reasons, do you really think I'd be here, talking to you so nicely?"

Her tone suddenly shifted, sharp and cold again. "Fine, you don't want to be my companion? Then marry Liliana and become my son-in-law. Work under me and help me expand the Peck family empire. If you do that, I'll let everything go."

Andrew's voice turned icy. "Mrs. Peck, this is coercion! You're basically putting a knife to my back."

Victoria smirked confidently. "If

that's how you see it, I won't argue. The bottom line is: you don't have a choice. Tiana believes in your

potential, and so do I. Andrew, you'll be mine-one way or another."

Andrew rubbed his temples, visibly irritated. "Look, I don't mean to offend, but I'll say this from the heart. Mrs. Peck, you're just as overbearing and annoying as Tiana!"

Victoria was startled. Then, she burst out laughing. "I didn't expect you to be so bold! You dare to

offend both Tiana and me! Now not

finally understand why she likes you so much! Your personality really resembles someone we both knew. Both Tiana and I liked him very much."

Andrew sighed, "Was that person Reginald Lloyd?"

Victoria's eyes narrowed, a dangerous glint flashing in them, "You know about this? Did Tiana tell you? Or did you find out from somewhere else?"

Seeing her nervous yet excited expression, Andrew felt increasingly helpless! Mrs. Peck, you don't need to be so paranoid! I know this told me, person not because Tiana

nor because I heard about him elsewhere. It's because Reginald is my father!"

The words dropped like a bomb.

Victoria froze, and her face twisted in disbelief. "What did you just say? Reginald

is your father? You're part of the Chetvine Lloyd royal bloodline? That's impossible!"

Andrew took a single step back just as Victoria erupted. A terrifying wave of energy burst from her body as she lunged toward him, her fingers curled into claws.

"You bastard! If you're lying to me, I'll tear you to pieces right here and now!" With a ripping sound, her hand tore right through his shirt, shredding it to ribbons. "What the hell are you doing?" Andrew snapped, furious.

What was it with these crazy women and their obsession with tearing clothes? Now, his bare chest was exposed, and so was the Blood-Eyed Black Dragon tattoo.

Victoria froze mid-motion, completely stunned. "The same mark... Y-You really are of the Lloyd bloodline. And not just that, you're the Dragon Prince, the prodigious heir of the Lloyds..."

She gasped aloud, and her voice cracked.

Andrew looked down at her with a cold expression. "So? Still want me to be your male companion now?"