

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

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Faced with the questioning and angry glares from his three ladies, Andrew maintained his innocent expression as he firmly denied it.

"Lauren, Fran, Aspen, don't believe this guy. He's just jealous of me and trying to slander me!"

Hank sneered. "Andrew, you and Chantelle said you were checking into a hotel right in front of me. Now you want to deny it?"

Andrew's expression remained calm. He used the oldest skill in a seasoned man's playbook-deny till the end.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Hank. If you want to frame me, at least

come up with a better story! Lauren, do you trust him or me?"

Lauren did not hesitate. "We trust you! But that doesn't mean it's entirely impossible either."

Francesca scoffed. "Honey, if you really got involved with Ms. Garcia, just say it. We won't blame you."

Aspen nodded quickly. "Exactly. Ms. Garcia's actually not bad at all. We'd gladly welcome her to the team."

Hank almost exploded from jealousy.

Where on earth could a man find three wives so understanding, so supportive?

If Hank could have even one woman like that in his life, he would happily shave ten years off his lifespan.

"Listen, ladies, don't buy into his lies. He's nothing but a beast in disguise. Think about me instead! Compared to Andrew, I beat him in every way. If any of you loved me, I'd give you my heart, my soul, I'd walk through fire for you!"

He looked ready to swear an oath on the spot.

Andrew rolled his eyes. "Hank, do us a favor and get lost. Didn't you just hook up with Hannah? And now, only a few days later, you're here trying to flirt with others? Just wait until she finds out you're nothing but a two-faced player. Let's see if she still sticks around."

Aspen's brows lifted. "Wait... Freya's little sister, Hannah? She's with him?"

Andrew had not planned on exposing that yet because he wanted to give Hannah some space to come to her senses. But now, he had no intention of holding back.

Hank was trash, a classic playboy. Someone needed to sound the alarm before it was too late.

Hank's face turned beet red. He pointed at Andrew, fuming. "You nosy bastard, stay out of my business! We're not done here!"

The truth was, he had been sneaking around behind Hannah's back, hoping she would not find out. She

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was madly in love with him, head

over heels to the point of obsession.

Yet, after just two days, he already felt bored. Sure, she was beautiful and came from a top-tier family. However, she was way too clingy.

And guys like Hank? They thrived on novelty and hated anything that tried to pin them down.

"Honey, is it true that Hannah is with this guy?" Aspen asked seriously. Andrew snorted. "Yeah, it's true. I warned her, but she wouldn't listen."

Francesca frowned. "The Kellers and you are close. We should really let them know what's going on. Hank is a walking red flag. You could see it just now from how he acted. Hannah's gonna get hurt if she stays with him. Worse, she'll drag the Keller family's name through the mud."

Aspen nodded. "I'll let Freya know right away."

Honestly, Andrew did not want to get too involved. He thought maybe Hannah

needed to hit rock bottom to learn her lesson.

If it were not for George keeping things together behind the scenes, those three Keller sisters would have been picked apart long ago, and they definitely would not be living as comfortably as they were now.

Just then, a buzz stirred downstairs in the bar. Almost everyone stopped what

they were doing and turned toward the main entrance.

Naturally, Andrew and his group looked over as well. When he saw who walked in, he simply smirked and turned away.

Lauren smiled. "Ms. Phelan is Gabo Creek's number one darling. She really knows how to make an entrance."

Francesca nodded in agreement. "She definitely has that star quality."

Andrew said bluntly, "In my opinion, she's nothing special."

Lauren blinked in surprise. "Honey, you really don't seem to like her, huh?"

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Andrew chuckled and said, "How would I dare? She's the pride of Gabo Creek. I wouldn't even qualify to be in her presence!"

Downstairs in the bar, Luna stepped through the door and immediately looked up toward the second-floor booth.

The moment her eyes landed on Andrew, a flash of coldness crossed her face. Leslie, following close behind, sneered. "General, that arrogant fool is here too." Luna replied calmly, "Ignore him. I'll leave as soon as our business is done."

Zachary approached and greeted her politely. "General Phelan, welcome. Please, have a seat."

Luna sat down with a relaxed posture, casually crossing one long, boot-clad leg over the other. "So, you're about to take Jerome's inner disciple assessment. How confident are you?"

Zachary gave a sly smile. "If you'd asked me before, I'd say 30%. But now? I'd say 80, maybe even 90%."

Luna scoffed. "That's nonsense. Zachary, I have no idea where your confidence is coming from. Jerome is a titan of the Southern Martial Union. Becoming one of his inner disciples is no small feat; history proves that."

She added, "You haven't even reached the martial king level, yet here you are talking about 80% percent? Don't you think you're getting a little ahead of

yourself?"

Zachary remained calm. "General Phelan, no need to get so worked up. I'm not bluffing. I've had help from someone significant, and that's boosted my chances." Luna smirked. "Let me guess. That 'someone significant' is Andrew upstairs?" Zachary did not dodge the question. "Exactly."

Leslie could not hold back a laugh. "Mr. Fischer, you're one of the top names in Blumedale, and you're seriously putting faith in that fraud? You should know better than that."

Zachary stayed composed. "Who I choose to trust is my business, not yours."

Leslie, clearly offended, clenched her jaw. "You—"

"Enough!" Luna snapped. She turned back to Zachary and asked, "Tell me, what exactly did Andrew do that gave you so much confidence?"

She added, "I'm not trying to meddle in your affairs, but a lot has been happening in the southern martial arts world lately, and Jerome is at the center of several tensions, so I have a responsibility to ask."

Zachary responded plainly. "You've got your duties, and I respect that. There's no reason for me to hide this from you. Andrew gave me two pills, and that's where my confidence comes from."

Luna's brow furrowed. "Two pills made you this confident? What kind of pills are they? I'm highly skeptical."

Zachary answered calmly. "Two seventh-grade Divine Pills, but I won't go into detail about their exact type. And yes, both were real."

Luna fell silent, her wide eyes flickering with shock. Seventh-grade Divine Pills were not something to take lightly, not even for someone like her.

Getting her hands on just one usually required serious favors and negotiation. However, Luna had always been proud and independent. She hated owing people, let alone begging. Due to that, her own stash of seventh-grade pills was extremely limited.

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For martial artists, pills like those were the difference between life and death, a true game-changer. That was also why she had sought out Andrew several times, asking him to teach her alchemy.

However, she would leave frustrated every time, empty-handed, and fuming.

Now, Andrew had casually gifted Zachary two of them?

That comparison left Luna with a bitter taste in her mouth.

Leslie, unable to hide her envy, muttered, "Who knows if those pills are even real? Mr. Fischer, you'd better double-check them. You don't want to be scammed."

Zachary let out a cold snort. "Lieutenant Terrell, projecting your own pettiness onto others isn't a great look."

Leslie turned bright red, humiliated and furious. Her jaw tightened, but she said nothing more.

Luna stood abruptly. "Since you have a powerful supporter, I wish you success in your trial."

She looked up again, just in time to see Andrew still ignoring her, not even glancing her way. That made her burn even more inside.

Without another word, Luna turned and stormed out of the bar.

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Leslie did not leave, looking like she was waiting for someone.

Before long, Ryder arrived with about five bodyguards behind him. It was an impressive entourage that befitted the head of the Ulrich family.

Leslie stood up with a bright smile. "Ryder, you're here! Come, have a seat!"

Ryder grunted and sat down casually. He said matter-of-factly, "Did you ask me out for something specific? I've been pretty busy taking over the family business lately, so if it's nothing urgent, I'll head out."

Leslie playfully scolded him. "Even with all that going on, you should still make time to relax! I already ordered drinks, and they'll be here soon. I just wanted to sit down and talk with you tonight."

Ryder was not particularly interested and said flatly, "Wow, now that's unexpected. You never used to be so warm to me before, let alone invite me out for drinks. Honestly, this sudden friendliness kind of throws me off."

Leslie looked a little awkward and let out a dry laugh. "Oh, come on! Don't say that. Back in the military, you know how the General was. She didn't like us goofing off. But this is a bar, and the vibe is totally different. Of course, I'm being nicer!"

"Besides, our drinks just arrived. Believe it or not, this is my first time having drinks with a guy in public."

She gave him a shy little smile as she spoke. Unfortunately, Ryder was not taking the bait.

Meanwhile, upstairs in the booth on the second floor, Andrew and his three ladies were leaning over the glass railing, watching the interaction below with great interest.

"Didn't she used to look down on Ryder?" Aspen asked with a puzzled look. "Now she's acting all sweet on him?"

Lauren chuckled. "What's so hard to understand? Ryder just became head of the Ulrich family, and his status shot through the roof. She may have looked down on him before, but things are different now."

Francesca rolled her eyes. "Let's be real. She saw him get rich, and now she's trying to cozy up. Pretty typical move if you ask me."

Aspen grinned mischievously. "So what do you think? Will Ryder fall for it?"

Lauren took a sip of her wine and gave it some thought. "If you ask me, odds are high. Ryder was totally hung up on Leslie, practically her doormat back then. Now he might look successful, but that clingy nature doesn't just vanish. All she has to do is act a little interested, hint that she's finally open to being with him, and boom.

"His feelings for her will kick in, and he'll be willing to bend his back for her. Guys

like that? They'd give you the world just for a smile."

Francesca shook her head. "I'm not so sure. Ryder's now the head of a powerful family, and he should've developed better taste. Leslie might be Luna's aide, but she's nowhere near Ryder's level. He could do so much better now."

Aspen giggled and shook her head. "That's not how it works. Even if Ryder doesn't worship her like

before, all Leslie has to do is act et

little vulnerable. Throw in a few subtle glances full of admiration or longing, and maybe toss in some push-and-pull tactics, wear something a little revealing, and make 'accidental' physical contact.

"And just like that, the old doormat instincts come flooding back. Before you know

it, she's got him wrapped around her finger."

Just as she finished speaking, they watched Leslie dabbing at her eyes like she was about to cry. She looked pitiful and fragile, giving Ryder a wounded look like he had wronged her somehow.

Ryder, clearly flustered, leaned in to comfort her.

Leslie took full advantage of the moment, leaning on his shoulder, her chest brushing against his arm ever so suggestively.

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Ryder's face was pure bliss, like he was floating on cloud nine.

In the bar's dim lighting, Leslie's pitiful expression vanished instantly. It transformed into a cold, triumphant smirk of someone whose scheme had succeeded perfectly.

This scene completely escaped Ryder, who was too busy embracing his beautiful catch. Little did he know, Andrew and the others upstairs had witnessed

everything crystal clear.

Francesca stared in shock. "Aspen, you really nailed it on the head. Oh my goodness, she's such a master manipulator!"

Lauren gave her a thumbs-up. "Aspen, your ability to spot a manipulative bitch is seriously impressive! You got it completely right, not even slightly off!"

Aspen felt a bit smug and was about to speak when a whistle suddenly pierced the air nearby.

The three women looked over with exasperation. "Honey, what are you whistling for?"

Andrew shrugged casually. "Breaking up the lovebirds, of course. Those two are making me sick just watching them, so they need to be separated!"

Lauren stomped her foot. "Honey, you're so mean! You're supposed to build bridges, not burn them! Don't ruin other people's relationships."

Francesca chimed in, too. "Honey, you're way happier than Ryder could ever be, so there's no need to be jealous!"

Andrew laughed in disbelief. "Me? Jealous of that idiot? Fran, you're hilarious! Besides, they're nowhere near ready for a relationship!"

The whistle had interrupted Ryder and Leslie's moment downstairs.

Leslie lifted her head from Ryder's shoulder and glared furiously at the upper level.

Andrew ignored her warning look and waved Ryder over.

The latter quickly scrambled to his feet with an apologetic smile. "Oh hey, Mr. Lloyd's here too! I'll be right up!"

He pushed Leslie aside and bounded up the stairs to find Andrew.

Leslie was fuming mad, but after thinking it over, she followed him upstairs. She did not want to face Andrew, but since her golden goose had run off, she had no choice but to chase after him.

"Mr. Lloyd, all three Mrs. Lloyds, hello there!"

Ryder was extremely courteous as he went upstairs and greeted everyone. His eyes showed clear envy at how Andrew was surrounded by three gorgeous

women.

What more could a man want?

Lauren's cheeks flushed as she waved her hand. "Please don't call us that from now on, just use our names!"

Andrew leaned back on the couch,

looking completely relaxed, then

casually offered Ryder a bit of

advice. "Out partying this late? As

the head of a major family, this isn't exactly model behavior."

Ryder nodded like a scolded schoolboy. "You're absolutely right, Mr. Lloyd. Won't happen again."

Leslie could not take it anymore. "Andrew, seriously? You're calling him out when you're here doing the same thing?"

Andrew shot her a cold glance. "And you are?"

Leslie froze. Her face flushed red, nearly bursting from anger. This jerk was clearly doing it on purpose.

"Ryder, let's go. No reason to waste time with people like him!"

She reached for Ryder's arm, ready to drag him out.

However, Ryder pulled away and frowned. "Lieutenant Terrell, if you want to leave, go ahead. But Mr. Lloyd is here, so how could I just walk off like that?"

Leslie's voice sharpened. "You're not just the Ulrich family's heir, you're still one of us in the military. If I ask you to leave, what's the problem?"

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Ryder had had enough. "What's the problem? The problem is, why are you dragging me into it like I'm your lapdog? You know damn well I'm a second lieutenant, not your subordinate. And Mr. Lloyd here? He's practically a second father to my family. I'm warning you-don't stir up drama. If you mess this up for me, I won't be polite about it."

After saying this, he apologized to Andrew and asked him not to take offense at a woman's behavior.

Being scolded out of nowhere made Leslie feel utterly humiliated, wanting to crawl into a hole and disappear. Especially being yelled at in front of Andrew like that!

Leslie's blood boiled, and she

snapped, "Ryder, do you even hear yourself right now? Are you leaving or not? If you don't, then there will never be anything between us!"

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Before Ryder could respond, Andrew feigned surprise. "Ryder, is there seriously something going on between you and her?"

Ryder gave an awkward laugh. "To be honest with you, Mr. Lloyd, I did pursue Leslie for a bit. But now, I've pretty much lost interest in her! Just now, she was clinging to me, so I had no choice but to humor her for a bit! Otherwise, I couldn't be bothered to deal with her!"

Leslie was incensed when she heard this. "Ryder, you son of a—"

She pointed at Ryder, about to unleash a furious tirade.

However, Andrew cut in first. "Ryder, a real man never has to worry about finding a woman, especially someone with your family background. There's no need to settle for second-rate goods!"

Ryder lit up, his face full of respect. "Oh? I'm all ears, Mr. Lloyd."

Andrew chuckled. "Well, these are just some thoughts from experience. You've seen the women around Mr. Lloyd, right? Each one of them is one-of-a-kind, out of this world, jaw-droppingly gorgeous. And it's not just their looks.

"Their class, their charm, their brains, the way they carry themselves... It's all on another level. Do you have any idea how many men would line up just to get a glimpse of my women? They could have suitors stretching from Blumedale all the way to Chetvine!"

Lauren, Francesca, and Aspen grew increasingly uncomfortable the more Andrew spoke.

By the end, they were utterly embarrassed, wishing they could run up and slap a hand over his mouth.

They had seen bragging before, but never anything quite like this. Even though he was praising them, it was still too much to bear. This ridiculous man of theirs was absolutely insufferable when he got going.

Meanwhile, Ryder listened with attention, nodding enthusiastically. "Yes, you're absolutely right, Mr. Lloyd! If my future wife could be even one ten-thousandth as beautiful and virtuous as your wives, I'd die happy!"

Andrew spoke earnestly. "I'm the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, so I'm technically your superior! What I just said comes straight from the heart! The bottom line is that you need to handle this yourself!"

"When it comes to women, you really can't choose the type who's obviously fake and manipulative! Otherwise, she'll ruin you sooner or later and drag the entire Ulrich family down!"

Ryder nodded in complete agreement. "Mr. Lloyd, you're right."

Leslie's expression had already turned grim. She growled, "Andrew, you're slandering me, you shameless, despicable bastard..."

She completely exploded.

Andrew did not even look at her as he said to Ryder. "See that? Not only is she fake, she's also a complete madwoman! Ryder, you're about my age and have at least one percent of my good looks! If you end up with a lunatic like that, I won't even want to associate with you anymore!"

Ryder gave an awkward laugh. "Mr. Lloyd, I understand exactly what you're saying. I'll take my leave now!"

With that, he dragged the raging Leslie downstairs. They did not linger and headed straight out of the bar!

Lauren, Francesca, and Aspen stared at Andrew in absolute amazement.

Andrew shrugged. "What are you all looking at me for?"

Aspen was the first to crack, bursting into laughter. "Honey, that was incredible! Leslie is probably traumatized from that!"

Francesca chuckled. "Exactly! Honey, I had no idea you could be so ruthless with your words!"

Lauren giggled sweetly. "After you sabotaged things like that, Leslie's grand scheme is completely ruined!"

Andrew smirked. "The Ulrich family is an important member of the Gabo Creek Chamber of Commerce, and Leslie thinking she could get

something for nothing was puoline

fantasy! Besides, I've been fed up with that woman for ages, and she brought this on herself!"

Outside, Ryder immediately shook off Leslie's hand once they left the bar.

Leslie asked in disbelief, "You're picking a fight with me over Andrew?"

Ryder sneered coldly. "Fight? Leslie, you think way too highly of yourself! In the past, you couldn't care less about me! But sorry to break it to you... Now, you're not even in my league!"

A black stretch Maybach pulled up and stopped. Then, a bodyguard jogged over and opened the door. "Sir, please get in!"

Ryder gave a satisfied smile, straightened his collar, and slid into the back seat. The door shut, and the car drove off without another word.

Leslie stood frozen in place, her face slowly twisting in disbelief. "Ryder, you dumbass! If it weren't for your damn luck getting named successor to the Ulrich family, do you really think I'd ever look at you? You clueless idiot!"

After screaming into the night, her thoughts turned back to Andrew. "That bastard ruined everything. This isn't over! He can play whatever tricks he wants, but he's nothing but an insect in front of General Phelan. Just wait!"

Though she worked under Luna, Leslie knew her own martial arts skills were limited. She had no future in that world and could already see the ceiling. However, if she could lock down Ryder, she would become the wife of a high-born family, set for life. *śwnovel*

Leslie was smart and had planned her path out long ago. While she could still bask in Luna's spotlight, she needed to act fast because when the day came that she lost her place by Luna's side, nobody would even remember her name.

Her strategy had been solid. She had Ryder wrapped around her finger, step by step. However, after tonight's chaos with Andrew, everything had unraveled.

Leslie knew that any lingering attachment Ryder had for her was now completely shattered. Winning him back would be nearly impossible because she no longer measured up.

That realization only made her more desperate to get revenge on Andrew.