

Rising from the Ashes (Andrew and Lauren)

1536-1540

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What was even more unsettling was that the one thing they feared most-the Blood Ghoul was nowhere to be seen in the coffins. Instead, each casket held scraps of decayed fabric and a mess of crude burial items scattered carelessly inside.

The others gathered around, studying the contents with growing intensity.

Tiana gave a soft chuckle. "Looks like you were spot-on, Andy. This Fallen Crimson Dynasty treasure really is just a massive tomb."

Chantelle stared at the three open, empty stone coffins. Then, she asked, "But if that's the case... Where did the bodies go?"

That one question silenced the entire group.

Logan gave a forced laugh. "Maybe this tomb is so ancient that the corpses turned to dust?"

No one joined him. After all, anyone with half a brain knew that under sealed conditions, it was almost impossible for a body to decay to the point of total ash.

Even if the flesh rotted away, the bones would remain. However, these coffins were completely empty.

Something felt off.

Andrew, calm as ever, finally spoke. "These coffins probably belonged to the Blood Ghouls. They're just not here right now. Maybe something disturbed them, or they sensed us coming and moved elsewhere."

The unease returned, and the group's faces turned pale again.

Andrew quietly shut off his high-beam flashlight and issued a calm command. "Everyone, turn off your flashlights. Switch to the tallow torches."

Chantelle frowned. "Mr. Lloyd, but flashlights are way more reliable. Why would we switch to torches when ours are waterproof and impact-resistant?"

Andrew lit his torch without looking at her and said, "Torches are still the best tool for exploring underground tombs. One, they help you test the air quality—if the flame dies, you're short on oxygen. Two, they scare away certain evil.

"Of course, you're free to keep using your flashlight. But if something happens, I'm not responsible."

Chantelle's heart jumped. She

quickly said, "Alright, torch it is. But Mr. Lloyd, ever since something happened to the two people t brought over, it feels like you've been targeting me."

Andrew looked her straight in the eye. "I'm not targeting you. I just think you're dumb."

Chantelle's face flushed red, but she bit her tongue. Normally, she would have fired back instantly.

But right now, deep underground with death all around them, she realized Andrew was the only one holding it together. Even Logan did not give her the same sense of security.

Once everyone lit their torches, Andrew stepped into the narrow passage at the back of the stone chamber. "Let's go. Stay close and don't fall behind."

They were now at least 300 feet underground, and from the slight downward slope of the path ahead, they were still going deeper.

Even Andrew, with all his experience, was secretly stunned.

Could it be that this massive tomb hidden beneath Gallow's End was actually a burial site for fallen royalty? If it was, then the scale of it was absolutely absurd.

A secret royal tomb, buried in a

forgotten canyon, so hidden that not

a single record or text had survived

to tell its story Only a few

families

With scraps of the treasure map

even knew it existed.

In a feudal society, pulling something like this off was nearly impossible. That only

proved how extraordinary this tomb truly was.

This tomb might truly hold treasures vast enough to rival kingdoms.

However, Andrew did not care much about treasure. His mission was to solve the mystery of the map.

Andrew was now completely certain Rafael, Magnus, Axel, and that foreigner-Stanley-knew about this tomb. Odds were they even knew the identity of whoever had been buried here.

So, did all these people gather at the same time, in the same place, just for the treasure?

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As the group continued deeper into the tunnel, more and more stone chambers appeared on either side. Each one had been carved out into a small room, no bigger than 45 square feet. Every one of them held a coffin inside.

The sight of those caskets sent chills down Natasha and Chantelle's spines. They stayed close behind Andrew, finding comfort in his steady presence.

Jerry, ever the professional, kept a firm position guarding Tiana's flank without missing a beat. Meanwhile, the two men Logan had brought along were not nearly as reliable.

At first, they kept pace and followed the group without issue. However, as they moved farther in, they noticed gold wares, gemmed ornaments, and ancient oak chests in the chambers.

The two started whispering, greed beginning to take root in their eyes.

"Mr. Keller, aren't we here to find treasure? Some of these items would fetch a fortune if we took them out. Instead of stumbling around in the dark, why not scoop up a few things and make this trip worth it?"

Logan frowned and snapped, "Idiots. I know the stuff here's valuable, but we're still moving. Carrying that junk will just slow us down. And besides, Andy made it clear-nobody touches anything in the side chambers. Got it?"

Reluctantly, the two backed off. However, as they went further, the artifacts only got more extravagant. Later, they passed a hand-sized gold carving and even a gemmed ornament nearly half the height of a man.

Even Andrew was quietly impressed. Whoever was buried here must have held immense status. If this was the level of wealth given to their servants in death, then what would the central tomb hold?

Tiana whispered, "Andy, are we really just gonna pass all this up?"

Andrew shook his head. "Mrs. Rhodes, these side rooms are likely the resting places of Blood Ghouls. Sure, the valuables are easy to grab. But some of those coffins are sealed, and who knows if there's a Blood Ghoul sleeping inside? If we disturb one, we'll have a hell of a problem on our hands."

Chantelle nodded. "I agree. We should focus on finding the main tomb or treasure vault first, and then decide from there."

Tiana huffed and rolled her eyes playfully. "Well, if my wonderful son-in-law says so, I'll listen."

Andrew looked ahead and said, "Let's keep moving... the exit should be close. If this really is a royal tomb, then according to traditional burial design we should be coming up on the main gateway or the central plaza just outside the main crypt."

Everyone's heart started racing. They knew they were finally approaching the most important part of the entire expedition.

Logan glanced over his shoulder,

planning to give his men a warning to stay sharp. He mumbled in surprise, "Wait... where are Lenny and Darius?"

Tiana turned quickly, face hardening. "Damn it. Those two are gone."

Andrew spun around, and his expression darkened immediately. "Let's turn around now!"

Chantelle scowled. "It's obvious that those two idiots definitely went digging through the burial chambers."

The group split up, working their way backward, checking one chamber at a time.

Meanwhile, at the far end of the

path, in a chamber just off the tunnel, Logan's two men, Lenny

Graham and Darius Walsh, were net

grinning from ear to ear. Their faces were flushed with excitement as they stuffed ancient burial treasures into their bags without hesitation.

"Lenny, we've hit the jackpot! We're gonna be rich!" Darius laughed.

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"Holy crap, I've never seen a gold pendant this massive in my life! Look at it—it's carved with dragons and phoenixes. No doubt it's worth at least a few million!"

The two men were panting hard, eyes bloodshot, completely overtaken by greed.

After looting one side chamber, they immediately turned and rushed into the next, tearing through it like rabid dogs.

Lenny, with his long horse-like face, grew impatient with how slow things were going. He said, "Darius, we should split up. It'll be faster that way."

The short, stocky Darius chuckled awkwardly. "Fine by me, but let's be clear- whatever we find, it's finders keepers. No splitting."

Lenny had no objections and nodded quickly. "Fair enough. Whatever you find is yours to keep."

Without another word, the two men darted off in opposite directions, each chasing treasure on their own.

Darius pretended to charge into one side chamber. A sinister smirk crept across his face when he glanced back and saw that Lenny was not paying him any attention.

He scoffed and mumbled, "Lenny, you really think you can outsmart me? You've got a long way to go."

Darius doubled back along the hallway and returned to a side chamber they had already searched earlier. It looked the same as all the others, except for one detail -the stone coffin in this room was still completely sealed.

He jammed his torch into a nearby wall bracket, cracked his knuckles, and rubbed his palms together in anticipation.

He thought, 'Out of more than ten rooms, this is the only coffin that hasn't been disturbed. Whatever's inside has to be worth a fortune. Jackpot! Blood Ghouls? I don't buy into that crap. Even if one popped out, I wouldn't be scared.'

As he pushed with all his strength to pry open the stone coffin lid, he kept laughing to himself.

Darius had grown up among outlaws and had heard every crazy ghost story in the book

According to legend, if you came across a Blood Ghoul-basically a supercharged, undead monster-in an underground crypt, the best way to deal with it was either with

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spike dipped in holy water or an old ritual.

That ritual involved burning myrrh and mimicking a monk's apology tour.

Usually, if the ghoul had already been exposed to light, burning the myrrh alone could send it back into dormancy.

While Darius had no myrrh with him the torches on the wall were good enough. In his mind, adaptability was survival, and he felt pretty damn proud of himself for thinking on his feet.

Sure, Andrew was a beast in a fight.

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Hell, the man even managed to scare off that massive Dire Tiger. Even though he had unmatched brute strength Darius was not some slouch either. At least he had the

guts to mess with the coffin when the others did not even dare touch it.

With two loud cracks, he finally pried the stone lid open just enough to create a small gap. He paused, catching his breath, trying to recover his strength, then jogged over to the door to peek outside.

The underground tunnel beyond was dead silent.

Lenny was still buried in his own loot pile, completely unaware of what Darius was doing.

He mumbled, Idiot. All that junk he's hoarding has a price ceiling. Best case, he might sneak out with a few million bucks worth of trinkets. But me? I just need one priceless item, and KIT be living the dream with beautiful women left and right!"

Darius had it all figured out and ran back to the coffin. With the flickering torchlight behind him, he leaned close to the small gap and peeked inside with one squinted eye.

What he saw made him gasp so sharply that he nearly lost his balance.

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The stone coffin was stacked with a dazzling layer of gold, silver, and gems. Even with just a sliver of torchlight, everything sparkled like a treasure chest straight out of a dream.

That scorching wave of greed surged up and filled every inch of Darius' mind and body.

"I'm rich... I'm filthy rich..." he muttered, practically shaking with excitement.

Shoulder braced against the heavy lid, he threw his full weight into pushing it open even more. Finally, with a series of harsh, grinding screeches, the several- hundred-pound stone lid slid open by two-thirds.

That gap was more than enough, and he could easily crawl inside and grab whatever he wanted. However, instead of diving in, Darius crept back to the doorway and peeked outside again.

He had no idea if Lenny had caught wind of all the noise he had made just now. After a quick glance, he let out a relieved breath.

He thought, 'Thank goodness! That greedy bastard is still too focused on looting, completely oblivious to what's going on over here.'

He leaned over and took another look inside, practically drooling at the sight of all the glittering gems and jewelry. Yet, right in the center of all that treasure was a mummified corpse.

The dead guy was dressed in some kind of old-timey official uniform.

Darius was not exactly a scholar-he barely finished grade school. However, even he could tell that outfit was something from the Crimson Dynasty or whatever era those dramas always show.

It was a robe embroidered with ornate gold patterns, and it even had a matching hat.

Feeling smug, Darius nodded. He silently praised himself for watching a lot of period dramas as a kid, as that helped him recognize the outfit so quickly.

With a trembling hand, he reached out-his eyes instantly locking onto the artifact beside the corpse's skull: a Governor's Luck Stick. He remembered hearing that only noble officials back then could own something like that.

However, just as his fingers brushed against the stick, something strange happened. He felt a hand grab his wrist.

Darius' first thought was that Lenny must have snuck over to steal his prize. So, instinctively, he looked up, ready to curse him out.

What he saw made the words die in his throat.

The room was completely

empty no one was there. Just the quiet flickering of the tallow torch on the wall, the coffin in front of him, and him-the only living soun the room.

So, who the hell grabbed his wrist?

His Adam's apple bobbed as a wave of cold sweat slid down his face.

Darius realized, too late, that he had let his guard down. He could feel the hand

rough, shriveled, and

ice-cold-like it belonged to

corpse.

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Eyes slowly lowering, he leaned over and looked down, and what he saw nearly made him scream.

The corpse's hand had risen slightly and was now gripping his wrist, almost like it was trying to stop him.

Moreover, that was not even the worst part. What truly made Darius's heart slam into his throat was the expression on the corpse's face.

Its rows of yellowed, rotting teeth were slightly parted as if it were smiling. Its hollow eye sockets and shriveled cheeks were barely held together by leathery skin. Only about three strands of dry, white hair clung to its scalp, and the rest was just cracked, dead flesh.

As Darius thought the corpse was smiling at him, his whole body broke out into a cold sweat.

His mouth hung open, and tears nearly welled in his eyes. His legs were shaking uncontrollably, and he almost collapsed headfirst into the coffin.

"Corpse awakening..." That was the only thing his brain could come up with.

To his surprise, even after several long seconds, the mummy did not move again.

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The mummy just stared at Darius with that eerie smile, one bony hand still gripping his wrist.

But soon, Darius started to realize something was off. He gave a quick tug, and just like that, his hand slipped free with no resistance at all.

The corpse's hand stayed frozen midair, curled like it was still trying to grasp him. Even that creepy grin on its face now looked stiff and lifeless.

Darius wiped the sweat off his forehead and let out a long breath. His blood, which had turned ice-cold just moments ago, started to warm up again.

"False alarm..." he muttered, trying to laugh it off. It turned out that he had just scared himself silly.

That mummy had been dead for centuries, and its muscles and bones were already rotting and collapsed in weird ways. So, that was probably why its face looked like it was smiling.

After all, dead bodies could not possibly smile.

"Motherf—" he growled, and then spat angrily at the corpse inside the coffin. "This whole place gives me the creeps. I need to grab the goods and get the hell out of here!"

The scare had sobered up the greedy Darius just enough. With quick hands, he peeled off his jacket and began scooping up everything from the coffin—every piece of treasure, not leaving a single item behind.

He bundled it all into his jacket, tied it up tight, and weighed it in his hands a few times. Once he was sure it was secure, he exhaled again, feeling satisfied.

This was more than enough to make him rich for life.

That idiot Lenny could comb through every damn room and still not find half as much as he did.

Grinning smugly, Darius turned and walked toward the exit of the chamber. However, just two steps out, he heard something behind him. It was a faint, papery sound—like butterfly wings flapping, or maybe like brittle bones grinding together.

He did not think much of it and kept walking. Yet, just as he neared the door, the sound suddenly grew louder. He rubbed his ear and frowned, then turned back to check.

Nothing.

"Dammit," he muttered and turned to go.

Then, it came again. This time, Darius was sure that the sound was coming from the coffin, and a jolt of icy electricity shot down his spine.

Just as he wondered if the mummy had come back to life, he snorted. Just now, he had climbed all over that corpse, stolen its treasure, and nothing happened.

What could it possibly do now?

No way was he falling for that superstition.

Clenching his fists to pump himself up, Darius forced his nerves down. He crept back toward the coffin, his heart racing, but curiosity dragging him forward.

Human nature was just like that. You knew you should not, but you simply could not stop yourself.

As the old saying went-curiosity killed the cat.

He leaned in and peeked inside, only to find that everything still looked the same the mummy was lying motionless.

Except now, under its belly,

something seemed to be squirming. It looked like insects were crawling underneath the skin, causing small bulges to rise and fall.

Weird stuff was just par for the course in places like this.

At least Darius had enough common

sense to know-when it did not involve him, it was best to walk away if he continued to stick around, Logan and the others might come looking for him any minute.

So, he turned around, determined not to stop for anything else, no

matter what he heard. Howeve

before he could even take a step, he felt a hand land on his shoulder.

"Dammit, Lenny, you bastard, is this all your doing?" Darius snapped. "Are you trying to scare me, you little-"

Still swearing, he turned to look, but his face instantly drained of color, and his knees almost gave out.

The mummy from the coffin was sitting up, and the hand on his shoulder wasn't Lenny's at all—it was the corpse's.

The mummy's head turned with a stiff, creaking motion, and that horrible, skeletal smile locked eyes with Darius again.

"Sweet mother of—!" Darius screamed in pure terror, chucking his bundle of treasure and bolting. However, it was no use.

Though rigid, the mummy's other hand moved like lightning and snatched the back of his shirt in an instant.