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## A Letter from Zucker

Zia dismissed the thought almost as quickly as it had formed.

Celestial Realm.

Impossible.

She had spent fifteen years inside Azure, surrounded by some of the most gifted warriors in the City. She understood better than most what it took to reach the upper echelons of cultivation. Dragon Lord alone required decades of disciplined training, refined technique, and a natural affinity for Aether that perhaps one in ten thousand people even possessed.

Celestial Realm was something else entirely.

In all of Azure's thirty year history, only one person had ever stood at that level.

Master Zucker.

And even he had taken a lifetime to get there.

This young man was barely twenty-four. He had spent the last ten years inside a prison. No matter how gifted he was, no matter what Zucker had taught him inside those walls, the idea that he had reached Celestial Realm was simply...

She shook her head slightly.

Don't be ridiculous.

He was confident. Perhaps genuinely strong. But confidence without

matching ability was just arrogance. And tomorrow morning, Chad would demonstrate that difference in the most painful way possible.

Which meant she needed to know exactly what she was working with.

"If I may ask, Young Master," she said carefully, keeping her voice neutral, "what is your current cultivation level?"

Kade was still standing at the glass wall, looking out at the dark ocean. He didn't turn around.

"High enough," he replied.

The words came out lazily. Unbothered. As if the question itself barely warranted a response.

Zia pressed gently. "Elder Chad is at peak Dragon Lord. That is not a small gap to bridge regardless of your talent. Tomorrow's duel—"

"Is not something worth losing sleep over."

He finally turned from the window and moved toward the bed, rolling one shoulder as he sat down.

"A Dragon Lord," he said simply, "is not worth worrying about."

Zia stared at him.

For a long moment she said nothing.

Then she exhaled quietly through her nose, turned slightly away, and muttered under her breath.

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"I need to find a way to save his ass."

"I heard that," Kade said.

Zia straightened immediately. "I said nothing, Young Master."

The faintest trace of something crossed Kade's expression. Not quite a smile. But close.

Zia reached into the inner pocket of her jacket and produced a sealed envelope. The paper was aged slightly at the edges. On the front, written in a sharp, slanted hand she recognized immediately, was a single name.

Kade.

"Master Zucker asked me to give you this," she said, stepping forward and presenting it with both hands. "A letter. He was very specific that it be delivered to you personally. After you arrived."

Kade looked at it for a moment before taking it.

"What's in it?"

"I don't know," Zia replied honestly. "No one was permitted to open it. Not even the inner council."

He turned it over in his hands, studying the seal. A small dragon impression pressed into dark blue wax.

He set it on the bed beside him without opening it.

Zia waited a beat, then straightened. "I'll take my leave. If you need anything during the night, my number is on the card at the table." She

placed a slim white card beside the lamp. "I'll return at eight tomorrow morning to escort you to the duel."

She turned toward the door.

"Zia."

She stopped.

"How strong is Azure's research division?"

She turned back slowly, recalibrating. The shift in topic was abrupt but his tone had changed. Quieter. More focused.

"We have one of the strongest intelligence networks in the city," she answered. "Private investigators, former government analysts, digital forensics specialists. If information exists somewhere, our team can find it."

Kade was quiet for a moment.

Then he reached beside him and produced the thick file Jeffrey had handed him in the hospital. He held it out.

Zia stepped forward and took it.

"Ten years ago," Kade said, his voice still calm but carrying something heavier underneath, "my family was murdered. My parents. My younger sister." He paused. "I was the only survivor."

Zia looked down at the file in her hands.

"I spent a decade inside Tartarus because no one investigated what actually happened that night. The evidence was sealed. The case

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was closed before it began." His eyes darkened slightly. "That file is everything Jeffrey Sky gathered over the years. Financial trails. Partial witness accounts. A name on a classified authorization order."

He looked directly at her.

"I need everything Azure can find. Anyone connected to that night. Any organization that ordered it. Any individual who signed off on it." His voice was quiet but absolute. "No stone left unturned."

Zia held the file carefully, as if its weight had just increased.

She had read enough about Kade's case over the past three weeks to understand the surface level of what had happened. But hearing him say it directly, without anger, without trembling, just cold and resolute certainty, made the reality of it land differently.

"We will do our best," she said. Then after a pause, she added sincerely, "We will find something."

Kade gave a single nod.

With a slight bow, Zia turned and left. The door sealed shut behind her with a soft, final click.

Silence settled over the suite.

Kade sat on the edge of the bed for a long moment, hands resting on his knees, eyes fixed on nothing in particular.

The ocean beyond the glass was black and vast and still.

He reached for the envelope.

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He broke the wax seal carefully and unfolded the letter inside. The paper was thick. High quality. The handwriting was unmistakably Zucker's — sharp angles, slightly cramped, the penmanship of a man who wrote quickly because his thoughts moved faster than his hand.

He began to read.

"Kade.

If you're reading this, you've finally stopped sleeping long enough to walk out of that prison. Good. You were beginning to embarrass me. And by now you'll be preparing for your coronation as the King of Azure Throne organization.

Zia Makari is the most capable person in that building. Rely on her. She has been loyal to me longer than most of the elders have been alive.

As for why I chose you above all of them — you'll understand eventually. You always do.

For the main reason I'm writing this later...

There is a girl. Her name is Elara Voss. Daughter of the Voss family.

Protect her. I cannot explain why yet. The reason will reveal itself when the time is right. Trust that it matters more than you currently understand.

One more thing.

I've made a formal arrangement. A betrothal between you and the girl. Signed, witnessed, and legally binding.

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In other words — you're engaged.

Before you destroy something expensive: the reason for this will also reveal itself. Everything I do has a purpose, even when I don't explain it. You know that better than anyone.

She is not happy about it either. That should make you feel better.

Keep her alive, Kade. And try not to be insufferable.

— Zucker

P.S. I owe you fourteen bowls of decent soup after feeding you that prison slop for eight years. I'll collect my debt when we meet again." 1

Kade stared at the letter for a long moment.

Engaged. To a girl he had never met. For reasons his master had deliberately withheld.

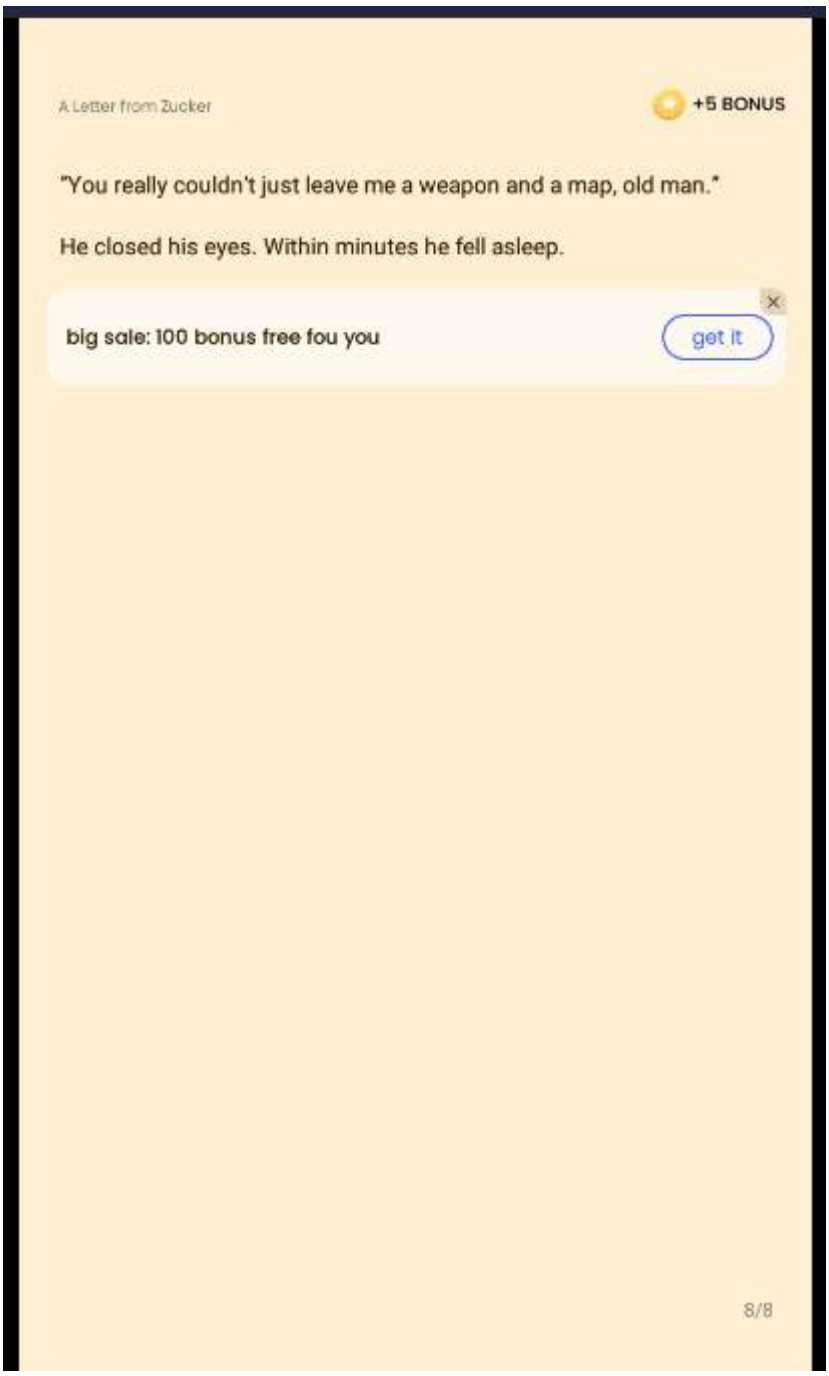
He folded the letter slowly and set it on the bedside table.

The old man never did anything without purpose. In eight years, not once. Every lesson, every instruction, every seemingly ridiculous demand had eventually revealed its reason.

But this?

He exhaled and lay back against the pillow.

A duel in nine hours. A betrothal he never agreed to. And somewhere out there, a girl named Elara Voss who apparently needed protecting for reasons he wasn't allowed to know yet.


A Letter from Zucker
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"You really couldn't just leave me a weapon and a map, old man."
He closed his eyes. Within minutes he fell asleep.
big sale: 100 bonus free fou you
get it
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