The Duel

"KADE!"

Sofia's voice tore through the smoke.

She was reaching for him, she stretched her small fingers, her face wet with tears and her eyes were wide with terror.

"KADE HELP ME!"

He was running toward her.

He was always running toward her.

But hands grabbed him from behind. Thick, rough hands that seized his arms and yanked him backward. He fought against them, thrashing, twisting, but they held with a strength that didn't feel human. He couldn't see their faces. He could never see their faces — just dark shapes, outlines, figures that existed only to hold him back.

"LET GO OF ME!"

His fingers stretched toward her.

Sofia reached back, straining, her small hand inches from his...

"KADE PLEASE —"

On the floor behind her, his parents lay still.

His mother face down against the marble. His father beside her, one arm extended forward as though even in death he had been trying to reach his family. Dark pools spread slowly beneath them both, black

in the low light, creeping between the tiles like something alive.

"SOFIA!"

The hands dragged him further back.

Her face crumpled.

"Don't let them take me," she whispered. "Don't let them —"

"KADE PLEASE—"

His fingertips almost reached hers.

Almost. But then...

BOOM!

The explosion swallowed everything.

Kade jolted awake, his breathing heavy and his shirt soaked with sweat. He stared at his open hands in the grey morning light. Then closed them slowly into fists.

He sat at the edge of the bed for a moment. Letting the dream dissolve.

Then he stood, changed, and waited.

The knock came exactly at ten.

"Young Master. It's Zia."

"Come in."

+5 BONUS

She entered dressed in a fitted black suit, tablet in hand, already in motion. Her eyes moved briefly to his face and registered something she didn't comment on.

"It's past ten. The arena is ready."

"Mm."

She set a folder on the table. "I spoke with Elder Chad last night. After considerable convincing, he's agreed to send a representative in his place. It's part of the rules, and same option is available to you." She opened the folder. "I've already shortlisted candidates. Any one of them would be a capable stand-in."

Kade glanced at the folder.

"Don't need one."

Zia stiffened. "Young Master." Her professional tone slipped slightly. "I understand your confidence but Azure warriors are not an ordinary opponent. Even among—"

"You worry too much." Kade walked past her toward the door. "Let's go. I have other things to attend to."

Zia stood still for a moment after he left.

She had spent half the previous night persuading Chad to use a representative. She had done it carefully, framing it as protocol. She had genuinely believed it would keep Kade alive long enough to reach his coronation.

He hadn't even looked at the folder.

+5 BONUS

She exhaled slowly and followed him out.

The arena was already full.

The elders occupied a raised private section to the left, seated with the authority of people accustomed to watching others bleed. Below them, dragon guards and senior members filled the tiered seating in separate clusters, organized by rank. The atmosphere was tense.

At the center of the arena floor stood a young man.

Mid-twenties. Tall. A striking build that looked less like something trained and more like something forged. Dark short hair, black trousers, no shirt. He stood with his arms loosely at his sides, completely relaxed in the way that only genuinely dangerous people can be.

Reign Bozeman.

The moment Zia saw him she stopped walking.

"Oh no," she murmured.

Kade noticed. "You know him?"

"That is Reign Bozeman." She kept her voice low. "Elder Chad's son."

Kade looked at the young man in the arena, then back at the elder seated above.

A slow smile crossed his face. "So it's a family matter now."

"Young Master, please." Zia turned to him, her composure fraying slightly at the edges. "Reign is not like the others. He's been

cultivating since childhood. His Aether control is—"

"Stop worrying."

Kade stepped forward into the arena.

A ripple of irritation moved through the crowd the moment he appeared. Murmurs spread quickly through the tiers.

"Forty minutes late."

"No respect for the code."

"Master Zucker made a terrible mistake."

Chad leaned forward from his elevated seat, jaw tight.

"You have the audacity to show up late?" His voice carried across the arena without effort. "Or were you hoping we'd cancel?"

Kade looked up at him with mild, unhurried eyes.

"You seem very eager to get your ass handed to you."

The arena went silent.

Then the gasps came all at once.

"He has no manners whatsoever."

"He isn't even coronated and he speaks like this?"

"Who does he think he is?"

Chad's expression darkened. The vein along his temple surfaced

+5 BONUS

visibly. His hands gripped the armrest of his seat.

"After this match," he said quietly, each word measured and cold, " you will know your place."

Kade said nothing. He simply looked at Reign. And smiled.