The Duel II

An elderly man stepped between them, hands clasped behind his back. The arena quieted immediately at his presence.

"Mr. Hollow." His voice carried easily across the space. "Have you chosen a representative?"

"Don't need one."

The words landed flat and simple.

For a moment nobody spoke.

Then the arena erupted.

"Is he insane?"

"Does he actually think he can beat Reign?"

"He's bluffing. He has to be."

In the elevated section, Chad leaned back in his seat with a slow, satisfied smile. The kind of smile that had already written the ending.

Zia stood at the edge of the arena floor, arms folded, jaw tight. She had done the math repeatedly since last night and it never changed. Reign was mid-Sovereign, borderline peak — the youngest Captain in Azure history. Her own cultivation sat at beginner Sovereign, which meant that if this went wrong she couldn't intervene even if she wanted to. And Kade was an unknown quantity whose only documented history was ruling a prison full of criminals.

Criminals who, by Azure's standards, were completely ordinary

people.

She exhaled quietly through her nose.

He needs to know what he's doing. He has to.

The announcer raised his voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen. The duel will now commence." He turned slightly. "On my left — successor to Master Zucker. Kade Hollow."

Polite silence. A few murmurs.

He turned to the other side.

"On my right." A brief pause, the kind that preceded something worth hearing. "Captain of the Dragon Guard. Cultivating since the age of six under the personal instruction of Elder Chad Bozeman. Undefeated across forty seven sanctioned duels within Azure. The youngest fighter in this organization's history to hold the rank of Captain." Another pause. "Currently at mid-Sovereign cultivation and still rising."

He let it settle.

"Reign Bozeman."

The arena responded immediately. Applause, cheers, the collective sound of people affirming what they already believed. Several of the elders nodded with quiet approval. Even the dragon guards in their section, men and women who rarely showed open enthusiasm were clapping.

+5 BONUS

To everyone present, the duel was already over.

Only the formality of it remained.

Reign stood in the center of the floor and absorbed it without expression. He cracked his neck once, then his knuckles. His eyes had been on Kade since he walked in and they hadn't moved.

His father had been insulted in front of the entire council.

He intended to collect that debt with interest.

"I'll give you one chance," Reign said. His voice was calm. He sounded like someone who genuinely believes they are being generous. "Kneel. Apologize to my father. Do it now and I might let you walk out of here."

Kade looked at him for a long moment.

Then sighed. 1

"You're too arrogant," he said lightly, "for someone who's only a Sovereign."

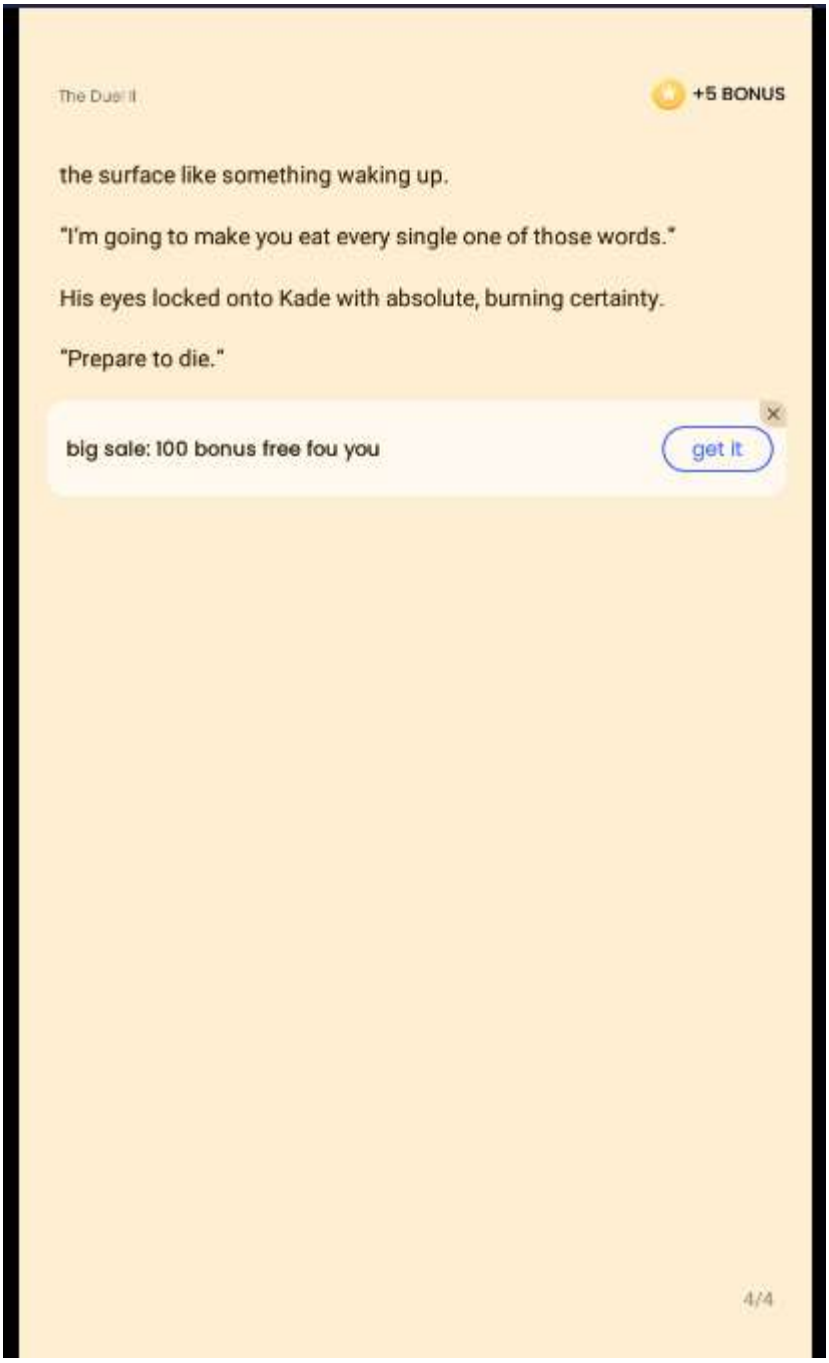
He let the words settle. Then added, almost as an afterthought.

"Newbies are always the loudest."

The color drained from Reign's face.

Then flooded back as something hotter.

His fist clenched at his side, knuckles whitening. The air around him shifted, a faint pressure beginning to build, Aether stirring beneath


The Duel II
+5 BONUS
the surface like something waking up.
"I'm going to make you eat every single one of those words."
His eyes locked onto Kade with absolute, burning certainty.
"Prepare to die."
big sale: 100 bonus free fou you
get it
4/4