The Duell III

Reign's aura exploded outward.

It wasn't gradual. It detonated a violent pressure that swept across the arena like a shockwave, rattling the air itself. Several of the lower ranked members in the stands instinctively leaned back. Even some of the dragon guards straightened in their seats.

"That aura..."

"He's not holding back at all."

"Hollow is finished."

Zia's hand moved to her side. She had already made her decision. If it came to it, if Reign went for something lethal. She would move regardless of the consequences. Zucker had given her one task. She would not fail it in the first hour.

Reign launched forward.

The ground cracked beneath his first step. By the second he was already crossing the distance. By the third his fist was driving toward Kade's face with enough force to cave stone.

Kade moved his head.

Barely. Just enough. The fist passed so close it disturbed his hair.

A beat of silence.

Then the crowd found its voice.

"Lucky."

"Had to be luck."

"He won't dodge the next one."

Reign pulled back and drove forward again. Left. Right. A combination that had ended every previous opponent within the first exchange. Each strike carried the full weight of his cultivation behind it, compressed Aether wrapped around his fists like invisible iron.

Kade rolled his shoulder. Shifted his weight. Leaned back by a fraction.

Not a single blow connected.

"What..."

"How is he..."

"It has to be luck. It has to be."

Even Zia had gone still. She had braced herself to watch Kade absorb punishment and endure. She had not prepared for this. Her eyes tracked every exchange, searching for the pattern in how he moved, and found something that made her chest tighten.

He wasn't reacting.

He was already there. Already in the right position before the strike came. As though he was reading Reign's body a full second ahead of every movement.

Reign's jaw tightened. He reset his stance and came again, faster

this time, combinations bleeding into each other without pause, each strike harder than the last. His Aether output climbed visibly, the air around his fists beginning to distort.

Still nothing.

Kade drifted through it. Unhurried. Expression somewhere between mild interest and faint boredom.

"STOP MOVING!" Reign snarled, throwing a haymaker that would have taken someone's head off.

Kade leaned back. It sailed past.

"HOLD STILL YOU COWARD!"

Another combination. Another miss.

"FIGHT ME PROPERLY!"

From the elevated section, Chad was on his feet.

"REIGN! Stop playing with him! END IT NOW!"

"I'M TRYING!" Reign roared back through gritted teeth.

The admission silenced the arena for a half second.

He was trying.

That was the problem. He was throwing everything and the young man in front of him was standing there like a man waiting for a delayed appointment, occasionally glancing around the arena, occasionally rolling a shoulder, never once appearing to be in any

danger whatsoever.

One moment Reign had him. His fist connected... he felt it, felt the impact and then Kade simply wasn't there. Same position. Different angle. As though he had briefly ceased to exist and reassembled somewhere slightly to the left.

Reign stopped.

His chest heaved. His knuckles were split from the force of his own strikes meeting empty air. His Aether reserves had dropped further than they should have this early in a fight.

The arena was completely silent.

"You call yourself a warrior," Reign spat, his voice shaking with rage. " Stop hiding behind your footwork. Stop dodging. Face me like a man."

Kade blinked slowly.

"Okay," he said. "If you say so."

He pivoted once.

The uppercut came from below...compact, precise, almost lazy in its delivery.

BAM.

The sound was wrong. Too loud for a single punch. Like something structural giving way. Reign left the ground completely, his body rotating once in the air before he crashed down several meters away,

+5 BONUS

skidding across the arena floor and leaving a trail in the stone.

The arena didn't react immediately.

It took a moment. Like the collective mind of the crowd needed time to process what it had just witnessed.

Then an uproar.

"Impossible!"

"He took down the Captain!"

"One punch..."

"ONE PUNCH!"