+5 BONUS

The Duel IV

Zia stood with her hand still raised from where she had half-moved to intervene. She lowered it slowly. Kade's shirt was unwrinkled. His breathing was the same as when he'd walked in. He hadn't broken a sweat.

She had expected to be pulling him out of the infirmary by now.

Chad had gone pale in his seat.

Then Reign moved.

Slowly at first. One hand pressing against the arena floor, pushing up, blood running freely from his nose and the corner of his mouth. He got to one knee. Then both feet. He straightened up with stubbornness. He was someone who has never been put on the ground before and cannot process the experience.

His eyes found Kade across the arena.

Something in them had changed. The calculated confidence was gone. What replaced it was rawer and more dangerous.

"You bastard," he said quietly.

Then louder.

"YOU'RE DEAD!"

The temperature in the arena dropped.

Reign dropped into a stance nobody had seen him use before. Both arms pulled back, Aether visibly condensing around his entire body

not just his fists now, but his core, his legs, the air immediately surrounding him compressing with an audible hum that several people in the front rows physically felt in their sternum.

The dragon guards in their section sat forward simultaneously.

Two of the elders exchanged a sharp look.

Chad's expression transformed completely. The pale shock replaced by fierce, electric excitement.

"YES!" he bellowed. "THAT'S IT! USE IT, REIGN! FINISH HIM!"

Reign's Aether reached its apex and the technique detonated outward. 1

"Sovereign Fang — Dragon's Wrath."

A concentrated lance of destructive force, refined over years of personal instruction, compressed into a single directional burst that moved faster than most Sovereign level warriors could track. In forty seven duels it had never been survived cleanly. Three of those opponents had never fought again.

The crowd reacted before it even landed.

People were standing. Some stepped back instinctively. A few of the lower ranked members near the front physically moved away from the arena edge.

"GET AWAY FROM THERE!"

Zia was already moving.

She crossed the distance in under a second, Aether surging through her legs and stopped.

Because Kade hadn't moved.

He stood in the direct path of Sovereign Fang — Dragon's Wrath with his hands loose at his sides and one corner of his mouth turned upward.

The technique hit him dead center.

The impact threw dust and pressure outward in a ring that knocked several front row spectators off their feet. The sound rolled across the arena like thunder.

Then it cleared.

Kade stood exactly where he had been standing.

His shirt had shifted slightly from the force. That was all.

He looked down at himself briefly. Then back at Reign.

"Not bad," he said. "But the Aether compression fractures at the third rotation. The output drops by roughly forty percent before it reaches the target." A slight tilt of his head. "Whoever taught you that technique didn't finish teaching it."

The arena was not silent this time.

It was something beyond silent. The specific absence of sound that occurs when a large number of people simultaneously stop breathing.

+5 BONUS

Reign stared at him.

His hands were shaking. Not from exertion.

"You!" His voice came out fractured. "You haven't even used Aether. You haven't shown a single..."

"I've been using it since the first exchange," Kade said simply. "You were just too far behind to notice."

Reign's mouth opened. Nothing came out.

"That technique has potential," Kade continued, almost conversationally. "But potential without proper foundation is just wasted energy." He turned to face Reign fully for the first time in the entire fight. "Let me show you how it's done."

He settled into a stance.

The same stance. Reign's own stance, the opening position of Sovereign Fang — Dragon's Wrath, replicated with flawless precision.

But something was different immediately. The air around Kade didn't just shift. It bent. The Aether that rose from him was a different category entirely not the visible, pressurized output of a Sovereign straining at their limits, but something deeper and far more absolute. Several of the elders rose slowly from their seats without realizing they were doing it. 2

Chad gripped his armrest.

Zia took a single step back.

+5 BONUS

Kade completed the third rotation without the fracture. The compression held clean, total, without a single drop in output. The air in the arena pulled toward him slightly as the technique reached full charge.

Then he released it.

BOOM.

The force crossed the arena in an instant. Reign didn't have time to brace. The impact lifted him off his feet and carried him the full length of the arena floor before he hit the far wall and slid down it in a heap.

He did not get up.

The dust settled slowly.

The arena remained frozen, twelve elders, hundreds of dragon guards and senior members, Chad Bozeman with his hand still raised mid-shout all of them staring at the young man standing calmly in the center of the floor.

Kade lowered his arm. Rolled his shoulder once. "I guess we're done here."

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