George Hale

The arena held its breath.

Nobody moved or spoke. Every eye was fixed on Reign's motionless body against the far wall, then on Kade standing at the center of the floor looking like he had just finished a light stretch.

The announcer walked across the arena slowly. He crouched beside Reign, tapped his shoulder once, twice. No response. He straightened up and turned to face the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen." His voice was steady but carried a faint undercurrent of disbelief he couldn't entirely suppress. "The winner — Kade Hollow."

The gasps that followed weren't surprise exactly. More like the sound of a large group of people having their reality adjusted against their will.

Then the elevated section moved.

Chad didn't use the stairs.

He dropped directly from his seat onto the arena floor, the impact sending a shockwave outward that cracked the stone beneath him. His aura followed immediately, the full unrestrained pressure of a peak Dragon Lord with no intention of containing himself.

The crowd parted instinctively. Even some of the dragon guards stepped back.

He began walking toward Kade.

Zia moved faster.

She stepped directly into his path, both hands raised. "Elder Chad." Her voice was firm despite the pressure bearing down on her. "The duel is finished. Interference is a violation of Azure law."

"I don't care about the law right now." His voice was low and controlled which made it worse than if he had shouted. "He hurt my son. He pays for that."

"You should have faced me yourself," Kade said from behind her. Casually , almost bored. "Instead of sending someone who wasn't ready."

The last thread of Chad's restraint snapped.

His aura detonated. A single sweeping motion of his arm sent Zia and the announcer sliding across the arena floor like pieces on a board. He closed the distance to Kade in two steps and drove his fist forward, not a warning blow but a full force strike with lethal intent compressed into a single point.

"KADE GET BACK!" Zia scrambled to her feet.

The crowd was already looking away.

The punch stopped.

Two hands caught it. The impact didn't disappear, it transferred downward, the force carving a crater into the arena floor beneath the man who had intervened, stone splitting outward in jagged lines from where his feet were planted.

+5 BONUS

George Hale.

He held Chad's fist between his palms, expression not afraid but visibly strained. His jaw was set. His eyes were hard.

"That is enough, Elder Chad."

Chad stared at him.

"Release me, Hale."

"No." George's voice was flat. "You are violating the code in front of the full council. Whatever your feelings, this ends now."

"This is none of your concern."

"It became my concern the moment you raised your fist outside a sanctioned duel." George straightened slightly, maintaining his grip. " Master Zucker named this man his heir. That decision deserves respect regardless of your personal grievances. You entered a duel. You lost. Accept it with the dignity your rank requires."

Chad's aura continued to press outward. George absorbed it without stepping back, though the crater beneath him deepened slightly.

For a long moment neither man moved.

Then Chad's aura receded. Slowly. Like a tide pulling back reluctantly, but pulling back nonetheless. He lowered his fist. His eyes moved from George to Kade, his gaze felt like a threat.

He turned and walked off the arena floor without another word. Several guards moved quickly to carry Reign toward the medical

wing, carefully.

The arena exhaled.

Zia pressed a hand briefly to her chest. She turned to George, composure reassembled but gratitude visible beneath it. "Thank you, Elder George. Without your intervention—"

"I abide by the law." He said it simply, without ceremony. "Nothing more."

"I could have handled that myself," Kade said. 1

George turned and looked at him with one raised brow.

"Young man." His tone was measured. Patient. "I have served in this organization for thirty years. In that time I have seen perhaps four individuals who could contain Chad Bozeman's full output." He paused. "I am not entirely certain I am one of them."

He held Kade's gaze.

"Whatever you demonstrated today was impressive. Genuinely. But Chad restrained himself in that exchange, barely, but he did. What he is capable of at full capacity is a different matter entirely." He placed a hand briefly on Kade's shoulder. "Do not be reckless with your life before your coronation. You are worth more to this organization alive."

He studied Kade for a moment longer.

"Your duel with Reign...the technique at the end in particular." He paused as if organizing his thoughts carefully. "I have never seen

+5 BONUS

Sovereign Fang replicated with that degree of precision by someone outside that lineage. The compression held completely." His eyes narrowed slightly. With genuine curiosity. "What is your current cultivation level?"