

Hitched 1691

Chapter 1691

The president of the Thyania Martial Arts Association shook his head at Punikon's grandfather, his face grim. Punikon's grandfather looked at the members of the Stevenson family who had stood up and gestured for them to sit back down. He turned to Tarquin Bradford. "Since you're so arrogant, I have nothing more to say. Do you dare fight me in a deathmatch?" This was exactly what Tarquin had been waiting for. He nodded immediately. "Of course, I dare." The crowd looked at him with contempt. "He's got a death wish!" Punikon's grandfather asked, "Do you know the rules? Once we sign the deathmatch agreement, even if I kill you in the ring, I bear no responsibility!" Tarquin said, "You don't have to tell me. I signed one with your son. I know the deal." Punikon's grandfather's jaw set. He turned to an aide beside him. "Go prepare the contracts." The aide withdrew and quickly returned with the papers. After signing, Punikon's grandfather handed the contract to Tarquin. "You'd better think this through! This is your life on the line! All you have to do is put on a show in the ring, and you can walk away. Your life is the most important thing!" Tarquin ignored him and signed his name without hesitation. The agreement was in triplicate: one copy for Tarquin, one for Punikon's grandfather, and one for the president of the Thyania Martial Arts Association. Tarquin took his copy and left, ignoring the furious crowd. As soon as he was back in his car, Lowell burst out, "Those guys are a complete disgrace. I'm embarrassed for them! They don't have an ounce of a true martial artist's honor!" Tarquin said, "There are scumbags in every walk of life. It's nothing to be surprised about." Lowell sighed, then asked, "So, what's next?" Tarquin put the agreement away, in a surprisingly good mood. "After they clear out, we'll come back for him later tonight. First, let's head back and check on Elliot, Evan, and Elijah." ... When Tarquin got back to their place, the three little guys were huddled around a computer, whispering and studying something. Tarquin asked, "What are you looking at?" Elliot immediately looked up at him. "We're looking at the contestant profiles. Daddy, why did Punikon's grandfather want to see you?" Tarquin took off his jacket and walked over. "He wanted to intimidate me." Elliot's expression turned skeptical. "Did he want you to throw the fight for them?" Elliot was sharp; he guessed it right on the first try. Tarquin nodded. "Yes, but I refused." Elliot didn't understand. "Didn't you know what they wanted when you went? Why did you risk going over there?" Tarquin said, "Even if they hadn't invited me, I would have found a way to meet them." He mainly wanted to get his hands on that contract. With the deathmatch agreement signed, he could proceed with the next phase of his plan. Elliot asked, "Any news about Bernard?" Tarquin shook his head. "I'll tell you as soon as I hear anything." He leaned over to glance at the computer. "Did you guys hack into the tournament's internal system?" Elijah nodded. "We're analyzing the strength of the competitors. There are quite a few powerful fighters this time." Tarquin looked at Evan and reminded him, "I'm letting you compete, but you can't get hurt. That's what we agreed on. If you get injured, your mommy will have my head." Evan was deep in concentration, his eyes glued to the computer screen, lost in thought. He hadn't heard Tarquin. Elijah nudged him, and he snapped out of it. "What?" Elijah explained, "Daddy said you can compete, but you absolutely cannot get hurt." Evan immediately looked at Tarquin. "Don't worry, I won't let myself get hurt." Tarquin's expression darkened slightly, a sense of unease creeping in as he looked at Evan. He felt like Evan was hiding something from him, but he couldn't figure out what it was...

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Late at night, after the three little ones were sound asleep, Tarquin changed into a lightweight tracksuit and quietly slipped out of the house. Lowell was already waiting in the yard. Seeing Tarquin, he immediately said, "Tarquin, my team is ready. We can move whenever you say." Tarquin got into the car. "Tell them to move in now." "Got it!" Lowell immediately made the call. The two drove away from the residence. Much later, the car stopped outside the walls of the Punikon family's estate. A shadowy figure approached and tapped lightly on the car window. Lowell rolled down the window. "Is it done?" The bodyguard nodded. "Everyone except Punikon's grandfather is out cold. They won't wake up until morning." Lowell turned to Tarquin. "Want me to go in with you?" "No need. You guys keep an eye on the perimeter. Don't let anyone notice we're here." Tarquin pushed the door open, got out, and vaulted over the wall into the courtyard. Punikon's grandfather was still asleep when a sudden noise jolted him awake. He snapped his eyes open. "Who's there?!" Tarquin, wearing a face mask, appeared in his bedroom. He made no move to attack. The room was pitch black, and only the moonlight outlined a human figure. Punikon's grandfather shot up from the bed. "Who are you?!" Tarquin didn't speak, walking toward him with his hands in his pockets. Punikon's grandfather immediately jumped off the bed, shouting for guards while launching an attack. His solid fist sliced through the air, heading straight for Tarquin. Tarquin didn't dodge. He caught the punch with his bare hand. Punikon's grandfather was stunned. Tarquin caught the fist in a vice-like grip, absorbing an impact that would have shattered a lesser man's ribs. But Tarquin stood his ground, not moving an inch. It was terrifying to imagine how skilled he was. Punikon's grandfather strained, trying to press his attack, but he couldn't move forward. Then he tried to pull his hand back, but it was stuck fast. A look of shock crossed his face. "Who in the world are you?!" Tarquin remained silent. A few seconds later, he suddenly applied force, pushing the fist he held. Punikon's grandfather had no way to defend himself and stumbled back repeatedly. Just as he was about to fall onto the bed, he swung with his other hand. Tarquin was quicker, grabbing his wrist and executing a perfect shoulder throw. Punikon's grandfather tried to spring back up, but Tarquin gave him no chance, instantly clamping a hand around his neck. With his life in someone else's hands, Punikon's grandfather froze, too scared to move. He gasped for breath. "Who... who are you?!" He was trying to distract Tarquin, preparing to make a move with his free hand. Tarquin showed no mercy. His brow tightened as he grabbed the man's other hand and, with a sharp 'crack,' snapped his finger. "Aargh—" Punikon's grandfather screamed in agony. Tarquin said coldly, "I'm here to negotiate, not to take your life. If you try any more tricks, you'll spend the rest of your days in a wheelchair." The voice was familiar. Punikon's grandfather was horrified. "You... you're Tarquin?!" Tarquin released him, pulled off his mask, and switched on the bedroom light. Seeing his face, Punikon's grandfather stared in pure, unadulterated shock. "You... how... how are you this strong?!" Tarquin didn't explain, sitting down in a chair in the bedroom. "It would be easy for me to kill you." Punikon's grandfather, having seen his true strength, was so scared he could only swallow hard. "What do you want?" Tarquin said, "I'm here to make a deal." "What kind of deal?!" Tarquin got straight to the point. "You're no match for me. I could kill you in a heartbeat. The deathmatch contract is signed, so I wouldn't even be held responsible. Right now, your life is in my hands. The fate of your entire family is also in my hands. If I kill you in the ring, the Punikon family will be a laughingstock, and the Thyania martial artists will cast you out for bringing them shame!"

"From that day on, the Punikon name will vanish from the Thyania martial arts world!" Punikon's grandfather's breathing was ragged, his eyes filled with panic. What Tarquin said was the truth. "What do you want?!" Tarquin said, "If you cooperate, I can spare you. We can even fight to a draw to protect your family's honor and allow you to maintain your standing in the Thyania martial arts community. After all, I didn't come here for your life, nor do I want to completely destroy you. I have no real grudge against your family." Punikon's grandfather looked conflicted. "How do I cooperate?" Tarquin looked at him. "I want some information. Who was behind the plot to murder Jake all those years ago?" Punikon's grandfather froze. "Ja... Jake? Which Jake?" Tarquin's expression turned grim. "The Martial King of Zhinora, Jake Warner!" At the mention of that name, a storm of emotions crossed the old man's face. It took him a long moment to ask, "...Why are you asking about him? He's been dead for many years!" Tarquin's eyes were icy. "Just answer my question." Punikon's grandfather swallowed hard. "I... I don't know!" Tarquin narrowed his eyes, looking down on him. "If you really don't know, I'll just go ask someone else. And your Punikon family will be completely finished within a week. I'll give you one last chance. Think carefully before you answer. Who was behind the plot to murder Jake Warner?" Punikon's grandfather panted, staring at him. "...". The seconds ticked by. Tarquin lost his patience and stood up to leave. Punikon's grandfather quickly called out, "Wait! I... I know something!" Tarquin stood his ground, waiting for him to continue. The old man's face was etched with suspicion. "Can I trust your word? If I give you this information, you won't kill me in the ring, and you'll fight me to a draw?" Tarquin replied, "I may not be a 'true' martial artist by your standards, but I always keep my word. I stand by what I say." After a moment's hesitation, Punikon's grandfather said, a grim look crossed his face, "I don't know who the ultimate mastermind was, but I know it had something to do with Nipponora and Koryon. Back then, to avenge his master, Jake Warner tore through the dojos of seven countries in a row. It was about to be our turn, and we were so worried we couldn't sleep at night. Jake Warner's fighting ability was just too terrifying; we were no match for him. We wanted to just forfeit, but we couldn't stomach the humiliation. But if we didn't forfeit, we'd just be waiting to get beaten! Just when we thought our world was about to end, the president of the Nipponoran association contacted me privately. He said he could help us get through the crisis, but it would cost us a lot of money. At first, we didn't believe him. After all, Jake Warner had already been to their country. If he couldn't even protect himself, what could he do to help us? Then he said we could sign a contract. He guaranteed Jake Warner would not come to Thyania, and if he broke his promise, he would pay us back double the amount. He even got the Koryonians to act as guarantors. We had no other choice at the time, so we agreed. Only after signing the contract did we learn they were plotting to kidnap Jake Warner's junior disciple and his master's wife to use as leverage against him. We later found out that Jake Warner was incredibly close to them, so the plan seemed solid. We finally breathed a sigh of relief. To show off our 'martial might,' we started trash-talking him all over the internet, even boasting that if he came, he'd never leave. We could say whatever we wanted because we knew he was never coming. You probably know what happened next. His student and mentor's wife were taken, and he traded his life for theirs. And just like that, a martial arts king was gone..."

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Tarquin's brow tightened. "...Besides those two countries, were any others involved?" Punikon's grandfather quickly shook his head. "I don't know about that. You'd have to ask them. They might not be the masterminds, but they definitely know more! Oh, right. Besides them, there must have been

someone from the Warner family's own circle involved in the kidnapping. Otherwise, it couldn't have gone so smoothly." In short, there was a mole in the Warner family. They had colluded with foreign powers, working from the inside and out to pull off the kidnapping. In the end, it got the mentor's wife killed and brought ruin upon Jake Warner and Jeremy Warner. Tarquin's jaw clenched, the fury in his eyes deepening. "Do you know who the mole in the Warner family was?" The old man quickly shook his head. "I have no idea." Tarquin was silent for a moment, his face cold, then asked, "Do you have any proof of what you've told me?" "Yes!" Punikon's grandfather said. "When they came to me, I made an audio recording! And I still have the confidentiality agreement." Without waiting for Tarquin to ask, he said, "I'll get it for you right now!" Tarquin watched as he scrambled up from the floor and went into an adjacent room. "The items are in the safe in my study." Tarquin didn't reply, just followed him to get the evidence. Punikon's grandfather was a smart man. At this point, his entire family's fate rested in Tarquin's hands; he didn't dare resist. Besides, his family weren't the masterminds behind the Jake Warner affair. Even if Tarquin wanted revenge for Jake, he wouldn't come after them. Punikon's grandfather opened the safe, took out a file folder, and handed it to Tarquin. "The recording and the agreement are in here, along with some photos." Tarquin opened it and glanced at the contents in front of him before closing it again. He looked at the old man. "Act as if I was never here tonight, and I will hold off on making any moves against the Punikon family for now." The old man nodded vigorously. "I won't say a word to anyone!" Tarquin left with the evidence. Before he went, he added as a courtesy, "Don't worry about the others. They'll wake up naturally by morning." Punikon's grandfather stood stunned for a few seconds, then rushed out to look. Tarquin was already gone from the courtyard. He mulled over Tarquin's last words, then saw a bodyguard standing in the yard and hurried over. "What kind of guards are you? Didn't you hear someo-" He stopped mid-sentence, frozen. The bodyguard was standing in place, but he was unconscious. He checked on the others, then ran to the other rooms... He couldn't believe his eyes. The entire Punikon household was in a deep sleep. Punikon's grandfather gasped for air, his face pale with terror. So many people... how did he do it?! It was over. It was all over. The Thyania martial arts world had just picked a fight with the wrong man... Outside, as soon as Tarquin got back in the car, Lowell asked, "How did it go? Did you find anything?" Tarquin's expression was dark as he lit a cigarette in frustration. Whenever a mole was involved in anything, it made him think of the mysterious figure, and his chest would tighten. Enemies just made you angry, but traitors broke your heart. If Bernard's case only involved foreigners, he could just focus on revenge. But with a mole in the mix, the day of reckoning would surely break the old man's heart. "Start by investigating everyone connected to the Warner family." Lowell was surprised. "There were insiders involved in my grandpa's kidnapping?" "...Apparently. Start digging. Besides them, run a deep check on the people in these photos." Tarquin handed the file folder to Lowell. Lowell looked at the photos first, then read the agreement, his eyes widening in shock. "So Nipponora and Koryon were the masterminds?" Tarquin took a drag from his cigarette but didn't nod or shake his head.

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"We can't be certain yet, but we can confirm they were participants." Lowell gritted his teeth. "Those bastards. They never fail to disappoint, do they? Utterly depraved, with no conscience at all! That poor Martial King! What a tragic loss! Goddamn it, one of these days we'll make them pay!" Before Tarquin could respond, Lowell contradicted himself. "On second thought, who'd want them for anything? I wouldn't even acknowledge them. I don't want that kind of scum." After his rant, Lowell secured the

evidence and turned back to Tarquin. "Do we still need to pay a visit to the president of the Thyania Martial Arts Association?" Tarquin flicked his ash. "The old president of Thyania died a while back. The current one only took over a few years ago. He won't know as much as Punikon's grandfather. No need to go. Let's head back." Lowell started the car. "So, we'll follow the leads on Nipponora and Koryon. Should we get Elliot and Elijah involved in the investigation?" Tarquin slowly exhaled. "Let them rest. We'll investigate privately for now. We can ask for their help if it becomes necessary." "Got it." As Lowell drove back, he couldn't help but mutter, "I hear Nipponora and Koryon sent a lot of people this time. They were already strutting around the registration area yesterday like they owned the place. Every single one of them looked like they were begging for a punch in the face. If only Axel were here. We could sign him up and let him absolutely wreck them in this 'friendly' tournament." Tarquin stared out the window, lost in dark thoughts, his face a mask of silence. The next day, the three little ones were up early. Evan had a match today, but they didn't know what time he'd be up, so they had to get to the venue early. After breakfast, the female bodyguard applied their makeup. It was the kind of cool, colorful face paint you'd see at a festival, meant to hide their faces—which were carbon copies of Tarquin's—and conceal their identities. Once they were ready, the boys said goodbye to Tarquin. "Daddy, we're leaving now." Tarquin's face was full of affection as he reminded Evan, "Safety first." Evan nodded repeatedly. "Don't worry, Daddy. There's no shame in retreating when you're outmatched. If I can't win, I'll concede. Besides, I'm just a kid, so it's not embarrassing to surrender!" Tarquin nodded, then added, "If you run into any fighters from Nipponora or Koryon, don't hold back. You can let loose on them. Just don't kill them." This was a friendly tournament without any deathmatch waivers; killing someone would have serious consequences. So, no fatalities. Evan, influenced by Bernard and Walter, already disliked those two countries. He pursed his lips and said, "One is always trying to steal our culture, and they even throw their own presidents in jail! The other one invaded our homeland and brutalized our ancestors! We've got bad blood with them. I won't go easy on them if I see them!" Tarquin said, "It's more than that. We have a personal vendetta with them, too. They were involved in what happened to your grandpa Bernard." Elliot, Evan, and Elijah were stunned. "!" Tarquin didn't hide anything from them, telling them the whole story. "We can't be sure they were the masterminds yet, so to avoid tipping them off, we can't make a direct move against them. But in the ring, you have my permission to let them have it." The three boys had identical expressions: jaws clenched, brows furrowed, fists tightened, eyes blazing with fire. The anger in Evan's eyes, in particular, was practically shooting flames. Tarquin patted Evan's head. "Let out all that anger. Daddy will clean up any mess." Bernard's death had affected Evan deeply, and he needed an outlet. Letting him participate in this tournament was meant to give him a way to release his grief and rage. Telling him about Nipponora and Koryon was a way to help him channel that anger more effectively. Evan's little brow was knitted tightly. He took a moment before nodding firmly. "I understand, Daddy!"

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The three brothers, along with the bodyguard couple, left their residence and headed to one of the tournament arenas. This martial arts competition, like any other, was a ladder you had to climb. First came the preliminaries, then the semi-finals, and finally, the finals. Today was the first day of the tournament, the preliminary rounds. Due to the large number of participants, the preliminaries were split across several venues. The arena Evan was at had about a hundred contestants, but only three would advance to the semi-finals. When they arrived, the stands were already packed. They walked

straight to the front, taking the seats they had bought in advance, ready to watch the show. When the time came, the announcer gave a brief opening speech, read the rules one more time, and then started calling fighters by their numbers. Fighter #1 was a 55-year-old man from Thyania. Fighter #2 was a 21-year-old man from Alerasia. There was a big age gap between them, but in the world of martial arts, that wasn't unusual, and no one thought twice about it. After all, skill had nothing to do with age or gender. A whistle blew, and the match began! The Thyania fighter, #1, had a very steady and deliberate style. The Alerasia fighter, #2, was clearly more impulsive. Evan said, 'Number 1's got this in the bag.' Sure enough, after a few exchanges, the Thyania fighter won, and the Alerasia fighter was eliminated. According to the rules, if the winner needed a rest, two new fighters would take the stage. If the winner didn't need a break, they could continue to the next match. The Thyania fighter chose not to rest and went straight on to face #3. Fighter #3 was a 42-year-old man from Koryon. He looked mild-mannered, but his moves were vicious. He knocked out #1 in a flash! Fighter #4, also from Thyania, only lasted a few exchanges with #3 before he was on the ground, unconscious. Fighter #5 was a Zhinora fighter, around the same age as #3. The moment he made his move, Evan tensed up. He was no match for #3. Just as he feared, less than a minute after stepping onto the stage, he had taken several punches and his face was already bruised and swollen. Fighter #3 gloated, 'Give up and admit that you Zhinora fighters are trash, and I'll stop hitting you!' Fighter #5 gritted his teeth, his face a mess of injuries, and charged forward. Fighter #3 kicked him, sending him flying, then quickly rushed over, straddled him, grabbed his collar, and started wailing on him. While punching, he asked, 'Giving up? Are you giving up?' Fighter #5 stubbornly refused to speak. So #3 kept hitting him, even after he'd lost consciousness, he didn't stop! The referee was from the Thyania Martial Arts Association. He just watched as the Zhinora fighter passed out and didn't blow the whistle! Elliot, Evan, and Emmett were going crazy in their seats. This was obviously unfair! According to the rules, you had to stop hitting someone once they were unconscious. This was supposed to be a friendly competition, after all! Due to the incident with Bernard years ago, the relationship between Thyania and Zhinora fighters was already strained. And recently, because of Punikon's father, the Thyania fighters had an even bigger chip on their shoulder regarding Zhinora fighters. Now, with a fighter unconscious and the ref not stopping the match, it was clearly personal revenge. Evan was furious. He yelled at the top of his lungs, 'He's unconscious! Stop the match!' Elliot also shouted, 'Stop hitting him! He's already passed out!' The Koryonian fighter and the referee just pursed their lips, glanced dismissively at Elliot and Evan, and pretended not to hear. They weren't about to listen to a couple of kids. Evan was about to explode. Just as he was ready to rush the stage to save the man, Fighter #3 lazily stopped and got up. Only then did the referee blow the whistle! He didn't even glance at #5's injuries, simply declared #3 the winner, and then waved over a couple of guys to carry #5 away. Evan's eyes burned with a mix of worry and rage as he watched #5 being taken away. He was eager to get on stage, but he looked at his number card: 9. There were still a few fighters ahead of him. Fighter #6 was also from Zhinora, a young man of 19. Provoked by what happened to #5, he came out swinging, his rage palpable. Fighter #3 didn't take him seriously at all. He didn't knock him out; instead, he toyed with him like an angry monkey, making him a spectacle for the crowd. Many of the martial artists in the audience roared with laughter. The Koryonian fighters were the most excited, chanting from the stands, 'Trash! Trash! Zhinora fighters are all trash!' The Zhinoran fighters in the audience weren't having it. Their blood boiled, and they looked ready to start a brawl. Thyania police stepped in to maintain order, but they were shouting at the Zhinoran fighters! This only made the Koryonian fighters cockier, and they started flipping off the Zhinoran fighters. On the stage, #6 was furious and flustered, his face red with rage! He was young and hot-blooded, with a heart full of desire

to beat #3, but he just didn't have the skill. He charged again and again, but #3 dodged him easily every time. In the end, he exhausted himself without landing a single punch. Fighter #3 taunted, 'Is that all you've got? Kneel, bow your head, and say 'I'm trash,' and I'll let you go.' This sent #6 over the edge, his eyes turning red with fury. 'Aaaargh!' He roared and charged, as if ready for a fight to the death. But #3 easily knocked him to the ground. Just like with #5, #3 began punching him relentlessly, with no regard for his well-being. The referee had the same attitude as before, turning a blind eye... The Koryonian fighters in the crowd were yelling, 'Finish him! Finish him! Finish him!' The Zhinoran fighters all frowned, their fists clenched, watching their countryman nervously. Elliot, Evan, and Elijah also held their breath, their hearts aching for the older boy on the stage. The pain was so much that they almost wanted him to just say, 'I give up.' At least if he gave up, the beating would stop... After a moment, #6's eyes suddenly closed. He was unconscious. Elliot, Evan, and Elijah all said in unison, 'He's out!' Normally, you're not supposed to hit an unconscious opponent, but Fighter #3 was still hitting him! The referee still hadn't blown the whistle! Evan finally snapped. In a single bound, he leaped onto the ring and kicked Fighter #3 square in the chest! Fighter #3 went flying, tumbling like a bowling ball right into the referee! The referee let out a grunt as the two of them stumbled backward... 'THUMP!' Both of them flew out of the ring and crashed into the audience.

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'Aaargh!' A few Nipponoran fighters who were hit screamed in pain. The Koryonian fighter and the referee's faces were twisted in agony. It hurt so much they could only grit their teeth, not even daring to cry out loud. Once they'd recovered a bit, a group of them started shouting curses at the stage in broken Zhinoran. In an instant, the whole arena was filled with Zhinoran swear words! There was the Koryonian version, the Nipponoran version, and the Thyanian version. Of course, the Zhinoran fighters weren't about to take that lying down. They all stood up and started hurling insults right back at them. And so, the battle spread to the audience. The Koryonian, Nipponoran, and Thyania fighters all ganged up on the Zhinoran fighters. The Zhinoran fighters were already furious. This was supposed to be a friendly match, but the Koryonian fighter broke the rules, beating a Zhinora fighter half to death. And the damn referee just turned a blind eye! It was too much bullying! You can defeat us, but you can't humiliate us! The blood of the Zhinoran fighters boiled. Gritting their teeth and clenching their fists, they rushed forward, ready for a fight. Martial artists are naturally bold and impulsive, and faced with such injustice, who could stand for it? The sons and daughters of Zhinora certainly couldn't! Members of the Thyania Martial Arts Association and the police stepped in to maintain order. But even now, they were still taking sides! This made the Zhinoran fighters even angrier, and the situation spiraled further out of control. The tournament had been running for less than an hour, and it had already descended into chaos, attracting the attention of the event's general director. In the end, it took the director firing a warning shot into the air to quiet everyone down. The general directors for the preliminary rounds were all core members of the younger generation of the Thyania Martial Arts Association. They were the successors to the old guard or their star pupils. They didn't have to go through the preliminaries; they got a direct pass to the semi-finals. The general director of Evan's arena was named Shekao. He was 31 years old and the student of a legendary Thyania boxing champion. He was also one of the leaders of the Thyania Royal Guard and a big name in the Thyania martial arts world. Shekao was tall and muscular, with a fierce look that made it clear he wasn't someone to mess with. After getting a rundown of the situation, he frowned and looked towards the stage. Fighter #6 was still lying on the ground. Since the

referee hadn't given the word, the medical team hadn't come to help him. Evan and his male bodyguard were on stage, standing guard over #6. The female bodyguard was below, ensuring Elliot and Elijah's safety. Shekao's gaze fell on Evan. He spoke to his subordinate in Thyanian, 'Are you sure he's the one who did the kicking?!' The subordinate nodded immediately. 'No doubt about it. He suddenly rushed onto the stage and sent #3 flying with one kick.' Shekao's face twisted in fury. He glared at Evan, then at the number card on his chest: 9. 'He's a contestant too?' 'Yes.' 'Do you have his information?' 'Yes. A Zhinora fighter, 5 years old, boy. Calls himself Mr. Gage.' '... From which Zhinora school?' 'He didn't say. He registered as an independent fighter, no other information provided.' The subordinate added, 'I heard that in Zhinora, some kids start training at two. By three, some of them are as strong as an ox! But martial arts isn't just about brute force. Just because he's strong doesn't mean he's skilled. Besides, that kick was a sneak attack. If #3 had been prepared, the kid wouldn't have stood a chance!' Fighter #3 had already defeated several opponents in a row; everyone had seen his skill. and he came from the best martial arts school in Koryon. They didn't believe a little kid could take him down in one hit. The subordinate asked again, 'Boss, what's the call?' A harsh glint entered Shekao's eyes. 'A sneak attack is dishonorable! He disrupted the competition and broke the rules. Disqualify him!'

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'Issue a public warning to the other Zhinora fighters. If anyone else causes trouble, they'll all be disqualified! Remind all contestants that when they compete abroad, they're not just representing themselves. They're representing their country's entire martial arts community! They represent their whole nation! They better not do anything to disgrace their country!' The subordinate nodded immediately. 'Understood. I'll go make the announcement.' The subordinate took the microphone and went on stage. He first told everyone to calm down, and just as he was about to relay Shekao's message, Evan spoke up. 'There's still an injured person here. Get a doctor to treat him first!' The male bodyguard next to Evan acted as his translator. The man with the microphone frowned, and with an impatient wave, he had the medical team carry #6 off the stage. Then he began to publicly announce Shekao's decision. The bodyguard stood next to Evan, providing a real-time translation. When Evan heard he was being disqualified, he clenched his fists, ready to argue. The bodyguard held him back. 'Let him finish.' After the man on stage finished speaking, the Koryonian, Nipponoran, and Thyanian fighters all applauded, very pleased with the outcome. The Zhinoran fighters were furious. How could they be so unfair?! They wanted to protest, but before they could even open their mouths, the man on stage emphasized again, 'Everyone is here to compete, not to fight. I hope we can all get along peacefully. Be gracious. Don't throw a tantrum just because you lost. You'll make a fool of yourself! There's an old Zhinoran proverb: To the victor go the spoils. Since you lost, don't expect people to praise you and respect you! If you're really that mad about it, then try harder and win! If you don't have the skill to win, then keep a low profile and don't embarrass yourself!' After he said this, he deliberately looked at the Zhinoran fighters in the audience, all but calling them out by name. The implication was that the Zhinoran fighters were sore losers, causing trouble only because they'd lost. The Zhinoran fighters gritted their teeth in anger. They were so mad they didn't even know how to respond. The man on stage continued, 'Alright, the competition will now resume. Number 3 will take a break. Number 7 and Number 8 will face off next, followed by Number 10.' Number 9, Evan, had been completely kicked out of the lineup. Seeing the man turn to walk off stage, Evan, his face dark, called out, 'Hold it!' The man stopped and narrowed his eyes at Evan, a look of contempt on his face. 'If you have a problem, solve it

privately. Don't waste everyone's time and disrupt the schedule!' Evan clenched his little fists, his teeth grinding. 'If you don't clear this up in front of everyone today, this tournament of yours won't be happening at all!' The man frowned. 'Looking for trouble?!' He then looked at the bodyguard next to Evan. 'Are you his guardian? If so, get him out of here, now! Our Thyanian hosts have been preparing for this tournament for three months. It involves martial arts fans from all over the world. We will not tolerate anyone causing trouble, even if it's just a little kid!' The Koryonian, Nipponoran, and Thyanian fighters started jeering again. 'Are the Zhinorans trying to be funny? They're all too scared to step up, so they send a little kid out to cause chaos!' 'They must have forgotten that in martial arts, there's no age or gender. Even if it's a little kid, you don't have to hold back!' 'The Zhinoran fighters are always claiming to be so graceful. What a joke! Even their kids are sore losers. How embarrassing!' Someone even shouted, 'Stop wasting time talking to him! Just cripple him and throw him off the stage! Teach them a lesson! Make an example of him!'

Chapter 1699

The Zhinoran fighters exploded with rage! Disregarding the risk of being disqualified, they all stood up, ready to rush the stage to protect Evan. Elliot and the female bodyguard stood up, working to calm them down. On stage, the male bodyguard stood beside Evan, his face impassive as he translated, waiting for Evan's command. Evan gritted his teeth. 'Cripple him and throw him off the stage? Make an example of him? Oh, I know how to play that game!' With that, the little guy charged. He didn't give the man on stage a chance to speak, nor did he kick him off the stage. Instead, he leaped up, wrapped his legs around the man's neck, and executed a brutal, lightning-fast takedown. 'THUD!' Before the man even knew what was happening, he was slammed hard onto the ground. The microphone went rolling. He clutched his neck and began to cough violently. 'Cough! Cough!' Evan landed gracefully, raised his little fist, and stomped down hard on the man's ankle. 'CRACK! CRACK!' Two sharp sounds of bone breaking. The man's eyes bulged in pain. A moment later, the screams came. 'Ah, ah, ahhh—' The sound echoed through the entire arena. Evan gave him another kick, sending him tumbling towards the Thyania fighters. Evan clenched his fists and glared at them. 'Cripple him and throw him off the stage. Make an example of him. I'm the best at that game!' Everyone was stunned. '?!!!!!!' A dead silence fell over the arena. Shekao's brow tightened. He leaped onto the stage himself. 'You're asking for it!' Just as Evan was about to meet the challenge, Elliot suddenly appeared on stage, stepping in front of Evan to block him. He stared at Shekao and said, 'If this is the attitude of you Thyania fighters, then we'll have to take this up with your king! Our two nations have had peaceful diplomatic relations for many years, with no animosity. If you want to turn a martial arts tournament into a political confrontation, we will be more than happy to oblige. Let's talk about our two nations' military strength, and we'll see who's really stronger!' Shekao's face darkened. 'This is a martial arts tournament. It has nothing to do with politics!' Elliot fixed him with a cold, unwavering stare. 'If it has nothing to do with politics, then it should be fair and just, with everything following the tournament rules! Right now, you Thyania hosts have failed to be fair and just. You should apologize to us Zhinora fighters!' The Thyania fighters behind Shekao were enraged. 'You're the ones causing trouble, and you want us to apologize? Are you crazy?!' 'You think just because your richest man beat Punikon's father, we're scared of you? We could crush you easily!' 'Stop wasting your breath on them! Let's just take them out!' In response, Elliot calmly took his phone from the female bodyguard and began playing a video of the matches between #3, #5, and #6. Fearing that the crowd wouldn't be able to see, Elijah discreetly tapped a few commands on his smartwatch, and the

video feed flashed onto the massive screens above the arena, ensuring everyone in the venue could see it clearly. First, it showed #3 brutally beating #5. The man was unconscious, but he was still being hit. The referee glanced over coldly, did nothing, and let #3 continue. Then, it showed #3 fighting #6. After #6 was knocked out, #3 was still hitting him. The referee, again, just glanced over, playing dumb, and let #3 continue his assault. The two clips played on a loop. The arena was silent. The Zhinoran fighters gritted their teeth, their eyes red with anger. What was this if not bullying? It was outrageous! On stage, Elliot questioned Shekao, 'When Thyania sent out the invitations to the world, you said this would be a friendly competition. Barring any private agreements, all fights are supposed to stop once a point is made! After a fighter surrenders, you can't hit them! After a fighter is unconscious, you also can't hit them! But the Zhinoran fighters, #5 and #6, were clearly unconscious, yet fighter #3 ignored the rules and kept hitting them!'

Chapter 1700

'And your Thyania referee also ignored the rules and didn't stop the fight! So which is it? Did you Thyanias just decide not to care about the rules, or did you and the Koryonian fighters conspire together to bully us Zhinora fighters?!' The Zhinoran fighters in the audience finally had someone speaking for them, and they roared in agreement, 'Yeah! That's right! That's right!' The Koryonian, Nipponoran, and Thyanian fighters' faces were dark. They wanted to argue back, but with the video evidence playing for all to see, they were at a loss for words.

Shekao stood frozen, his face darkening as the weight of the evidence silenced him. Elliot's face remained solemn as he continued, "As our Zhinoran ancestors said, 'To the victor go the spoils.' But our ancestors also said, 'Winning and losing are a part of life!' We Zhinorians, since ancient times, have never been sore losers! Our ancestors knew hardship. We endured invasions, we faced atrocities, we survived wars that were meant to break us. And even though we eventually triumphed, we lost on the battlefield time and time again. We've lost so many times, we are never afraid of losing! A loss is a loss. If we lose this time, there's always a next time. We'll just work harder and win it back! As long as we don't give up, there's always a chance to win! Zhinorians participate in all kinds of international competitions, and we don't win every time. We're not afraid to lose. But we demand to lose on a level playing field, under fair and just conditions! Otherwise, we will not back down! We Zhinorians value peace and reason. But that doesn't mean we only use our words to argue. You play by the rules, and we'll reason with you. You break the rules, and we'll beat you while we reason with you! We'll reason with you until you listen, and we'll fight you until you submit. Whatever it takes!" Elliot's speech brought several Zhinora fighters to tears. That's right. We're good-natured and we like to be reasonable, but that doesn't mean people can just bully us! Our ancestors fought back even when the whole world was against them! And now that our nation is strong, we certainly won't let anyone push us around! A young martial artist cried out, "The Thyania Martial Arts Association has to give us an explanation, or we'll report this to the highest authorities! We'll have our elders go to your king and demand an answer!" "Yeah! Let's have our parents ask their king why they're bullying us like this!" Other Zhinorians who were just there to watch also spoke up. 'On the one hand, you talk online about how friendly Zhinora-Thyania relations are, warmly welcoming Zhinorians to travel to Thyania, doing everything you can to get us to come and spend our money! And then on the other hand, you treat Zhinorians like this! I really

don't know who the real joke is here. Who's the one that should be embarrassed?!' 'I demand that this video be posted online, so the whole world can see how undisciplined the Thyanian and Koryonian fighters are!' 'A true martial artist should have integrity and honor. Look at them. It's a disgrace!' Even fighters from other countries started to speak up. 'I'm with the Zhinoran fighters on this one. It's a competition. You have to follow the rules. Otherwise, what's the point of having rules?' 'Exactly! The Koryonian fighter was in the wrong, and so was the Thyania referee!' The tide of public opinion was turning, and Shekao's face grew darker and darker. With fighters from so many countries speaking out, and with Elliot escalating a martial arts tournament to the level of international politics, they didn't dare make a rash move...