

Dance of the Blades

From the series

Silent Power

1

The air in the slave quarters was cold, permeated with the smell of sweat, blood and detergent. Aiden could feel the dampness coating the stones of the walls as he sat on the hard cot. He sat upright, his shoulders pulled back as he had been taught - even in stillness, his body was a representation of perfection. He knew he was the result of decades of breeding and selection, created to kill and celebrate death like a work of art.

The breeding program from which it sprang was more than just a brutal misuse of science to create fighters. It was an art, a craft, a centuries-long practice of genetic selection. And it was a remnant of one of the bloodiest wars between the Steel Cities and the Borderlands. Its owners had manipulated the genes of generations of slaves, crossing the strongest, fastest and most disciplined specimens to form the ultimate weapon - the perfect fighter. It began with the careful selection of parents whose genes were tested for maximum physical efficiency and mental toughness. From birth, the children of these programs were monitored; every misbehavior, every weakness was mercilessly corrected. They never had a choice. Aiden was one of many. He knew that only the best survived.

He had never known his parents - they were cogs in the machinery, tools of the owners that had served their purpose when he was born. The trainers had molded him from an early age. Every aspect of his being had been planned - from the rhythm of his breathing to the precision of his punches. Every movement was the result of years of drill - a single mistake meant death. In the early years of his training, the overseers had often spoken of his 'roots'. Of the importance of the bloodline he carried on.

It wasn't just about brute force - the owners wanted elegance in the killing, an aesthetic performance that made the bloodshed seem almost ceremonial.

His muscles, his balance, his reflexes - all this was the result of endless training, corrections and painful adjustments. Even as a child, he had been molded in the harsh rituals of the arena, where every mistake was punished. The goal was nothing less than an art form of killing. They molded him like a sculptor working tirelessly on the perfect work. This was the only way he could fulfill the expectations of his owners. And yet, although he knew that he was the product of all this effort, he could not suppress the thought: Was he more than that? More than just a weapon that was programmed to work?

Aiden closed his eyes. His every muscle was tense, ready for the fight ahead. His gaze wandered briefly as the thought of something else - something he couldn't name - sprouted within him. He pressed his hands firmly onto the stone edge of the cot, his fingers unconsciously drumming a nervous rhythm. *He wished his old teacher was still here.* He had been able to talk to him about such thoughts. The cold of the stone crept up his feet and brought him back to reality. He began to warm up. The thought of the upcoming battle made him function again.

A soft noise made him pause. The guards were on their way, soon he would be called out to compete in the arena. This time it would be a special fight, he had been told. His opponent was new, a warrior who spoke no words and whose body was marked by battles. Luca - that was what they had called him. Aiden didn't know much about him, but something about the description caught his attention. Perhaps it was the idea of facing an opponent who had not been shaped by the arena, but by fighting outside its walls.

Aiden stood up and walked to a small mirror hanging on the damp stone wall. The light from the few lamps that illuminated the room cast uneasy shadows on his face. His own reflection stared back at him - a perfect body. The high forehead and prominent cheekbones gave him an almost aristocratic appearance, hardly marked by the hardship of his life. His dark brown eyes, once full of life, looked empty, as if every battle had taken away some of their vibrancy.

His skin was flawless, an unnatural, almost white ivory color that made him a living work of art. The scars on his body told of the battles he had won. Underneath, the muscles were precisely defined, taut as the sinews of a bow, ready to explode on command. The tendons on his neck stood out, and under the taut skin you could clearly see the veins on his arms - a symbol of the constant tension that dominated his body.

Despite his outward perfection, the fine lines at the corners of his mouth and the shadows under his eyes betrayed the tension that had burrowed deep into his body. He was tired of killing, of killing again and again. Added to this was the expectation that he would deliver everything to perfection, that he would never fail. The pressure weighed on his shoulders. His black hair, shoulder-length and straight, was neatly tied back into a tail, emphasizing the severity of his profile. He was not allowed to shave for three days before the fights so that his face would look more masculine.

"Go!" a rough voice rang out after the door had been opened. It was always a different guard, he never saw their faces. They always wore masks. The guards stood there, motionless, as they always did. Aiden nodded silently. They cuffed his hands behind his back and led him through the narrow, gloomy corridors of the quarters. Aiden concentrated on the rhythm of the guards' footsteps. Each step echoed off their boots. His footsteps could not be heard, he was barefoot.

A young fighter was led out of another cell. A boy no older than sixteen, he closed his fingers into a fist as the guards shoved him forward. His shoulders shook, only slightly, but Aiden saw it. He knew the boy was scared. Without thinking, he put his hand on his shoulder briefly, nodding to him. A silent command: Not now. Don't show him. The boy took a deep breath and gave a barely perceptible nod.

As Aiden entered the arena, the glare blinded him. The shiny metal surface of the fighting ring reflected the light and made it dance across his sweaty skin; he was part of the production. The audience in the luxury seats above the arena watched his every move. He put on his armor. He could feel the eyes of his owners on him, but he blocked them out - he had learned that. Only one thing mattered now: survival.

His gaze wandered across the fighting ring until he saw him - Luca. The muscular warrior stood on the other side, his body marked by scars, leaning casually against the ring, watching him. Aiden saw a depth in his eyes that took his breath away. It was as if he saw his own fate mirrored in the other warrior - a reflection of destruction.

Silence.

The other said nothing. A wordless connection formed between them, an unspoken pact of death that made everything else around them unimportant.

A shrill signal cut through the silence of the arena and the fight began. The dull roar of the crowd grew louder, but Aiden tuned it out. Automatically, he got into position. The blade in his hand was like an extension of his arm, familiar, deadly. He and Luca moved like two predators, lurking, searching, waiting for the slightest mistake from the other. There was no room for hesitation, no room for mercy.

With a quick step, Aiden rushed forward, his blade hissing through the air. The first blow landed hard on Luca's shoulder, the sound of metal on flesh echoing through the arena. But Luca turned, quick as a flash, and countered. His movements were precise, and his opponent's blade struck Aiden on the forearm - just a cut, but deep enough to feel the blood. Adrenaline shot through Aiden's body, and for a moment Aiden melted into the frenzy of the fight.

Pain was nothing new. It was part of the dance, part of life. Aiden disregarded the wound and launched a series of precise attacks. Each strike was designed to break Luca. The blades clashed against each other, their movements became faster, more brutal. Aiden pushed Luca back, and for a moment he thought he could finish. A deep cut across Luca's chest, the sweat mingling with the blood - this was what the crowd wanted to see. It was what his owners expected him to do.

Luca backed away - always with his left foot. A reflex that Aiden had noticed in the first minute. Was it a weakness? Or a deception? He took his time. Took him apart, not with his blade, but with his thoughts. His breathing remained steady as he waited. Watched. When Luca finally took the next step, Aiden already knew where he would be.

The sight of the blood under his blade darkened his resolve. This was about survival, about dominance. That was the purpose of his existence. Everything he had been trained for culminated in these moments. His punches became heavier, his breathing shallower, he did not let up. Luca backed away, drops of sweat glistening on his skin, blood flowing, but his eyes remained focused.

The arena floor beneath their feet vibrated with the rhythmic roar of the crowd, demanding more. The owners in their boxes

began to stir. Aiden could feel them, their cold stares that wanted only one thing: Blood. Her blood. Luca's blood.

Aiden struck a devastating blow. The blade whizzed down, aimed at Luca's neck - a blow that would end the fight like so many before it. But when the blade was only a few centimetres away from its target, the world around him slowed down. His breath caught, his heart beat faster, as if the space around him had suddenly become narrower. The sweat trickling down his forehead seemed to gather in this unbearable silence.

Luca stood motionless in front of him, his chest rising and falling evenly, but there was something in his eyes that made Aiden lose his footing. It wasn't fear. Not hatred. Not anger. It was ... realization. A silent reflection of his own despair.

The blade hovered in the air. Just a breath away from Luca's skin. Aiden felt his fingers spasm, the sword trembling slightly in his hand. At that moment, the sounds of the raging crowd merged into a murmur that became more and more distant. All that remained was Luca - and the one thought that sat like a thorn in his consciousness: I can't do it.

The blade in his hand was still a weapon. Still deadly. But at that moment - between him and Luca, in the vibrating tension - it became heavy. Not because his body was failing. But because he decided to. There was a difference between a reflex and a will. And Aiden knew that he had chosen in that moment.

He couldn't. He wouldn't finish it. Aiden felt the weight on his shoulders increase as he slowly lowered the gun. The ground beneath his feet vibrated from the screams of the crowd baying for blood, but he barely heard them. All he felt was the burning in his arms and the emptiness inside him.

Luca didn't move. He looked at Aiden, and there was more in that silent exchange than words could ever express. Two fighters trapped in a system that had destroyed them both. As Aiden lowered his blade, he felt the gazes of the owners at his back. The decision had been made. The line had been crossed.

Before he could retreat, the hands of the guards placed themselves on his shoulders. They pulled him away, out of the arena, back into the cold corridors of the quarters. The metallic click of the handcuffs on his wrists did not touch him.

Aiden knew that this was just the beginning. The decision he had made would have consequences - consequences he could no longer influence. As the guards led him through the gloomy corridors, Aiden asked himself: had he chosen the right path?

"The perfect fighter," spat out one of the owners. "A wasted investment." The trainers looked at him as if he were suddenly a stranger - a flaw in the system. One of them, an older man with thin lips, shook his head barely perceptibly. 'I should have known,' he muttered, before turning away as if Aiden was no longer worth mentioning. That was the worst part - not anger, not punishment. It was the sudden insignificance.

The echo of it reverberated heavily in his chest. So that was it? Years of drilling, years of molding - and a single moment made him worthless?

2

The door to the slave quarters slid open with a smacking sound, and the cool air of the training room rushed towards Aiden. Aiden's breathing became shallow as the two masked guards led him on in silence. Their footsteps echoed off the bare walls as always, but this time they had a menacing quality to them for Aiden.

He knew that this was no ordinary training session. The eyes of the owners rested on him, hidden behind the mirrors that reflected his every move. He was being tested. The room itself seemed like a trap today - no exit, no warmth. Only weapons and mirrors that reflected the harshness of his life.

Luca stood in the corner. The silent warrior whose face betrayed nothing of what he was thinking. There was a calmness in his eyes that so confused Aiden - as if Luca was already seeing beyond the fight at that moment. Almost a refusal.

Aiden took the sword in his hand, but it felt strange. His muscles tensed as if to force the blow - but something inside him resisted. This was his world, his role - since childhood he had been drilled to be a dancer of death. But now, in the face of Luca, he doubted. Not of his ability, but of the necessity.

They began to fight. Both moved quickly, the blades clashed with a sharp sound. In those first moments, Aiden was completely in character, the automatisms kicked in. The movements were precise, practiced a thousand times over. His muscles worked perfectly with every blow, the blade whizzed through the air and crashed hard against Luca's sword. The impact vibrated through his arm, and for a moment he wondered how long he could maintain the façade of determination. Every strike, every block was like a ritual they both performed because it

was expected. But the true intensity was missing. The longer the fight went on, the harder it was for him to ignore the emptiness in his movements. Aiden realized that Luca was fighting just as he was: against the inner pressure, with the will not to submit completely to the orders of the owners.

The blades clashed hard again, but there was no aggression in the fighters' gazes. They understood each other without exchanging a word. And that made it all the more difficult. Aiden felt his fingers tighten around the sword hilt as his breathing became more labored. The mirrors reflected the scene, but they didn't show the real battle - the one that was raging inside him.

The fight continued and Aiden was tested - put through a ruthless test to see if he was ready to wrestle down his doubts and be the perfect fighter the owners expected him to be. Every time he struck and Luca flinched, he sensed that he wanted something else. Not victory, but clarity.

Suddenly he stopped. His blade was only centimeters away from Luca's body, but it missed. The tension in his shoulders released itself in a slight tremor as he looked Luca in the eye. What was it that was stopping him?

The trainers at the door moved closer, sensing the hesitation hanging in the air. They watched him as they always did, ready to punish him if he failed.

Aiden forced himself to lower the blade. The room seemed to shrink. His heart beat hard against his chest. This was the moment they expected of him - the moment when he would fully embrace his role or break it. But instead of a clear ending, only one question arose in him: What if he refused?

Luca remained motionless, his chest rising and falling calmly. Their wordless connection was still there, deep and heavy.

They hadn't spoken to each other, but it was as if they had said more in those few minutes than words could ever express.

"Go on!" shouted one of the trainers in a cold voice. But Aiden didn't move. His fingers loosened, the blade fell to the floor, the echo reverberating through the room. In the silence that followed, he felt the weight of his decision - and it was liberating.

The trainers exchanged a quick glance, their eyes glinting coldly beneath their masks. They knew what was coming - and so did Aiden. But at that moment, all he could feel was the emptiness spreading through him. There was no mercy. Aiden offered no resistance. The handcuffs clicked as they bound his wrists. He felt that strange lightness again. It was over, at least this fight. As the guards led him away, he felt Luca's gaze on him.

Perhaps that was the only victory he could achieve that day?