

Dark Rage

From the Series

Silent Power

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Dane raised the bow, his breath shallow, the string taut. In front of him, the targets flickered in the heat. He blinked, closed one eye and took aim again. The string vibrated under his fingers. One breath and he let the arrow fly. The shot was bad. The arrow landed far to the right, too far to be passable.

The clearing lay open between the tall pines, which stood far apart as if they had retreated to leave room for the action. The sandy ground was dry, parched by the sun, interrupted only here and there by low tufts of grass. Between the trunks, the walls of their dormitory flickered in the distance - silent and unreachable, a distant sense of security.

"Just missed!" Elias clapped his hands. "Really impressive for a future officer!" The laughter of the other boys echoed across the clearing. Dane felt a bead of sweat run slowly down his back. The air seemed even more oppressive, the heat like a weight on his shoulders. His shirt was already soaked with sweat, even the wind had fallen asleep.

Why? His hands were steady, his posture secure. But something inside him was blocking him - like an invisible resistance that he couldn't overcome.

"Why don't you leave him alone, Elias?" Mark's voice was calm, his gaze was disapprovingly on Elias.

Elias shrugged his shoulders. "Why? He's the future officer, isn't he?" Elias' smile seemed strained for a moment. "Sometimes it takes more than a name, Dane. A little talent wouldn't

go amiss." He spat out the last words as if there was more to them than mere mockery. His words hung in the air, a challenge.

Mark paused, his words deliberate: "Sometimes you have other things on your mind, you should know that too."

Elias looked at Dane: "Did you ... ?"

Dane took a deep breath, tightened the string again, concentrated. His father appeared in his mind: Garrick, putting the first bow in his hand. *A man always hits, Dane.* The words echoed in his head. The other, his mother's warm voice was missing, the quiet: *Calm breath trumps the strongest arm.* He let the arrow fly - and missed the target again.

"Just missed!" Elias clapped his hands, a broad grin on his lips - but his eyes flitted briefly to the other boys, like a silent plea for approval. For a moment, something flickered in his gaze - an uncertainty that disappeared as quickly as it had come. "Maybe you need tutoring!" Elias' laughter now rang across the clearing, seeking approval from the others.

Dane lowered his bow, his gaze boring into Elias, sharp and controlled. *You are the heir to the greatest court in the district,* he reminded himself. *The one who will one day stand above them all. You should show respect, damn it*

But the look Elias gave him in return only betrayed derision. And the other boys? Their gazes avoided him, as if they were waiting to see how the duel between the two would end. Something inside him tightened, an involuntary sting that he didn't dare name.

"Why don't you try it yourself?" His voice sounded calm, but inside he was seething.

Elias grinned and took the bow. *Of course he's going to try. He loves to make me look bad in front of the others and the bow is his strongest weapon.* Elias stepped up to the line, pulled back the string and let the arrow fly. The hit wasn't perfect, but it was good enough to make Elias look like the winner.

"Not bad, is it?" Elias bowed mockingly to the other boys and the laughter broke out again.

The sound of hoofbeats distracted Dane. The carriage appeared at the edge of the clearing. Levan sat on the buckboard, the reins firmly in his hands, his face calm and controlled as always. *Of course he is punctual. Always on time, always perfect.*

"Here comes your rescue!" Elias pointed to the carriage. "Your slave - maybe he can show you how to shoot on the way."

Elias' voice dripped with derision, but Dane remembered the rumor that Elias' father considered him a "second son" even though he was the eldest. Perhaps Elias was not only driven by Dane's failure, but also by his own struggle for recognition. Dane wanted to say something, but felt the words catch in his throat. The heat in his face intensified. Levan brought the carriage to a halt and climbed down. He bowed slightly. "Sir."

Elias' grin remained, but his fingers drummed restlessly against the bow before he continued. "Levan, come here." A brief hesitation, barely perceptible, then he put a mocking tone into his voice. "Show us how it's done. I bet you're better than Dane."

Dane gave him a warning look. "That's not necessary."

"Oh, yes." Elias laughed. "Are you afraid? Or maybe you're just too proud to ask your own slave for help?"

Elias' voice had that special tone that crept under his skin, and Dane felt his confidence crack and he became angry. Elias threw the bow to Levan. "Show us."

Levan hesitated, letting the bow rest in his hand. His gaze met Dane's, paused - longer than necessary. For a moment, there was a hint of something else, barely tangible: a silent judgment perhaps, hidden behind the usual calm. Then he walked to the line. His movements were calm, confident. He stepped up to the line, the string tightened with a slow, precise draw. He raised the bow, calmly, almost demonstratively. Just before the shot, he looked at Dane, not challengingly, but with a look that said: Look! The arrow flew - and hit the center of the target.

Levan stood there relaxed again, enraptured, as if this moment did not belong to him. There was a silent triumph in his indifference. Dane was sure that Levan felt it too, the looks of the other boys, this mixture of admiration and silent approval. Of course he felt it. How could he not? And yet Levan didn't make a face. Not even when one of the boys whistled softly before the conversation stopped and the attention fell away from him again. It was as if Levan had the ability to absorb such moments without them sticking to him.

"Not bad, is it?" Elias bowed mockingly, but his smile didn't reach his eyes. He glanced quickly at Dane, as if to check whether his mockery was still having an effect.

Dane looked at Levan, narrowing his eyes. Was it ignorance, intentional? The thought made him uneasy. Levan knew what that shot had meant - what it had meant for Dane. And yet he had made no attempt to soften the impact, found no words that could have saved Dane's pride. Instead, there had just been that one, brief look that made Dane feel like Levan saw everything and said nothing. It was worse than Elijah's mockery,

worse than the silence of the other boys. It was the silence of a man who needed no justification. He hated Levan for it, for just that one look.

The rain began to fall as the carriage left the dusty road. Large drops pattered on the tarpaulin above their heads, the wind whipped the ears of corn, which bent like waves in a storm. Dane sat next to Levan, his bow between his legs. His hands were tense, his fingers clenched around the smooth wood. The rain splashed on the ground, the air was heavy, damp.

Dane stared into the distance, the carriage bumped over the stony ground, but he barely noticed the movements. Instead, he thought about Elias. Elias talked a lot, always loudly, always so that no one could miss what he was saying. He wanted to be seen. It wasn't the first time Elias had embarrassed him, but this time it had felt different - more personal. The mockery in Elias' voice, the exaggeratedly broad smile, the way he had kept looking at the other boys as if he needed their approval.

Levan was the opposite. Quiet. Even now, as the carriage rumbled across the fields, he had a firm grip on the reins and no eyes for Dane. His strength lay not in words, but in his attitude, in the little things he did - without explaining them, without expecting applause. Levan didn't have to prove anything to anyone.

That was what irritated Dane about him. He could dismiss Elias, wipe him away like an annoying insect, but Levan? Levan made it harder. He never talked about his abilities, but when he showed them, there was no room for doubt. That was the difference between them. Elias wanted to impress, Levan just did.

Dane wondered again and again whether Levan had even thought about what his shot meant. Was he trying to expose him? Perhaps it was just another task for him that had to be done - like driving the carriage. But that was what made it worse:

this indifference, this ability to make everything look so effortless.

Dane knew he would never feel that way himself. And maybe that was why Levan's shot had stung more deeply than Elias's words - not just because he'd hit the target, but because it had felt like Dane wasn't even in the same league. Like he was one of the boys in the clearing who stood amazed and silent while Levan demonstrated how easy it was to do everything right. He couldn't get rid of that damn teacher act!

"The weather is changing, sir," Levan said calmly, his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

Dane remained silent. He avoided looking at Levan. His officer's exam had been a success, he knew that. But what was the value of a success that no one saw? His jaw was grinding, and the other boys' words were still echoing in his head.

Perhaps he has other talents and can teach you something else

Dane swallowed, but the words stuck in his throat like a foreign object. His grip on the bow tightened.

"A little slippery," muttered Levan and tightened the reins.

"Just drive," Dane replied, his voice sharper than he had intended.

Levan tightened his grip on the reins and gave him a look. For a moment, there was a barely perceptible twinkle in his eyes - not defiance, but not complete subservience either. Then he turned his gaze away again, as if the moment had never existed.

Dane leaned back, his shoulders remaining tense. The arrow that had hit the center of the target from Levan's hands bur-

ned itself further and further into his mind. This effortless precision, this composure - and then the looks of the other boys.

My slave. You admire my slave. Not me. Maybe it's not enough to surpass him. Maybe I have to break him. The thought came so suddenly that he flinched, but he didn't drive it away.

He closed his eyes, but instead of finding peace, new images emerged. Sanna. Her face, framed by the light hair that shimmered in the sun. Her laughter, which lingered in his mind like a soft melody. She had once told him how much she admired strength, real strength that didn't have to prove itself. What would she think of me if she had been there today? The idea that she would have admired Levan's shot brought him to the edge of endurance. Maybe she had even noticed it - Levan's calm, his skill.

Maybe she would have smiled. Not at me, but at all of us. Then like a sting, sharper than the wind whipping across the fields: didn't she admire Levan too? The thought was unbearable.

Levan and Sanna - both should know where they belong.

A bright flash tore through the sky and the horse suddenly snorted, jerking the carriage to one side. Dane pulled up, reflexively grabbed the armrest.

"Keep it under control!" His voice was loud, almost panicked. The horse reared up, the wheels of the carriage skidded across the slippery ground. For a moment, Dane thought they were going to tip over.

Levan tightened his grip on the reins and spoke quietly, almost inaudibly. "Quiet," he murmured, his words soft, as if he

were speaking not only to the horse, but also to Dane. Slowly, the animal lowered its head and stepped back onto the path.

"Of course you can do that too," Dane muttered, the words barely audible.

Levan gave him another of his brief glances, which also flashed a hint of pride - so fleeting that Dane wasn't sure if he was imagining it. When the courtyard came into view, Garrick was standing under the canopy, his hands clasped behind his back. Even through the rain, his posture seemed unyielding, almost awe-inspiring.

"We're here, sir," Levan said calmly, without taking his eyes off the path. Dane did not answer. Garrick, Dane's father, stepped closer, his gaze slid briefly over Dane before resting on Levan.

"Good work," he said, patting Levan on the shoulder and inspecting the carriage. "It looks like you survived the storm unscathed."

Levan nodded. In his eyes, for a fraction of a moment, there was a glimmer - not a smile, but a spark of satisfaction. He said nothing, as usual.

But this tiny moment made Dane's blood rush to his ears. It was as if Levan had won the victory without even claiming it. Dane felt something tighten inside him - a dull, hot knot in his chest. Garrick had only looked at him briefly. His praise was for Levan, as if Dane had been invisible. Dane bit the inside of his cheek, tasting the metallic copper of his own blood. It wasn't just anger. It was a cutting pain he didn't want to name. He wasn't enough. Not for his father. Not for Elias. Not even for himself.

Dane opened his mouth, but Garrick's gaze remained fixed on Levan. "Put the horse in the stable," Garrick said to Levan before turning to Dane. "I'll talk to you later."

Then he turned and walked into the house. Dane stood still, letting his father's words hang in the air. The rain had subsided, but his mind continued to swirl. Levan led the horse into the stable with his usual confidence. He paused for a moment, stroking his face briefly - a barely perceptible hesitation, a breath that seemed too deep, as if he was trying to shake something off. He probably thought no one saw him. But Dane did. *He's not untouchable, he thought. He just hides it better.* Dane went into his room, threw the bow on the table and stared at the ceiling. The day had drained him, but the images stayed with him: Levan's shot, Elias's laugh, Garrick's pat on the back - and Sanna's face. The fact that he had passed the exam with flying colors faded into the background. He would be allowed to go to a school in the Borderlands for a year.

But first he would have to take care of Levan. He's just a slave, he thought. A tool. And yet ... Dane stepped to the window, saw Levan coming out of the stable, other slaves greeting him. They nodded at Levan - not out of fear, but with a kind of natural respect. Something about it burned in Dane's stomach. *Even here, he's more than me.* He pressed his forehead against the cool glass. *He forgets where he belongs. But I'll show him.*

He watched as the rain turned the yard into streaks of mud. The puddles reflected the gray sky, cut up by the streaks of mud. Like his thoughts - cloudy, agitated, without a clear picture. The storm had passed, but the air remained heavy and damp. The storm had washed everything away - except the weight in his chest.

Dane carefully placed the bow in the corner of his room. He eased it to the floor, stroking the old wood that had served his grandfather. He could not calm his thoughts. Suddenly, full of rage, he slammed his fist into the mirror, which shattered with a crash. The reflection was just glass, as fragile as the boy inside. But the cracks were not in the glass, but in himself. Dane gasped, the echo of his outburst reverberating in the silence. Blood dripped from his hand. But the pressure in his chest remained.

At some point, Levan would no longer be so untouchable. At some point, Sanna would no longer look up to him. Someday, Dane thought, he would be above them all. Not because it was his right - but because he would rise above them all.