

Helping hands

From the series

Silent Power

The figures were not correct. Sana had checked them three times - the error remained. Overslept, she let her gaze wander over the fields. The dust danced in the golden rays of the morning sun - weightless, as if it didn't belong to her world

There was a bitter taste on her tongue. The grain count was lower than expected, but perhaps someone had simply miscounted? Even Levan wasn't good at math, even though she had taught him. But she knew it was wiser not to voice such findings. Garrick demanded order, but not the truth. She had to do something.

It smelled of hay in the barn. Sana stroked the sacks with her hand, opened one and let the grains trickle through her fingers. Where was the mistake?

"Are you calculating again how many grains I waste every day?" Sana winced - she hadn't heard Levan coming. She pursed her lips mockingly. "I've long since accepted that you're a hopeless cost factor for all of us." His closeness was familiar, but at that moment she sensed something she had previously pushed aside. A different kind of perception.

Levan laughed softly and his gaze lingered on her for a moment too long. She realized that her heart was beating faster, and not just because of the numbers. He slumped down on the bale of straw, rubbing the back of his neck. In the past, she would hardly have noticed. Now she noticed that he was never completely relaxed - not anymore. His composure seemed like a façade, as if he was trying not to show that the constant humiliation had left its mark. A hint of warmth rose to her cheeks and she quickly lowered her gaze.

She forced herself to focus on her work again, but the energy in the air had changed

Footsteps crunched in the sand near the barn. Dane.

An unpleasant tingling sensation spread across the back of Sana's neck and her fingers unconsciously closed tighter around the parchment. Levan heard it too. His smile faded, he exhaled shallowly and straightened up. Dane entered the barn, his gaze traveling slowly, scrutinizingly, over Sana and Levan. His expression remained indefinite. Then his gaze went back and he fixed on Levan. The tension between the two men was almost palpable. Sana knew that something must have happened between the men, although neither of them spoke about it. And that Dane had recently begun to enjoy savoring his superiority.

Levan seemed like someone who could not be shaken by anything. Dane was the opposite - precise, calculating. Sana had never seen him any other way. Where Levan's muscles played beneath tanned skin, Dane's demeanor was one of cool elegance. He was not at ease, and he had an iron will. Dane would pursue a career as a cadet and become the owner of the estate. He knew it, and it was already shaping him. His posture was straighter, his gaze more calculating. While Levan surrendered to the moment, Dane lived in a world of strategies and goals. His intelligence was cutting, a weapon he wielded masterfully. She could see the differences so clearly that she wondered why she had never been so aware of them.

"You have time to chat, Levan?" Dane's voice sounded casual, but Sana heard the sharpness in it.

"Just a moment, sir," Levan remained calm, his posture proud.

Sana lowered her eyes, arranging the parchment as if it could serve as a shield. "I was just asking him why he's working so slowly," she said in a soft, playful tone. "But apparently he's only so slow because he's struggling to carry out your orders perfectly, Dane."

A clever balance - a hint of joking, but wrapped in respect.

Dane scrutinized her, his eyes resting on her for too long. Scrutinizing. Searching. Sana felt goose bumps run down her arms. After a moment, he turned away. "Make sure the supplies are right this month. I'll check."

"Of course, sir."

Dane left the barn, and with him went the leaden tension. Sana still felt the cold he had left behind, and her gaze involuntarily wandered to Levan. He had relaxed again, but there was a shadow over his features. Something inside her regretted how harshly Dane had treated him. Levan had obviously made mistakes, yes, but did he really deserve this relentless severity? In another life, in another world, the two of them would have been friends, not enemies. But in this reality, Dane's harshness was a sword that left no room for doubt. Sana exhaled softly. Levan looked at her, a tiny, barely visible smile at the corners of his eyes. She knew he understood what she had done.

"You're better with numbers than with lies," he muttered.

Sana looked at him silently for a moment and turned back to the parchments. But a residual thought remained: who was she when no one was looking?

Later that day, Sana was called into the main house. Garrick sat behind his massive desk, his fingers drumming slowly on the wood. The dull rhythm cut into her nerves. Beside him lay a roll of parchment she knew only too well - her accounts.

"Those adjustments you made," he began slowly, his gaze resting heavily on her. "Did you allow yourself to make adjustments on your own?"

Sana felt her fingers growing moist, but she forced herself to calm down. "I was just trying to iron out an inconsistency, sir. To make the stock more consistent with the harvest figures."

A moment of silence. Garrick's eyes narrowed, his gaze slid over her slowly, longer than necessary. A creeping assessment that settled on her skin like invisible shackles. Her breath hitched for a heartbeat. She knew these moments. Knew the cold, calculating expression that weighed more than his words. She couldn't allow herself to react.

Then he leaned back. A smile, barely more than a hint, flitted across his lips. "Smart thinking. But I won't tolerate any decisions without my consent."

"Of course, sir." She lowered her eyes, rehearsed humility. He said nothing more. But his silence was a weight she carried with her as she turned around. His gaze followed her, like a hand that wouldn't let go. It was only when the door closed behind her that she dared to take a deep breath. Her lungs filled with air, but the oppressive feeling in her chest remained. She knew it hadn't been the last time.

In the evening, Sana heard that Dane had assigned Levan to count and close the day again. She had seen it coming. Dane knew that something was almost always wrong at the end of the day - ideal if you wanted to punish someone. Levan was too quiet, too smart, not broken enough. That made him Dane's target. She put the tool aside and wiped her forehead with her glove. The damp night air was heavy on her skin, but the sudden chill inside her had nothing to do with the weather. She couldn't watch them destroy him. Not him.

Without thinking twice, she dived into the shadows between the barracks. She restlessly searched through the work lists in the warehouse, looking around again and again. Every night, the assignments for the next day were reassigned. One small change - hardly noticeable - and Levan would be working at a different post. Her fingers trembled as she changed the entry, then she put the list back and took a step back. Was it too much? Too obvious? If anyone got suspicious ... A soft crack behind her made her freeze. She held her breath, peering into the darkness. Was it just an animal? Or was someone there? Seconds passed. Her fingers were cold as she quietly closed the warehouse door. It had probably been nothing. Hopefully. But her skin tingled as if she hadn't been alone. A deep breath. If she did nothing, Levan would suffer again.

The next day, as she passed the barn, she saw him. Levan was stacking hay with calm, tired movements, while a young woman took over the counting. Sana waved to her. And hopefully Levan had been spared punishment. A wave of relief flooded through her, but it didn't last. Her eyes met his, just for a moment,

and there was something in his dark eyes that sent a shiver down her spine. He knew it. Of course he knew.

She sought his gaze, and for a split second she wondered whether he would approve. Whether he could understand why she had taken this risk. Because he couldn't become what Dane wanted him to be. Because he meant something to her. Probably more than she dared to admit.

But there was no gratitude in his eyes. Just a silent judgment. A barely perceptible hesitation, as if he wanted to say something - then he lowered his gaze. Her throat went dry. She had saved him - but had probably also set something else in motion. Something that could no longer be controlled.

The next day, Sana stood before Garrick again. Her heart beat faster when she felt his scrutinizing gaze, the way he leaned back slightly as if he were watching an insignificant ant. But she had made up her mind.

"Sir, I've noticed that we could cut losses by a few percent by changing our delivery routes." Her voice was firmer than she'd expected, but her stomach tightened as Garrick slowly raised a brow.

"Is that what you mean?" His voice was sluggish, almost bored.

Sana felt her courage tighten for a moment. Now it was too late to retreat. She forced herself to hold her gaze. "Yes, sir. It would be more efficient."

Garrick remained silent. His eyes scrutinized her, dark, appraising. Then he leaned forward, placing his fingers against each other. "Tell me more."

Sana swallowed. He hadn't rejected her immediately. But that didn't mean she was safe. So she kept talking, explaining how switching routes would not only mean fewer casualties, but could also increase efficiency. Her words came faster, fueled by nervousness and the urge not to look stupid.

Garrick let her talk. There was no movement on his face. Then, when she had finished, he shook his head slowly. "And you think the masters of the trade routes haven't considered that? Do you think you have more foresight than men who do nothing else all their lives?"

Her throat went dry. No, she didn't think so. Or did she? She wasn't sure anymore.

"I... I see it from a different angle," she tried, but her voice trembled.

Garrick stood up. Slowly. Almost gleefully. He walked around her, taking his time. "Sana ..." He stopped behind her, so close she could feel his breath. "Do you know what happens to people who make hasty suggestions?"

A cold shiver ran down her spine.

"You ... you will be reprimanded, sir."

"Reprimanded." His tone was gentle. "If they're lucky, yes."

Sana felt her hands clench into fists. Fear crept up inside her, and with it the desire to simply nod, to withdraw, to forget this conversation. But she could not remain silent.

"But what if I'm right?" Her voice was quieter than she wanted, but the words were spoken.

Garrick moved in front of her again, his gaze now more direct. He was silent for a long while, and in that silence Sana grew to realize that she had crossed the line. Whether she could ever step back behind it, she didn't know.

Then Garrick nodded slowly. "I'll keep it in mind."

That was all. No approval, no praise. Just this vague, cold remark. Garrick always spoke to her in this tone, which contained no direct threat, but still made it clear to her that she was not considered an equal. He would have reprimanded a man in her place differently - more harshly, probably, but with more respect. Sana didn't know which she preferred. She exhaled carefully, trying to expel the tension from her body. She was just about to bow when Garrick casually added, "And Sana... if you try to manipulate the work schedule again to

save Levan from a predicament, I will deal with it personally."

The blood drained from her face. A dull roar filled her ears. Her mind raced - he knew. He had noticed. Her small, precise adjustment, the tiny advantage she had smuggled into the system, barely visible among all the numbers and justifications.

Garrick didn't even look at her anymore. He turned away as if the conversation was over for him, just leaving her standing there, trapped in her own stupor.

Sana forced her legs to move, forced herself to leave the room.

The air outside was warm, but she was freezing cold. Had that been courage? Or stupidity?

Later that day, Sana discovered a young, injured dog near the barn. The animal was lying on its side, its flank rising and falling heavily. Blood was sticking to its fur and its dark eyes were half closed.

Sana knew it was risky to help the animal. Someone might see it. Someone could report it. As she looked around, her gaze lingered on Dane. He was standing not far away, watching the goings-on in the yard and her with her arms crossed.

She took a deep breath. "Sir, may I take care of the animal?" Her voice was calm, but her fingers tingled with tension. "It might help keep the rats away."

Dane turned his head towards her. He looked at her, but not the way a man would look at a woman - more like a hunter considering whether his prey would fight back. Sana involuntarily held her breath. She expected a mocking smile, a harsh remark, a disparaging gesture.

But he just looked at her for a long time. Then, slowly, he nodded. "Show me what you would do."

She blinked in surprise. Then she knelt down next to the animal, careful not to make any frantic movements. The dog flinched fearfully when her hand touched it, but this time it growled softly and tried to break away.

"Careful." Dane's voice was closer than expected. He had crouched down beside her, and before Sana could react, he had the dog pinned down. His hands were strong, sure, but not rough.

"You can't get bitten like that," he said calmly, as if he had done this often before. Sana felt his closeness, felt his arm brush against hers for a moment. It wasn't a big movement,

nothing significant - and yet it made her falter. She forced herself to concentrate on the animal again. With careful movements, she cleaned the wound with a damp cloth and the dog calmed down under Dane's firm grip. Her fingers briefly touched his as she applied the bandage. A moment of silence, heavy and unfamiliar.

Dane only let go of the dog when she had finished. The little one lifted its head and sniffed carefully at Dane's hand. He scrutinized the animal for a long time before saying quietly, "Maybe he'll stay useful." Sana couldn't tell if he was serious. "Are you going to look after him?"

Sana ventured a brief smile. Maybe she hadn't just helped the dog today. Perhaps she had taken a first step - or Dane had. She was just about to stand up when Dane suddenly said quietly, "Garrick pointed out the manipulation of the work list to me."

An icy shiver crept up her spine. Slowly, she turned to face him. His gaze was impenetrable, but there was no anger. No mockery.

"I knew it, I could have betrayed you," he continued. "But I didn't."

What was she supposed to say to him? Her mouth was dry.

Dane looked at her for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders, barely noticing. "I hope you're not taking advantage of it."

With that, he stood up, knocked the dust off his pants and left her sitting there - with a dog fighting for its survival and a truth that suddenly felt dangerous.

Later that evening, Sana went back to the barn, her eyes fixed on the parchment in her hands. She wanted to check everything

again in peace and alone. The lantern next to her cast flickering light on the wooden planks as she tried to organize the numbers. But the longer she stared at them, the less they made sense. The amount of grain was wrong, and slowly she began to get the feeling that it wasn't a simple math error. She took a deep breath and rubbed her arms - the oppressive heat of the day had eaten into the walls, making the air feel stuffy and heavy.

The door opened with a soft creak. Levan entered, a hoe in one hand and a shovel in the other. Without hurrying, he leaned the tool against the wall and wiped his forehead with his forearm. He looked dirty and tired, Sana thought. His shirt was tied around his loins.

"Still over the numbers?" His voice sounded amused.

Sana shook her head, barely noticing. "They're contradictory. I'm trying to find out why."

Levan snorted softly and came a little closer. "It's probably just wrong numbers, Sana."

She pursed her lips, smelled his sweat, but before she could say anything back, she saw a shadow out of the corner of her eye. She slowly raised her head.

"You guys are busy." Dane's voice was calm, but it left no doubt that he wanted to know what was going on.

Sana placed the parchment on the box next to her, forcing herself not to let her gaze rest on it for too long. Levan, on the other hand, barely moved, only his fingers briefly playing with the rope around his pants

sudden silence was as suffocating as the sultry night air.

Dane let his eyes wander around the barn as if he were examining a chessboard on which he was checking every move. His fingers drummed imperceptibly against his thigh. His gaze lingered on Levan.

"Ah, my slave. I haven't seen you with a bow for a long time," he said. "Too bad. Shine once and then... Nothing more."

Levan returned the look calmly and stood up slowly. Sana could feel the tension rising almost palpably

Dane stepped closer, his tone softer, almost thoughtful. "But it's good that everyone knows their place. Isn't it?" He wasn't speaking directly to Levan, but to Sana. She knew, and yet it was a question that had no easy answer

"Sana understands what loyalty means," he continued. He looked at her, his gaze so calm that she felt sick.

She knew that expression. Men like him didn't expect rebellion from women - only silent submission. A joke, a defense, a tiny sign of resistance, and he wouldn't see her as a serious threat. But one wrong word and she would be vulnerable. She pressed her lips together and returned his gaze - just long enough to show him that she had understood him.

"She's smart enough not to get on the wrong side."

"I..."

"Tell me, Sana," Dane interrupted her, his voice soft as velvet, "if it came down to it, would you report misconduct by Levan as well?"

A moment of silence.

Her fingers clutched the parchment. Levan turned his head and looked at her, not urgently, not demanding - but waiting. Time

dragged on. Then, almost imperceptibly, Sana averted her eyes. No no, no yes. Just a tiny, fleeting hesitation.

And that was answer enough.

Dane smiled, almost regretfully. But a glint in his eyes betrayed his deeper satisfaction, as if he had already imagined this scene and was now enjoying seeing it come to pass. He took a step back as if the matter had been decided. With a barely perceptible gesture, he stretched out his hand and pointed to the jug of water next to Sana. His fingers were loose, but there was something demanding in his gaze, as if this were not just an order, but a test - proof of his control.

"Give me that." He wasn't talking to her. But to Levan, his slave.

Levan paused for a split second. Then he stepped up to the jug, took it and handed it to Dane. His movements were calm, controlled - but not submissive.

Dane took the water and drank a sip. Then he gave the jug to Sana. His fingers lingered on the vessel for a moment, as if he wanted to feel her take the jug of water from his hand. Sana wanted to make her gesture seem casual, but her fingers were trembling. Not much - but enough for him to see.

"You can go, slave."

Levan did not hesitate. He turned and left the barn. Sana felt her chest tighten. There was a vague pressure on her, as if she herself had failed without knowing exactly what.

The knot in her chest tightened as her gaze wandered indecisively back and forth between Levan and Dane. A part of her wanted to say something, anything that could resolve this moment. But what? Now, in this moment, she had to make a decision. One

word, one gesture - it would be enough to set the tone. But what would the consequences be? The words struggled inside her, forcing their way to the surface, but she couldn't form them.

Duty or guilt? Decision or silence?

Her stomach tightened as if she had taken a blow herself. Should she have reacted differently? Could she have reacted differently at all? Her thoughts raced as her fingers closed around the jug as if she could find support in it. But the cold remained - silent and unrelenting.

Sana watched Levan's back tense, holding his head straight as he followed Dane's order and walked

She knew it was a defeat that would count. And Dane knew it too.