

The Silent Fields

FROM THE SERIES

Silent Power

1

The morning sun blazed down on the fields. Levan guided the scythe through the tall grass with rhythmic movements. It was haymaking time and every hour of the harvest counted. His muscles tensed as he worked, sweat dripped from his forehead and flies buzzed around him. His tanned body, covered only by a loincloth, leaned forward slightly. Scars from previous injuries cast patterns on his skin. They were evidence of the hard labor, but also of the punishments he had endured over the years. His striking face with its dark eyes betrayed nothing of his troubles. Although he was only nineteen years old, he had learned to hide his feelings. Nevertheless, as a foreman, he had already earned the respect and esteem of the others. Conversations fell silent when Levan entered the barn. Heads lowered, hands reached faster for tools. No words were exchanged, but here and there he was met with brief glances that looked up at him questioningly and expectantly before turning back to the ground.

He straightened up and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. The air shimmered with heat and the smell of freshly mown grass made him smile. He liked harvest time, even though it always meant hard work. He looked out over the endless fields, saw the other slaves toiling away and took a deep breath. The grass in front of him stretched out boundlessly, an ocean of green that rustled in the gentle wind. His gaze wandered into the distance and lingered on the distant figure of Dane, who was handling a horse near the farm. Levan paused for a moment, the weight of the scythe firmly in his hand, his knuckles white with tension. But then he lowered his gaze, his grip loosened, and he leaned forward again to continue mowing. Dane was the farmer's son. And he, Levan, was his property.

"Levan!" called a bright voice behind him, and when he turned around, he saw Sanna, one of the maids of the court. Sanna's hair moved in the light breeze, and as she poured water from a jug into

a bowl for him, her smile seemed to dispel the dust and the heat for a moment. "Did you manage half the field on your own again?" she asked teasingly as he drank the water greedily. Levan grinned, stroked his hair and held out the bowl for her to refill.

"If I don't, who will?" he said, responding to the mocking tone before taking another sip. The cold water brought momentary relief to the relentless heat of the day. Sanna settled herself on the fence, the wood creaking as she sat down and straightened her skirt. Levan felt her gaze on him, warm and attentive. For a moment he wanted to return her smile, but instead he tightened his shoulders and gripped the scythe tighter. Emotions were dangerous, and he could not afford to show even a hint of weakness. He took another deep breath and began to sharpen it with the whetstone. His smile faded as he refocused. Sanna was like the summer rain - a brief refreshment that he couldn't grab, no matter how much he wanted to

"You always take work so seriously," she finally said, tapping her fingers against the edge of the fence. It was a casual comment, but Levan heard the quiet undertone in it. He knew she saw him differently from the other slaves. Her smile had a warmth that made him pause for a moment. He saw it in her eyes when they looked at him perhaps a little longer than they should. But he didn't return that look, at least not for more than a heartbeat. Her world and his were separated not only by the courtyard, but by something deeper - by possession, by Dane.

"Do you think you're faster than me?" she suddenly asked with a cheeky smile and put the jug back in the basket next to the fence. Levan looked at her in surprise before his face broke into a grin.

"You know I don't stand a chance," said Levan. But there was a glint of anticipation in his eyes. "Let's find out. If it goes home, we could have a race."

Sanna laughed out loud. "You'd like that so much, wouldn't you?"

Levan placed the whetstone under the fence at her feet, dropping to one knee in front of her as if by chance, and said, looking up, "You do what you have to, don't you?" His voice was calm again, almost indifferent, but the hint of a smile still lingered at the corner of his mouth. Sanna laughed softly, a sound that seemed like a breath of fresh air in the oppressive heat. But Levan knew better than to rely on such moments. Sanna suddenly fell silent. Levan saw Dane mount his horse and slowly walk over to them.

He immediately saw in his mind the boy with the cold gaze who had once eyed him wordlessly. Back then, on Dane's fourteenth birthday, Garrick had made him his slave - as a gift.

"You will protect him," Garrick had said. Levan had nodded obediently, but Dane had only stared at him with icy eyes. He could still feel the sinking feeling afterwards. At first, Dane had followed him, watching him work with the animals, carrying heavy loads effortlessly. But with every day that he had to show Dane something and teach him, his eyes seemed to grow colder. And then there were the comments from the other slaves - first behind closed doors, later loud and blatant: "Levan is stronger. Levan is smarter." Dane had said nothing. But his eyes narrowed each time, his lips barely parted, while he was seething inside. Levan had tried to help Dane. He had shown him how to calm a horse, how to repair a fence without getting his hands bloodied. But each time, Dane's lips had pressed together, his fingers trembling on the reins. Whenever Levan had corrected him in front of other slaves, he had killed him with looks. But Dane had waited.

Finally, about a year ago, Dane had given vent to his anger. It had been a hot day when Dane stormed into the yard. Levan saw him charging at the horses, the whip cracking in the air and hitting the flanks of the animals, which threw themselves to the side in fear. Without thinking, Levan had stepped forward, grabbed

Dane's arm and snatched the whip from him. For a moment they stood facing each other, Dane panting, his face red with anger, Levan silent, the whip firmly in his hand. But the silence that spread between them was only the harbinger of the disaster to come.

They dragged him to Garrick while Dane's accusation resounded across the courtyard. Levan only remembered the sharp hiss as the whip cut the air, the dull sting and the unending humiliation. The world went silent for a moment, only the aching waves that rolled through his body remained. After the punishment, it was as if he found himself in a new, crueler world. He became a field slave. Every step was difficult for him as he left the stables. The eyes of the other slaves followed him as he walked out into the dust of the fields. Levan heard the heavy gate fall shut behind him. The worst thing for him was that Master Garrick, the man who had given him support in his youth as a substitute for his missing father, had also turned his back on him.

And Dane? Dane stood by the porch, arms folded, and watched Levan fall. He was Levan's owner.

2

"Slave, what do you think you're doing?" Dane was now standing just a few steps away, his arms crossed in front of his chest, his lips curled into a smug smile. "Stop being lazy. Do you really think you can get away with anything here?" he asked, his voice sounding calm, but the threat behind it was unmistakable.

Levan turned around, his dark eyes meeting Dane's cold, bright ones. A moment of silence passed as the tension between them thickened. "I've done my work, sir," Levan said, his voice strained, every muscle in his body tensed to the breaking point.

Dane stepped closer, his smile vanished, and something dark flickered in his eyes. "That's for me to decide, slave!" Dane gestured casually at the hay bales at the far end of the field, his eyes narrowing. "They're not standing right yet. Come on, slave." His voice became quiet, threatening

The sun was still burning down mercilessly on the vast fields of the farm when Levan finally finished his work for the day. The tools were put away, every muscle in his body screamed for rest, but he was used to ignoring the pain. He walked to the well with the spring to cool off a little, his steps steady, heavy with the fatigue of the day. The warm wind brought no more relief, but the soft lapping of the water promised at least a moment of rest. Levan leaned over the fountain, filling a bowl and savoring the cool water in his throat as he drank in one gulp. The rest of the courtyard was silent, apart from the soft rustling of leaves and the distant snorting of horses. He took a deep breath, savoring this moment of solitude.

"Hey you!" Dane's voice broke the silence of the evening and Levan froze. He slowly turned around. *What else, I'm already on the floor, I can't take any more.* He said aloud: "Yes, sir.

Dane approached him with firm steps. His eyes flashed with the pleasure he derived from his power over Levan. The tension in the

air grew. Levan felt his knees almost buckle, but he forced himself to remain calm.

"Finally finished?" Dane said, seemingly worried, so that it was frightening for Levan again. "I have a surprise for you."

Levan felt his throat constrict. The balmy evening breeze that swept across the field carried the scent of mown grass with it, but all he could think was, "It's not over yet." He wasn't afraid of Dane - at least not physically. But there was a coldness in Dane's eyes that stirred something dark inside Levan - an anger that he had buried deep inside himself for years in order to survive.

Dane smiled, it was just a twitch at the corners of his mouth. "You'll get your collar at the weekend," he said, as if it were a matter of course. "A gift from me. So to speak."

Levan nodded barely perceptibly. His fingers gripped the bowl tighter, clutching the rough wood as if it were his only anchor in this world. "Yes, sir," he replied, his voice still surprisingly calm, although his chest felt constricted.

Dane took a step closer. "You know what that means, don't you?" His voice was soft now, almost gentle, but Levan could sense the danger in every word.

Levan kept his gaze lowered, his eyes fixed on the ground. "No, sir."

"The branding iron." Dane took his time, letting the words hang in the air. "And I will wield it."

Levan's stomach tightened, but he dared not unclench his fists. Part of him had expected it. He could feel the beads of sweat beginning to form between his shoulder blades. Dane would not let this chance pass him by. Levan tried to sound calm. "Yes, sir."

Dane stepped even closer until he was so close to Levan that he could feel his breath on his face. "After this," he said, his

voice now just a hoarse whisper, "you will never forget what you are and who you belong to."

Levan closed his eyes briefly. He wanted to say something back, anything - but his throat was as dry as the parched earth beneath his feet. He cleared his throat and swallowed. He still couldn't say anything.

"You may feel strong," Dane continued, his lips little more than a thin line, "but that doesn't matter anymore. You'll finally understand what it really means to be a slave." Dane placed his hand on Levan's shoulder. "You are and always will be my property."

Levan's breathing was shallow. The words burned inside him, although he showed no outward reaction. His eyes fell on the bowl in his hand. A single blow ... but the thought vanished as quickly as it had come. Levan knew there was no point.

"And you know what the best part is?" Dane straightened up again, the smile returning as if he were the king of this little kingdom. "Everyone will be watching. The men, the women. Even Sanna."

Levan's chest tightened as if someone had squeezed the air out of his lungs. The thought of the branding iron paralyzed his thoughts. It wasn't just the fear of the pain, but the knowledge that Dane would belittle him in front of everyone. His eyes twitched, involuntarily, for a split second, but he forced himself to keep his eyes on the ground. What would Sanna think when she saw it? Would she feel pity - or contempt?

Dane grinned broadly, his teeth flashing white. "I want her to see it. That she sees what you really are. My slave. My property. Nothing more." He stepped back. Levan paused, struggling to maintain control. The sun hung low on the horizon, and the shadows of the trees stretched long across the field. The echo of Dane's words reverberated through him, booming, relentless.

"In three days, at the start of work!" Dane shouted as he left. A long moment of silence followed. Levan felt his heart beating faster, but he forced himself to calm down. He didn't look up, didn't show any emotion.

"Yes, sir," he finally said, the words flat. A hint of faintness lingered in the air. He knew there was nothing he could do. Levan stood there for a long time, the bowl in his hand, the setting sun at his back. The rage that raged inside him pulsed like a smouldering fire. Levan knew Dane would make it a show of his superiority, would savor every second of the branding and make him feel that he was its owner. He had known that one day he would bear the mark of the Court, but until now it had always been Master Garrick's Court to him and he had accepted it as part of his future. But now, now the brand screamed that he was Dane's property, and Dane would make everything a demonstration of his humiliation, his degradation.

3

In the days that followed, Dane seemed to take every opportunity to humiliate Levan. At first it was little jibes, malicious comments that hardly anyone noticed. But the humiliations quickly became more personal and public.

One morning, Dane ordered him to run across the yard to fetch tools, which he then rejected as false and sent Levan off again. "Don't you have eyes in your head? Get the right one, slave!" His voice cut through the air as the other workers looked on silently. Later that day, Dane made him repeat the work on a haystack he had just finished. "All over again, that's sloppy," Dane said with a smug smile as Levan silently began to pile the hay again.

The climax of the humiliations came when Dane punished Levan in the presence of the other slaves and workers for an alleged delay at work. "Kneel down! You took too long," Dane said as he stood in front of those assembled. Then he grabbed Levan roughly by the arm and tore off his loincloth. "Maybe this will teach you to work faster," Dane said with a cynical smile. Then he pushed Levan's knee further outwards with his foot to further stoke his shame.

Levan knelt naked in front of Dane, his dignity shredded in front of everyone. The eyes of the others burned on his skin, but he remained silent. Shame burned like fire inside him. He had barely been able to process the humiliation when Dane called him. Sanna stood at his side, her eyes fixed on the ground, her hands trembling slightly.

"Levan," she said quietly, almost choking, "run to the house and get the basket we forgot. That's an order." Her voice was little more than a whisper, but the words echoed like hammer blows in his head. Every step he took felt like a fall into the depths. *Why was he dragging Sanna into this*

The eyes of the others bored into his body. He had always known that he would be a slave for the rest of his life. That was the law. Still, it felt like Dane was peeling off one layer of his dignity after another in front of all those whose approval had always been important to him, his fellow sufferers. He felt the heat on his skin, but the real pain came from within. Sanna had given the order - his Sanna. Had she left him too? But no, her eyes had trembled, her voice had been little more than a whisper. She - had had no choice. But then why did it hurt so much?

The eyes of the others bored into his body as he ran naked to the courtyard. The feeling of betrayal that seethed inside him was almost unbearable. Sanna had given the order - the only person who had given him comfort and light in this dark world. Levan gritted his teeth so as not to lose his temper. He knew that Dane's goal was to make him break free. He knew one wrong move and he would not only jeopardize his own position on the farm, but his life as well.

He tried to imagine what Sanna was feeling. She had to see him running naked now, had to wonder if he saw through Dane's game or if he hated her now too. He knew, or at least believed, she wanted to help him, but she was powerless. Although she had a little more freedom as a maid, she couldn't defy Dane, and she couldn't help Levan. He came back with the basket, handed it to Sanna, panting.

"Kneel, slave," Dane said quietly, but loud enough for everyone to hear. Levan felt his chest tighten. A low murmur went through the crowd and he felt the other workers' eyes on him. It was as if they were all waiting for his downfall - or his uprising. But he knew there was no way out. In this world, where power meant everything, he had no chance of winning without giving in.

Levan slowly sank to his knees. His fists were still clenched and he could feel his nails digging into his palms. The humiliation

burned deep inside him, but he couldn't help it. He knew that any resistance would only lead to even worse consequences.

Dane stepped closer, his eyes sparkling with triumph. "See?" he said as he leaned slightly over Levan. "You're nothing." Dane grabbed Levan's chin and forced him to lift his head. "Stay like that!" Slowly, he let his fingers slide across Levan's throat. "You're mine." He beamed at him. "And in three days, conditions will finally follow our traditions again. The slave obeys his master."

Levan noticed the burning looks from the other workers, but he didn't move his head. He also felt Sanna's eyes on him, and that was the worst part. He didn't want her to see him like this - broken and humiliated. Tears began to fill his eyes.

Dane forced Levan to keep looking at him with an iron grip. "Tell everyone what you are, slave!" Dane's eyes glittered with triumph. Levan's gaze met Sanna's - her eyes were wide, full of tears, and the world seemed to be collapsing around him. He looked around, but there was no help.

"I ... I'm your slave, Dane," he whispered, his voice breaking. The words hurt more than any whipping he had ever endured. Dane laughed softly and leaned over Levan. "Louder!" Levan lifted his head and looked at Sanna. Her tears were now running freely down her cheeks, and she averted her eyes. The image burned deep into Levan's soul, and he knew that this moment would haunt him forever. But he had no choice.

"I am your slave, Dane," he repeated, louder this time, his voice trembling with humiliation.

Dane grinned. "Good," he said. "Very good." He patted Levan's neck lightly with his hand, just as Levan had shown him for the horses. "You seem to have learned your lesson. And if you know what's good for you, you'll never try to rise above your place again."

Levan remained on his knees until Dane sent him away with a casual wave of his hand. He stood up slowly, his shoulders heavy with the weight of humiliation. The eyes of the other workers followed him as he walked away without a word.

That night, Levan lay on his straw bed and stared up at the star-studded sky. The cool night air brought no relief to the shame burning inside him. He clenched his fists. He had bowed down again. Not out of cowardice. For Sanna. Levan closed his eyes, the physical pain nothing compared to what was raging inside him. The humiliation was complete. In front of the others, in front of Sanna, he had allowed himself to be humiliated to please Dane. Dane had won, he knew that. Levan closed his eyes. The day had drained him, and the humiliation burned deeper than any pain. This was not the end. It couldn't be the end. He had to hold on. He reached out and touched the flowers lying on his mattress. He didn't know who they were from, and it didn't matter. Tomorrow the sun would rise again and he would get up and cut the grass - just as they expected him to do. The fields would be silent. But nothing escaped their gaze. He knew one thing for sure: the grass always grows back.