Tale of Tarun Erura

 This is gonna sound like an excuse, but I grew up poor. You know how some people complain that they don’t know where their next meal is gonna come from? For me, it was more like living life one bite of food at a time. I’m not poor due to anything being wrong with me. I’m strong, I’m fast, I’m smart, and I’m not a bad charmer. If anything, I have better luck with women than with money.

But you can’t eat women. At least, I prefer not to.

I lived life one heist at a time. And by heist, I almost always mean by stealing food from some market and sprinting off as fast as my legs could carry me, and then eating as much of it as I can before the guards find me. Then, when I know I can’t hide any longer without being caught, I take off again. Whenever too many people start to recognize my face in a town, I get out of dodge before they start asking the guards to do something about me. I can handle hiding for a few hours, but even scum like me likes to take a walk down the street without being thrown in jail.

I can’t even tell you how many towns I’ve blown through.

One day, I tried to steal a piece of jerky from the wrong person. Now, this wasn’t to say I stole from someone with the right connections, or that I stole from someone who didn’t deserve it. Everyone I steal from deserves it. No, it was a mistake because this was the first time I stole from someone faster than me. I had only just picked up the jerky when a gnarled hand shot out from behind me and snatched my wrist. His grip wasn’t that strong, and I’m sure I could have broken it, but it was the speed of it that caught me off guard. I didn’t even think of breaking his grip and darting off like normal… being caught in the act was new to me.

When I turned around, I saw an impossibly old face. No one lives to that age around here, and I do mean no one. The craziest part was that the face and the hand belonged to the same human being. When I saw how fast his hand moved, I was sure it had to belong to someone around my own age, give or take a few years. But, this guy… time seemed to flow around him instead of through him as it does for myself and everyone else, like you fellas. The guy was old as dirt, looked old as dirt, but his moves were quick as wind.

Now, this guy, he grabbed my wrist and I spun around like I was saying, but this is the craziest part of all. He told me I could keep the jerky, and then he let go of my hand. Only, when I started to walk away, I realized the jerky wasn’t in my hand anymore. I turned around and it was back on the counter where I’d taken it from. This crafty old fart had stolen it back from me. So I must’ve looked as surprised as I felt, because this smug old coot just grins and says. “What’s the matter? You must not have wanted it very badly.”

So, I figure, I’m not getting any less hungry, I’m just gonna steal from somewhere else. So I turn around to walk away, right? Like walking away is really my only option by that time. So I start walking away, and suddenly I feel a hand with a strong grip grab one of my ankles. I fall, and hit the sand hard. I spring back to my feet, ready to beat the crap out of whoever it was; only there was no one there. I glance over at the counter, and the old man is still there where he was, haggling with a customer. So I shrug and start trying to leave again, because I figure my mind must be going hazy from the hunger, but there’s some guy I’ve never seen before. He was dressed like… Well, me. He was dressed the same way I’m dressed now. He said, “You have potential. But you squander it on petty theft! Come with me, and learn the Brotherhood of the Shadow.”

So I ask him the first thing that comes to mind. “If I come with you, will I have something to eat?”

“Of course.”

“Sign me up.”

So I arrive at this secluded, abandoned looking building, and I look around and see a few other street urchins, but they all look like wimps. Some of them have iron rings around their forearms. I feel the dude’s hand on my shoulder, and he says, “I know what you are thinking, but do not pick any fights. These are all students of the great Master Maketsuo. Any one of them could beat you silly.”

So I scratch my head, and say, “Master… Magetshuo?”

“It’s pronounced Maketsuo, you weakling.” I spin around, and the old man from the stall earlier is standing there holding the jerky. “Now, do you want this jerky or don’t you?”

I nod. “Yeah, I want it. But are you gonna let me have it?”

“Here.” And he hands it over. So I take it, and go to have a bite, only I close my teeth on air. It’s back in his hand.

“What’s the deal? Are you gonna let me eat this?”

“I tried to, but you see, it just slipped out of your hand, so I caught it.” He hands it over to me again, and I go to take a bite, only to realize I’m about to bite down on my own hand.

He looks up at me and says, “I am Master Maketsuo, and every one of my students has tried to steal this jerky. None have succeeded. Study under me, and never go hungry again.”

“Alright.” I said.

What a fucking joke. I had to go weeks at a time without so much as a bite of solid food, I had to spar until my face was swollen and bruised, and I had to do exercise after exercise until I could feel my muscle fibers snapping.

There was one time I was sparring with some other trainees, and I managed to land what I thought was a brilliant sweep kick on my sparring partner. I smoothly chained this into a takedown and shoulder lock. My opponent slapped the floor, and I let him go. We stood up, bowed, and prepared to go again. But my instructor, a stout dwarf with three rings on each arm called Brother Uruk, called for us to halt. He told me I would be sparring a two-ring monk instead.

This would be the first time I’d ever sparred against a ranked monk as opposed to another trainee. The two-ringed monk looked to be about my age, and he grinned widely as he stepped into the circle. “Good morning. My name is Brother Retsu. Let us spar with honor, my friend.”

I bowed to him. “Good morning, Brother Retsu. I am Tarun. I look forward to sparring with you.”

Brother Uruk raised his hand. “Starting positions. And… Roll!” He swung his hand down after calling for the roll.

The moment Uruk called for the start, Retsu leapt high into the air and raised his leg high, his knee touching his shoulder. I sidestepped swiftly, and ducked as his heel cut downward through the air where my head had been. He landed on the ball of his other foot, and his leg swung back after the massive swing. Hee turned his torso into it, using the recoil from his kick for momentum. I didn’t see his fist coming until it connected with my face. The blow was harsh enough that I saw a flash of light, and felt my feet leave the ground. I landed on my back, and realized I had been flung several feet. I was knocked out of the ring in a single blow. Uruk raised his hand, and called for the round to be over. “Ring out! Retsu wins this round!”

I’d heard of that technique before, the technique where a monk lands a blow mighty enough to force their opponent backward. “Using Ki on a trainee, eh? What was this about sparring with honor?”

The grin didn’t leave his face. “The technique you’re thinking of belongs to a different school. Had I used that, you’d be stuck in that wall instead of just knocked flat.” He looked down at me, right in my eyes. “Besides… I don’t use Ki.”

“What?” I was dumbfounded. He had two rings, how could he not have Ki?

His grin widened. “It’s all muscle, my friend.”

We went for seven more rounds, each time he landed a blow so unexpected and solid that I was flung out of the ring.

Eventually, I gave up. “What is the point of having me spar someone of your skill before I’m even ready? Am I being punished for something?”

Brother Uruk looked to Brother Retsu. The former shrugged, and the latter… “My friend, you have been diligent in your training. However, some of the brothers have noticed that you’ve been too singularly focused on drawing out your Ki, and less focused on perfecting your raw martial techniques.” He sat on the floor next to where I had fallen, and I pulled myself to my feet with aching muscles.

“I thought I had already perfected my martial techniques.”

Retsu shook his head. “If I can repeatedly beat you with so little effort, then you haven’t gone as far as you can. None of the monks can beat me in a sparring match without relying on Ki-infused strikes and techniques; none can do it, except Master Maketsuo, Brother Banu, and Brother Shiwa. You know as well as I do that their mastery of ki-related techniques is unmatched here, but they have achieved that level by training their body on the outside as well as on the inside. You cannot rely on focus alone.”

I took this all in. I thought I had gotten pretty good at fighting hand-to-hand, but I’d just been shown unforgivingly how far I still had to go. “If Ki is the boiling hot magma of life, then I must become a vessel worthy of containing that heat.”

Retsu stood up, and helped me to my feet. “You’ve got the right idea, Tarun. I look forward to sparring with you again after you’ve gone as far as you can.” He patted my shoulder, and moved to the next ring to spar another trainee without so much as a moment of rest.

I tried my hardest to train my body to the furthest extent I could. I pushed my limbs until they could barely move. I practiced techniques until I was confident my very bones could handle no more.

But, to Brother Retsu’s credit, it worked. Bit by bit, I awakened the Ki inside of me, and I could feel it flowing as I practiced my movements and performed my exercises. One day, I felt something within me break loose during my training. It wasn’t magic, but it felt like suddenly I’d broken free from something. It was like I’d discovered a second set of lungs. They had been there all the time, breathing automatically, and I’d just now learned how to breathe manually through them.

I channeled my Ki into my fists, and in that moment I was able to slice through the air with my fists as though time stood still. I could sense the air trying to fill the spaces left by my fists as I drew them back, but the air did not move quickly enough, allowing my next strike to move completely unimpeded into the vacuum left behind.

I heard a dry laugh from the archway into the training space. With my fist still outstretched, I turned to look over my shoulder. There was Master Maketsuo, a grin of beaming pride on his face. “That was flurry of blows. I can tell by the look on your face that you’ve understood how the technique works. This is good. Tarun, you are no longer an ordinary human being. You are now a monk. Come with me. Your training session is done for today.”

Curious, and proud of my achievement, I followed him. “Now, I’m sure you’ve noticed that some of the monks, me included, have these curious iron bands around our forearms. Have you ever wondered how we put these on and take them off?”

I thought for a moment. “Does it have anything to do with flurry of blows? Like, do I move the iron aside the same way I moved the air aside? Wait… Can I actually do that?”

“Don’t be silly, boy. No, the answer is that we put them on only once, and never take them off. Now, do you have some idea how we get them on in the first place?”

I pondered his question. They were solid iron. If it wasn’t a matter of technique, could it possibly be… “You must be joking, master. You break your bones to move them through the iron rings?”

My master stopped walking, and slowly turned around to face me. “With that kind of thinking, you might be cut out to be a master yourself one day.” He resumed walking, and I followed. We were entering an area of the monastery which I’d been told was forbidden for trainees like myself. “But no, while you’ve got the right line of thinking, you’re going about it backward. It isn’t a matter of contorting your hand to get inside the rings, but rather, contorting the rings to fit outside your hand.” My master pushed open the heavy wooden door before us.

“But the only way to contort iron is…” I looked down in thought, but a blast of heat against my face from the open doorway made me look up again.

“We’re here. Welcome to the forge, Tarun.”

My brothers, at that time my seniors, were waiting in the room, each of them seated before a stone plate, by a small stone forge. There were twelve forges in all here, all of them glowing brightly within.

“The process is exactly what you’re thinking now… It is *excruciatingly* painful. But it is a trial. All students who have reached your level have been able to face it. But the decision remains before you. You still have a choice. Will you undergo the trial, and become a fully-fledged Brother of the Way of Shadow? Or will you return to the life you lived before?”

I gulped. I wasn’t stupid, and I’ve always been careful. But I had my pride as a survivor, and I thought myself to be one of the toughest men around. If the others could handle it, so could I. “I’ll do it. I’ll undergo the trial.”

Master Maketsuo smiled warmly. “Good. Allow me to explain how this works. You may or may not have noticed, but not all of the brothers have the same amount of rings. I have six on each arm, twelve total, and they were put there by my brothers, at the direction of my master at the time, some sixty years ago. In this very room, from these very forges. This trial is the only time when rings may be added. You will not have the opportunity to undergo it again.”

I was a bit confused by the way he worded it. “What do you mean by the opportunity? This doesn’t seem like the sort of thing any person would want to do more than once.”

He smiled again, and shook his head. “You misunderstand. These rings are not only a symbol of your brotherhood, but also a symbol of your rank within this brotherhood. Those with six rings on each arm, like me, have the right to become a master. Only a select few have more than three on each arm. Most have two. Some have only one. The trial is over any time you would like it to stop, or when you pass out from the pain. When either happens, cold water will be poured over the iron rings. But until that time, the iron remains glowing hot, and after each pair of rings, you must say, ‘I am not done, brothers. More iron.’ If you fail to say this immediately after you are prompted, then the trial is over, and your rank is final.”

I looked over the room. A stone stool stood solemnly, and next to this stool, two brothers sat. The stool was at the far end of the room, and the forges lined the room. The forges by the door were manned by trainees like myself, those behind them were manned by brothers with a single ring on each arm, so on like that until the back of the room, where the brothers on either side of the stool (I recognized one of them as the one who led me to the monastery) had five rings on each arm. “I am ready.”

My master nodded. “Take your place, Tarun. Be seated.”

I walked by each pair of forges to the stone stool. Master Maketsuo stood before me, and any trace of warmth was gone from his face. “Tarun Erura, you have completed the basic training necessary to receive the title of Brother of The Way of Shadow. You must now undergo a trial. I have explained the rules of this trial to you already. Shall we begin the trial?”

I spoke clearly. “I am ready. Begin the trial.”

The brothers on either side of me lifted two large stone slabs, and placed them on either side of the stool. Each of them grabbed one of my wrists, and placed my arms on the slab on either side.

The trainees at the far end of the room took their iron from the forge, and handed it to the one-bands behind them, and each in turn passed it behind them, until it reached my end of the room. By this time, the bands had cooled down considerably, and were no longer glowing red with heat. However, when my arms were lifted, and placed back down onto the iron, I could hear my flesh burning, and stifled back a scream of pain. With stone pliers, the bands were bent around my wrist to form the first pair of rings.

Master Maketsuo spoke. “Welcome, Brother Tarun, to the Brotherhood of the Shadow.”

I spoke clearly and loudly. “I am not done, brothers. More iron!” The trainees at the far end of the room bowed to their new superior, and turned to leave. The one-bands took the iron from their forges, and person by person, they were passed to the back, where I sat. The iron was noticeably hotter, and glowed with a dull red color. My arms were lifted, the bands were placed on the slabs, and I lowered my arms. Again, my flesh was seared, and the iron from the first pair of bands still burned against my wrists. The second set of bands was bent around my arms, and blood seeped from the gaping wounds torn open by the unrelenting heat, boiling against the iron.

Master Maketsuo spoke. “Brother Tarun, you now hold the rank of Two-Ring. You are in good company here, as most of your brothers are at this rank. You may-”

He tempted me, yet I could still tolerate more. “I am not done, brothers. More iron!”

The one-rings at the far end bowed to me, their superior, and filed out of the room. Again, the iron was passed up, this time from the two-rings, and placed on the slabs before me. They glowed with a cherry’s red. Any sweat that had been on my forearms from training earlier had now been boiled away. My arm hair caught fire and burned down to the follicle before my flesh could even touch the iron. The third set of bands was bent around my arms, and my flesh was cooked through. The pain by this point was no longer something I could bear with concentration alone. No, by this time, I needed to use my Ki to keep myself from collapsing. I breathed deeply, and let it out.

Master Maketsuo spoke. “Brother Tarun, you now hold the rank of Three-Ring. Your will is admirable, and you have earned the admiration of-”

I shook my head, sweat dripping from my hair. “I am not done, brothers! More iron!”

The two-rings at the far end of the room bowed to me and turned to leave. When they opened the door, I could see a small gathering of my brothers peering in. The iron was passed up from the three-rings, and placed on the slabs before me. It was glowing orange, like the sun in haze. I breathed deeply, keeping my Ki flowing, to spread out the pain and endure. The bands were unimaginably hot now, and they were pressed against my arms by the five-bands on either side, and bent underneath. No longer could I rely on the stone to soak up the heat from the iron. I understood now why so few progressed beyond this point. But I was still conscious, and I could still see.

Master Maketsuo bellowed, “Brother Tarun, you now hold the rank of Four-Ring. Your stupidity is amusing, and your gullibility is fascinating. You can end this charade-”

I stared into his eyes, and growled, “I am not done, brothers… *More iron.*”

The three-rings, who I had admired for their skill, bowed to me and turned to leave. When they opened the door, I heard a small gasp from the other side. Their incredulous eyes struggled to catch a glimpse of the inside of the room through the shrinking gap in the doorway. The four rings, by their forges, pulled thin strips of iron from the forge with their tongs, and passed the white-hot strips to the five-rings behind me. To my astonishment, the five-rings grasped these strips with their bare hands, and slid the strips under my four rings before I had a chance to react. All with lightning speed, the four-rings passed more and more of these thin iron strips to the five-rings, and again and again, they slid the strips underneath the rings. I focused on keeping my Ki flowing, as it was the only thing keeping me from passing out. Finally, the familiar shape of the band which is formed into the ring was pulled from the forge. The white-hot strips were pressed into my arm as the ends were pulled around it to form the fifth ring. This spike in pain would have been far too much to bear, if I did not have the ability to force Ki to flow through my body.

Master Maketsuo yelled into my face, “Brother Tarun, you now hold the rank of Five-Ring. Your reckless endangerment of yourself shall grant you no further admiration, and I implore you to end-”

I slammed my fists against the stone and hissed, “I am not done, brothers. More iron.”

The four-rings, whom I had seen as enigmatic and intimidating, bowed to me, and turned to leave. Upon seeing the crowd outside, I could see them wave their arms while whispering harshly, and the crowd dispersed.

When the door closed, the five-rings and I were left alone with Master Maketsuo. Once we were alone, he spoke. “The sixth rings are the hardest. I want you to take a good look.” He showed me the rings on his arm. The first through fifth looked like mine, but the sixth… The sixth was wrapped like a figure eight *through* his forearm, between the Ulna and Radius bones. “If at any point during this part of the trial, you pass out, the bands will be removed, and you will remain at the rank of Five-Rings. Do you wish to continue?”

“Yes!” I choked out.

“Brother Banu, Brother Shiwa… Proceed.”

The two brothers on either side of me pulled the bands from their respective forges, and instructed me to keep my arms raised above my head. “The less blood is in your arms for this part, the better, Brother Tarun.”

“Have you done this before?” I grunted, as my own superheated blood dripped down my arms towards my shoulders.

“We have trained to do this. As five-rings, it is our duty to know this and to pass it down. Now, hold still.” Both of them stabbed my arms just above the fifth ring with the superheated bands. I screamed from the pain. I could feel my wounds being seared as the band slid through. I glanced upward, and almost passed out at the sight of the white-hot band through my arm.

Master Maketsuo stepped forward, and grasped the ends of the bands nearest to him in his fists. Brothers Banu and Shiwa stood behind me and each grasped the other end of a band, and pulled outward to either side while Master Maketsuo pushed his ends inward. I could feel my bones straining against the force. I had only half of my Ki left, but I needed it now. I forced it to flow through my bones, to give them greater strength for this trial. I squinted my eyes shut, and pushed as much Ki through my forearms as I could manage without running dry. Bit by bit, I could feel the scorching iron band bending against my flesh, until finally the figure-eight was formed.

“Brother Tarun, lower your forearms. This is the final part of the trial. Brothers Banu and Shiwa, you may leave.”

Brothers Banu and Shiwa bowed to me, and calmly left the room without as much as a glance behind them.

Master Maketsuo produced a hammer from within his robes. “Place your palms on the stone.”

I did so. With blinding speed, he brought the hammer down on each of my hands, but my Ki had hardened my hands like the iron behind them. Master Maketsuo was pleased by this. “Good. You still have the feeling in your hands, and Ki flows through them.” He then hammered the bands on the outside of my forearms flat, sprinkling iron filings into the bands as he hammered to fuse them together. “Turn your palms upward.”

I did so. He hammered the bands on the inside of my forearms flat.

“Brother Tarun, you have completed the trial, and stand as my equal in rank, having attained the rank of Six-Rings, as I have. However, you still have many years of training ahead of you before you can be called a master. You have the same potential as I did at your age, and you may even surpass me one day. Hold out your palm, Brother Tarun.”

I held it out towards him. He held his palm an inch from mine. With his other hand, he produced a dagger. He held it in the dying coals of the forge beside him. “Brother Tarun, do you swear to uphold the Brotherhood of the Shadow, in times of hardship, in times of chaos, and in times of war?”

“I swear it.”

He placed the dagger flat between our palms, and turned it sideways, such that an edge dug into my palm as well as his. He then drew the knife up sharply, and both of our palms bled from the cut. “Then let your blood be your bond.”

He clasped my hand, and stared deeply into my eyes. “Someday, I will die. Death is ever inevitable, and no one is immune to it. On the day I die, you are to inherit the title of Master of the Brotherhood of the Shadow. Do you swear to never let this art die?”

“I swear it, and my blood is my bond.”

It took my arms weeks to fully heal, but eventually I regained fine motor control in my hands, and the skin under my bands got used to the constant wear. My joints, too, grew accustomed to the permanent weight behind my hands.

The months passed, and my mastery of the art grew. On one occasion, several months after my ritual, my instructor at the time, a four-rings named Brother Jidon, told me to spar one of the resident two-rings. I nodded. “Sure. Who am I sparring?”

None other than Brother Retsu stepped into the ring before me. He smiled, and bowed. I bowed in return.

“It is an honor to have this opportunity to spar with you, Brother Tarun.” His grin hadn’t changed.

“The honor is mine, Brother Retsu.”

His mere two rings were massively misleading as to his actual combat prowess. The last time I’d faced him, I had been a trainee. But now, months later, I was not only a stronger monk, but a stronger man as well. I readied my Ki, and probed the air around me. I knew his style… He led his attack with a wild blow that, if undetected, could topple anyone caught by it.

This time, however, I was ready. I read the flow of his movements, and smoothly rolled forward as he leapt into the air. My mistake the first time I’d fought him was allowing him to keep me in front of him. I whirled around and ducked under an incoming back-kick. I took the moment he used to turn around to rise back to my feet and ready my guard. His other heel caught my ringed forearm almost immediately. He swung his foot back… I knew this pattern. His fist bolted forward like a steam piston, but I leaned back and grabbed it. He’d committed too much force to his swing, and I was able to take that momentum and use it to flip him over my shoulder, and finally, dump him outside the ring. He slapped the floor as he fell, his rings producing a sharp *thwack* against the floor.

He grinned up at me from the floor. “I’m so proud of you, Tarun! Help me up so we can go again.”

He sprung to his feet after I grabbed his wrist, and we resumed our starting positions. In the second round, he was far more conservative, never committing anything to any one strike unless he knew for sure that it would hit. I went for a flurry of blows against him, and two of them connected (to my satisfaction) However, he responded with a flurry of his own, which caught me completely off-guard. Once he’d swung the rhythm of the fight in his favor, he overwhelmed me with his speed and power, and soon enough I was staring at the ceiling with a dull pain in the side of my face, several feet outside the ring. He helped me back to my feet.

“I thought you didn’t use Ki?”

He shrugged. “I was just responding in kind. I should have specified that I don’t use Ki against trainees… That said, I’m not very good with Ki. Wanna break the tie?”

I smiled, confident that I could beat him now that he had no more hidden tricks up his sleeves. “Let’s go.”

He then proceeded to knock me out of the ring six times in a row. After the last ring-out I sighed without making any effort to get up. “I think I might be done for now, man. Any more of this, and my beautiful face will be pulp.”

He grinned, and snickered to himself. “You mean it isn’t already pulp?” He sat down next to me. “Don’t feel down about this, you’ve made quicker progress than anyone I’ve seen. Remember, no one can beat me other than those three at the top.”

I stared at my forearms. “I’m supposed to be at the top, too. I get that it’s going to take me years of training to get to that point, but it’s still frustrating that even after tehse years of training I’ve put in, I’ve still got so far to go.”

He put his hand on my shoulder. “You’ll get there, Tarun. You’ll go further than I ever could. I’m frustrated, too, you know? These two rings… This is all I can amount to. I’ve basically reached my fullest potential for this art. All that’s left is for me to get old, and for my movements to gradually slow down. But even still, I’ll keep training every day because I love sparring. I love when someone turns the tables on me, and I love the feeling of that rare punch to the gut I get when I get careless or when someone else gets lucky. As long as you find something about this life to enjoy, it doesn't matter how good you are or how fast you get better. All those bands mean is that you've got opportunities the rest of us don't have. We don't resent you for that, either." He patted my shoulder before withdrawing his hand, and stood. "I'm gonna go back to training. Let's spar again, sometime." Retsu flashed his signature grin, and off he went.

Now, I'm sure you're wondering. *How could any secret monk order possibly keep themselves fed and supplied in Tyr of all places?* Well, strange as it may sound, we did odd jobs for the merchants from Tyr, and the folks trying to rob the merchants from other cities. I didn't feel particularly bad about the second kind of job, considering I'd made my living by stealing food from people who didn't need it as badly as I did. Considering nearly all of the economic activity of this city was rich people selling things to each other, stealing a shaving of their shipments here and there hardly felt like the wrong thing to do.

To get these jobs, from time to time a denizen of Tyr would notice one of my Brothers, sometimes myself, out and about town. On these occasions, we were asked for help with situations that could benefit from a hired sword. Of course, iron is

On one occasion, I went down to Tyr’s market district with Brother Shiwa to purchase some bread and fruit for our monastery, and a man I had never seen in town approached us. “Excuse me,” he began, “but I’m in need of some assistance with moving a cart of Tyrian iron from here to Nibenay. The roads, these days, are fraught with danger, and a weak merchant like me is no match for the brigands out there, especially if they catch a whiff of this iron.”

I looked to Brother Shiwa for guidance, and he slowly shook his head. Having spent long enough around him to know exactly what he meant, I replied to the man, “We do not leave Tyr.”

I noticed, as did Shiwa, that across the square, several people had stopped in their tracks, like pebbles amongst the stream of people. The man took on a face of innocent confusion. “I apologize, but who exactly does this *we* refer to?”

“Me and my friend here, we do not leave Tyr.”

The man slowly paced around us, looking each moment more and more like a hyena. “Those rings on your arms… Both of you have them. What do they mean?”

Shiwa tapped my shoulder three times. This was what we had trained for. I turned around and sprinted away from him as quickly as I could, also away from our monastery, while Shiwa took off for a nearby building and started sprinting up a wall.

That was the last time I saw him while he was alive.

Several of the figures I’d noticed standing still earlier came after me, and the small man who had initiated the conversation with us was leading them, having cast off his cloak to reveal the garb of a monk of The Order of the Way. By this time, it was perfectly reasonable for word to have reached them about our unauthorized operation, and for the sorcerer king of Nibenay to have sent these men after us.

Of course, it did occur to me to tell the city guard that Nibenay had launched an invasion of Tyr, but that would mean outing the Brotherhood of the Shadow. Our only option would be to handle this problem by ourselves. Now, my first concern was to lose my pursuers. I felt a disturbance in the wind behind me as I ran, and whirled around just in time to knock a blowgun dart out of the air with my ironclad forearm. As it spun after clashing against my rings, I noticed a thin liquid splashing from it. I am certain that had it hit me, the foul poison coating it would surely have done me in.

I knew that the longer this chase wore on, the greater my chances of capture became. So, it was time to use my newest technique: *First Shadow*. This is the first of four sacred techniques known only to the brothers of the Brotherhood of the Shadow. It would burn most of my Ki as fuel for the technique, but it would allow me to escape and warn the monastery. I ducked into an alleyway with my pursuers not a hundred feet behind, and bent the shadows around me using my Ki, to muffle my footsteps and shroud me from sight. Once I was veiled in this way, I ducked behind a pile of crates and waited. Soon enough, the pursuers rounded the corner, and as I had hoped, they sped past me without noticing my presence. I counted as they passed by. One, two… six… there were twelve monks in total. At that time, the Brotherhood of the Shadow was fifty men strong, but I doubted that the Order of the Way would send only twelve men to take down a rival monastic order.

I waited for five minutes to ensure that anyone who was smart enough to wait outside the alley would have their guard down, and crept out to blend in with the crowd beyond. In this way, I made it back to the monastery without being caught, but I was greeted by a scene of chaos. In every corner of the normally-tranquil monastery, one of my brothers grappled for their life against an Order of the Way monk.

I moved to help a nearby two-ring against his opponent, but one of the invaders grabbed my arm and attempted to throw me to the floor. Luckily, his grip was sloppy, and I was able to dispatch him by countering him as he’d put too much weight into his attempted throw. I slid my iron wrist from his hold, dipped down, and came up underneath him with my shoulder, knocking the wind out of him. While he was stunned, I swung my arm in a wide arc, smashing my forearm into his head like a heavy club. I felt his skull crumple from the blow, and he fell to the floor, dead. I would like to say that this was the first time I’d ever killed a man, but I had been with the order for several months by this point.

However, my small victory over what amounted to a mere trainee was lost in the sea of conflict before my eyes. If they had already swarmed the monastery to this degree, then…

I sprinted for Master’s quarters as quickly as my legs could allow, and found his door broken from its hinges. Inside, I saw a thin, bald man wearing pure white robes, and facing him were Master Maketsuo, Brother Banu, and Brother Shiwa. These were our three best men. And yet, even outnumbered, this man in white was more than their match... By the time I arrived, he had already badly bloodied Banu and Shiwa. As they fought, I couldn’t bring myself to do anything but watch in horror and awe. I have never seen anyone who could move so fluidly.

I later learned that he had simply walked into our monastery, and every blow that he didn’t dodge seemed to curve away from him. He had a peaceful air about him that was as terrifying as it was tranquil and still. The strength of the Brotherhood of the Shadow is at its maximum when we outnumber an enemy, and it was Brother Shiwa and Brother Banu protecting our Master against this invader. However, faster than we could see, he struck all three of them in an instant, and their reflexes were dulled by the precision of the strikes. Shiwa, Master, and Banu are all able to call forth the Final Shadow, becoming the shadow of their allies’ strikes, however his targeting of their chakra points robbed them of the ability.

When we were able to move again, he weaved and dodged most of our blows, however Master was able to hit him *hard*, and both Shiwa and Banu were able to shadow this blow and connect. He was flattened by their combined force, but he simply stood back up, light enveloped him, and his wounds closed. At this point, the invader looked over his shoulder and saw me standing in the doorway behind him. “Ah, the inheritor. Watch, and witness the futility of your struggle.

 Then, I watched with horror as he seemed to flash forward, and he struck our Master in the heart. Master Maketsuo fell silent, and gingerly touched a hand to his chest. After drawing a few shaky breaths, he asked, “What is this power? This disturbance of my ki… what have you done to me?”

The invader smiled and said, ‘This is the ultimate technique of the Way of the Open Hand. This is quivering palm. Now, perish.’ And with this, the invader clenched his hand into a fist, and our Master flew backward. His chest caved in where he had been struck. He turned, and used the same technique on Shiwa, and he was likewise flattened. Then, he turned on Banu… but he was able to slip his Ki around some of these vibrations, and it did not kill him outright. He was knocked to the ground, however.

This left him and me alone. I raised my fists in front of my face, and prepared to fight him. He simply laughed, and in another flash, he was behind me. “Don’t worry.” He whispered into my ear. “I’m not going to kill you. Your meat isn’t tender enough to devour just yet.” He drew a finger across my chin, and I was too petrified with fear to move. “But one day, perhaps in a month, perhaps years in the future, you will reach a wall in your progress with the monastic arts, and I shall stand atop that wall… ready to destroy you…” He leaned closer, and I could feel the breath of each word against my ear. “Any trace of the Brotherhood of the Shadow shall die with you.”

He backhanded me across the face, and the next moment, I found myself crashing into the wooden wall of Master’s quarters. I must have blacked out right then, because when I opened my eyes and climbed down from the hole I’d made in the wall, he was gone. I heard a raspy, weak voice above me.

“Ta… Tarun.” I looked up, and I saw Brother Banu, hanging from the rafters, his ribs cracked, his arm broken, and his shoulder dislocated. Blood dribbled down his chin and from his side.

“Brother Banu! Are you going to be okay?”

Banu wheezed as he drew in breath to speak. “The… blood oath. When you and Master Maketsuo took the blood oath, he passed his ki onto you. The knowledge of the techniques… It is within your blood. In your very veins, it dwells dormant.” Banu coughed, hard. Blood came up with this cough. “This is really it, huh? Tarun, he knows about your blood oath. I do not know how he could know, but someday, when you are worthy of fighting him, he will appear before you.”

I panicked. Someone who was so powerful they could regenerate from wounds and defeat three incredibly experienced monks singlehandedly knew who I was and wanted me dead. “So… What should I do? I can’t take on someone who could kill our master in a single blow. I tried to just now, and he didn’t even acknowledge me as a threat.” This was far too much trouble over a piece of jerky.

“For the sake of our martial art, keep training, Tarun. These techniques will burst forth when your body and mind are worthy of executing them. I am not long for this world, my friend. I’ve lost too much blood. You must escape. If you find other survivors on your way out, rescue them.” He extended his good arm down towards me.

I gripped his elbow, and he gripped mine. Our forearm rings clanked together. “I will carry our torch, Banu. I will guard its flame with my life. Go in peace.”

Banu smiled, and closed his eyes. I don’t know how long he continued breathing after that, and I didn’t stick around to find out. I believe with near certainty that he lost his life on that day, alongside Shiwa and Master Maketsuo.

I don’t remember how I got out of the monastery. I think I entered some sort of trance. I have disjointed memories of the escape. Here, a memory of my fingers slipping deep into someone’s eye socket, there, a memory of the feeling of bone cracking in my grip. I must have killed a dozen men on my way out of that place, but at that time I was possessed by a fierce desire. My survival now meant more than just my life.

I woke up the next morning in a bed. I was taken aback by this, as I’d never slept in a bed before. At the foot of the bed, I noticed one of my brothers, dozed off in a chair. I recognized him as one of my training partners, Brother Retsu.

“Retsu.” I whispered. “Retsu, wake up.”

He stirred. He was a two-ring, but he was nonetheless a fierce sparring partner who I’d faced several times. His grasp on using Ki was always a bit iffy, and a single extra strike from flurry of blows was all he could manage. However, his instinct for sheer martial combat and quick reflexes were unmatched, not counting our Master, and the five-rings. It was no surprise to me that he’d survived. “Good morning, Brother Tarun.”

I sat up in the bed, my abdomen and arms sore from yesterday’s fighting. “How did we end up here? Where is this?”

Retsu stood up and motioned for me to do the same. “This is my brother-in-law’s house. You passed out after the last of them fled, but we couldn’t stay there after what they did to the place… And now they know where it is, to boot. I carried you here. Did you know you saved my life? We fought off a dozen men, but you were unresponsive the whole time. You just kept beating their faces in, you wouldn’t answer me when I asked if you were okay, but you at least recognized me as an ally. Good thing, too. I know the rings are status symbols, but those things must weigh fifteen pounds each, easy. You were nearly beheading those guys with those arms of yours. I’m *still* glad you went for a throw in our second sparring match instead of caving in my lungs with those things.”

I looked over my arm bands. I couldn’t tell where the rust ended and where the bloodstains began. “They’re deadly, alright. My shoulders always ache pretty badly after a fight, though, and it’s not like I can take these off to give them a break. So is your brother-in-law okay with us being here?”

“My sister likes me to visit every couple weeks, but we might need to stay here for a while, a few days, at least until those scums from Nibenay leave. Given the circumstances, I think we’ll be alright to lay low here as long as we need to.”

As if on cue, the door opened, and a slender woman entered, carrying a tray with what passed for a feast in Tyr. On the tray were two biscuits, half of an apple, and five small cubes of cheese. It was food I’d have killed someone for three years ago. In fact, I very well might have killed someone for a plate like this. Who knows?

The slender woman spoke. “Good morning, Tarun. Retsu told me about you last night. My name is Miki, I’m his big sister... Please, both of you have some breakfast. You need to replenish your strength.”

The day wore on, with Retsu’s insistence upon me taking my rest keeping us from sparring to pass the time. Eventually, the owner of the house came back. He stood at six feet and some change, and his thin face was cloaked by thick black facial hair. He hung his hat on a wooden hook by the door, and nodded at us. “My name is Domui, I hope you’ve found my home comfortable. It’s a damn shame what those fools from Nibenay did. Are you both doing well?”

Retsu spoke first. “I’m alright. If this fella here hadn’t swooped in and helped me fight them off, neither of us would be here right now.”

Domui eyed my arms. “Six?”

I glanced at Retsu. “How much of our way do you know?”

“Retsu has told me enough to know that your six rings are a big deal.” Retsu looked at the ceiling bashfully. Domui’s eyes narrowed. “I’m shocked that the Order of the Way let someone of your rank escape.”

I shrugged. “So am I. I spoke with one of my elders, a five-ring named Banu, about the intruder.” I then told them the story of the infiltration that Banu had told me.

Domui stroked his beard. “I see. So, are you now the acting master of the Brotherhood of the Shadow?”

I shook my head. “Right now, the Brotherhood of the Shadow has no master. I am not yet experienced enough to take on that role. When I am strong enough to reclaim the monastery, we will take it back and resume perfecting our art.”

Then, Domui said all-too-candidly something which to this day I can’t believe he said. “Did you know that Sorcerer-King Kalak is planning to starve off the slaves, now that the Ziggurat is nearly complete…? Mainly the slaves who built the ziggurat.”

I was dumbfounded. Retsu, likewise, was completely shocked. Had I really missed out on this much by holing myself up in the monastery? I decided to break the silence that hung in the air after this revelation. “I knew that news doesn’t usually reach us in the monastery, but this is something else.”

Domui held a finger up to his lips. “He doesn’t know that we’ve figured this out. But if you look around, the signs are everywhere. The ziggurat does nothing for the economic health of the city, but in the last few days, as the remaining work to be done on the Ziggurat dwindles to nothing, food has grown scarcer and scarcer. The inauguration is in two weeks, and I’m not sure we can make it that long on what little we have left.”

I sheepishly bit my lip. “Eh… Miki gave each of us a biscuit and a quarter of an apple, and some cheese… Is it okay that we had so much to eat, given the situation?”

Domui’s expression softened. “Of course. Now that, from what I’ve gathered, the monastery has been destroyed, and the only remaining way for you to make a living is to be a slave, like we are.”

I cocked my head slightly. “This city has no honest work in it?”

Domui shook his head gravely. “Exile or slavery, those are the two options for anyone who doesn’t have the money to pay King Kalak’s extortionary tax rates. Have you ever been outside the city?”

“I grew up drifting from village to village. These past few years are the first time I’ve been to a city.”

“And do you want to go back to drifting from village to village like that?”

“I averaged two proper meals every month, and I was carried by stealing bites of food here and there. I fared much better at the monastery, but I can’t go back. It’s in ruins. My options are starve here, or starve outside. That being the case, and there being no shackles on me except for these…” I held up my arms, showing my rings. “I’ll take my chances outside. I’d better go before they come knocking for me. More chance of spreading the way of the shadow if I’m actually getting out in the world to find people who are worth teaching. So, uh… Thanks and so long.”

Domui grabbed my shoulder. “Wait. There’s something I haven’t mentioned yet.”

I slowly turned around. “Ah? What’s that, then?”

He whispered conspiratorially. “They say there’s a slave revolt, going to happen on the night of the inauguration in a couple weeks. They say we’re gonna take this city for ourselves, and then once we do, we’ll have food enough for everyone. Lookit what I’ve got, here.” He lifted his ragged shirt, and showed me the hilt of a dagger. It was stone, and its edge was ground razor sharp. “They’ve been giving these out lately. They’d been telling us to carry these knives at all times, keep them hidden from the King’s men, and wait until the time is right. I’ve had this dagger for a couple days.”

Now, this was big news. I suppose at this point you know how that revolt went… but nonetheless, I was a bit frightened. Taking down an equal in single combat with my skills, that’s something I could handle. But fighting against an army, the *King’s* army? That was a little much, even with a horde of armed slaves. “Who is this *they* you’re talking about? These people handing out weapons to slaves… It’s admirable, but if they’re an unauthorized group like the Brotherhood of the Shadow was,” Retsu flinched at my use of the word *was*, it was still less than a day since the attack had happened and I could barely believe it myself. “I can’t imagine it’ll take long for Kalak’s men to sniff it out. If it isn’t him, some army from another city-state will swoop in to take control.”

“These people, they’re among the slaves, they’re among the guards, they call themselves the *Veiled Alliance*. They’re tight-lipped about who they’re serving, and what their end-game is. But they’ve given me a weapon. Anyone who arms me is a friend, in my book.”

So, at this point, I had a decision. Stay with Brother Retsu and his conspiracy nut family, or hightail it out of there. Inexplicably, I chose the former. “So… A slave revolt. Two weeks, you said?”

Domui nodded vigorously.

“And the slaves, do they know how to *use* these knives?”

Domui looked at the knife in his hand. “I mean, you just kinda…” He thrust the knife forward, point first, into the air in front of him. “Unh, right?”

I pinched my brow. “If this revolt is going to succeed, we need to use the next two weeks training with these knives. The king’s army has better weapons than these, and they’ve been using them in combat for many years. We have the number advantage, but also inferior weapons and pitiful experience if any.”

Domui raised his eyebrows. “You train with knives, too? I thought you only used fists… That’s what monks do, right?”

I spread out my fingers and jiggled my hand. “Eh, we *mostly* train our fists, but we’ve all done training with weapons like knives and staves, as well. Retsu… You’ve always been pretty handy with knives, in particular.”

“That’s true. My Ki’s never been strong, but I don’t need Ki to fight with a knife. Domui, we need to send word out to the slaves. We have to begin training, and fast.”

Over the next few weeks, we held nightly training sessions in secret. Retsu and I led these sessions, in order to teach the slaves how to fight an armed opponent. There isn’t much you can do with only two weeks of training, but it was much better than nothing. And so, the days slid by, one at a time, with Retsu and I occupying ourselves with the dwindling slave labor as the Ziggurat neared completion.

We couldn’t have imagined that as we prepared to rebel, we were constructing the instrument of our impending near-destruction. But you already know about that.