

Enarë stood in the training yard of Daernholm Fortress, the banded wooden slats of his practice sword clack-clack-clacking against that of the sword master. It had been a week since he, Mirren, and her cousin, *what was his name?* had been attacked by a band of San'hadar. In that time, he had dedicated himself to the study of the Seventh Form: Crouching Dragon. He wasn't practicing it now, of course. Currently he was dueling with Illiam, a knight of the Order of Cinder. Illiam was a man of middle years, with dark bronze skin and sharp, angular features common among the De'ahmen people. He wore his long, curly black hair in a high bun, the sides hanging down to his chest. His beard was almost the exact opposite as it was close cut, save for a small, three-inch braid hanging from his chin.

*He's good. Really good.* Sweat trickled down his chest and arms as he twisted through and away from Illiam's strikes. Enarë bore several large bruises on his back and shoulders, and the older man had none. They'd been at this game for almost thirty minutes and neither man was close to tapping out. Now circling each other, practice swords angled slightly up. Enarë's feet shifted, remembering the fluid, graceful motions of Dancing Tiger. He smirked and lunged at Illiam, and the Dance began.

Enarë, now using the Fifth Form, flowed easily between the older man's strikes.

But still, he could not land a single blow on Illiam. The man blocked his swings and thrusts as easily as before, and the analogy came to Enarë of the cat toying with the mouse. *Well, I certainly don't want to be—*

—He blinked.

And Illiam switched into the Third Form, Falling Mountain. Falling Mountain incorporated powerful, two-handed swings that, when used with a greatsword, produced brutal wounds. Enarë found himself walking backwards and frantically swinging to block the older man's slashes at him.

Illiam spun and brought the sword up and over his head, swinging towards Enarë's shoulder. Enarë barely managed to block it, but the next swing caught his side, the next his left bicep, and the one after that his right leg. With a cry he fell to the ground, clutching his swelling leg.

Illiam stood over him, his practice sword propped on his shoulder. "Well, boy, you blocked more of my strikes than last time. But you didn't use Dancing Tiger as it's supposed to be used."

"And how's that?" Enarë replied through gritted teeth.

"Dancing Tiger is an offensive Form designed for use against multiple opponents. You were using it against one. And you were being defensive." Illiam offered a hand.

Enarë took it and was pulled to his feet. "Which is why I'm studying Crouching Dragon. It's best at defense."

"True. Against *multiple opponents*. Enarë, if you wish to be able to expertly defend against one opponent, you should learn the First Form." They began walking back to the barracks to rest and tend to Enarë's welts and bruises.

Enarë scoffed, limping slightly. "Iron Tower is *only* defense."

"And you were declared a Bladesinger at sixteen and recognized a master of Dancing Tiger at nineteen, your point?"

"My point is that Iron Tower is... is too simple. I want a challenge."

Illiam rounded at him, the tip of his practice sword poking Enarë's chest. "*Simple?* Do you think one of the Seven Forms is *simple*? *Simple* is what you were doing with a wooden toy when you were a child. *Simple* is the kind of sword fighting that *isn't* what one of the Forms is. *Simple* is what common men do!" The knight sighed, letting his sword-point drop back to the ground. "None of the Seven Forms are simple; they are the most complex ways of sword fighting known. To master one is dedication, to master two, well, that is a rare thing indeed."

Enarë nodded. "What about mastering more than two? I'm a Bladesinger, so it should be possible for me, right?"

Illiam's head slowly shook back and forth. "No. While you would know them, yes, you would not be able to use them. Not properly. The Forms are designed to be able to all work together, to flow from one to the other," he snapped his fingers, "very quickly. What you are attempting is a perfect example of that. Both Dancing Tiger and Crouching Dragon are *meant* to be used with two weapons and against multiple opponents. So they compliment each other very well. If you mastered three, you would not be able to move between them fast enough for it to be effective."

"But... but didn't Thaddeus Ironsides know more than two?"

"Ironsides was a Battleborn, Enarë. You are a Bladesinger. There is a *very* distinct difference between the two. To see him fight..." Illiam stopped, taking on a very distant look and staring off into the distance. "To see Thaddeus Ironsides fight was as if Taranis the Thunderer himself had taken form as a man. As a Battleborn, Ironsides was untouchable; he once snatched an assassins dart out of the air and threw it back before his guards had time to shout. With a sword he moved like a lightning bolt, none could match him. He flowed through all Seven Forms like a masterful musician through songs. He would go from Falling Mountain to Charging Bear, from Dancing Tiger to Crouching Dragon, then into Iron Tower and back; all before you could finishing reciting the Creed."

Enarë regarded him with narrowed eyes. "You speak as if you were there."

Illiam stared back, his face unreadable. "In my time, I have seen many warriors rise and fall, and there are many among those whose names are known to you." He then turned away, walking to the barracks to wash.