

AMACHI: Warrior

By

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## **PROLOGUE**

Derjjuwa kneel to no one, not even to their masters.

To ones enemy it is a show of strength, resolve, and defiance in the face of conflict. To ones master, it is a show of respect, confidence, and pride in their ever-increasing skills. That is the Derjjuwa's Creed and it was the first thing Amachi learned when she began her training as a child. She remembered being so small and fragile, so consumed by fear and sorrow, her entire world was a nightmare from which she could not awake and the cruel powers that be would not allow to end.

Back then, she knew not the importance of the Creed, it seemed so meaningless in the aftermath of losing her family. For a while, nothing held meaning. Years later, now a young woman, a warrior, fearless and skilled in many Derjjuwa Arts, she held to the Creed as if it was life itself and to break it would be to die.

She stood in the *Clearing*, back straight, feet slightly apart, hands clasped behind her back, a disciplined warrior at ease with unflinching dark eyes. Her coarse charcoal hair was pulled into a long braid that hung down her back wrapped tight in cloth and her full lips complemented her strong jaw line. A dirt-stained shirt clung to her frame dingy and frayed with ragged edges where the sleeves had been torn off. Her skin was like polished amber and the muscles of her exposed arms, even though relaxed just under the skin, were defined as if by chisel.

Around her, *The Clearing* reflected her mood with cloudy gray skies and a cool breeze tugged the grass at her bare feet and gently swayed the leafy branches of scattered trees. It was oddly quite, even for *The Clearing*, only the leaves rustling in the wind made any sound and it was as if all other forms of life had disappeared from the woods.

Her two guardians were before her dressed in black, dominate and looming as always. They surveyed her like blacksmiths analyzing a weapon just born from the forge. Cirviigo, a bald, heavily

muscled man with a perpetual scowl that even his burly gray beard failed to hide stood to her left. His skin was nearly obsidian and his dark eyes, always glaring and disapproving, looked her over gravely. Amachi forced herself to relax within his presence for he loved to test her and would just as soon strike her down with a single blow then speak a single word.

Montasel, to the right, was a beautiful woman with skin of cinnamon and long black hair parted in the middle and twisted into two long braids that hung down her back. She was a hand shorter than Amachi and a bit smaller in stature. She wore a soft smile, one that a mother would give a sleeping child; but Amachi knew that smile to be one of practiced deception. A deception so inviting that it has lured countless sure-footed opponents to a swift and often painless death.

“Amachi,” The woman spoke. “Cirviigo and I have both agreed that you are ready to advance in your training.” Her voice was soft and very soothing and was yet another deception. Amachi heard the woman speak in such tones that could cause lightening to a halt in mid strike. “As always, you have shown great dedication to your training and you adhere to the ancient knowledge of the Derjjuwa teachings.” Her smile broadened a bit. “Down the Female Path you have mastered the Art of the Flowing Hand, the Hunting Knives, and Synapathy.”

“Down the Male Path,” Cirviigo’s grating voice took up. “You have mastered the Arts of the Repeating Fist, the Battle-Axe, and Kinetic Energy.” Without taking his eyes away, he began walking around her slowly. Amachi held her stance and only turned her head slightly to follow him with her eyes. That alone took much effort, for it was like allowing an enemy to walk up behind her.

“Even with those six techniques mastered do not forget that you have only scratched the surface of a Derjjuwa’s full power.” He suddenly stopped behind her and for a moment she tensed up. “Your achievements, however high *you* may hold them to be, are truly minuscule.” He continued around her completing his circle until he stood beside Montasel once again. “Remember, you are but a mere

student and you have no idea how much is left to be learned.” With that said, he partially turned his back to her. As usual, she did not require his full attention.

Montasel smirked at him and shook her head. “I believe she is aware of such, Cirviigo.” she said, and only a deep grunt was his reply. With a nod, she brought her smile back to Amachi. “Have you given any thought to which Art to learn next or do you need time to think?”

There were many elements to consider when choosing a new Art. The first was deciding the Gender Path for that dictates the amount of time spent in training. A female learning a male Art took twice as long as learning a female art and vice’ versa. Only when learning a neutral art were the sexes on equal ground. The second element to consider is diversity of skills. How will the new Art complement those already mastered? One needs to be able to adapt to the ever changing battlefield. “No, I don’t need time. I’ve made my choice.”

“Have you now?” Cirviigo’s glare was upon her once more. He folded his thick arms across his barrel chest and loomed over her. “I suppose one as wise as you needn’t any guidance from your teachers with such decisions, huh?”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” she shook her head. She had no reason to be hesitant about her decision. She would have given them an answer over a month ago if they had asked. “You and Montasel have taught me that in an instant a Derjjuwa should always know, with exact certainty, what their next move will be for it could mean one’s own life or the life of others in their charge.” She said. “I was just putting your teachings, the Derjjuwa teachings, into practice.”

He grunted and partially turned his back to her again. There was no pleasing the man. No action of hers was good enough, no answer she gave was ever correct, everything she did was wrong, but yet and still she excelled in everything he asked of her. He was nearly the exact opposite of Bargiss, her first teacher, and often times she wondered why Bargiss chose him to continue her training.

“Well handled, my child,” Montasel chuckled. “a perfect response.” She threw a glance to Cirviigo’s back and her smile grew into a wide grin. “So then, which Gender Path do you choose Female, Neutral, or Male?”

“Female.” Amachi nodded towards the woman and ultimately, her answer named Montasel as her instructor for the next Art. Cirviigo glanced at her and grunted again. She was not sure but she could have sworn that his scowl had deepened with her answer, if such a thing was possible.

“Which of the three Arts do you choose Hand, Weapon, or Power?” Montasel continued.

“I choose the Hand.”

The woman nodded thoughtfully. “You’ve already mastered one of the Female Hand Arts, Amachi. Which of the two left do you choose, the Opposing Break, or the Piercing Claw?”

The Hand Arts she had already mastered were both offensively based and Amachi thought that it time to diversify her skill set with a defensive style. “I choose the Opposing Break.” She replied, and with that answer, Cirviigo gave another hard grunt and completely turned his back to her. She watched him stalk off a few paces to a tree where he sat cross-legged on the ground. He closed his eyes and began to breathe deeply.

If he was not scowling, grunting, or fighting, he was mediating on the art of combat; and of all the things that make Cirviigo who he is Amachi could not dispute the fact that she admired his passion for being a warrior, for being a Derjuwa.

“The Opposing Break is an interesting choice.” Montasel considered. “I will look forward to teaching it to you; it will not be easy to learn.”

Amachi nodded. “I understand.” Was anything ever easy to learn? Surely nothing she had ever been taught. For some, what little she has already come to master as a Derjuwa would be impossible to even attempt.

With a hand, Montasel motioned Amachi towards her. “Come to me.”

Taking two steps forward, Amachi did as told and stared into her guardian’s eyes. Even though she was younger, taller, and physically stronger than Montasel she still had to do her best to hide her intimidation. Standing so close to the woman, she could feel the aura of power that emanated off Montasel’s body. It brushed across her cheeks in waves with an airy touch.

“Are you ready?” the woman asked.

Amachi took a deep breath to clear her mind. Even after all these years and having to go through this with every new Art learned since Bargiss died, this was the one thing about Derjjuwa training she has failed to overcome; it was the one thing that she actually dreaded. “Yes, I’m ready.”

The smile faded from Montasel’s face and she reached up placing one hand on Amachi’s forehead and her other at the base of her skull underneath her braid. Amachi tensed and fought not pull away from her guardian’s hands, the anticipation of what was to come played with her nerves.

Montasel’s smile slowly returned. She looked into Amachi’s eyes and whispered softly. “Relax.”

Suddenly, a ball of what felt like fire and lightening exploded inside of Amachi’s skull, she clenched her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut writhing in the woman’s hands. She fought against her instincts to pull away as pain rippled across her face in waves of needles. Electricity ripped through her brain and down her spine and into her bones. Her flesh burned and her body felt ablaze with hellfire. Her knees nearly buckled but she caught herself grabbing hold of Montasel’s dark robes.

Between the pain, the fire, and the lightening that seared her skin and cooked her brain, countless blurred images and garbled voices poured into her skull blinding her mind’s eye with a hot white light.

Then suddenly, the light blinked out to darkness. A wail knifed through her ears and soon she

realized that it was the sound of her own screams echoing through the woods. Pain slowly began to fade and her screams shrank to a weak rasp. She fell to her knees gasping for breath, her palms slammed into the ground catching herself from completely falling over on her face. Squeezing her eyes shut, the world seemed to spin on its axis and she hunched over dizzy and dry heaved several times. Saliva clung to her lips and she brought her arm across her mouth to wipe it away.

“Rise, Amachi.” Montasel beckoned. “The Derjjwa kneel to no one, not even—”

“to their...masters.” Amachi finished the line in raspy tone. Her throat was scratchy, raw, and it actually hurt to speak. She opened her eyes to a world of blurry green and pulsing white spots. She could feel the grass between her fingers and she blinked repeatedly until the earth beneath her came into focus and she could see the tops of Montasel’s bare feet and ankles. A wave of needling pain rippled across her body and her bones felt as solid as mud. She shuttered and wiped saliva from her mouth again then pushed herself up off her knees and staggered to her feet.

“Are you alright?” Montasel smiled softly.

Amachi clenched her fists to stop herself from ripping the woman’s eyes out for such a question. Instead she nodded and her skull began to throb. That was to be expected, a headache always followed afterwards. Psychic Branding was always painful but the end results were always worth it.

Psychic Branding is an ancient art discovered by Derjjwa of centuries ago, where a teacher passes down knowledge of skills to its student within a powerful burst of psychic energy. The knowledge is imprinted or burned into the student’s brain like the mark of a cattle herder on his stock. Even though infused with this knowledge, the student is still required to practice the new skills, under close supervision of their teacher, for a period time or risk the knowledge fading from memory like a wisp of smoke in the wind. It is one thing to have knowledge of skills, but in order to master it, one must constantly practice and put it to use in the world.

Amachi rubbed her face until the feeling came back into her cheeks and the heat in her skull began to ebb. She could feel her guardian's knowledge slowly sinking into her mind. It was like remembering things she hadn't thought about in years.

In one graceful motion, Montasel held a hand out over the ground before her and raised it into the air. Suddenly, a small tremor shook the ground and Amachi took a step back as a large gray stone sprouted up from the earth at Montasel's feet like a pedestal. Taking a seat upon the stone, the older woman adjusted her black robes and crossed her legs. "Can you tell me, Amachi, what is the philosophy behind the Opposing Break?"

If not for the dull pain in her head, Amachi would have answered instantly, but the knowledge was still settling in her brain and it took a few seconds for the answer to spring from her lips. "It is to predict assault, intercept attack, and strike vulnerabilities." After she spoke the words, she could feel the philosophy sink into her being and solidify until it was as if she had always known it, as if the philosophy had always been there in her mind. That was the beauty of Psychic Branding, but without routine practice and study, that same knowledge would be lost just as quickly as it came.

"Good, I see the Branding took." Her Guardian nodded. "Now, tell me—"

A piercing howl ripped through *The Clearing* and it was so loud it seemed to shake the world. Amachi covered her ears and seconds later, it began to fade echoing in every direction. She turned scanning the woods around her for movement but all was still. Every tree, branch, and bush stood still as if frozen. She could not feel anything else in *The Clearing* except for the guardians and herself. Turning back around, she met with Montasel's questioning eyes. "It wasn't me!" she exclaimed. "It must've come from outside, something near the camp." She had not had an uncontrolled manifestation in *The Clearing* for at least the last two years; she had learned to control her thoughts. When she was younger though, things were much different. *The Clearing* was a very dangerous place influenced by



her very being and her unfocused thoughts gave birth to all manner of things. Stepping into *The Clearing* was like stepping into a nightmare.

“If that’s so,” Cirviigo approached with a steady stride. “it sounded like a wolf on the hunt.”

“Indeed it did.” Montasel nodded. “You’d better go see what’s going on out there, Amachi.” She stood from her pedestal. “It’d be a shame for things to end so early on your quest.”

“Yes, and secure the campsite. We may have to move on soon.” Cirviigo ordered.

“I understand.” Amachi nodded. It was possible for things from the outside world to leak in and manifest inside *The Clearing* much like how things affected the realm of dreams, but *The Clearing* was nowhere near a dream. Exactly what it is Amachi was not sure and neither were Cirviigo and Montasel for that matter. Whatever it is, it seemed to come into existence only after the summoning of her two guardians.

Exiting *The Clearing* was always much quicker and easier than entering it though, perhaps more practice was needed on her part. To enter involved a form meditation, proper breathing and focusing the mind, it was like forcing yourself to go to sleep. To exit was simple; all she had to do was close her eyes and wake up.

## **CHAPTER 1**

Amachi opened her eyes to a star speckled sky, the moon, full and pale, hung in its place silently. She quickly pushed her cover away and sat up in the darkness of night. The fire she built earlier that evening for her campsite was but a pile of smoldering embers now and the moonlight did little to illuminate her surroundings. Its soft light only allowed her make out the basic shapes of the trees and bushes around her.

The night air gripped her with an icy touch and she allowed herself the slightest of shivers before sealing her composure and casting the cold from her mind. It could ignored much like pain could be.

She searched the darkness with her eyes and listened to the creatures within. Frogs croaked in unison with chirping insects filling the air with a mess of sound, in the distance an owl called rhythmically and something moved through the tree branches above her head. A breeze rustled the foliage and brought a foul odor with it. She wrinkled her nose sniffed at the growing stench.

In the back of her mind she could feel the spirits of her guardians, they were always there watching and listening and feeling through her eyes, ears, and flesh. Outside of the Clearing, she could not communicate with them directly but she could always feel them inside of her.

Reaching out beside her, she felt her backpack still in its place and just below it, laid her axe. A piercing howl ripped through the darkness and her hand shot to hilt of one of the hunting knives at her hip. She froze, ready to strike, only her eyes moved searching the darkness as the howl faded and echoed through the woods. She tried to fix her ears to the sound but could not make out what direction it was coming from.

Another howl tore through the woods, but this time it was closer and before it could fade a second howl joined filling the air, then a third, and fourth getting louder and ever closer. It was a wolf pack on the hunt she knew, and from the sound of them, they were nearly upon her. Once again, she searched the darkness but saw nothing in the moonlight.

There was a rustling in the bushes and fallen leaves behind her and she slowly turned. She could hear, was it, panting? Crouched, she spun towards the rustling noise coming towards her. Squinting, she tried to use as much of the dim moonlight as possible to see and through the trees, she saw a mass of shapes huddled together. They trotted towards her and suddenly they all stopped.

Five sets of silvery eyes, reflecting in the moonlight, appeared within the shapes and glared unblinking. As they panted, that foul odor, their breath, filled her nose. Locking eyes with the wolves, she slowly stood, secured her footing and drew her second hunting knife from its sheath at her hip. The

serrated blade glinted in the moonlight.

The panting turned to low growls and Amachi saw a flash of sharp teeth as the five shapes stalked towards her slowly spreading out as they got closer. Slowly she stepped backwards as to not be flanked by the beasts and she could better make out their shapes as they came. The moonlight gave hint to their mangy gray fur.

Running would do nothing but bring death, she knew, out running them was not an option. One beast stood before her, its teeth glinting in the moonlight. The other four were coming up along her sides in a semi-circle. They began growling and snapping at her but she was not going to be prodded into running, she knew better.

Setting her feet she brought up her hunting knives ready to strike. She held the left blade overhanded, the right was held under-handed.

The first wolf lunged at her and she sidestepped swiftly to the left with a quick swipe of her right hunting knife and sliced open its exposed belly; it fell to the ground squirming. Pain shot through her left forearm as a second wolf dug its teeth into her flesh and a third wolf came snapping at her right. With a wild spin, she swung the second wolf around and batted the third wolf away with its body. Completing her spin, she slammed the second wolf to the ground and sank her right blade into its belly and tore it open with a powerful twist and yank.