

## Chakra's Debt

She could feel her heart pounding, adrenaline pumping through her with anticipation of the battle to come. Her long, light, auburn hair was tied back to keep out of her face, showing the semi-circle tattoo on the left side of her face. Every Nomad was given tattoos for different accomplishments in their lives, a badge of honor to show how they helped contribute to the clan. This was Chakra's only tattoo thus far, only 17 years of age and no major accomplishments yet.

The semicircle was given to her just a few short weeks ago, to commemorate her completion of the survival challenge. She was put into the wilds of the Greater Woodlands, with nothing but some simple clothing, a bone knife, and a skin of water. She had to survive ten days in the woods, alone, and return in good health with some kind of gift for the clan that she created or procured during her time of solitude.

Chakra had performed quite well in the challenge, better than most males and rumored to have the best result from a woman they had ever seen. Of course, no one had ever said that to her face, but when eavesdropping around the camp she had overheard a few such comments. She had used all of the skills taught to her to find and reserve water, create small fires, find edible plants to nibble on, and even hunt small game. On the last day of her challenge, she nearly lost her life, however, to a lone wolf that had appeared to be on the brink of starvation. It must have strayed from its pack, and thought that Chakra could satiate its ever-growing hunger. A dexterous chase, a frantic climb up a tree, and a strategic leap onto the wolf's back had allowed Chakra to use her little knife to stab the wolf's eye, and slice its jugular. She had suffered a bite on her forearm, but nothing more.

When she returned to the camp, on the outskirts of the forest, she dragged behind her the corpse of the wolf, bundled and tied with her the clothing she had been wearing, cut into strips and weaved together into a crude semblance of a net. She walked out from the forest, wearing nothing but the straps that allowed her to pull the bundled wolf. She offered the wolf to the Nomad clan as her gift from the challenge.

"Chakra, the time is now, are you ready?" shouted Cage, a middle-aged man that was second in command of their clan.

"Never more." Chakra replied, letting the memory of that challenge dissipate as she focused on the task ahead. She was a woman of few words, rarely saying more than five words in any response she gave.

There were five of them, including her, about to ambush an approaching wagon. From what Cage had told her, it was a pair of priests from Braell travelling with a wagon of books they were delivering to communities across Novus to share the benefits of coming to the city, and of believing in their goddess, Aura. Cage had said that Priests often carried weeks of food supplies in their wagons, and sometimes even had expensive trinkets such as silver holy symbols or coin to spend in the cities.

Jago, the Nomad leader, had informed the clan that this would be Chakra's first opportunity for battle, to earn her first "rune". A rune was a small, unique tattoo applied to one's forearm for each kill they had earned. Jago had both forearms almost completely covered with runes, often claiming targets so that others in the clan had no choice but to allow him the kill. Cage had about fifty runes, all on one arm, and the others had less than ten each.

Jago gathered the Nomads together behind a large cluster of massive rocks, one of their favorite ambush spots along this part of the trade road. The road ran from the Western city of Exire all the way to the far Eastern city of Silverin. Their clan spent most of their time near the outskirts of the Jungles of Dalmaria, just north of the Flooded Plains. Jago claimed that many travelers were cautious and protective for the days of travel from Exire to the edge of the Tropics, but once they were past that dangerous territory they tended to let their guard down.

"Remember, we give them the chance to surrender first," Jago said, a wide, eerie grin on his face. "I've never heard of a Priest of Braell giving in though, they always seem to think their precious Goddess will save them in the afterlife." The large man, over six feet tall and thick with muscle, twirled his flail, the spiked ball at the end of its chain whipping in circles as he did so.

"Cage, you take Tinder to the back of the wagon, if there is anyone inside they are likely to come to the Priests aid. Dane and Chakra, we will stop the wagon and engage the two Priests. Chakra, you take the small one on the left if they do not surrender, I will claim the right, and Dane you watch our backs."

"Yes Headman Jago." Chakra acknowledged.

"Understood Headsman Jago." Dane said as well.

Jago discussed a few other things with the three other men, leaving Chakra to the side until the ambush took place. The thought of killing someone had loomed heavy in her mind ever since the day she was told she must join her first raid. She had hoped it would not come to this, as there were some raids where she had been told they let the travelers go after giving up any goods the Nomads wanted. She had actually never heard of these travelling priests before, but Jago had seemed excited about the chance to kill one of them. Maybe she could just be the watcher, and let Dane do what must be done...

"In your positions!" Cage shouted, a sign for everyone to be silent and take their predetermined spots along the rocks. They were angled in such a way that the approaching travelers would have no visibility to them. Tinder, a thin, wiry man with a toothless mouth and scars all about his face, was their lookout, and had a nice position within the rocks to see the approaching wagon.

The Nomads waited patiently as the horse led wagon maneuvered slowly up the road. There were four horses, tall and strong, but even they seemed to strain with the load. Behind the horses, in the front cart, were two dark skinned men dressed in white robes with the holy symbol of Aura stitched over the chest. Behind the cart was the covered wagon, curved slightly

towards the middle in a way that kept cargo centered and stable. The covering was made of a black linen, with no visibility to what was inside.

As the wagon came within a few feet of the rocky area, Tinder gave the signal for everyone to move. As a trained unit the four men, and Chakra, dashed out from behind the rocks to charge the wagon. Dane had a special spear in hand, one the Nomads had designed for just such occasions. It was called a Wheel Breaker, and indeed that is exactly what it did when Dane launched it at the wagon. The long shaft had a bulbous, spherical tip of metal covered wood. The center had some heavy metal studs, and the back had some counterbalancing metal as well. It did not seem like such a device would fly two feet without falling to the ground in a clunky mess, but somehow the composition of the metal and would, and its intricate design, allowed it to fly as straight as an arrow toward the front wheel of the covered wagon. It smashed through the spokes and caused some damage to the axel from the force of the throw.

The wagon came to a lurching halt, the horses trying to rear up but struggling due to their harness connections to each other. Jago circled around the front of the wagon to stand near the front right, a throwing axe in one hand while his other held the metal ball of his flail, still hooked on his waist. Dane stood in front of the horses, a small spear in hand. The other three men dashed to the back of the wagon as planned.

“What is this, what’s going on!” The older of the two men said, holding the reins with a white knuckled grip with a look of fear and terror in his eyes. The other man, much younger, simply sat still; back straight, one hand on the reins and the other at his side.

Jago stepped up to the side of the wagon, then leaped up to the rail of the cart the priests were in, putting his face right next to the old mans.

“We’re here to take our piece of your goods, and our piece is whatever piece we want.” Jago said, with a low but aggressive tone. “Now you can either let us take it easily, or you can have this as a chest ornament.” He patted the iron ball of spikes hanging from his flail, still tucked into his belt.

The old man stuttered, but instead of replying, he looked to his younger companion. The younger priest did not look like a traditional Southern man, although he still had a dark brown complexion, his eyes seemed slanted more and his hair was straight instead of curly. There seemed to a be an inexplicable sense of confidence in him, noticed by all three of the Nomads.

“No.” Came a quick, quiet, curt reply from the young priest. “This is your one chance to save yourself. You may fix the wheel, and then be on your way.”

Chakra could not believe what she just heard. She knew the priests might object to the robbery, but this brazen statement was a bit much.

Jago began laughing, his eyes going wide at the comment. “Fix your wheel! Hahaha, save myself! Who, exactly do you think you are?”

The older priest said nothing, looking very uncomfortable next to the crazed Nomad and the calm priest next to him.

“Who I am does not matter,” the young priest said, now releasing the reins and bringing that hand up slowly. “What I can do... does.”

“Enough of this!” Jago shrieked, snapping his fingers as he said “Now, Chakra.”

Chakra felt a whirlwind of emotions as she followed through with Jago’s demand. She whipped the knife she had been holding semi-concealed at her side, aiming for her targets chest. At the same time, Jago slashed at the older man with his hand axe. From in front of the horses, Dane shouted out “It’s on!”, in case the pair at the back of the wagon had not realized what was happening.

As the knife flew through the air, less than ten feet from away from the young priest, he stood up and yanked the white robe up and over his head, then slammed it down in front of his torso. The knife sank deep into the bundle of robes. It was then that the true nature of the younger man was revealed, for he wore a suit of fine chainmail with the crest of the Knights of Exire displayed proudly on his chest.

At the same time, the older priest had leaned back and away from the aggressive Nomad, leaning into the young knight to escape from being hit. Jago’s hand axe landed deep into the wooden frame of the cart, he promptly released it and pulled his flail from his belt instead.

“A promise is a promise!” Jago cackled, rearing back the flail to give it some momentum before swinging it in an overhead arc towards the old man. The old priest cowered in fear, but was saved by the forceful throw of the knight’s robe, still holding Chakra’s dagger. It did not completely save the man, but it tangled up in the spikes of the ball as it landed on the man’s shoulder. The priest screamed in agony, the force of blow crushing the top of the man’s shoulder.

“You said we’d be safe,” groaned the priest, “You were wrong, Kain.”

Kain said nothing, focused on the Nomad instead. He dashed forward as Jago was attempted to strike the man again, determined to save the priest. Jago leapt off the cart, not wanting to battle a trained warrior from the side of a wagon cart. Cage and the other two Nomads were now at the cart side as well.

“Anyone in the back?” Jago said, eyes still focused on the knight, who had retrieved a sword from the floor of the cart and now stood still, seeming to assess the situation.

“Just books and baubles,” Cage said, “Some have gold and silver on them, and they’ve a bit of food as well.”

“So you chose to die over some trinkets and storybooks,” Jago snapped at the pair on the cart. “Knights and Priests, always so single minded. Cage, Nim, Tinder, Dane, kill that knight!”

Kain didn't wait for them, he leapt down from the wagon cart, his black leather boots landing with a thud on the well-travelled road, thin plates of metal along the tops and around his shins for protection.

Dane threw his small spear at the knight, hoping to end the fight before it got messy. The trained knight stepped to the side and swatted it with his sword just in case, forcing it to veer to the side and strike the wagon behind him.

"The odds are most definitely in your favor," Kain said to the approaching Nomads, "but the Way of the Blade is in mine."

Cage took the first move, using a scimitar he had grown fond of since stealing it from a caravan several months ago.

"Tinder, you know what to do." Cage said to the thin Nomad, as he began a flurry of quick strikes at the knight. Kain calmly deflected each one, holding firm stance and staying on the defensive against the barrage of slashing attacks.

Tinder dashed to the flank of the dueling pair, digging something out of a pouch strapped about his shoulder. Dane pulled off a simple two handed Warhammer from its special holster strap on his shoulder, waiting for a good moment to strike when he would not accidentally hit Cage.

"Chakra, get to the priest!" Jago yelled, watching the lopsided battle from a safe distance now. He wanted the thrill of the kill, but had heard stories of the training of the Knights of Exire, and had no desire to be in a battle with one until he could see his fighting style.

Chakra did as directed, clambering up onto the wagons rider seats where the old man was lying on his side, clutching his shoulder. The battle below continued.

After a few more sword deflections, the well trained knight began to fight back. He lunged and slashed at Cage with careful strikes, making sure not to leave an opening the man with the Warhammer could take advantage of.

Suddenly there were a dozen small brown spores at Kains feet, and Cage did a reverse roll backwards to get out of the way. The wiry man had tossed a collection of dust bombs, a naturally growing fungus that exploded into a blinding powder if prepared and dehydrated the right way. Kain hadn't been expecting that, and was suddenly inhaling a bitter, powdery air that also burned his eyes.

"Gotcha, you stupid, self ri...", said the mocking voice of Tinder, before a small, diamond-shaped piece of folded metal lodged into his throat. Kain had two of the special throwing stars, one on each hip. He hadn't been able to see to aim, but knowing the general location and size of the man, then hearing his voice, was enough to take a good guess. Tinder fell to the ground, clutching feebly at his throat in a desperate attempt to hold his blood in.

Dane charged in, seeing that Cage was catching his breath from the swordfight and avoiding the spore cloud. He held his breath as he swung in with a sideways arc, angling upward to try and strike the knight in the jaw. Kain could not see the attack very well, but he had heard the Nomad approach, and the distinct sound of the hammer through the air. It was a sound Kain was very familiar with, having grown up in blacksmiths shop. Kain jumped backward just in time, the top of the war hammer nearly grazing his chin as he tipped his head out of its path. As soon as it was clear, he dashed forward as far as he could step, then lunged forward, sword tip ahead of him. He couldn't see yet, but he could feel as his sword tip pierced through the thin leather armor Dane was wearing, into his flesh and then his stomach. The Nomad yelled, trying to pull his hammer back down atop Kains' head. Before the shaft could hit him, Kain twisted gripped the hilt tightly and twisted the blade quickly, rending the Nomads insides. The pain caused Dane to drop the hammer, and his legs gave out. He slid to the ground, falling off the knights blade and curling up, grasping at some of the intestines that had slipped out.

Not liking how the battle was going, and frustrated at Tinders sudden death and Danes critical injury, Jago felt it was time to get involved again. First he shouted at Chakra, "Kill the priest Chakra, now!"

Chakra looked up at Jago, thinking she might be able to avoid it, but he was already focused on something else. She knew what his answer would be anyhow, he had tasked her to kill him, which meant there were no other options to him. She stared at the old man, his eyes were closed and his breathing was now shallow. The shock of the blow on his shoulder had been too much, the man was no threat to any of them. Everything about this said it was wrong, this man didn't deserve to die. But if she didn't kill him, what would happen to her? She gritted her teeth and clenched her eyes shut for a moment, then proceeded to deal with the priest.

Jago followed up his command to Chakra with another command, to Cage this time.

"Double strike maneuver, Cage, lets finish this!" Jago shouted. Cage acknowledged with a nod, raising his scimitar up and stepping to left of the knight. Jago went to the right.

The stinging in Kain's eyes had subsided enough for him to see, despite the pain and disorientation he had to battle to do so. He saw the shadow of one Nomad move to his left, but kept his focus on the larger man with the flail on his right.

"You were warned." Kain said, bringing his blade up, still wielding it with two hands. The sword was designed to be able to be used either one or two handed. With one hand, it could feel heavy, but allow other actions for the other hand, such as using a shield or second weapon. With two hands, it could deal more critical blows, and cause less fatigue to the wielder.

"As was your old priest," Jago replied, motioning towards the wagon cart where the priest and Chakra were. Kain stole a glance at them, and was disheartened to see that the woman must have followed through with Jago's demand. A pool of blood was around the man's abdomen, and his robe was soaked with blood around a tear in the fabric, most likely a knife blade. He looked back at Jago, saying nothing.

“What, no more threats? I guess you know what’s coming then!” Jago said, charging forward with swing of his flail, aimed at Kain’s knees.

Kain was surprised by the low attack, very unusual for such a weapon, and such a foe. He stepped back, a simple dodge from such a heavy weapon. Then he realized the mistake he had made, something he never would have done if he had been on his own. The sight of the dead priest flashed in his mind again as he felt the slash of the sword on his back. The scimitar sliced across his shoulder blades, cracking open some of the links of chain mail and tearing a deep gash into his back.

Kain reflexively lunged forward to avoid a second blow, only to feel the spiked ball of the flail slam into his stomach. Two of the spikes from the ball found their way through the links of his armor, and the force of the ball itself winded him. The knight gasped, and for a split second, the world went white as his body sent signals to his brain of the pain and agony he was experiencing.

The well-trained knight took that split second to focus his mind, envisioning the fire of his forge back in exile, the smile of his dead wife, the touch of the gauntleted hand on his shoulder as he was knighted, and the promise he had made to himself to rid the world of Asmakai, the Mindcrushing Demon.

The split second ended, Kain’s eyes snapped open, and he jumped backward from his kneeling position with all of the force he could muster. He felt the second attack of the scimitar fall clumsily aside from his unexpected action towards Dane. Kain had dropped his sword, so he was able to reach up and grab around the back of the Nomad’s neck. In front of Kain, Jago was grinning wildly as he was in mid-swing with his flail, already on a downward trajectory from overhead.

Kain raised his lower leg from the knees, letting his entire weight hang on Dane’s neck. The Nomad was strong, but not that strong. He fell forward, the top of his head going down above Kain just as the heavy ball of the flail struck. Dane’s skull exploded from the full force impact of the spiked metal ball, gore flew in all directions, and blood seeped over Kain like a bubbling fountain.

Jago roared with a ferocious rage at what had happened, but did not relent. He ripped his flail out of the skull, sending brain and blood splattering across the wagon, the dead priest, and Chakra.

“Come Chakra, claim your first rune!” Jago screamed, attacking Kain again.

Kain had picked up his sword between the flail attacks, letting the mutilated head and body of Dane fall to the ground. His hair and face were covered in warm blood, so he took a few quick steps backwards to dodge the attack and wipe his face clear with the back of his arm.

Another strike of the heavy weapon, but this time Kain had his back to the wagon. He raised his blade up, swinging forcefully not at the Nomad, but at the base of the chain of the flail. The

chain wrapped itself around his blade twice before the heavy head struck it, and both of the warriors dropped the tangled mess of weapons to face off against one another.

Chakra was off the wagon and at Jago's side now, a bloody knife in one hand and a small shield in the other. Kain noticed the shield arm was quivering for some reason, but had to keep his attention on the larger Nomad and could not determine why.

Jago jumped at Kain, grabbing him by the shoulders as Kain did likewise to the Nomad. The two wrestled back and forth, Kain trained at pressure points and angles, but Jago significantly stronger and larger. Jago forced Kain to the ground, smashing his head to the hard dirt road several times as Kain attempted to get his hands clamped firmly around Jago's neck.

"Chakra, stab... him... now!" Jago grunted, in between rushed breaths of air as he used all of his strength to keep Kain down, and his hands away from his neck.

The woman knelt down beside Kain, knife in hand, her mind in complete disarray from all that she had seen this battle. Three of her clan were killed by the hands of this knight, but for some reason she did not feel sadness for them, nor did she feel he did wrong. She tried to picture herself in their situation, and what she might do if in the same situation. The only thing that seemed wrong about today was what her clan had done, what Jago was still trying to do.

"Chakra!" Jago snarled again, "Now!"

Chakra stood up, dropping the knife beside the two men. Tears streamed down her face as she considered everything that had taken place, and her decision not to help.

Kain stopped fumbling for the Nomad's neck, instead stretching out a hand frantically for the knife he heard drop next to him. Jago raised Kain's head up, about to smash it into the ground one final time with all of his strength. The knight's hand found the knife blade, he grabbed the handle in his fist and brought the blade between him and the Nomad. Bringing his other hand behind the hilt, he pushed forward with the last bit of energy he had left, shoving the blade up into Jago's upper chest, puncturing his lung.

Jago still slammed Kain to the ground, the knight lost his breath, and his consciousness.

Chakra watched the battle come to an end from a few feet away. She saw Kain go limp with the last blow to the back of his head on the ground, wincing as it happened. Then she saw Jago fall upon the knight, the knife still protruding from his chest. He lay on top of Kain, blood flowing down the knife handle and into the knight's chainmail, then to the ground.

Jago's head was turned towards Chakra, one eye closed but the other fixed upon her.

"I knew you ... were too weak..." he said, some of the words gargled as he spoke, blood seeping from his mouth.

"It took all of my strength to choose not to listen to you," the young woman replied, "And even more not to kill you myself."

The Headman of the Nomads let out his last breath, the one open eye staring vacantly at Chakra.

She stepped towards the men, heaving the heavy, still warm corpse of Jago off of the knight. As she rolled her former clan leader to his back, she heard a sharp intake of breath. At first she thought it was Jago, perhaps not quite dead. She realized, too late, that it was the knight who had breathed in.

Kain rolled out from under the dead Nomad, towards the entangled sword and flail. He was able to slide the sword out from the wrapped chain in one, swift jerk. He rose, ignoring the ebbs of pain throbbing from the many bruises he had suffered from Jago's ground pounding.

"Wait, stop," Chakra pleaded, realizing that sword was now pointed at her. "I could have killed you, but I didn't!"

"You killed Remin," Kain said in a low, hushed tone. The fight with Jago had taken a lot out of him. "You deserve death for that alone."

"He's not dead, I didn't even hurt him. Look!" Chakra exclaimed, thrusting her arm into his view. A thin slice ran up her forearm, still wet with blood.

"Don't move." Kain said to the woman, walking slowly to the driving cart of the wagon, where the still body of the priest layed. He was surprised to see the old man still breathing, and the blood that was around his abdomen had started to dry up. He looked towards Chakra, a during she was not trying to distract him, then cautiously climbed up onto the cart. He looked closer at the bloody robe, moving the torn area around with his fingers. There were no injuries on the man's stomach, only the damaged shoulder from the flail.

"Why didn't you kill him?" Kain asked, truly surprised to see the Nomad had not stabbed Remin.

"I don't know, I've never disobeyed him before." Chakra replied, turning her sight away from Kain. "Not even when he said to attack you! I could tell by your eyes a simple knife throw from me wouldn't stop you. But the priest was defenseless."

"So what will you do if I allow you to live?" Kain questioned her. "Will you go back to your clan, and just help raid the next caravan? Or return after this one again?"

"No, after today I cannot go back. I will have to travel alone." she said, "It's probably better that way."

"You should be slain for your participation today," Kain said stepping down from the wagon cart. "If circumstances were different, I would. But you saved a priests life, and in a way you saved mine as well. But there must still be consequences for your actions."

Chakra looked at him quizzically. Was he going to cut off her hand, like many over her clan had suffered over the years when charged with minor thievery? Force her to be a slave to his group of knights? She said nothing, just looked at him.

"Get down on your knees, and lower your head," he said, approaching slowly.

"I thought knights had more self control than this..." she muttered, thinking the worst of his request, but complying.

"It's not what you think. Actually, I expect this may be a far worse fate." He said solemnly, as he stepped behind her. He raised his sword, placing the flat of the blade on one shoulder. "I, Kain, Knight of Exire, bestow upon you..." He put a bit of pressure on the blade to signal her to speak.

"Ch.. Chakra, of ... nowhere." she said, uncertain what he was expecting of her.

"Chakra of Novus", Kain said, feeling it more appropriate then nowhere. "a Debt of Honor. This debt, if not fulfilled within five years of today's date, will result in you being sentenced to death for your actions today."

"What is a.." she started to ask.

"Your Debt of Honor terms are as such..." Kain continued, forcefully silencing her question.

"First, you will sever all ties with the Nomad clans immediately. Second, you will accompany me to Vace City and undergo basic combat training during our rest periods. Third, you will begin establishing yourself as a force for good from the time I leave you at Vace City. And finally, before five years pass, you are tasked with slaying Monsigneus, the red dragon, by whatever means necessary."

Chakra gasped at the last requirement. The dragon! She had heard horrible tales of cities burned to ash during its worst times, and of people being torn to shreds in its best. The beastly creature was likely the most powerful thing on the planet.

"So you are sentencing me to death." Chakra said quietly, head still tilted, starting at the ground.

"Your head remains firmly attached to your neck," Kain said, feeling no empathy for her. "How you choose to use it from this point forward will impact your fateful encounter. I have my own... Demons to battle. But someone, somehow, needs to stop this creature from ... whatever it is that it hopes to do. Travel the world, find some of the amazing creations the new wizards of the world have created. Learn from the best warriors in the land. Find others that want to help you in your cause. What I am offering you may be next to impossible, but within it there is hope. Hope that you can survive an encounter with the dragon, hope that it can be defeated, and hope that you will save thousands of lives, if not more, in the coming years."

He removed his sword, driving the tip into the ground beside her.

"And one more thing..." he said, "You will help me repair the wagon."

Chakra stood up, picking up the long shaft of the blood stained flail that still lied on the ground. The weight of the ball was fairly heavy, swinging with ease from the chain. She had never used such a weapon before, but it was as good a weapon as any to attempt to learn more about how to fight with. She turned about, staring Kain in the eye once more.

"I will fix your wheel. I will train and travel with you. I will find my way, and I will slay the dragon. This is my debt to you, and I intend to pay it."