

Amelia gripped the wooden sword with both hands and stared down her opponent. Serena was turned slightly to the side, her own wooden sword pointed to the floor as she exuded confidence. The wind gently rustled her black hair, contrasting against the evening sky.

“First lesson,” she said as she slowly approached Amelia, who reflexively gripped the wooden sword even tighter. “Don’t grip the sword too tightly; you don’t want to tire your hands.”

Amelia relaxed her hands a little and the moment she did a flick of Serena’s wrist wrenched the sword from her grasp and flung it to the ground.

“Not that loose,” Serena said, a smile forming on her lips.

Titters erupted around her as she picked up her sword, her face flushed with embarrassment. She faced Serena again, trying to ignore the spectators. They were on the first deck, where a circle of demons had formed, providing an impromptu arena.

When she asked Serena why so many of the crew were watching, the captain shrugged and replied, *‘Evening entertainment!’*

“Second, let’s fix the stance.” Serena motioned with her sword. “Feet. Keep them slightly more than shoulder-width apart for better balance.” After adjusting her stance, the sword was pointed at her knees. “Don’t lock your knees; stay flexible and ready to move. Bend them slightly to lower your centre of gravity.”

“Like this?” Amelia adjusted her stance as best she could from the instructions.

“Yes. Your stance is the most important thing. Everything else will be built from it. This one is called *hachiji-dachi* and is the *natural stance*. Now, tense your body and feel how little force is needed to tip you over.” Amelia clenched her core as Serena placed a hand on her collar, slowly applying pressure. Doing her best to

ignore how her heartbeat skyrocketed, she focused on how her body quickly began tipping backwards.

Unconsciously, she moved her back foot to stabilise herself.

“Not a lot, right? *Hachiji-dachi* is your gun and sword, it-” Serena stopped, and Amelia realised she had unconsciously frowned. “...What?” Serena asked.

“Gun and sword? Is that an expression?”

“...Yes. It means your foundation. Something you become so proficient in, you can always fall back on it.”

Realisation dawned on Amelia as she made the connection. “We have an expression like that! We call it your ‘bread and butter’! Wait! Do you even have butter here!?” Now that she thought about it, she realised a lot of food from her world might not exist here! What about cheese!?

Oh no. She wasn’t sure she could survive without cheese!

“Yes, we have butter. Focus on the lesson, idiot.”

“Sorry!” Amelia gave her a small smile.

“Sorry, what?”

“Sorry, Lady Halen!”

“Idiot. Call me *Sensei* when I’m training you!”

“Yes, Sensei!” she squeaked. The spectators chuckled at that, and a few jeers were thrown in.

“Don’t be too harsh on her, Cap’n!”

“It’s like I’m back at the academy!”

“Little mouse looks out of her depth!”

“You’re going to find out why the humans call her the *Hellfire Captain!*”

Amelia felt her mouth quiver as a flash of anxiety rippled through her. Maybe asking the captain to train her wasn't a good idea. Serena did have *that look* in her eye, after all.

"Fifty push-ups, go on."

"Y-yes, Sensei!" Amelia got down, but before she could begin, she heard Serena's exasperated voice say, "Idiot, why have you let go of your sword? Never let go of your weapon. The weapon *is* the warrior, and the warrior *is* the weapon. You are one! Grip your sword and do it on your knuckles!"

Serena was enjoying this, wasn't she? Amelia gripped the sword in her right hand and began doing push-ups. She was far tougher than a normal human, so the pressure on her knuckles didn't bother her at all. Soon, she was lost in the rhythmic motion of the exercise. How much time had passed? She had lost count! Just as she started to feel her muscles slightly protest, a voice called out to her.

"Stop! Up!" Amelia scrambled up. "I said fifty, and you did a hundred. What am I to do with a student who cannot follow instructions, I wonder?" Serena tilted her head, placing two fingers on her cheek with an expression of mock distress.

She was definitely enjoying this!

"Still, your physical endurance is exceptional, which is expected of someone who has communed the First-Word. You have your wards active, yes?"

"Yes, Sensei!"

"It depends on the talent of the mage, but wards are roughly equivalent to a warrior's aura in defensive ability." Serena took out her firearm, pointed it at Amelia's chest and pulled the trigger.

The gunshot was like a crack of thunder. Amelia flinched, felt an impact, and smelled gunpowder. She… she'd shot her!

"You shot me!" she exclaimed.

“Yes, it was rather an enjoyable experience.” Serena spun the firearm on her finger before bringing the barrel to a stop under her lips and blowing on the smoke. Amelia had to admit, it looked pretty cool! “I’ll make a habit of it if you don’t follow my instructions.

“From the attempt on your life, you’re already aware of how difficult it is to hurt you with conventional weapons. However, the noise of gunfire will still induce panic and shock to the inexperienced, so we’ll work on fixing that with you.”

She couldn’t believe it! Serena was going to keep shooting her! Sure, she wasn’t in any real danger, but she was still getting shot! Amelia resisted a small sigh escaping as she resigned herself to her fate of being a bullet sponge.

“A first-circle ward from a mage is roughly the same as a first-level aura of a warrior. It will make you untouchable by most handguns.” Serena calmly continued with her explanation as if shooting her maid was the most natural thing in the world. “The second circle, and second level, will protect you against most riflefire. You should always keep something active at all times, if possible.”

Amelia nodded. She ran the *Ward of Thew* constantly, which moderately boosted her attributes. On top of that, she’d stacked a second-circle and two third-circle wards from the *Aseco* branch that significantly enhanced her defence against physical and magical attacks. All of these were cloaked because she glowed like a miniature sun if she didn’t.

She had more defensive spells from the demonic branches she was more familiar with, but she refrained from using them. Amelia didn’t know what kind of detection abilities others in this world had, and she didn’t want her communion with the demon gods to be known. Not yet.

“A half-decent warrior or mage is resistant to most forms of conventional warfare, which is why we use these.” Serena wiggled her sword. “The martial weapons can be reinforced with a warrior's aura or a mage's spells. With enough reinforcement, they can cut through enemy wards and auras and withstand the forces required to do so.” An orange hue appeared across Serena’s skin, shimmering in the evening light. The aura spread from her hand to cover the sword, causing it to take on a subtle orange tint.

“Take your stance. Spread your wards to your weapon. Angle your sword like this to receive my strike.” Serena demonstrated the position, and Amelia did her best to mirror it while wrapping the sword in her magic. She was scared she might accidentally unleash a large amount of her titanic aether reserves, but she seemed to be able to control it.

Serena raised her sword and struck down, collapsing Amelia’s guard and stopping just short of her throat.

“You need to keep these muscles engaged at all times,” Serena poked Amelia under the shoulder. "Pull the shoulders down. Try again.” Amelia did as she was instructed, and this time, when she received the captain’s strike, her block held firm. However, she was forced to take a step back to stabilise herself.

“That is the rising block called *age-uke*. It can be used to parry or take the brunt of a strike. See how you took a step back? Your stance needs adjusting.” Serena used her foot to pull Amelia’s front foot forward. “More. More… there. Bend the knee more. That’s it.” Amelia’s knee was now over her foot, and her centre of gravity felt much lower.

“Again. Make *age-uke*. Receive the strike.” The sword came at her again, but she wasn’t pushed back this time. “Your stance will decide whether an attack breaks your defences or not. This is the front stance, called *zenkutsu-dachi*. It maximises your stability against frontal assaults, as well as allowing you to strike hardest at the enemies before you.”

Serena moved into the first stance she had shown. “*Hachiji-dachi,*” she said, before stepping out with one leg and bending the knee over her foot, mirroring Amelia. “*Zenkutsu-dachi*.” Serena then shifted her weight back onto her back leg, making an L shape. “*Kokustu-dachi*, the back stance. Useful for parrying, baiting attacks, and kicking. Finally, we have”–Serena moved her weight to the centre, bending both her knees equally–“the straddle stance for maximum stability and defensive fighting. *Kiba-dachi*.

“These four stances are the foundation of the school of combat I was taught in–the *Shimokan* school. The stances are your *sword and gun*, or bread and butter if you like. We will go over them together. Copy me.” Amelia began emulating Serena’s movements as she flowed from one stance to the next. She had no idea

about actual fighting, but even as an amateur, she could see the experience in Serena's footwork and movement.

She thought her dexterity, strength, and perception from the game would make her a natural, but the reality was very different. Over the next hour, Serena constantly pointed out and adjusted every part of her body, from her feet to her hips and even the direction she was looking. Her only advantage was her endurance, which allowed her to maintain a deep stance for far longer than an average demon or human.

Even so, the physical effort built up over time, and Amelia soon started to sweat with exertion. She could heal herself, but Serena instructed her not to.

Serena showed her several more blocks and had her use them to defend against attacks from all directions in all the different stances, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each position. As time went on, Amelia found herself forgetting she was on the deck of the ship, surrounded by nosy demons.

It had become just her and Serena. Sensei and student.

It was nice to learn something new. Magic seemed to come naturally to her, unfairly bestowed upon her by some higher power. However, the paths of the warrior? This was something else. You had to repeat motions hundreds and thousands of times over until they were ingrained in your mind. Just being strong wasn't enough. She needed *technique*. Technique which would take years to develop into proficient muscle memory.

Amelia fell in love with the movements. After years of being bedbound, she was doing something she could only dream of before. She could move her body and be rewarded for it! Why didn't everyone do this? It felt amazing!

As time ticked on and the sky slowly darkened, Serena showed her a few *katas*. These were sequences of movements that, if done correctly, would start and finish in the same spot. Amelia lost herself in her focus, only being distracted when Serena would come close to adjust her in this or that way.

Amelia wanted to ask: did Serena's heartbeat rise like hers when they were close? Did Serena find her blue eyes as pleasant and pretty as she found her crimson

ones? Did she feel as comfortable as she did around her, as if they were lifelong friends? When she looked at her with an examining eye to correct her stance, was it all business, or was there any interest in her body at all?

“You're distracted,” came a commanding voice from behind her. “It’s getting late. The body and mind will remember the training when they rest. Let’s end it here.”

“How did I do?” Amelia asked, quickly adding, “Sensei?”

“Above average talent, but nothing exceptional.” Serena peered down at her. “Thank the Empress and the Moons. If you were a genius at martial combat, I might have needed to retire. I believe you will grow quickly; your inherent strength and endurance already put you years ahead in that area of development.”

“When will I get to, you know…” Amelia swung her sword a few times, unable to stop herself from making *whoosh* noises. Serena had made her hold the sword throughout the entire training session, but never once asked her to strike with it.

“Next time, if you keep practising the *katas* in your spare time.”

“Okay! I’ll practice *really* hard!”

Serena curled her lip. “Good,” she said. “Let’s retire for the night. I have work to do.”



Serena sat in her chair and began busying herself with paperwork. Most importantly, she began to think about how to write a letter to her father. From the Dragon, they discovered that he had already been made aware that she’d hired a human Speaker. Even so, she should prepare a letter to soften the atmosphere that would no doubt be extremely awkward in their upcoming meeting, more than a month out.

Amelia had disappeared into her quarters to wash up, leaving her alone in the captain's office. Serena tapped the paper, thinking about what she should say. She should probably mention they were training her in etiquette. Her father would pick up on that and be more forgiving of any mishaps. Maybe.

"Captain," Anathor said. "Word from the bridge. We just got hailed by Kenhoro perimeter ships."

"They're out a bit far. Have sensors sent them our identification?"

"...Just sent, Captain."

"We have visuals? Aetherscope signatures matching?"

"Hmm…" the moose mumbled. "Visuals match… signatures matching. Two light cruisers. *Moris* class. Reply incoming…" Serena waited patiently. There was a speaking tube connecting the captain's quarters to the bridge, which she rarely used. She more often relied on the nicknamed *Anathor-tube* form of communication.

"Hmm… they congratulate us on our victory and will escort us to the Imperial airdocks in Kenhoro."

"*Will?*" Serena felt her eyes narrow. "They didn't offer?"

"No, Captain."

Tsk! She bit her tongue, thinking. "We might have complications the moment we make land. They're not escorting us. They're keeping an eye on us."

"Because of the human?"

"That's right."

The side door opened, and Amelia stepped out. "What's happening because of me?"

"Kenhoro authorities sticking their–" She looked in Amelia's direction, reflexively taking a breath. "What are you *wearing?*" Amelia had removed her uniform and was left in only her undergarments, the loose-fitting top and shorts that left her

midriff and legs bare. To make matters worse, she had been cleaning herself up and had gotten enough water on her top that it had started to… cling to her chest.

“What? I was sweaty from the training, and if you remember, I have *no other clothes!*” Amelia put her hands on her hips, and Serena found it difficult to keep her eyes from wandering. Amelia was well-proportioned but lacked the muscle definition a trained warrior would have. She looked… soft.

Tsk!

As if I would find a human... attractive! Serena chastised herself.

“First etiquette lesson. Displaying yourself like that–”

“Like what?”

“Like *that!*” Serena waved a hand, gesturing in Amelia’s direction. “In the presence of not just a captain, but also a noble, is improper! If anyone finds out, that would only lead to rumours, especially for me!”

Amelia tilted her head in confusion. “Why especially for you?”

“I…” She bit her tongue. That was a mistake. She shouldn’t have this conversation now. She had started to suspect Amelia was somewhat… impressed by her. To discuss the rumours that had been started during her academy days within the all-women’s dorm… would complicate things further.

Even if, as the saying went, where there was smoke, there was fire.

“Never mind. If anyone comes, you disappear into the bedroom, got it?”

“Yes, Sensei!”

“It’s only *sensei* when we’re training, idiot.”

“Okay!” Amelia gave two enthusiastic thumbs up. The raising of her arms caused her chest to compress, and Serena could not stop her eyes from flickering to the location.

Damn it!

“What do you want, anyway?” she said, unable to keep a hint of frustration from her voice.

“I heard you talking about me.”

“...Right.” Serena took a breath, collecting her thoughts. “We’re being escorted by two Kenhoro authority ships.”

“Cool! Can I see them?”

“No, idiot. They’re most likely here because you’re here. They’re keeping an eye on us to see if anything happens. You won't be going on deck tomorrow. You can spend some time with Tomes. He’ll get you started on your letters.”

“Okay,” said Amelia. “Can I do my *katas* here? It’s easier to move around like this, and the bedroom is too small. I’ll be quiet! Promise!”

“...Can’t you do anything else? I’m trying to work.”

“Well, I would read, but I can’t really do that, can I? I don’t want to go to sleep just yet… I’ve spent enough time in bed!” Amelia shook her head from side to side. “Besides, doing the katas is fun! It’s a bit like meditation!”

“Did you… Enjoy the training?” Serena asked.

“Mmm, mmm! Sure did! Apart from you shooting me!” Serena couldn’t help but smile at that. It was amusing to see Amelia so flustered. She would have to shoot and stab her at random times in the future. It would add some variety and entertainment to her daily life.

“You’ve got that look in your eye again, Captain,” said Anathor.

“What look!?”

“...Nothing.”

Serena looked at Amelia. “Do your *katas*. Be quiet, and don’t ask for any help. I have a letter to write.”

“Okay!” Amelia began going through the motions she’d memorised so quickly earlier that evening. Serena set about writing her letter, but no matter how much she tried to focus, her eyes kept being drawn from the paper to the person in front of her. She would only look when Amelia was facing away from her, and the more she caught herself looking, and the more she realised where she was looking, the more a realisation slowly dawned in her mind.

Over a human? she thought. *Really, Serena? You’re such an idiot.*

Eventually, as the last of the evening light faded and the night came, Serena got up from her chair and, contradicting her earlier statements, gave Amelia some further instruction.

After all, it was somewhat exciting to feel how her heartbeat sped up.

When they were close.