



Serena woke at first light. She didn't open her eyes just yet, instead choosing to enjoy the warm pressure of Amelia leaning into her. It was unbelievable how difficult it was to maintain composure around her girlfriend. At first, she accepted it as the result of a fledgling infatuation, but in many ways, it only got worse. Was this what it felt like to be madly in love? As the days and weeks ticked by, Serena not only began factoring Amelia into more and more decisions, but she'd also begun working on the assumption they would always be together.

An assumption that made Serena giddy.

She wrapped an arm around Amelia's sleeping figure and gave her a small squeeze. Her action earned her a satisfying squeak and something mumbled about fried chicken. Serena slipped out from under the blanket and stood up, quietly yawning as she regulated her aura to resist the morning chill. She glanced through the window and was greeted by a frosty, foggy morning. Turning away, she—

Wait, what was that?

Serena snapped her gaze back out the window. She eyed the suspect corner, where she swore she had just seen someone watching her. There was no one there. Serena pushed through orange and manifested yellow aura, enhancing her perception as much as she could without Speaking. While her senses now informed her of a few dozen aether signatures around the academy, there was no sign of the person who'd been watching her.

Was it just a coincidence?

"We being attacked?" a mumbling and sleepy Amelia asked, not even turning around. "Or are you training?" With an exaggerated yawn, the blond-haired mess slowly moved onto her back. "It's so early!" she exclaimed suddenly before reaching out with one hand, gesturing at Serena. "Ren... come back to bed. It's so cold and lonely without you..."

The invitation brought a smile to Serena's face. She approached the sleepy Amelia, letting her aura drop to its usual red hue before kissing her girlfriend's forehead. "I thought I saw something," she explained. "But we need to get up anyway. You need to slip out before anyone sees you."

"Mmm..." Amelia reached and took hold of Serena's hand, pulsing a subtle healing spell into them both. At least Amelia possessed enough awareness now to know that if she blasted her magic here, it would announce to half the academy that she was in Serena's room. The familiar golden warmth filled Serena, revitalising her for the day ahead and washing away any sleepiness. Amelia continued their morning ritual by casting her cleaning spell on them both, erasing any sweat from their bodies and removing the need to use the toilet.

"Well, I'm awake now," Amelia chirped, sitting up and looking around the room. "Coffee?" she asked, pointing towards a small gas stove. The main academy building hadn't been modernised fully. While it replaced the old gas lamps with aetherlights, the gas lines remained in use.

"Sure." Serena filled a kettle, struck a match and lit the stove. "Some of your Jimari beans." She gestured towards a small pot. She'd taken the liberty of *borrowing* some of Amelia's stash from the *Vengeance*. After her girlfriend had bought a ridiculous twenty-pound bag of the stuff – a luxurious expense Serena would never do herself – she'd found that she'd become accustomed to the quality coffee over the military rations she was used to. "Mind brewing while I wash?" she called out, heading to the washroom. With Amelia's cleaning magic, washing wasn't necessary; it was simply a habit Serena enjoyed.

After washing and dressing, Serena returned to the bedroom to find two steaming cups of coffee waiting for her. "What are your plans for today?" she asked, sipping the black liquid and enjoying the bitter sensation.

"I..." Amelia closed her eyes, seemingly focusing on remembering her schedule. "I'm free till lunch, then there's a first-year magic class Lunaria wants me to attend, but only to observe how they teach. Oh, that reminds me! Since when was *Taranis's Downpour* a seventh-circle spell?"

"I don't know exactly. Maybe a few centuries?" Serena offered. *Taranis* was close to becoming a Second-Word god. Even now, the aether required to commune his

name as a First-Word was so substantial that he was one of the rarest Words out there. It was estimated that within a few decades, maybe another century, *Taranis* would make his first *embodiment* and officially move higher up the divine ladder. Serena explained this to Amelia and finished with, "He's sort of considered a *one-point-five* Word."

"Guess that explains it." Amelia nodded, sipping her coffee. "I almost killed Lunaria yesterday with it."

"Ah," Serena uttered. "That's how the roof got damaged?"

"Yeah."

"Idiot."

"...Yeah."

They sat in silence for a moment, enjoying the morning. After their coffee was almost finished, Amelia said, "Sarafina knows I Spoke *Asclepius*, and I suspect Lunaria also knows. I think a lot of them know, to be honest." She shrugged and added, "I didn't confirm it directly, but I can't deny it..."

Serena nodded slowly. If there was one major fault with Amelia, it was how difficult it was for her to deceive others. She could do it a little, but anyone half-trained could pick up her body language and know what was truthful and what wasn't. "I imagine it'll be officially announced eventually. They're probably drip-feeding information to get a feel for the response."

Of all nations, the response of Christdom was the most important. Had *Asclepius* informed the Vatican of Amelia's embodiment of his divinity? *Asclepius* was, like the other human gods, aligned with the human race. After all, there was a reason they were called the *human* gods. But there were rules and accords in the halls of divinity that transcended the racial politics of the Known World. It was entirely possible that after Amelia had, in her own words, *told off* the lower rung of demonic gods through some mysterious way of Speaking, divine arrangements had been made regarding her.

Still, who was Serena to start guessing what happened in the Seven Hells or the Six Heavens?

"Gah!" Amelia groaned. "I should have picked one of the demonic Second-Word gods to save the *Sakamoto*. They're far more fun!"

Serena snorted. Despite Amelia's growth, she still said ridiculous things. Even knowing Amelia's circumstances, it was strange to hear her talk about picking a Second-Word as if she were plucking fruit from a tree. A Second-Word was a lifelong goal of the most talented and dedicated demons. A goal most would fail to achieve.

"What?" Amelia questioned.

"I'm just happy to have such a capable girlfriend," Serena mused, nursing her cup of coffee. Amelia's cheeks flushed. Serena knew Amelia loved being referred to as her *girlfriend*. Hells, Serena enjoyed it too, especially as it was one of the few things she could use to make Amelia giggle and blush. "You were reading that last night. What is it?" she asked, pointing to the book Amelia had brought.

"*The Mathematics of War*," Amelia said, turning the book so Serena could see.

It was a familiar book. One she'd studied during her time at the academy. *The Mathematics of War* reformed many military processes. The anonymous author greatly influenced the thinking of Centralis with its commentary on the Cascadia-Republic conflict in its early stages. It argued that technological advances meant war would become bloodier, not quicker, and that Cascadia should prepare for long, grinding wars of attrition that prioritised destroying the enemy instead of taking territory. When it was written, the conflict hadn't yet become the quagmire it is today, where Republican efforts only persisted due to countless resources and 'volunteers' being funnelled into the country by the human nations. Thankfully, the reforms it suggested were carried out years ago and meant that Cascadia could constrain most of the fighting off the Cascadian continent.

"What did you think of it?" Serena asked. Amelia wasn't military-minded, but some of the weapons she'd mentioned were shocking. Torpedoes that could travel thousands of kilometres, hugging the terrain, guided by their machine brains that were aided by artificial satellites. She didn't think Amelia was pulling her horn, but Serena simply couldn't fathom how the handheld machines Amelia described could do millions of calculations a second.

"I don't know," Amelia replied, shrugging. "I wasn't actually reading it. I was more focused on teasing you! Hey! No hair ruffling!"

The woman's complaints were left unanswered as her golden hair was thoroughly ruffled.

"What about you?" Amelia asked as she fixed her hair. "What are you doing? Can we meet up later?"

"Katalin of Driss runs an instructor-only training session on Wednesday mornings. That's where I'm heading. Did you want to come?" Serena asked.

"Uh." Amelia hesitated for a moment, a look of indecision on her face. "Sure!" she suddenly exclaimed. "Maybe she'll have some insights on me breaking into red aura!"

"That's good. It saves you from needing to sneak out. If anyone sees us, we can pretend you came first thing to me so I can take you to the session."

That excuse became useful sooner rather than later. Shortly after leaving Serena's quarters, they crossed paths with Ryosuke Yamamoto. Serena greeted the demon, explaining her role as Amelia's guide. Luckily, he didn't seem to give it a second thought. As they got closer to their destination, Serena felt an unfamiliar bubble of anxiety form. Was it because this would be the first time she trained with her fellow instructors? Or was it perhaps the fact that something about the northern demon set her on edge?

"What kind of sessions does she run?" Serena asked Ryosuke.

"The first half is relatively standard, although at a much higher pace than what we put the students through. Then, most instructors leave, unable to cope with the second half of the session where she..." The demon warrior's eyes narrowed, his brow furrowing. "...She mostly just *destroys* us."

"Well, that sounds awfully ominous!" Amelia exclaimed. "Why do you keep coming back?"

"Where's your warrior spirit, Assistant Instructor Thornheart?" Ryosuke's eyes gleamed. "How can we resist? She's as talented as the rumours say, and it feels

as though no matter how much we try, she's always there to match us. Not just with the sword either; she wields the spear just as well!"

They arrived at the training hall. From within, Serena could hear the muffled sounds of clashing metal. "Steel, not wood?" she asked Ryosuke with a raised eyebrow.

"It's how she wants it," came the reply. "Oh, and one last bit of advice: if she asks you to attack her, then *attack her*."

Serena nodded. Ryosuke opened the door, and the three of them stepped in. Inside, two dozen instructors and assistant instructors were warming up. Perhaps half of the warrior side of the teaching academy was present, the value of Highlord Driss's teaching outweighing the painful early mornings.

In the centre, the demon in question stood. "One minute!" Katalin called out before locking her purple eyes with Serena and then Amelia. Serena watched Katalin's expression closely, looking for any signs of anger or hatred. The North did not like humans, and Katalin's comments from the last time they met suggested the demon didn't vary from the norm. She didn't want to cause conflict, but if anyone started to bully Amelia, she'd have to step up, no matter the complications it caused.

Other than a slight narrowing of the eyes, Serena couldn't decipher much from Katalin's expression. The demon slowly turned her gaze away followed shortly by the other members of staff who had been gawking in their direction. Serena recognised a few others: the muscular Nathaniel Endo, the Head of the Department of Combat Training; Kenji Tanaka, the Head of Tactics and Strategy; Joey Ito, the Head of the new Department of Physical Training. The rest of the pack seemed to tilt mainly to the Department of Combat Training, which wasn't at all unexpected.

"Here," Serena said, fetching two swords and handing one to Amelia. "Does this feel okay?" Seeing Amelia nod, she leant in and whispered, "Keep your wards up. And, uh..." She leaned in further. "Stick with me when you can. Don't be afraid to demonstrate raw power against anyone who disrespects you. You are the Head of your own House now. An insult to you means far more than it did previously.

And besides..." Serena felt a smile form. "You can just heal any limbs you chop off, right?"

"R-right!" Amelia clenched a fist, prompting another smile from Serena. Amelia had difficulty with the *finesse* of combat, lagging behind experienced aura users, but if she abandoned accuracy and any attempts to defend, she could swing her ward-infused weapon with enough force to obliterate anything in her path.

"Line up!" Katalin suddenly called out. The room scrambled into ordered rows with absolute obedience. The atmosphere was strangely tense. Serena felt like she was a first-year again, where she felt dread and anticipation lining up in her first-ever formal class. This time, seasoned instructors were the students, and the instructor was a martial genius who seemed to meet every expectation.

"Start running! Keep those auras high!" The order came, and the group began running laps around the room while pushing themselves to mostly yellow aura, with a few assistant instructors only managing orange. Every ten seconds or so, Katalin would shout out, "Flare!" and everyone would start flaring their aura as much as they could. A few more seconds would pass and Katalin would yell, "Relax!", and the flaring would end.

With the exception of Amelia, of course. Just as Serena wondered what she should do instead, Katalin fell into line alongside them. "Human," she said. The northerner glanced at Serena before correcting herself. "Assistant Instructor Thornheart. You are perhaps the first human mage I've ever taught." Katalin turned her head, shouting into the room, "Flare!"

"Umm..." Amelia seemed not to know how to reply.

"You are yet to reach the first colour, yes?" Katalin asked. Without waiting for an answer, she asked, "Have you learned to cycle your aether like a warrior? It is different from the mage, yes? It is within the body, like a convection current. Not outside." Katalin then shouted, "Relax!"

"Mmm!" Amelia answered. "I learned it recently. I—"

"Do that then. Accelerate the aether when everyone else flares, yes? When we conduct drills, match your wards with the level of aura called for. Understand? I see you're protecting Instructor Halen, but can you also ward your weapon?"

"Um, yes!" Amelia hesitatingly answered. Without saying anything further, Katalin jogged ahead as the group continued their rhythmic warm-up. Katalin continued to call out orders for a few more minutes, and Serena would quickly flare and cool her yellow aura. Perhaps it was because she felt out of place in the room or the fact a legendary figure was teaching her, but Serena pushed her aura harder than usual and, as a result, found herself out of breath by the time Katalin called for them to stop.

"Pace yourself," someone next to her mumbled. "It doesn't get any easier."

That person was, for better or for worse, correct. Katalin took the group through the stance and strike she'd used against Serena the day before. Arms raised high with the sword poised to strike down. Stomach bent in, away from the enemy's reach. It was a killing strike designed to break the opponent's defence. Serena felt she would be better off carrying a club than a sword. The brutal way of striking was ferocious and practical, but felt foreign to the *shimokan* way.

Serena couldn't help but glance at Amelia. The woman was devoted to the task at hand, her face creased with concentration. For some reason, Amelia seemed more able to focus now than Serena. Was she worrying too much about Amelia?

"Two lines! Facing each other! Go!"

The group scrambled to align themselves.

Serena faced Amelia.

"Three-step aura stepping! Use the strike you just practised! Defenders try to block or parry! My side attacks first! Begin!"

Serena quickly bowed to Amelia, who followed suit. "Take a step back every time I attack forward. Three attacks, like I taught you," Serena whispered quickly. Amelia nodded, bracing herself. Serena cooled her aura down to red. She took her ready stance, her muscle memory naturally taking her into *hachiji-dachi*

before she quickly adjusted from the *shimokan* stance to the one Katalin had demonstrated.

Serena stepped forward, not wanting to fall too far behind, striking down hard with her red aura. Then, pausing only momentarily to move her aura into orange, she stepped forward to attack again with even more force. Taking a little more time, she pushed her aura into the final yellow, and taking a third step forward, she brought down her sword against Amelia's defence with such power that she was surprised her girlfriend didn't buckle.

The training in Kenhoro had really paid off.

Then, it was Amelia's turn.

"Remember the testing we did," Serena mumbled. Amelia looked confused for a moment before her eyes widened with understanding. Amelia's standards were several times higher than what everyone else was used to. Her first-circle magic held up against third-aura attacks, or, in their previous experimentation, a barrage of four-inch explosive shells. Likewise, her first circle enhancements she maintained at all times were likely sufficient to smash straight through Serena's red aura, as much as she hated to admit it.

Her girlfriend was just too strong!

Thankfully, Amelia understood what she had to do. When Amelia took her three steps forward, striking first with her blade wrapped in first-circle wards, then second-circle, and finally third, she kept the power in check enough not to embarrass Serena. There was a tentative nervousness to Amelia's strikes, which Serena understood all too well. Training with steel weapons instead of wooden swords had a psychological effect. She remembered her first practice duel with steel, where she finally began to understand she was wielding a weapon to kill.

"My side, move right!" Katalin ordered.

Serena took a few steps to her right, facing a new opponent. The person at the very end of their line ran to the other side to fill the newly vacant spot. It was a familiar method of training. Line up in pairs, conduct a drill, and then cycle

through the entire line. It was a quick and efficient way of getting practice against dozens of opponents.

The pace at which Katalin went, though, was surprising. Aura-stepping drills were designed to train the individual's ability to push into the next colour. However, when coupled with the devastating power carried out by the northern strike at the required cadence, many became exhausted before completing the drill against a dozen opponents.

Serena's opponent fell to their knee after failing to push themselves back into yellow. She helped them up. Her opponent thanked her before graciously excusing themselves, where they half-rested and half-collapsed against the wall. Considering how no one seemed to raise an eyebrow at the event, Serena figured it was a common occurrence. The assistant instructors gave up first, and not long after, a few instructors had to step out. By the time Serena faced Amelia again, Serena was sweating heavily, her body ached, and she felt that odd burning sensation you only experience when you exhaust your body's ability to handle aether.

"You don't look so great..." Amelia mumbled.

"Two minutes' rest!" Katalin called out to a collective groan of relief from the group who hadn't yet collapsed.

Amelia was sweating and red-faced, but it was clearly from the physical toll. She had no signs of aether exhaustion. This hadn't gone unnoticed by the other staff members, who mumbled amongst themselves that Amelia's spellwork was some of the quickest they'd ever seen. Typically, mages avoided close combat; their wards weren't as strong as aura, and it took too long for their spell formations to form against an opponent within reach. On the other hand, Amelia was talented beyond her fellow mages and could establish and tear down formations as quickly as her opponent could step forward and swing their sword.

"I'm fine." Serena waved her hand. "I just need some water..." She'd barely begun looking when Ryosuke appeared, handing her a bottle.

"Tough, isn't it?" he said with a grin. "No one would blame you for sleeping the rest of the day off. As for you, Assistant Instructor Thornheart, you've

single-handedly made me reconsider whether mages might be able to be squad commanders. How in the seven hells do you create your formations so quickly? Especially while keeping Instructor Halen's wards running?"

"I, uh," Amelia began, taking Serena's bottle and sipping it. "Practised a lot, I guess?"

"Some practice..." came the reply.

"How many make it to the second half?" Serena asked, feeling better now that her breathing had calmed down.

"Normally? Only me, Joey, and Nathaniel."

"So few?"

"Well, there were others, but they couldn't keep up. Most know their limits. What about you?" Ryosuke's eyes sparkled. "Think you'll stay?"

"I'll try."

"Do you want me to heal either of you?" Amelia asked.

"No healing!" Katalin shouted. She strode up to the three of them, glaring at Amelia. "Muscle needs to be stressed to grow! Iron needs to be hot before it can be forged! *Warriors* need to fight at their limits! Understand?"

Despite Katalin's disapproving expression, Serena again failed to find any signs of actual hatred. Was Katalin just good at hiding it? Serena hadn't forgotten that Katalin informed her she might be considered a *traitor* in the North for associating herself with Amelia, so she had no illusion regarding Katalin's general attitude towards the human race. Yet, Serena suspected that Katalin's famed obsession with swordsmanship might be just slightly stronger than her dislike of humanity. Did the northerner have a little bit of respect for Amelia for showing up to learn? Katalin was powerful beyond Serena's talent, which was already considered exceptional. Being so capable, how much of Amelia's power could Katalin see?

"Back in line!" Katalin shouted, pulling Serena out of her thoughts. She, along with everyone else, scrambled back into position. The purple-eyed demon paced down the line before stopping in front of Ryosuke. She then took several steps back, out of the range of Ryosuke's sword, and made the now familiar position of the northern hawk style, with her arms raised high and her belly tucked in.

"Stab me," Katalin said.

Ryosuke apparently followed his prior advice. When Katalin made the request, Ryosuke immediately leapt forward, thrusting with no reservation about skewering his opponent. It was one of the best *tsuki* strikes Serena had ever seen, perhaps only eclipsed by what she'd seen the grandmasters achieve. It was a strike Serena would surely fail to defend against.

But Katalin was not Serena, and she somehow managed to parry Ryosuke's attack with a mixture of swordsmanship and footwork. "The *hawk* is vulnerable to thrusts," she explained to the group. "You must use your feet more than in *shimokan*, yes? Now... form groups of six!"

Serena, Amelia and Ryosuke formed a trio, joined by three other instructors who looked worse for wear. "That was an exceptional strike, Instructor Yamamoto," Serena said, earnestly complimenting what she saw. Within her, the embers of her competitive spirit flared. This was the level she needed to reach!

"But still not enough," Ryosuke replied, the corner of his mouth rising.

Katalin explained their next drill. One person would defend using the hawk, while the others would form a queue and attack with thrusts one by one. Once the defender had gone through each opponent, they would switch. Attackers would maintain their aura one level below the defender for their safety.

Serena defended first, finding it difficult to maintain her yellow aura in her exhausted state. Aether exhaustion was not a familiar feeling to Serena. Plays, novels and tales told by drunken soldiers exaggerated how long a fight between warriors lasted. Nearly every fight Serena had been in had ended in less than thirty seconds. When it came to survival, it was better to flare your aura as much as possible, attack to the best of your capabilities, and retreat if you couldn't break your enemy in seconds. Most warriors could only flare their aura for ten to

twelve seconds before risking exhaustion, and an exhausted warrior can only manifest a weak aura.

And a weak aura meant death.

In their group, Serena only had difficulty with parrying Ryosuke. Ryosuke was a far more experienced warrior than she was, and she simply couldn't bring her sword down or step aside in time. Amelia was easy to parry. The woman wasn't suffering from aether exhaustion, but her body was relatively untrained, and she was getting tired. With her tiredness, her power became sloppy, and an Amelia who was being sloppy was an Amelia who was dangerous. It didn't help Amelia was still focusing on cycling her aether the way warriors do, all while maintaining her own and Serena's wards.

With so much going on, it wasn't unexpected that Amelia's sword flew out of her hand from Serena's parry. It tumbled in the air until stabbing into the floor.

"Death!" Katalin roared from across the room! "Death!"

The room went deadly quiet.

Katalin snatched Amelia's sword, jabbing the point in front of Amelia's neck. "You lost your weapon! That's death!" she shouted. "You think you're tired, yes? Well, you'll be able to sleep if you were on the battlefield because you would be *dead*!"

"I..." Amelia audibly swallowed, taking a moment to catch her breath. Her face was red, and beads of sweat dotted her forehead. "I have my wards!" she protested.

"You are not here to learn to be a mage! You are here to learn how to fight like a demon!" Katalin shouted. "Your wards hold you back! They are a crutch! Remove them!"

"R-remove them?"

"Remove your wards! You'll never reach red otherwise!"

"But you said—"

"Your wards are interfering! The warriors' aether convection cannot flow! You are more than ready to make the step! Remove them!"

"But I'll be unprotected!"

"So? Do you not trust me!?" Katalin glared at Amelia and Amelia glared back. Then, as the seconds ticked by, the frustration on Amelia's face relaxed into something else. A quiet look of determination and... understanding? Serena was puzzled by what she saw and even more confused when Amelia dropped her wards, leaving her vulnerable for perhaps the first time since Serena had known her. It looked like Amelia realised something about Katalin. Did her intuition inform her decision? Regardless, Amelia didn't stop supplying aether to Serena's wards.

"This shouldn't take long," Katalin stated. She flipped Amelia's weapon, holding the blade and handing it back towards Amelia. "Make some space!" she commanded, and the group obliged, backing away. "We'll spar until you hit red or until you lose consciousness, yes?"

"My weapon isn't warded..." Amelia muttered. Without the external wards on her weapon, it would shatter against Katalin's aura-enhanced sword.

"We'll do it the old-fashioned way," Katalin said before dropping her aura. "Metal against metal. Don't lose your sword. Even if you die, never lose your weapon."

"O-okay!" Amelia nodded. Serena saw her tighten her grip.

Without bowing or any other display of etiquette, Katalin closed the distance and began her attack. It seemed ridiculous at first; the expertly delivered strikes appeared slow and unthreatening to the aura-enhanced eyes of Serena. No matter how skilled an opponent was, normal steel wasn't threatening to a warrior unless it was in the shape of a bullet.

But Amelia wasn't a warrior, and without any wards, the steel swinging towards her would cut her. Watching her girlfriend hastily defend against the attacks, her tiredness becoming more evident by the second as she desperately tried to convect the aether within her, made Serena realise how much danger Amelia was actually in.

If Katalin wanted, she could cut Amelia's head off before anyone could react.

The moment this thought passed, Serena took a step forward, only to be stopped by Ryosuke. "Wait," he hissed quietly. "It's a gauntlet. The human will be fine. She's done this to others already."

The clanging of steel continued to ring throughout the air. "One mistake, and she could die," Serena replied, not taking her eyes away. She felt a knot form in her stomach. For the first time, she realised she might lose Amelia. The thought made her sick. At this moment, Serena realised the depth of her love for the human. It transcended all etiquette, all norms, and now she was sure it transcended her loyalty to the Empire.

Amelia's defence slowed and faltered, but Katalin kept the pressure up. "Don't stop!" Katalin shouted, assaulting Amelia with strike after strike. Katalin's sword slipped past Amelia's guard, slicing her shoulder. Amelia stumbled. Blood poured from the wound, darkening her outfit.

Serena saw red and prepared *Narean*.

She was about to Speak when Amelia suddenly shouted, "Serena, don't!" The blond human was on one knee, her sword grinding against Katalin's, who was simply applying physical pressure against Amelia's weakened form. "It's okay!" Amelia called between gasps of breath. "I want this!"

Katalin didn't even look Serena's way.

The other instructors looked at Serena in shock and, in some cases, fear. They would have picked up on Serena's readied Word. Ryosuke said something, but Serena was too tunnel-visioned on Amelia to register what he said. She simmered her Word, ready to Speak at any moment. Amelia's words had prompted Serena to hold back. Just.

Amelia grunted, standing with great effort. Katalin continued to attack, shouting, "Don't just defend! Attack!" Amelia obeyed and, with dripping sweat and blood leaking from her wound, began desperately swinging back against Katalin. The northern demon blocked, parried and simply dodged. "Is that it!? To become a warrior, you need more than that! What are you swinging a sword for!?" Katalin

taunted Amelia. "How will you protect those that you love!? Will you let them die because you're tired!?"

"I... can... protect..." Amelia muttered between gasps of breath. Her aether flared, more and more moving throughout her body with every passing second. It was not a mage's aether flow but almost the flow of a warrior's aura. As much as she hated what Katalin was doing, Serena had to admit it was working.

Amelia was close.

"Aura is more than a spell! It is a divine charge! A blessing to defend the weak! To defend the Empire!" Katalin called out as Amelia's strikes began taking on an element of fluidity. "To defend your family! Your friends! Can you do it, Amelia!? Imagine if I attacked Instructor Halen, yes!? Imagine if I cut her down! What would—"

"Argh!" Amelia screamed, swinging her sword as a red aura *exploded* from her body. Serena's vision was blanketed in a blinding red light, and for a moment, she thought Amelia had Spoken a Word. No, it wasn't that; it was still only red aura, merely amplified by Amelia's titanic amount of aether. It spewed from her, and from where she stood, Amelia glowed like the Red Moon itself. There was no subtlety about this, no gentle hue of red from a student manifesting aura for the first time. This was Amelia Thornheart, Serena's girlfriend, powering a red aura at a level equivalent to a First-Word.

And then, slowly, the red light dimmed, and everyone's vision readjusted to the scene before them. Amelia was in her stance, her hands gripping her sword where she'd just finished her strike. She was gasping; her eyes glowed with power while her breath fogged with both heat and aether. In front of her stood Katalin.

And on the floor lay Katalin of Driss's severed arm, still gripping her weapon tightly.

Serena felt her blood run cold as she, along with everyone else in the room, stared in shock at the dismembered limb. She looked at Katalin, expecting *something*, but the northern demon had a calm expression. Amelia stood up

slowly, her breath and aura stabilising. Only then did her face turn ashen, her eyes widening as she realised what she'd just done.

"Fucking hells..." Ryosuke muttered.

"I-I-I'm..." Amelia began blubbering, tears running down her cheeks. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean it! I didn't--"

"Enough," Katalin intoned, raising her remaining hand, cutting Amelia off. "How do you feel?" The demon sniffed, examining Amelia's aura. "Good stability. Good start. Are you going to throw up? That's common, the first time."

"E-enough about me!" Amelia stuttered, pointing a shaky finger at the severed limb. "Your arm! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

"Ah, yes," Katalin looked down at her solitary limb like it was a passing curiosity. "Let's see here..." the demon said idly. "Been a while since this has happened." Katalin bent down, picking up her arm with her remaining functioning hand. "This is a good lesson!" Katalin announced, raising the limb that was still gripping the sword. "Never forget how dangerous aura can be against an unprotected limb, yes? Or even a higher-tier aura against a lesser colour, understand? Now..." She held the detached limb against her bloody stump.

"Assistant Instructor Thornheart, now we have a decent foundation to build from. We'll take a break before the second half of the session. Would you mind invoking some of Aseco's grace and reattaching my arm?"

Katalin looked around, smiling softly, her purple eyes twinkling.

"And someone fetch us some mint tea, yes?"