

Mech 2891

Chapter 2891: Out of the Shadows

Ketis suddenly realized that there was more to her living sword intent than she initially realized.

The 'pet' that Ves created in her mind was not just a personification of her sword intent. She already knew that its nature was beyond her understanding, but she always figured its purpose was relatively simple.

Aside from keeping her company, Sharpie also assisted her in performing her superpower and deepening her insights into sharpness.

Its presence constantly inundated her mind with sharpness, allowing her to develop a more profound feel for the concept.

In turn, as her comprehension of sharpness continued to rise, Sharpie grew even sharper.

In essence, Ketis formed a mild positive feedback loop with Sharpie. Their symbiotic relationship meant they constantly stimulated each other.

She was well aware that she was probably the only mech designer who possessed this unique advantage. The gift that Ves had given to her was such a splendid boon that she would have never been able to progress her nascent design philosophy so much without its assistance!

Ketis conveniently ignored the fact that Ves treated her like a test subject.

Ever since she obtained Sharpie, she always assumed that her sword intent only came in a single form.

Yet today, she discovered that this assumption was wrong!

Sharpie was capable of shifting its focus from sharpness to annihilation. It was as if her intangible pet had exchanged one coat for another. The effect this had on her mentality and superpower was groundbreaking!

"This is impossible."

Even though she had only come in touch with the local swordsmanship tradition for a short amount of time, she knew it took years or decades for even the most devoted swordsmen to achieve this effect!

She was well aware that even the best prodigies had to master a sword style step by step in order to dig out its full potential.

Many other swordsmen invested an even greater amount of time, only to come away with nothing! Interim Director Fred Walinski was a little luckier than most people by being able to drag himself to the level of a pseudo-sword initiate.

It took at least half a century of constant training and practice for him to be able to reach this point!

Compared to Fred, the progress that Ketis made was so ludicrous that she couldn't even begin to explain.

She only read and contemplated the scriptures for a couple of hours. Throughout all that time, she hadn't been able to accept their concepts.

Logically speaking, that should have prevented her from channeling the power of annihilation.

Yet the abnormally smooth and straight cut through a solid stone wall proved otherwise.

She looked blankly at Shiva, the weapon that had once again become a vessel that had brought the Annihilator Sword Style to life.

Everything that had happened just now had an undeniable connection to Sharpie. Though a part of her felt terror at the unfathomable and uncontrollable nature of an entity that occupied a part of her mind, Sharpie quickly took off its annihilation coat and put on its familiar sharpness coat again.

Her sword intent felt much more familiar to her again. Her suspicions faded away. A smile appeared on her face.

"No matter what you, you'll always help me, right?"

Swish!

That was enough for her. Sharpie was still a part of her, and she was a part of Sharpie. Neither of them could exist without the other.

"We're two sides of the same coin."

A day later, the Swordmaidens returned to the arena. While their participation in the mech combat tournaments were close to ending, they still had some fight left in the personal combat tournaments.

Ketis was scheduled to fight in two different matches. In the morning, she would be entering the arena by herself. In the afternoon, she had to win a group match.

The Swordmaidens planned to debut her new identity through these two matches.

"You are not just Ketis Larkinson the Swordmaiden and mech designer anymore. Your battle garb should reflect that." Fred Walinski said as he tapped the protective suit issued by the arena and caused it to project an image over the chest area.

The emblem depicted a planet that had been cleaved apart by an enormous sword!

Ketis stared dazedly at the symbol that represented the Annihilator Sword School. She had only seen projected emblems like these on the protective suits of other seeded competitors!

"Hey, don't be nervous. You are the interim director of the Annihilator Sword School and a citizen of the Heavensword Association. I called in every single favor I had left in order to rush the applications. Everything is official and final now. While I haven't been able to convince the government that you're qualified to be a sword initiate, you can take care of that yourself by showing off your power in the arena. The public will decide."

Commander Sendra came close and patted Ketis on the shoulder. "Don't forget our plan. You're the star now, so act like it. People won't take you seriously if you don't have the swagger to back up your new identity."

"I... will try my best."

The transition was too abrupt. Ketis didn't have enough time to process all of the rapid changes.

For so long, Ketis always viewed herself as a background character. Compared to more brilliant personalities such as Ves and Gloriana, she was merely the mech designer obsessed with swords.

Now that she was asked to step into the spotlight, she felt the light was unbearable. She wasn't used to facing the galaxy by her own merits!

"This isn't me." She said. Her nerves were already starting to get to her. "I'm not cut out to be famous. I'd rather just be one Swordmaiden among many!"

"Hey!" Sendra pulled her in a bear hug. "There's nothing to be afraid about! You're a fighter, not a coward. You wouldn't have become a sister of ours if you only knew how to hide behind others. Didn't you kill dozens if not hundreds of enemies with your sword? You never showed any fear back when you fought against pirates and other dangerous scum!"

"That's different! I trained for that! This is different. I never thought I would become a public personality."

"Well, tough luck, Ketis, because you can't avoid this battle. Do you want to hide behind the patriarch's shadow forever? Grow up, girl! You'll become a Journeyman soon! Do you think you can continue to stay unnoticed forever when you have gained enough qualifications to design mechs alongside the lead designers of the Larkinson Clan? We need you to stand your ground if you want to secure more benefits for our fellow sisters!"

She snapped out of her daze. She realized she bore more responsibility now that she had accepted the inheritance of the Annihilator Sword School.

While she still held many questions about the sword school and her ability to channel its distinctive sword style, she knew that there were more important priorities to worry about.

Everything that happened to her was only a means to an end! The goal had always been to empower the Swordmaidens! As long as she did her best to follow the new plan, she could single-handedly reverse their sorry condition and make them stronger than ever before!

Just thinking about meeting Commander Sendra's ambitious goal of recruiting 10,000 high-quality swordswomen caused her heart to pump faster.

She wanted to make this dream come true! She wanted every Swordmaiden to grow less lonely and rid themselves of the trauma they still suffered from after losing hundreds of sisters over the years.

With the infusion of so many enthusiastic women, Ketis could definitely foresee a future where the Swordmaidens became a strong and indispensable part of the Larkinson Clan!

No longer would Ves treat her sisters like endangered animals that needed to be coddled. With thousands of mech pilots, the Swordmaidens would be fully qualified to fight on the frontlines!

All of this was contingent on her upcoming performances.

Having witnessed Ves stepping up and becoming greater than life in public, she attempted to channel some of his 'swagger', as Sendra called it earlier.

"I'm a big girl. I can do this."

Her mentality shifted. Suddenly, she didn't feel so nervous anymore. She possessed enough courage to charge a group of soldiers and hack them apart with her sword. Why

should she fear standing out and attracting more attention to her? No matter what all of those people thought about her, she was much stronger than nearly all of them! None of them would last a second in front of her blade!

Commander Sendra closely paid attention to Ketis' demeanor and smirked. She liked what she saw.

"You're truly ready to step out of the shadows now. Now go show them what you can do now that you have mastered a new sword style."

Her turn soon came up. After receiving the encouragement of her fellow Swordmaidens, she walked out into the arena ground while armed with two very different swords.

Her Unending greatsword was holstered and attached to her back while Shiva hung from her waist.

While it was unusual for competitors to bring multiple primary weapons into the arena, the rules did not disallow it. There were plenty of dual wielders and swordsmen who wanted to bring in backup weapons to the field.

The only reason why his phenomenon was fairly rare was that carrying extra weapons was cumbersome enough to affect someone's battle performance.

Even though Ketis knew that she was making it harder for herself by carrying a massive greatsword on her back, she did not wish to part with her favorite weapon.

She wanted to make the audience accustomed to seeing her with her greatsword. This way, it wouldn't be a surprise when she finally pulled out her best sword.

For now, she had different plans in mind. Once she reached her assigned starting position, she straightened her back and adopted a confident posture while slowly pulling Shiva out of its sheath.

[Now this is a surprise!] One of the announcers spoke. [My producers have just informed me that Ketis Larkinson of the Swordmaidens has just taken over the previously dormant Annihilator Sword School. Now that she bears the emblem of one of our sword schools, how will she fare in her matches? If her previous performance is indicative of how she will fight in the future, she will not be able to restore her sword school. On the other hand, if she is able to display a new sword style, then we might witness the emergence of a new sword initiate!"]

Sword initiate!

The public, who had only paid a modest amount of attention to ordinary matches, suddenly became energized.

The status of sword initiates were much greater than average swordsmen! While their strength and prestige were incomparable to that of swordmasters, they still represented the future of swordsmanship in the state.

Since this woman managed to take over a sword school, she should definitely be able to back up her new identity.

The swordswoman standing opposite to Ketis happened to be a foreigner. She did not care too much about the implications of fighting the leader of a sword school.

An average Heavensworder would have been much more cautious about facing someone like Ketis!

[Commence the match!]

Ketis stood her ground while her opponent stormed forward.

This time, the enemy wielded an ordinary longsword. Despite that, the older and taller woman held in such an adept manner that it was clear that she possessed an abundant amount of skill.

When the two swordswomen were about to clash, Ketis closed her eyes for a moment and began to concentrate.

Shiva's grew a little darker.

Once her opponent came close enough to launch an attack, Ketis opened her eyes and swung her saber, heedless of the fact that there was a longsword in the way!

Swish.

Empowered by her expanded superpower, Shiva's blade passed right through the solid structure of the longsword and continued on to impact an energy shield.

Although the Annihilator Sword Style fared less well against non-physical barriers, Shiva was empowered to such an extent that the shield could no longer hold the weapon back.

The saber cut through the energy shield and sank into the tough but flexible protective suit.

This time, the weapon experienced no hindrance at all. The blade continued to cut right through the suit materials before passing through the shoulder of Ketis' opponents.

"AAAAHHHHH!"

Even before Shiva amputated the woman's entire arm, the victim had already lost battle effectiveness!

Two separate thumps sounded across the arena. An arm and the body it used to be attached to had both collapsed less than half a minute after the match had begun.

This was a domineering result!

"What did I just see?!"

"That woman... she's actually a sword initiate!"

"Wait, that cut was way too strong! Isn't she a swordmaster!"

"I don't think so. Someone would have disqualified her if this was the case."

The audience became incredibly fascinated by Ketis' overpowering display of might. Even among the strongest sword initiates, the technique she displayed could make all of them nervous.

A new champion contender had entered the stage!

Chapter 2892: Sword Devil

From the moment she cut off the first arm despite all the safety precautions in place, Ketis knew she was doomed to become a famous personality in the Heavensword Association.

Every swordsman or swordswoman who was capable of performing feats comparable to her ability to annihilate solid barriers were already known celebrities in the state!

Their sword schools proudly promoted the strength and valor of these strong and powerful sword initiates. While not all of them were guaranteed to trigger the transformation that could turn them into swordmasters, they were still eminently stronger than practically every other citizen of the Heavensword Association!

The entire society of this sword-obsessed state revolved around exceptional swordsmen. From the media to cultural perception, the Heavensworders always paid a lot of attention whenever a new sword initiate emerged among the ranks of swordsmen!

"Miss Larkinson!" A reporter followed by a recorder bot tried to squeeze past the barrier of Swordmaidens just outside the arena building. "As the new head of the Annihilator Sword School, what is your ambition? Will you seek to revive it to its former glory?"

Ketis tried to maintain a cool and impassive expression as she briefly turned to face the journalist.

She quickly recalled the pre-canned answer that she had drilled into her mind.

"The Annihilator Sword School has sunk to its lowest point in its history, but has always managed to endure. With my leadership, the school shall rise to greater heights! By the time the Greater Omanderie Festival has ended, I aim to expand the ranks of my school with ten-thousand students and instructors!"

Ten-thousand members!

What a shocking goal!

While Ketis had certainly proven her strength in battle, she was not a real swordmaster as of yet. If she possessed a level of strength that was comparable to an expert pilot, her claim wouldn't draw too much attention.

The original Annihilator Sword School never took in more than a thousand students. This was because the sword style it taught was very difficult to learn. Since no one else aside from Venerable Trey Walinski was able to display his sword style, it took a lot of courage for sword students to invest years of training before they even had hope of touching upon the essence of annihilation.

The founder of the sword school was also selective about the students he enrolled into his school. While more members typically conveyed greater prestige, it was not always good to take responsibility for so many people at once.

The fact that Ketis signalled that she intended to defy this common sense was enough to get tongues wagging!

Though she continued to present a specific image to the news media, inwardly she began to feel amused.

Was this what Ves always felt when he addressed the public?

It was so easy to generate attention! As long as she said anything that was shocking or unexpected, she was sure she could leave a memorable impression in the minds of her audience.

She had to clamp herself down and restrain herself in order to avoid going off-script. No matter what, the plan to revive and empower the Swordmaidens mattered much more than any vanity she gained out of this circus.

Ves continually served as a role model and example for her. Even if she couldn't learn all of his methods, she could still imitate them. It was fine as long as her performance was convincing enough.

Another journalist tried to squeeze closer. "Miss Larkinson! While our state has officially recognized you as a Heavensworder, you have also insisted on maintaining your allegiance to the Larkinson Clan. Where do your loyalties lie? Will you leave the Heavensword Association as soon as the festival is over?"

This was also a question she expected to face. She did not lie when she filled in the forms that allowed her to acquire her new citizenship. Swordsmen and swordswomen disdained lies and hated it when they were misled. She would certainly not make the mistake of pretending to be a committed Heavensworder.

"I am loyal the values and ideals of both the Larkinson Clan and the Heavensword Association." She calmly replied. "To me, loyalty is not exclusive. You can be loyal to your family, your colleagues, your boss and your state at the same time. It is never the case that someone must choose to be loyal to one of them at the exclusion of others. So frankly speaking, I am proud to be both a Larkinson and a Heavensworder! As long as my clan and my new state do not have any contradictions or competing interests, there is no reason to pick one over the other."

"Isn't that a duplicitous answer? Tell us the truth! The fact that you haven't ended your association with the Larkinson Clan means you still prize it over your new citizenship. Just admit that you just want to use the Heavensword Association for your own ends!"

Ketis continued to keep her cool. She merely exhibited a modest smile. "As the leader of the Annihilator Sword School, I aim to make it great and spread its sword style across the stars. Compared to staying in the Majestic Teal Star Sector, I believe I can do much more for our local swordsmanship tradition if I bring a portion of our heritage to the Red Ocean! The Larkinson Clan will not hinder us from reaching our goal. In fact, it's the opposite! Since the clan is an avid user of swordsman mechs, it will welcome the rise of lots of strong swordsman mech pilots!"

A third journalist shoved aside a rival and asked his own question.

"Aren't you just a lackey of the Larkinson Clan? You just want to poach more talented swordsmen from our state in order to fill the ranks of your true masters. You're no Heavensworder!"

Ketis tried to repress her anger. She would usually lash out at this point, but the importance of her current role couldn't be overstated.

"Please do not impinge on my honor, sir. I am a swordswoman. Please give me the same level of regard you show to other swordsmen and swordswomen. I fought honorably against many pirates in the Nyxian Gap, so please don't slander my name. If you wish to question my integrity, then please back your statements with proof."

Fred Walinski quickly interceded before more journalists tried to irritate Ketis. "Alright, alright! Interim Director Larkinson will no longer be available to answer your questions.

Please direct your inquiries to me. As the former head of the Annihilator Sword School, I am happy to clear your doubts."

Once Ketis entered the shuttle, she sighed and slumped in her chair.

"How exhausting!"

"You'll get better, Ketis." Commander Sendra said. "Do this a couple more times and you'll become a natural like Patriarch Ves."

Ketis gave her a wry smile. "I'm not sure whether that will happen as soon as you think. I'm not a natural speaker."

"Well, if you don't like to talk, then fight. As long as you continue to cut down your opponents in the arena, those pesky journalists won't be able to affect you anymore. The locals love a winner."

She took those words in mind as she competed the following days. As more and more challenging competitors squared off against her, she became more determined to win as decisively and domineeringly as possible in order to silence all doubts about her intentions!

During a group match, Ketis, Commander Sendra and three other sisters faced a close-knit team of Heavensworders from a small sword school.

Even though none of the disciples of the so-called Windblade Sword School were sword initiates, they were still inner disciples, which meant that they were highly-trained and had the potential to become greater at any time.

According to the previous experiences of the Swordmaidens in the arena, these inner disciples were usually tough opponents. While they lacked actual battlefield experience, their sword drills were so sophisticated that they had an answer for anything!

Yet now that Ketis and the rest of her team took their places, the stances of their opponents became more and more defensive.

The Windblade disciples were very wary towards the inheritor of the Annihilator Sword Style!

Ketis smirked behind her protective helmet. She smoothly unsheathed Shiva while Sharpie entered annihilation mode. The change in focus caused her to drop some of her sharp focus in order to make way for a desire to unleash destruction.

"Let's follow the usual plan, sisters."

Once the match commenced, the Swordmaidens boldly charged forward!

Despite carrying two weapons at once, Ketis did not slow in her advance.

For their part, the Windblade disciples weren't willing to let their opponents bowl them over. They managed to regain enough of their wits to execute a pre-planned strategy.

"They're splitting up!"

Three of the Windblade disciples moved to the left while two moved to the right.

This put the Swordmaidens in a slightly difficult spot. If Ketis decided to split up their team as well, then their opponents might be able to stall her, thereby preventing her from aiding other Swordmaidens.

If the Swordmaiden team decided to stick together and pursue just one of the enemy pincers, then the other pincer would undoubtedly attack their flanks!

However, Ketis possessed enough confidence in her fellow sisters to be able to hold their ground regardless of the clever maneuvering of her opponents. The Swordmaidens were not fragile vases that collapsed at the first blow!

"Since these Windblade disciples have taken the liberty to line themselves up, let's gobble them up piece by piece! Attack the right pincer!"

The team of five Swordmaidens openly changed direction and charged faster towards the pair of Windblade disciples that had split up from their comrades.

"Damn!"

There was no way that the two swordsmen would dare to clash head-on against five opponents. The pair continued to run away in order to delay the moment of contact as long as possible.

Meanwhile, the left pincer had already turned around in order to close in on the rear of the Swordmaiden formation.

Right now, the match looked a bit silly to the spectators. The multi-level chase did not lead to any immediate excitement, so the crowd was quite upset!

"Stop running!"

"The enemy is in the other direction!"

"Chickens! I didn't sign up to watch this farce!"

Several minutes passed while the distance continued to narrow. This was because the circular arena did not allow anyone to run in a straight line forever. As the three

separate groups of people grew closer, it appeared as if the Windblade disciples were about to sandwich the Swordmaidens from two opposite directions.

Yet just when people thought that a chaotic melee would ensue, Ketis stopped running forward and began to charge in the opposite direction by herself!

"Ahh! It's the Sword Devil! Don't tangle against her by yourself!"

The reputation that Ketis had acquired was so notorious that the three Windblade disciples did not dare to parry any of her attacks. Instead, they spread out and prepared to evade as many attacks as possible.

Everyone already knew that blocking her attacks was an exercise in futility. The only way for them to avoid losing their limbs was to not get hit in the first place!

Ketis grinned. She already anticipated this response. She chased after them for a couple more seconds before turning around to intercept the other two Windblade disciples.

"She tricked us!"

"What a devil!"

"Go after her! Don't let the Swordmaidens gang up on our brothers!"

It was too late. The two pincer strategy was of no use as long as the Swordmaidens pried them apart from each other.

Due to her positioning, Ketis was able to approach her new targets from another angle and corner her two disciples!

Seeing that they were about to be sandwiched themselves, the desperate Windblade disciples concluded that their tournament run would probably end unless they took out Ketis!

"Attack the Sword Devil! As long as the fight is two-to-one, we still stand a chance!"

As Ketis was about to clash against the two oncoming opponents, her grin had grown wide.

Even as her opponents spread out a bit and launched a simultaneous attack from two sides, she whirled her body and cut both incoming swords in half!

As the upper halves of the blades clattered to the ground, Ketis fearlessly stepped into one of the disciples and made a low cut that sent a leg flying!

"AHHH!"

Even as the other disciple attempted to run away, Ketis ran after him like a shark that smelled blood. She drew more on her augmented body, allowing her to close in remarkably quickly.

Seeing that he was about to be overtaken, the remaining disciple boldly turned around in order to make a last-ditch effort at defeating the intimidating sword initiate.

"Don't underestimate the Windblade Sword School!"

The disciple's damaged sword began to flicker a bit. An almost imperceptible bright blue glow briefly covered the shortened edge.

Yet before it could do anything more, a saber that oozed darkness brutally cut through the pathetic display and went on to slice off an arm below the elbow!

[The Sword Devil has harvested yet another limb!]

Ketis twitched when she heard that. She hated that name!

Chapter 2893: Cloudstrider Sword School

As her brutal and vicious fighting approach continued to reappear in the tournaments, the press and public increasingly insisted on calling her by her new moniker.

"The Sword Devil has spilled more blood!"

"Does the Sword Devil's bloodthirst know no bounds?"

"Just admit defeat in front of her! It's not worth losing your limbs!"

Each time she entered the arena, she always took every opponent a bit seriously. Even if they were clearly outmatched or mentally defeated, she was always wary of being fooled.

Underestimating a weak opponent might work 99 times out of a 100, but if Ketis happened to encounter a deceitful snake with a venomous bite, then she might suffer a preventable defeat.

This could never happen!

The future of the Swordmaidens rested on her shoulders. She could not afford to make any mistake, especially when the press had a penchant of amplifying every single mistake.

The losers in the Heavensword Association were either forgotten or lampooned. This was because the competition between swordsmen and sword schools was especially fierce.

Since it was illegal to duel to the death in this state, many powerful swordmasters and their networks focused instead on trying to pull down their rivals in other ways.

Being called a Sword Devil was just one of those tricks. It wasn't even an inventive name. Whoever came up with it clearly looked at the name of her mentor and made a lazy adjustment.

"Don't let the media pressure get to you, Miss Ketis." Fred Walinski told her as she tried to recover back at Angelique's villa. "They all want to get in your mind and disturb your confidence. The moment you start to doubt yourself, they've already achieved your goal. Just focus on winning. Nothing else. That is the only way you can prove the critics wrong."

While Ves might be able to brush off bad press like it was nothing, Ketis was less experienced in these kinds of situations. While she could live with being vilified, she constantly worried whether the Swordmaidens could bear the consequences.

"I thought it would be different. I haven't made any enemies as far as I know. I've been careful not to do or say anything that will implicate the Swordmaidens."

Fred smirked and crossed his arms. "Your battle prowess and your newly-acquired status is also threatening enough to rile up the more sensitive sword schools. Before, you were just a foreign swordswoman who didn't show enough strength to make it into the top 1000. Now that you have not only inherited the Annihilator Sword Style, but shown that you mastered it to a surprising extent, it's different. They see a competitor in you that can potentially squeeze into the top 100. "

The entry of another person into the top 100 inevitably meant that someone else must be pushed out. This was quite frightening especially since Ketis showed up from nowhere. Compared to known entities like the seeded competitors, no one knew how far she could go and how many people she could pull from their pedestals.

This made so many sword schools concerned that their stance towards the new head of the Annihilator Sword School was universally negative!

"How is the recruitment going lately? Is our intake being affected by the surge of bad press?"

The former leader of the sword school sighed. "I won't lie. Our school used to get thousands of inquiries when you first exhibited your sword style. However, once our rival sword schools started their counterattack, those inquiries dwindled even as you

continued to steamroll your way through your opponents. Yesterday, we only received less than a hundred inquiries, and most of them are merely exploratory in nature."

Ketis pinned Fred with a glare. "I thought you said that everything would go better if I keep winning! Why are we going backwards?!"

"I did not lie. I just want to tell you that it will take some time for the trees we've planted to bear fruit. I don't predict our situation will turn around until you have defeated your first seeded competitor and reached the top 1000. You're still too new to the scene and your ability to contend against the best disciples of a sword school is still a mystery. You've merely been bullying the weak all of time. That's not actually that impressive."

Although Ketis did not feel confident in her current approach, Fred somehow managed to earn the trust of Sendra and Dise. Even though his identity in his home state was kind of embarrassing, he was a consummate insider and had a lot of old connections.

Together with the new staff he hired, Fred took care of a lot of background stuff so that Ketis could concentrate entirely on winning the next matches.

When Ketis met with Angelique Harcourt in order to get a second opinion, the Journeyman did not see any cause for alarm.

"You are an amazing swordswoman and mech designer. I am sure you will get the recognition you deserve as long as you persist in your current course. I have kept an eye on what your deputy director is doing. So far, he hasn't done anything that seems detrimental towards you. He's doing his best to lift the school from a rock bottom position. That is never easy."

Perhaps Ketis was too hard on Fred. The man might have behaved a bit improperly at first, but his motives were easy to understand. He just wanted to revive the Annihilator Sword School and make sure that his brother's legacy was not forgotten. That was a noble goal that didn't conflict with the goals of the Swordmaidens.

She was sure that Ves would have been able to obtain greater advantages if he was in her place. Yet he wasn't here this time and she needed to learn to solve her problems.

Though the pressure constantly made her want to stop and crawl back in her hole, she did not give in to it. She simply couldn't for the reasons she already mentioned.

She needed to step up. She needed to do more than just fight in the arena.

"Do you have any advice on what I can do to help my situation out?" Ketis earnestly asked.

"Oh, Ketis." Angelique approached and embraced her in a hug. "You should stop doubting yourself. No one is aware of it yet, but you're making history. There has never

been a mech designer who is simultaneously a swordmaster in our state. The progress you have made since you have arrived is astounding. I have never seen a swordswoman learn a true sword style and become a sword initiate so quickly. The fact that you are also capable of designing complete swordsman mechs while accomplishing all of this is incredible."

Ketis didn't feel so special. While she took pride in the hard work she put into improving her mech design capabilities, she never really felt as if she deserved to master the Annihilator Sword Style to this extent.

Sharpie did all of the heavy lifting. Ketis still didn't buy into Venerable Trey Walinski's writings to this day even as she faithfully executed all of his empowered techniques in the arena.

This was a contradiction that increasingly bothered her! How could she act as if she had fully embodied the Annihilator Sword Style when she essentially cheated?

While it was addicting for her to break every barrier and become an unstoppable fighting machine, each victory grew increasingly more hollow.

It was too easy. She didn't work for it. She was a fraud.

As she continued to struggle with her doubts, she finally progressed far enough to face her first true challenge in the group tournament.

However, the opponent she had been matched with happened to be one of the top seeds of the tournament!

Ketis, Fred, Dise and Sendra immediately gathered together in an office once the organizers announced the latest series of matches.

Everyone's face grew serious as Fred activated a projection that displayed their next opponent.

"I don't know if our luck is bad or if someone exerted a lot of influence to tamper with the random matching procedure, but we are about to face one of the favorites to win the tournaments."

The team of five men and women all stood proudly in their light blue uniforms. Random cloud patterns adorned their clothes as the sword disciples all looked light enough to step into the air!

A sinking feeling emerged in Ketis' stomach.

"Each of our next opponents hail from the Cloudstrider Sword School. As you might have guessed, this school teaches a sword style that is heavily slanted towards mobility.

The Cloudstrider Sword School only recruits the most swiftest and agile young talents and molds them into even faster warriors."

"How good are they, exactly?" Ketis asked.

"Four out of the five Cloudstriders ought to be inner disciples. They are only there to make up the numbers." Fred pointed at the white-haired man at the center. "The real threat is this fellow. Ivan Reid is not only the head disciple of his school, but also a formidable and mature sword initiate in his own right!"

Ivan Reid was 39 years old, but possessed a body that was considerably slimmer and shorter than that of the average male swordsman. In fact, even Ketis exceeded his height and bodyweight!

That did not cause her to look down on him, though. In fact, it was the opposite. Someone who was that light and short must have deliberately altered his growth pattern this way in order to increase his fit with his sword style!

Fred showed some footage of Ivan in action. While the matches he fought took place more than a year ago, it was still a good way to see what they could expect.

All three Swordmaidens in the room grew grave when they saw Ivan Reid in action.

The man stepped across the dueling ring as if his body weighed almost nothing. His opponent could never keep up and simply decided to stand in place in order to attack on approach.

While this was the correct decision to make, Ivan was simply too fast and elusive to get hit by any of the incoming strikes!

The head disciple slowly turned the match into a farce by performing constant hit-and-run attacks. His thin fencing sword rained down constant hits onto the opponent that steadily accumulated him points.

No matter what counterattack he faced, he was always able to step to the side and evade.

What astounded Ketis was that despite how much Ivan was running, he never seemed to tire!

"You're all swordswomen, so I am sure you can figure out why Mr. Reid is so formidable. The Cloudstrider Sword Style is one of the most trending mobility-oriented styles at the moment. While the style is not known for its explosive power, its elusiveness is incredibly frustrating to fight against. This goes double for power-oriented styles such as your own one. The odds are already against your favor even if you leave out Mr. Reid."

Neither the Swordmaiden Sword Style nor the Annihilator Sword Style would fare well against someone who excelled at dodging power attacks. While both styles incorporated a number of solutions against flighty opponents, it did not change the fact that the Swordmaidens were about to face their natural counter!

"What do we do?" Ketis asked. "We can't just roll over and let the Cloudstriders eliminate our best team from the group tournament."

Even though the Swordmaidens knew their chances in the following match weren't high, they were not resigned!

Venerable Dise was deep in thought for a while. "I haven't been idling around since I got here. I have been exchanging frequently with the local expert pilots. The tips I've received and the matches that I've witnessed have given me a lot of new ideas. Compared to the so-called true sword styles that have something special about them, our Swordmaiden Sword Style is too plain. I've been working for several weeks to correct that, and I think it is time for you to learn some new moves."

"Our match against the Cloudstriders begins a couple of days from now!" Ketis grew concerned. "Learning a powerful new move sounds great, but if they are as difficult as that of the other sword styles, we need months if not years to master it! We have way too little time!"

The expert pilot sighed. "You're right, but not completely. While I believe that your other sisters will probably have to struggle for years, you are different. You're a sword initiate, and one that has shown a remarkable penchant for learning new moves. If any Swordmaiden can master my new technique, it's you, Ketis."

For some reason, Venerable Dise was convinced that Ketis would be able to master her newly-invented empowered technique!

Chapter 2894: Swordmaiden Roots

While the Swordmaidens existed for decades, their sword style never evolved that much.

Part of it was because it was unnecessary. Most of the opponents they faced were frontier pirates, who rarely put up a great resistance when attacked up close.

Another part of it was because of the limited learning capacities of the Swordmaidens. Even if Commander Lydia set up a brutal training regime to forge desperate young girls into fearless Swordmaidens, she could not change the fact that they were not particularly smart or clever!

The third reason why the Swordmaiden Sword Style was kept simple was because the third-class swordsman mechs they piloted for most of their history did not allow for more.

Mayra had to design mechs under all kinds of limitations. The mech industry in the frontier was so barren and primitive that the mechs that emerged from this region were quite simplistic.

In short, the Swordmaidens adopted a sword style that allowed them to become more formidable by endlessly drilling the same set of basic techniques.

There was no need for them to do anything fancy! As long as they mastered the essentials, they could already outduel most enemy swordsmen or swordsman mechs in their way!

All of this changed once the Swordmaidens joined the Larkinson Clan. The previous circumstances no longer applied.

The Larkinson Clan's greatest threats were no longer shabby pirates and thugs. The Larkinsons had already fought a ruinous battle against an allied military force. Anyone with the courage to go after the clan would certainly dispatch something stronger!

The Swordmaidens had also implemented drastic improvements to their training programs. Their ample budget allowed them to invest in cranial implants and gene mod templates that increased the learning capabilities of the Swordmaidens. They also spent a lot of money on better and more sophisticated training facilities that allowed them to do more with their recruits.

Their mech pilots also had access to drastically better mechs. The difference between a third-class swordsman mech and its second-class equivalent was a huge jump. They had access to a lot more possibilities after they started to pilot the Bright Warrior Version B's, and they were waiting for Ketis to become a Journeyman so she could deliver an even better swordsman mech model!

All of these changing factors gradually caused the Swordmaiden Sword Style to look more and more inadequate.

While the Swordmaidens didn't suddenly become weak due to their basic style, it became increasingly clear that it did not convey them any strong advantages!

Venerable Dise took it upon herself to take the sword style taught by the late Commander Lydia and upgrade it. This was not an easy endeavor and required much thought and experimentation in order to formulate an expanded set of moves along with revising the ideology behind the sword style.

Although she initially invested her time in expanding the sword style's repertoire of ordinary techniques, her exposure to the empowered sword styles of the Heavensword Association caused her to change her direction!

The expert pilot had become extremely impressed at how people such as Ketis and Fred were able to annihilate everything their sword was cutting by performing an empowered technique.

The Swordmaiden Sword Style had to reach this level as well! Otherwise, it wouldn't do their sisters justice!

In order to put something special together, Venerable Dise not only consulted with local expert pilots and swordmasters, but also read through the scriptures of the Annihilator Sword Style.

Even though Venerable Trey's swordsmanship did not fit her at all, she only needed to learn the model of a true sword style in order to get her bearings.

"This is all new to us." The expert pilot said as she pulled Ketis to a training room. "Visiting the Heavensword Association has been the best decision that we have ever made. The unique traditions we became exposed to has revealed that there is much more depth to swordsmanship than we have ever realized."

Ketis nodded. "From what I have seen and experienced myself, I'm becoming more convinced that the mech piloting tradition is definitely related to the local swordsmanship tradition. The parallels are too great, and the fact that expert pilots like you are equivalent to swordmasters is conclusive evidence."

"I wouldn't say that, Ketis. Expert pilots aren't necessarily swordmasters and vice versa. There are still differences between the two. In fact, I cannot claim to be a swordmaster myself."

"Is it because of the shortcomings of our sword style?"

Venerable Dise nodded. "The difference between an ordinary sword style and a true sword style is that the latter can put its practitioners on the path of becoming a sword god. It is not enough for it to include a few loosely-related empowered moves or two. There has to be an ideology that ties it all together."

"Have you made any progress?"

"Some." The expert pilot modestly said. "I'm far from transforming our current method into a true sword style that is not any weaker than those from the Heavensword Association, but I have figured out a couple of useful aspects. Before I teach them to you, first you need to know the intent behind them. What is the purpose of our sword style?"

"To help us survive and overcome our adversaries." Ketis answered from her heart. "To defeat our opponents by overwhelming them with might and ferocity. By going on the attack so that we will never have to be put on the defensive."

"Those are good words. Never forget our roots. We struggled against adversity and sought to carve a place for ourselves in a region where any possible enemy could wipe us out. Showing weakness of any kind could be fatal. Although our circumstances have changed, our fighting approach must never become soft."

"While I appreciate the reminder, what does this have to do with your new moves?"

"Desperation has always pushed us further, Ketis. I believe that the essence of our Swordmaiden Sword Style lies in this quality. We are not stronger, faster or more exquisite than other swordsmen. There are many sword schools in the Heavensword Association that frankly teach more superior sword styles. However, what styles such as the Annihilator Sword Style lack is the unique background that has caused us to develop our ferocious fighting approach. This is our roots, and this is the basis in which I hope that sword gods will one day emerge from our gathering."

Ketis automatically disregarded the latter. What Venerable Dise was talking about went way over their heads. Not even expert pilots dared to say that they would be able to become god pilots. The difficulty of attaining this level of strength was unimaginable!

Still, she appreciated Venerable Dise's sentiment. While the Annihilator Sword Style possessed a lot of attractive features to the Swordmaidens, none of them wanted to abandon their current teachings.

The context and purpose of the two styles were substantially different.

One was born from the frontier and did not enjoy any external support.

The other emerged in a state that was steeped with a rich swordsmanship tradition.

All of the original veteran Swordmaidens still had enough of the frontier in their bones to feel more at home with the former rather than the latter!

Ketis was a little different, though. Her focus on sharpness and her first-hand exposure to the Annihilator Sword Style had caused her to diverge from her fellow sisters.

She was glad to receive the opportunity to increase her connection with her first sword style.

"Are you ready to learn what I have developed? To be honest, they are not particularly refined, so they have some very major flaws."

"Please teach me. I will try to do my best to work around their shortcomings."

They didn't have enough time for Ketis to master the new moves, but with the help of Sharpie, she managed to make some accomplishments.

The time of the dreaded group match soon arrived. This was a big day for many people. This would not only be the first time that the so-called Sword Devil faced another sword initiate, but would also suffer her first defeat!

"That Sword Devil has mutilated our boys and girls long enough! It's time for this she-devil to get her comeuppance!"

"Ivan Reid is so handsome! He will dance circles around that cruel woman."

"I wonder how far the Sword Devil can push Mr. Reid. He's championship material alright, but there are other sword initiates that can handle him. He'll have to win convincingly today for me to place my bets on his name."

Driven by the narratives espoused by the press, a lot of Heavensworders paid attention to the upcoming group match. The cruel and evil outsider-turned-citizen was about to receive her first lesson from a dashing and heroic Heavensworder!

Along with all of this attention came wagers. The betting agencies were some of the most accurate predictors of the strengths of different tournament participants. Despite the myriad of sword styles and the individual quirks of every swordsman, their rates often reflected the reality of every match!

Right now, someone who bet on the Swordmaiden team winning would be able to earn eight times their initial wager if their prediction came true!

"Those are awful odds!" A Swordmaiden indignantly cried.

"We're facing a top team, after all. You should see the odds for the other teams that fought against the Cloudstriders. You could earn a thousand times the money you put in if the amateurs managed to win!"

Ketis, Sendra and the remaining three Swordmaidens had all suited up and inspected their weapons. Each of them looked eager but also grave.

They knew their opponents this time were far more formidable than anything they faced before. Yet rather than cowering from it, they embraced the challenge!

An anticipatory grin appeared on Sendra's face. "We never tested our mettle against the best swordsmen of a second-rate state. Let's push our limits and see how far we can close the gap!"

This wasn't even a fight to the death, so the Swordmaidens did not have much reservations about this match.

When they finally stepped out into the arena, they were greeted by a lot of boos. The audience, having been inundated with critical stories on Ketis and her fellow Swordmaidens, did not have much sympathy for the underdogs this time.

The Swordmaidens smiled wryly as they readied their swords and waited for the start signal.

A team of smaller and shorter swordsmen did the same on the opposite side. Despite their slender statures, the Swordmaidens knew better than to look down on their opponents.

"Miss Ketis!" Ivan Reid called.

"What is it?" She growled.

"I won't let you chop a single limb again." He said in a manner-of-fact tone. "You have butchered our citizens long enough. I will do my best to beat you down so hard that you won't be able to recover to fight your next individual match, just like you did to all of those swordsmen who needed too much time to recover from their crippling injuries. Your reign of terror will end."

Although she knew her opponent was trying to affect her mental balance, Ketis couldn't help but get angry.

Ivan didn't just want to win the match. He wanted to end her participation in every tournament!

The Swordmaidens were far from reaching their ambitious recruiting goals, so this wouldn't happen!

"Shut your mouth." She growled. "If you think I'm a devil, then I will show you why. I've cut off a lot of big and strong limbs. It will be a nice change of pace to amputate those skinny legs of yours!"

Ivan merely smiled in response. "Do you know the greatest flaw of your Swordmaidens? You brutish women are incapable of showing finesse! You hack and slash those big sharp slabs of yours, but waste an enormous amount of energy in the process. Your previous opponents may have lacked the skill to handle your aggression, but your string of victory ends today."

"As if!"

Neither of them exchanged any more words. Both sides watched the countdown carefully.

[Commence the match!]

Both sides exploded into action. Just as the Swordmaidens began to form a circular formation that guarded against attacks from every direction, the Cloudstriders had already made the first move!

"AAHH!" Commander Sendra suddenly cried out! "Watch out!"

Ketis just turned around to see something she had never expected!

Ivan had already reached the Swordmaidens formation! He not only closed the distance with prodigious speed, but also managed to disarm Commander Sendra and pushed her to her knees!

His swift fencing sword hacked against Commander Sendra's neck! Although his attack wasn't strong enough to overcome the protective energy shield, the arena systems already registered it as a fatal attack!

"Commander Sendra has been taken out!"

The match had barely even started, but the Swordmaiden team had already lost one of its pillars!

Chapter 2895: Ivan Reid

Ivan Reid was strong!

Although Ketis and the other Swordmaidens had already developed an expectation based on previous battle footage, the head disciple of the Cloudstrider Sword School was much faster than they anticipated!

The huge amount of progress he made since last year was immense! The speed he exhibited at the start was so astounding that it was certain that he had not just refined his sprinting technique, but also undergone substantial augmentation!

After eliminating Commander Sendra from the competition right off the bat, Ivan did stop his stride. He exuded absolute confidence as he neatly stepped back from the furious counter attacks of adjacent Swordmaidens.

Ketis did not make the mistake of tunnel visioning on Ivan. This was still a group match so she had to maintain constant awareness of what Ivan's team mates were doing.

However, when she observed the other four Cloudstriders, she saw to her utter disbelief that they sat down on the arena floor while letting go of their slender swords.

They were mocking the Swordmaidens!

They were openly saying that Ivan alone was enough to defeat an entire team!

"This is too much!"

Previous encounters between teams that boasted a strong individual swordsman was that the generals would fight against generals while the soldiers squared off against their own kind.

In essence, neither side bothered to employ any brilliant maneuvers or clever tactics. They tacitly turned the group matches from a contest of teamwork into a contest of individual prowess.

While part of this had to do with the desire of strong swordsmen to test their mettle against their rivals, the main reason was that the main combatants were simply too strong!

If both of them were sword initiates, then they could easily butcher each other's rank-and-file teammates with ease.

Rather than waste time on cleaning up each other's grunts, it was much more preferable for the sword initiates to seek each other out right away!

Since the match commenced, Ketis had already adopted a defensive stance in order to await Ivan's first move.

The fact that he completely disregarded her and came after Commander Sendra took everyone by surprise!

However, the audience quickly cheered for Ivan even if he blatantly broke the unspoken rules!

"Go ahead, Cloudstrider! Clean up the trash before you beat up the Sword Devil!"

"I knew these Swordmaidens were pathetic, but I didn't expect them to fold this quickly."

"Leave the Sword Devil for last and make it hurt!"

Ketis ignored the ramblings of the crowd and tried to focus on capturing Ivan's movement. The sword initiate had rapidly faded back after completing his frontal assassination.

The remaining four Swordmaidens had become utterly serious! The fact that none of them had been able to react in time to stop Ivan meant that they faced a greater horror than they ever imagined.

"Steady, sisters." Ketis tried to take over from Commander Sendra. "Ivan is fast, but not to the point where we can't react. Now that we know what he's capable of, we won't get caught off-guard again."

What she said was technically true, but it was still a question whether the Swordmaidens could react in time.

The most astounding part of all of this was that all five Swordmaidens in the team had eaten a lot of candy beforehand! Their strength, endurance and other physical parameters had reached an insanely high level.

However, for all of the advantages bestowed by the candies that Ves had given out, they were not particularly focused or coherent!

One candy straightforwardly increased someone's strength. Another candy directly made someone tougher.

While the increase in basic attributes was useful, there was no way to exert more control over the direction of the physical improvement.

Another obvious shortcoming was that the Swordmaidens didn't receive any candy that directly increased their speed!

Sure, one candy was able to increase their dexterity, but only a couple of people like Ketis got it. While it helped a bit with increasing her reaction time, it ultimately did not provide a boost to her mobility!

Even though the Swordmaidens were not burdened by the need to guard against the other four Cloudstrider disciples, they still didn't relax. Ivan Reid was already fast and skilled enough to threaten all of them at once!

After leisurely circling around a bit, Ivan abruptly turned inwards and charged forth yet again!

"He's coming!"

"Get ready!"

Although Ivan approached just as fast as before, the Swordmaidens were mentally prepared this time. They not only formed a solid formation, but also began to swing their greatswords in time to cover every dangerous approach!

Even Ketis swung her saber in a wide sweep that would certainly pose a serious threat to Ivan if he strayed in her direction.

However, Ivan did not wish to tangle with her at first. He approached the opposite side and somehow managed to evade every greatsword coming in his way before rapidly moving away.

"I'm out!"

Ketis barely caught how Ivan slammed the tip of his fencing sword against the chest of another Swordmaiden!

Although the Cloudstriders weren't known for their power moves, speed was a powerful amplifier.

Against opponents who weren't able to block his charge attacks, one hit was enough to eliminate an opponent from the tournament!

In the next minute, the remaining Swordmaidens tried their best to land a hit on Ivan, but the sword initiative contemptuously mocked their failed attempts as he used his prodigious momentum to eliminate them one by one!

"Hahaha!" Ivan tauntingly laughed. "Do you see the difference between rabble like you and refined swordsmen like us? You can forget about touching me! I have made greater attainments in my Breeze Stride than ever before! Only the swordmasters that I look up to are faster!"

Ketis had witnessed enough attack passes from Ivan to understand that there was some sort of pattern behind his stride. The fact that it had a special name only confirmed her suspicion.

The problem she had was that it shouldn't make sense!

As a mech designer, Ketis was well-versed in the optimal ways that humans and humanoid mechs were able to move. The mech industry had long developed several sets of movement patterns that were optimized for walking, jogging, sprinting, evasion and other movement actions.

Although she didn't study too deeply into this field, she was pretty sure that there were lots of inefficient aspects about Ivan's specific stride!

However, these oddities didn't seem to affect Ivan. His considerable physical augmentation and shorter-than-average stature helped a lot, but that shouldn't be the entire story.

She slightly shook her head. There was no point in trying to decipher Ivan's illogical movement technique. She just needed to take it into account and prepare to fend him off next!

"Sharpie. Please help me out."

Swish swish.

Her living sword intent knew that the situation was quite bad this time. It vibrated in her mind while changing to annihilation mode.

Once Sharpie changed its coat, Ketis began to feel the urge to chase after Ivan and annihilate his precious legs. She wanted to see how this Cloudstrider could still outpace her after he had lost the basis of his speed!

Ketis snarled. She couldn't listen to this stupid impulse. Mindless destruction wouldn't avail her in this match, especially when Ivan was more than agile enough to evade her empowered attacks with ease.

The only way she even had a chance of touching him was to let him take the initiative to attack!

Only when he did the opposite of avoiding him would she be able to reverse this situation!

Ivan wasn't in a hurry to attack, though. He smirked and deliberately relaxed his posture. In any case, he was distant enough that Ketis had no way of landing a hit on him before he could respond.

"Your teammates are weaker than I expected. While I can respect their decision to take greatswords into the field, they are idiots if they think that large and heavy weapons will take them further in this tournament. Pursuing power to its extreme never works! You need to achieve balance. Most sword styles advocate this as the only way you can defeat any opponent is to combine both power and finesse."

Ketis was getting tired of this fellow's frequent insults. "How we fight is none of your business. We trained to fight against monsters and mechs, not take part in duels where killing isn't allowed. No one talks as much as you on an actual battlefield. If you have spilled blood and fought against hordes of enemies who wish to spill your blood in return, you would know better than to turn a fight into a game!"

She keenly sensed that Ivan Reid and the rest of the Cloudstriders weren't blooded warriors. To be sure, that did not make them weak. They drilled so much and mastered the Cloudstrider Sword Style to such an impressive extent that they could outfight pretty much every veteran!

What Ketis was actually aiming for was trying to poke at one of his psychological weaknesses. A true swordsman always dreamt of achieving glory in battle. The fact that Ketis had several battles to her name while the majority of sword initiates in the peaceful Heavensword Association never fought a battle to the death was a glaring discrepancy!

Ivan no longer had a playful smile on his face. "Oh, you've angered me, woman. I was willing to be somewhat merciful with you on account of your ignorance, but I will not allow you to impinge on my honor!"

Before Ketis could make a snarky response, Ivan utilized his Breeze Steps to dart forward at a slightly oblique angle!

The confusing steps, the slightly off-center angle and the unexpected timing of his approach caught Ketis slightly off-guard!

Still Shiva already began to swing in order to block Ivan's approach. She had managed to respond fast enough to ensure that her new saber would likely be able to cut through Ivan's fencing sword if the man insisted on pressing his attack.

She expected him to back off. The Cloudstrider Sword Style was known for its hit-and-run attacks. Its practitioners possessed plenty of endurance and could keep gnawing at their opponents for a long time.

Yet to her utter surprise, Ivan did not stop or alter his trajectory in any way. His fencing sword swiped forward at rapid speed as if it was about to offer itself up to be chopped by Ketis' annihilation blade!

CLANG!

Sparks flew and a small explosion of different lights briefly spread from the sword collision.

Ketis widened her eyes. Ivan managed to block her unstoppable attack!

"My Wind Slice can fend off all of your attacks no matter how much you empower it! Your annihilation trick can't work if it goes against the wind!"

He ran around and began to charge at Ketis again! When Shiva got blocked by Ivan's sword yet again, she knew that her greatest reliance was much more constrained this time.

There was no way for her to cut her opponent's weapon unless she banked on tiring him out!

While it wasn't impossible for her to win this confrontation, she could no longer rely on a lazy solution.

She needed to outfight Ivan the old-fashioned way!

Yet as Ivan made his fifth attack run against her, Shiva didn't encounter the physical resistance that she expected.

Alarms immediately rang inside her head. "Not good!"

It turned out that Ivan had swung his empowered sword a moment earlier! Even though his weapon didn't come close to hitting her, the strange blue corona that surrounded his blade traveled on and passed through her guard!

She awkwardly threw herself to the ground in order to evade the strange energy attack, but a part of it nonetheless clipped her side!

Although the arena's energy shield managed to block the swift attack, she nonetheless saw that her opponent gained more points!

When attacks weren't deemed fatal, they awarded points. If the match took long enough for both sides to remain standing, then the winner would inevitably be the one who scored the highest.

Somehow, Ketis didn't think that Ivan would let this match run out of time.

"It's a pity the arena strengthened its energy shields in response to your frequent butchery. No matter. If a breeze can't defeat you, then a hurricane will!"

Different from last time, Ivan charged head-on this time! The momentum he picked up was so ferocious that the air around him grew violent!

Clang!

Shiva slipped from Ketis' grasp and flew into the air!

Chapter 2896: Foil

The Cloudstrider Sword School was a sword school founded by an expert pilot who excelled at piloting light mechs.

Unlike many other sword styles, the Cloudstrider Sword Style did not center around the manner of attack. Instead, its starting point was mobility.

In other words, the usage of the sword came secondary to how to move on the battlefield!

The Breeze Steps that Ivan Reid had consistently demonstrated up until now could be performed without ever swinging the sword. Through some unknown means, Ivan's will surrounded his body and began to distort his body and the immediate environment in a way that allowed him to run faster without the aid of any special equipment.

This was incredible! Ketis and the Swordmaidens completely didn't expect that sword initiates were capable of channeling so much power. They were completely unlike expert candidates, who merely became a lot more skilled at piloting mechs but weren't capable of doing anything extraordinary.

As the hurricane rush swept over Ketis, her suited body stepped back again and again in order to bleed off the kinetic energy that had collided against her. She completely didn't expect that a light and airy sword style could deliver such a solid impact!

A clattering sound echoed in the air as Shiva disgracefully landed on the arena floor.

Ketis failed to maintain her hold over her weapon!

Such a loss was not only shameful, but also a sign that she was outmatched. It was not easy to wrench a sword away from its wielder, but Ivan did so in an overpowering fashion!

After losing her weapon, Ketis panicked a bit. She was keenly aware that the loss of her weapon left her open to follow-up attacks. Even if Ivan needed to recover from his great exertion, his speed was beyond her capability to defend against!

Fortunately, she possessed another weapon.

She never chose to leave her upgraded CFA greatsword behind even as she became more accustomed to wielding Shiva. The latter may be a powerful tool, but the former was always the weapon that accompanied her life!

Since she received it as a reward from the Starlight Megalodon, she had already fallen in love with it. The large weapon built with outdated first-class materials and design principles might not seem much to an organization as powerful as the Common Fleet Alliance, but to a small figure like her, it was like the weapon of a god!

Through several different battles, its blade had tasted the blood of pirates and other scum. With each fight, she grew more intimate with the weapon.

A major change happened when Ves incorporated the greatsword with a layer of Unending alloy. The mass, balance and dimensions of her weapon had changed. It couldn't be helped as Ves and Ketis didn't possess enough high-end equipment to make a more thorough modification of the weapon.

Even so, such a problem did not deter Ketis. She patiently relearned how to fight with her transformed weapon. Soon enough, she was able to wield the larger blade with as much proficiency as before. In fact, with the help of all of the candies she digested recently, her stronger physique allowed her to wield the heavy weapon with greater ease and fluency than before!

As soon as she finished drawing out her CFA greatsword, she felt as if she had finally returned home after enjoying a long vacation.

The exotic Shiva and its accompanying Annihilator Sword Style may have given her the power to annihilate anything, but she never felt she was meant to fight this way.

The greatsword had always been the Swordmaiden weapon of choice. Ketis was no different in this regard. The greater heft and reach of her favorite weapon quickly grounded her, allowing her to clamp down her panic and regain her composure.

No matter what, a Swordmaiden should never lose control! Negative emotions such as fear, panic or confusion only made her muddle-headed. They should never be allowed to dominate her decision-making!

Seeing that an imminent attack wasn't coming, Ketis forcefully calmed herself down and kept an eye on her opponent.

The man's attention wasn't even on her anymore. He had distanced himself from her just so he could raise his arms to greet the well-wishes of the crowd!

"You go, Ivan!"

"Teach her a lesson!"

"Take away her other sword before you force her to kneel!"

"Cloudstrider! Cloudstrider! Cloudstrider!"

Ivan's dazzling performance not only caused the audience to cheer him on, but also served as a great advertisement for the Cloudstrider Sword School!

Just like Ketis, Ivan not only fought for himself, but also his organization. His actions confirmed with his goal of promoting his school. This was why he foolishly did not seek to eliminate his opponent straight away, but sought to draw out the uneven duel in order to milk its publicity value to the greatest extent!

Ketis had a hard time repressing her anger as she realized how much her current foe looked down on her. In Ivan's eyes, she was not a qualified opponent at all. The disparity in strength was so great that her only use for him was to serve as his foil in front of the citizens of the Heavensword Association!

Even though this kind of approach was foolish to the extreme in an actual battle, Ketis had to admit that the Cloudstrider head disciple had the luxury to treat her with contempt.

"Have you understood the might of the Cloudstrider Sword Style?" Ivan teasingly asked.

Although he ostensibly posed this question to Ketis, his words were actually directed towards the audience in the arena and those watching at home!

Trillions of Heavensworders had just witnessed a dazzling spectacle. Up until this point, the seeded competitors never encountered an opponent that was strong enough to merit so much effort.

They were only scheduled to meet each other in the later stages of the tournaments, so it was quite hard for them to stand out before that time. Ivan actually felt fortunate that he was able to bump into a dark horse as strong as Ketis so early. With the timing advantage of this match, he became assured that he would become the first sword initiate to truly stand out from his rivals!

Though Ketis felt contemptuous at Ivan's approach, his strength could not be denied. As a swordswoman, she did not wish to lie even if doing so would play into her opponent's intentions.

"Your sword style is considerably more comprehensive than I realized."

"Our Cloudstrider Sword School is an institution that has existed for over a century." Ivan grinned with satisfaction. "Three generations of expert pilots and swordmasters have successfully mastered our sword style. Not only that, each of them has expanded it with their own insights and techniques."

Ketis was glad that Ivan chose to hold an exposition instead of finishing her off. With each second that passed, she was able to recover from her earlier ordeal. She knew she had to center herself and enter into a more focused state in order to pose a challenge against the sword initiate.

"The founder of our school excelled at mobility. He created our sword style and quickly brought it to prominence due to his novel movement techniques. Our second swordmaster sought to combine the strengths of the Cloudstrider Sword Style with defense. He introduced several useful techniques that combined defense with evasion. Our third swordmaster saw that our style lacked offense so she created several offensive techniques that leveraged momentum."

"That sounds messy. If different swordmasters keep focusing on different aspects, won't the Cloudstrider Sword Style turn into a bloated and mediocre method?"

Ivan barked a laugh! "Hahahaha! We are not novices who play at wielding swords. We have some of the best and most insightful swordmasters in our school! They are more than wise and restrained enough to respect the original form of our style. While our Cloudstrider Sword Style is not the fastest, sturdiest or deadliest available in our state, it is definitely one of the most comprehensive fighting methods that you can learn! Among all of the agility-oriented sword in our state, only ours is compatible with most swordsmen! There is always something for everyone, so the risk of making the wrong choice is also the lowest!"

This was one of the most important reasons why the Cloudstrider Sword School had become one of the most popular ones in recent decades. As long as any mech pilot or swordsman emphasized mobility, their fit with the sword style would always be sufficient.

Other sword styles that pursued the extreme of speed or evasion were different. Someone might be good at sprinting but relatively bad at making agile movements. If such an individual joined a sword school that mainly sought to enhance evasion, then the swordsman would have a very bad time!

No swordsman wanted to waste years or decades of his life on training the wrong sword style. A bad fit could easily delay their progression to the point where the path to becoming a sword initiate or swordmaster would be closed!

Therefore, even if the Cloudstrider Sword Style was surpassed by many other sword styles in specific areas, its comprehensiveness attracted lots of different swordsmen who did not exactly know their area of excellence and were too afraid to take a gamble!

With all of this positive development, the Cloudstrider Sword School's situation was completely different from that of the Annihilator Sword School. The former had multiple swordmasters who could each continue to build upon what their predecessors had accomplished.

A sword style didn't have to be static. They changed depending on different circumstances. Just like how Venerable Dise sought to enrich the Swordmaiden Sword Style, every other strong practitioner yearned to expand on the legacy they learned so that their contributions would also be passed on to the generation!

Ketis recognized the ambitious glint in Ivan's eye. She still needed time to regulate her body and sort out her messy mind, so she decided to keep playing her expected role.

"I guess you wish to become the fourth swordmaster to expand upon the Cloudstrider Sword Style."

"Exactly! I have trained patiently since my youth. I have trained in every move to a satisfactory level of proficiency. Even though I have yet to master any of my sword style's techniques, there is no one in my school who can make use of all of the possibilities. Only by doing this will I be qualified to expand on my sword style!"

"What do you hope to add to the Cloudstrider Sword Style?"

Ivan smirked. "Ah, that is a question that I shall answer at another time. Have you enjoyed the reprieve that I have given you? Did I give you enough time to regain your composure? I don't want you to collapse too easily. It would be so boring for me to take advantage of your weakness and send you packing from this festival so soon!"

The audience laughed. They did not think that there was anything wrong with his behavior. Instead, they approved of it! They were fully accustomed to theatrical performances in the arena!

All of this made Ketis more contemptuous of the Heavensworders. They all claimed to embody true swordsmanship, but their obsession with holding so many tournaments had long put them on a crooked path.

Still, her views weren't necessarily correct. Without the strength to back up her assertions, there was no point in feeling smug about her superiority!

She gripped her greatsword tighter. She had always wanted to fight against a true opponent with her personal weapon. She had never fought with it after its latest upgrade!

Her battle intent rose and her affinity with her weapon rose. Sharpie had turned back into its original form, so Ketis felt more attuned than ever with the sharpness of her long and deadly blade.

Compared to a second-class weapon like Shiva, her CFA greatsword was vastly superior!

Ivan sensed something different in Ketis. He became a bit serious.

"Do you know what the motto of our sword school is?" He asked as he started to step forward with light but swift steps.

"No."

"Then let me illuminate your ignorant mind."

The breeze around him turned into a hurricane as he replicated his earlier charge!

Ketis immediately felt the threat. Even if she wielded a larger weapon this time, she could not guarantee she would be able to fend off the incoming attack.

"As light as a cloud, as heavy as a storm!"

Chapter 2897: Disorienting Storm

Ivan Reid fully embodied the meaning of the motto of his sword school.

"As light as a cloud, as heavy as a storm!"

The Cloudstrider Sword Style may possess an abundance of techniques that caused its practitioner to become illusive and light, but the innovations of subsequent swordmasters caused it to gain a different approach.

When some of the methods of the original sword style were reversed, its practitioners became capable of borrowing the power of the storm to strengthen their attacks!

Their steps became heavier and their energy depletion grew more serious, but the reward for all of this was power!

Ketis had already been caught off-guard by Ivan's initial manifestation of the storm. Now that she knew what to expect, she did not lose her sword a second time!

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

She maintained a solid, two-handed grip of her greatsword as she used the flat of its extensive blade to block the forceful strikes. She frequently turned around in order to meet the incoming attack runs. She also stepped back after every collision in order to absorb and bleed off the kinetic energy transferred to her body.

Different from his swift and light Breeze Steps, the movement technique that Ivan employed at this moment did not seek to evade at all. It actively sought out a confrontation!

The air shook around her as Ivan's constant attack runs whipped up the surroundings and caused an echo of his power to linger after his passage.

The pressure he exerted and the will he radiated caused Ketis to feel as if she was a boat in a storm! The waves pushed her up and down and threatened to capsize her entirely. The surrounding became blurry to her as the storm around her grew stronger and more violent.

A normal swordsman would have succumbed at this point.

If they weren't able to block the repeated charge attacks, the disorienting storm around them constantly gnawed at their focus and attention span.

The storm was incredibly distracting! Ketis struggled to keep her mind straight as Ivan's repeated movements fed the storm.

From a top-down perspective, Ivan's straight-line charges slowly turned like a wheel. It became clear that he did not wish to leave any area around her opponent untouched!

Ketis already sensed that something worse was on the horizon. Once the storm became strong enough, she feared that Ivan would leverage its power to unleash his killer move!

Although she wasn't stupid enough to stay inside the trap, there was no way for her to escape the cage.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ivan's forceful attack runs weren't about hitting her anymore. Instead, he utilized the force of his charges to push Ketis back to the middle and keep her in place.

"Damn bastard!"

The seeded competitor continued to treat her like a demonstration prop for his sword school! He wanted to end this battle in the most spectacular and visually-stimulating manner possible. Her participation was essential for him to pull off his show, so he ruthlessly suppressed her until he finished his preparations.

"How can I break this storm?!"

Breaking her opponent's arrangements was her highest priority, but Ivan's frequent attacks constantly put her on the defense. She could hardly keep herself afloat by blocking the incoming attack. How could she have any opportunity to launch a counterattack?

This couldn't go on. She needed to do something quickly or get completely overtaken by Ivan!

Though the storm around her constantly pounded her mind with disorienting effects, Ketis was no slouch when it came to her mental fortitude.

As an Apprentice Mech Designer who was close to becoming a Journeyman, she had already condensed the beginnings of a design philosophy. Her core obsession and research focus kept a part of her mind stable and in control. She relied on it to remain sober so that she could figure out a countermeasure to her current predicament.

"What the hell is this storm? How come someone running around can induce such a drastic change in this environment?"

The storm wasn't literal. It was impossible for a single human to stir up the wind to such an extent that they become strong and chaotic. It simply did not conform to science.

The reason why Ketis felt so pressured and burdened was because there was a mental component to the storm!

She only had to look at Ivan when he was charging to recognize the source of this phenomenon.

His body exuded a sensation that felt very familiar to Ketis. Having spent a lot of time in close proximity with Joshua, she recognized that Ivan had somehow managed to strengthen and empower his will in a way that allowed him to leverage it in a concrete fashion!

Just this realization alone was enough to upend her views about sword initiates.

While they weren't necessarily capable of piloting mechs, their personal combat prowess was much greater than that of expert candidates and even expert pilots.

With just a small amount of willpower, they managed to develop several sophisticated means to channel it in a way that allowed them to alter reality in an inexplicable means.

"These guys are much further ahead than me when it comes to developing and expressing their superpowers!"

Compared to her original superpower, Ketis was too far behind! She was like a novice who started off from scratch while Heavensworders like Ivan benefited from a comprehensive inheritance.

Although it felt a bit depressing to her to recognize this disparity, she couldn't afford to lose her focus.

She did not look at Ivan just to get demoralized!

Instead, she sought to grasp some clues that would allow her to break his game!

Seeing that much of her current predicament had to do with the willpower that Ivan actualized, Ketis rapidly started to think how she could use this knowledge to come up with a countermeasure.

She recalled her interactions and sparring sessions with Venerable Dise and Venerable Joshua.

She dug up some of the lessons she learned from Ves.

She thought back on her prior encounters against unfathomable opponents such as the Grey Watcher.

Different from other mech designers or swordswomen, Ketis had already become exposed to the more extraordinary side of reality. She even fought against an avatar of a dark god!

"Willpower is the key to their battle prowess. Every expert pilot and every swordmaster is very determined when it comes to their own purpose."

The only true way to contend against Ivan was to leverage her own willpower!

However, there was one major problem.

Her will wasn't as powerful and condensed as that of Ivan! In fact, her willpower was only moderately stronger than the average soldier. Every veteran Swordmaiden possessed similar wills. While they were very determined in their own way, there was nothing special about it compared to true transcendents!

She already knew the reason why she was unable to evolve her will in the same way as an expert candidate.

"I'm a mech designer!"

It was common sense that mech designers couldn't simultaneously be mech pilots and vice versa. This was especially true at the higher ranks.

While the explanations for this were rather vague, she already learned enough to know that they were two mutually-exclusive progression paths.

As far as she was aware of, no one in the galaxy had successfully become both an expert pilot and a Journeyman Mech Designer!

Logically speaking, the same rules applied to swordsmanship as well. As an Apprentice Mech Designer, she had already progressed far enough as a mech designer that she simply couldn't adopt the mindset of a strong-minded battle maniac.

Just thinking back on the factually-wrong ramblings of Venerable Trey Walinski already showed her why expert pilots were never suitable to become mech designers.

That put her in a difficult situation. A sword initiate, especially a potential tournament winner like Ivan, possessed so many advantages that Ketis could not resist by solely relying on the will of a mortal person.

Was she destined to lose this match?

Would this be the end of her attempt to revitalize the Swordmaidens?

"No! I can't give up! Even if I'm a mech designer, I'm also a swordswoman! I don't believe I can't exceed Ivan!"

She became more bullheaded than ever as she focused on struggling against Ivan's will.

Even though her will still lost out by a huge margin, the more she focused on resisting the storm, the more she was able to clear her mind.

This was not normal!

Ketis clearly felt her will hadn't grown firmer. It was still as normal as ever. Yet somehow, she managed to gain ground and regain more clarity.

"How?!"

Then, she felt it. Sharpie, her living sword intent, had become increasingly simulated by her determination to resist.

Against the constant pressure exerted by Ivan, Sharpie did not remain oppressed, but instead became more indignant.

As a spiritual construct that encapsulated Ketis' strongest attributes, it did not incorporate the concept of defeat.

SWISH! SWISH!

The more Ivan tried to press Sharpie down, the more it pushed back. Her sword intent slowly grew sharper and more defined as it finally faced its first true challenge.

Ketis briefly recalled something that Venerable Dise had said.

The Swordmaidens resisted adversity. They did not cower against stronger opponents. Instead, they pushed back incredibly hard in order to show that they meant business!

The Swordmaiden Sword Style was geared towards fighting against opponents that were larger, stronger and tougher than the Swordmaidens themselves.

She realized she should never stay in such a passive position. Standing still and letting Ivan weave his trap without interruption was not the Swordmaiden way!

"Sharpie! Help me! Channel my will and show everyone that a Swordmaiden will never bend!"

SWISH!

Sharpie acted like it had been waiting for her declaration. It began to swell and express more power than ever before.

Several unexplainable changes happened in her mind. While Ketis was ignorant of what was going on, she clearly felt the effects.

Somehow, the fusion between Sharpie and her own willpower caused Ketis to become a lot more stable than before. The disorientations and the distractions whipped up by the storm suddenly became a lot more bearable.

Ivan sensed the change. "Have you finally become serious? You certainly took your time!"

He misunderstood her condition. To him, Ketis exuded a vibe that was similar to that of a sword initiate.

Different from the rivals that Ivan Reid truly worried about, the will that empowered Ketis was not as nearly as strong and stable.

She wasn't a true sword initiate, after all. Even if Sharpie somehow allowed her to become someone she wasn't, she had not gone through the grueling training and effort that enabled the most dedicated swordsmen to advance to sword initiates!

However, her personal life experiences weren't any less difficult, and Sharpie was still an intrinsic part of her mind, if abnormal.

It was that last property that was the most important! Even if it was an artificial construct, Sharpie's strength was also her own strength, which meant that there were no compatibility problems!

The only reason why Sharpie's empowered will was not that stable was because this was the first time that Ketis and her sword intent did something like this! They were not familiar with channeling the power of a sword initiate while Ivan was already a sword initiate for many years!

"Hah! The storm has arrived!" Ivan suddenly boasted as Ketis kept condensing her will. His fencing sword began to shake as a violent vortex formed around its blade! "Our Cloudstrider Sword Style contains several powerful finishing moves. Sword Devil, you have the honor of receiving the attack that I am most proud of! Your journey in the Greater Omanderie Festival ends here. Accept this defeat and go back to the moving homeless camp where you originally came from. Our Heavensword Association does not accept your evil swordsmanship!"

Ketis and Sharpie were still in the process of getting accustomed to the latest changes. They still needed time to figure out how to make use of their new strength!

Unfortunately, Ivan wasn't willing to give them anymore time. As some kind of tornado surrounded his fencing sword, he lifted it up and began to charge straight at Ketis with the force of a natural disaster!

"EYE OF THE STORM!"

Chapter 2898: Unyielding

Ivan's final charge completely leveraged the power of the storm.

And this was not just in a figural sense. As his body surged forward with indomitable speed and momentum, the chaotic storm that he had condensed with his will began to return to the source.

The winds changed direction. They flowed towards Ivan Reid. Instead of slowing his march, his steps continued to accelerate.

The vortex around his potent-looking sword grew stronger and more violent as it continued to absorb the power of the storm.

What Ivan managed to achieve at the moment would not be a strange sight if it centered around an expert mech, but the fact that a single sword initiate was able to summon so much power with his will alone was incredible!

If not for the fact that it was difficult to observe all of the details from an outside perspective, the audience would have become more amazed at what Ivan was able to accomplish!

This was the power of a sword initiate!

Different from an expert candidate, a sword initiate was already able to affect reality to a significant degree.

While the latter did not have the assistance of a mech, the scale of the battle was a lot smaller!

If an expert candidate tried to whip up a storm when piloting a mech, then it would hardly surpass the girth of the machine.

The scale of mech battles was too large to allow expert candidates to affect the outcome with their willpower alone.

Rather than waste time and effort on accomplishing something that would only have a minor influence in a mech battle, it was better for expert candidates to focus on improving their piloting skills and polishing their will!

This might also be the reason why expert pilots were more prevalent than swordmasters. Sword initiates allocated a lot more time on mastering difficult and opaque techniques.

Yet right now, Ketis couldn't say that their decisions were wrong. The power that Ivan was able to demonstrate in a personal combat match was beyond anything she had ever faced!

It was so easy for her to give up and accept the loss. As long as she lowered her weapon and signalled her surrender, she could end this nightmare in an instant. She might even be able to avoid suffering a crippling injury that would prevent her from continuing her run in the solo tournament!

Yet giving in never registered in her mind. As a Swordmaiden, she had her own pride.

"Swordmaidens never back down when challenged."

That wasn't strictly true. In practice, back when they were pirates, Lydia's Swordmaidens often turned around and took detours if they strayed near a powerful or dangerous rival pirate group.

Even if the Swordmaidens got entangled in battle against a superior foe, they were still willing to disengage if the odds weren't on their side!

If the Swordmaidens didn't do so, they would have been wiped out decades ago!

The true meaning of their determination to stand rather than bend was that they realized that running wasn't always the solution. Constantly showing weakness was a good way for a pirate gang to turn itself into a juicy target!

In order to earn the respect of fellow pirates and deter anyone who possessed ill intentions, the Swordmaidens had to show their strength and fight a battle even if the cost was ruinous!

The history of the Swordmaidens recorded many instances where they had to fight against stronger and more numerous opponents.

While their prospects weren't good, the Swordmaidens always managed to achieve a victory.

How?

By fighting harder, more recklessly and more ferociously than the opponent! By fighting to the death without any regard for escape, the Swordmaidens turned themselves into rabid warriors!

They already exhibited this determination to fight rather than surrender on the surface of Aeon Corona VII. Of course, the reason why Swordmaidens never considered surrender in the first place was that their end would not be good if they fell into enemy hands!

Rather than suffer death or humiliation, it was always better to fight to the end!

While the circumstances were vastly different this time, Ketis felt that she was drawing upon the bitter determination of the Swordmaidens.

A beast woke up in her heart. A determination to cut her adversary surged from her spirit.

Her confidence surged as Sharpie continued to condense her will!

Even as Ivan absorbed so much energy from the storm that his fencing sword was surrounded by a violent tornado, she no longer felt oppressed by his prowess.

Instead, she became swept by the urge to resist! No matter how much more power Ivan was able to leverage, she could not allow herself to get defeated without launching a counterattack!

"WE ARE UNYIELDING!"

There wasn't much time for her to think, let alone make a move. She recalled one of the new techniques that Venerable Dise attempted to teach her. The tutoring session did not go well as Ketis hadn't been able to pull off the moves.

Yet now that Sharpie augmented her will, she instinctively felt that this time might be different.

She no longer stayed in place. The storm no longer restrained her and Ivan had already absorbed the storm in order to empower his killer move.

Rather than stand around and attempt a futile defense, she committed to an attack of her own! She quickly gained speed and charged forth, her muscles straining to close in on her opponent!

Ivan did not take much notice of her actions. While it was beyond his expectations that she was able to bring herself to put up a fight, he did not believe that the Sword Devil was capable of aborting his fully-charged finishing move!

Yet even as his abnormal and impossible tornado blade began to thrust at Ketis' incoming body, his opponent began to resonate with her greatsword.

Ketis actively tried to execute the first empowered technique of the Swordmaiden Sword Style.

An essential step to doing so was to resonate with the weapon. When Venerable Dise taught and demonstrated the move to Ketis, the expert pilot's Unending greatsword sang with determination!

Ketis possessed an Unending greatsword of her own. Once Sharpie directed her condensed will into her weapon, the mysterious alloy that covered it easily absorbed the input.

Her upgraded CFA greatsword not only became an extension of her body, but also turned into an extension of her will!

If she was a mech pilot, then her sword became her mech! They were two halves of a single whole, united by a common will that transcended mortal limitations!

Ketis had never experienced anything like it before! It was so tempting to get lost in the rush of power and new sensations!

Just her ability to resonate with her sword as if she was an authentic sword initiate was a complete revolution to her! For the first time in her life, she felt her CFA greatsword agreeing with her determination.

It was alive!

The time she spent on nurturing and taking care of her personal weapon was not in vain! Through constant love and diligence, the attention she poured upon her weapon had produced a result!

Even if the results were not that impressive, the fact that it possessed life at all was incredibly heartening to her! Her blade sang in unison with her will and purpose!

Without realizing, Ketis essentially replicated the relationships that made LMC mechs and particularly prime mechs so special.

The resonance that formed between her greatsword, Sharpie and herself roughly equated to that of a mech, a design spirit and a mech pilot!

All of these coincidences enabled her to execute her move with remarkable speed and fluency.

A shining white corona formed around her CFA greatsword. It appeared in an instant and quickly expanded to triple the size and length of the weapon!

This also caused the tip of the manifested energy blade to be a lot closer to Ivan than the physical blade!

"SWORD OF LYDIA!"

Yes! Ketis executed a smaller and more simplified version of the impressive battle formations of the Swordmaidens!

Once displayed by a company of Swordmaiden mechs, now Ketis was materializing the attack that defeated Venerable Foster on an infantry scale!

Yet even if it was vastly reduced in size, reach, power and cohesion, it was still beyond anything that she had unleashed before!

Ivan widened his eyes! The energy blade appeared too abruptly! He hastily adjusted his sword and put his violent tornado blade in the path of the sharp and solid energy blade projected by the Sword Devil.

"My storm shall sweep everything away!"

Yet even as the powerful tornado blade that had been fed by an entire storm came into contact with Ketis' condensed energy blade, the latter cut through the former like a hot knife through butter!

"What?! That's impossible!"

Ivan spent minutes accumulating power in order to maximize the power of his finishing move. He expended so much energy to perform continuous Hurricane Charges just so that he could finish this match in the most dramatic and visually impressive fashion possible!

When his Eye of the Storm had reached this point, a swordsman or sword initiate shouldn't have been able to shake his attack, not even his fellow seeded competitors!

At the very least, his adversaries would never be able to break his strongest move if they did not put in the same amount of effort!

Therefore, the already-solid energy blade that cut right through the tornado blade and forcibly dispersed all of his wind energy should never be able to do this in the first place!

It didn't make any sense to Ivan!

Yet to Ketis, it made complete sense.

Even if the energy manifestation was very rough and unstable, there was an additional factor that strengthened it even further.

Her spirit lent its strength to the attack.

Her design philosophy, which not only centered around swordsman mechs, but also emphasized the concept of sharpness.

Her design philosophy was incredibly compatible with Sharpie, so her sentient sword intent did not hesitate to borrow from her professional obsession as well!

This extra influence caused the Sword of Lydia to gain a surprisingly sharp edge. The tornado blade might have been able to resist the cutting power if it was more condensed, but the nature of wind was that it was always loose and dispersed!

"DEATH!"

The Sword of Lydia not only cut the Eye of the Storm apart, but also went on to slice through Ivan's sword arm!

Blood spurted into the wind as the seeded competitor's arm along with the fencing sword in its grip dropped to the arena floor.

"AHHHHHH!"

Despite Ivan's will and fortitude, he could not suppress the pain of losing a limb! His final charge fell apart as pain overwhelmed his senses.

He tripped and skidded across the surface as the momentum of his body caused him to continue to slide for ten more meters!

At the same time, the Sword of Lydia finally dissipated as Ketis slowed and stuttered to a stop.

Her hands still kept an iron hold of her greatsword, but the rest of her body was completely drained of strength!

Sharpie had exhausted itself to such an extent that it had turned dormant. Ketis felt as if she squeezed the limits of her potential until there was nothing left.

"I still... got your arm... bastard..."

She was no longer able to hold on to her consciousness. She closed her eyes and dropped to the arena floor, still holding her weapon as if it was her greatest possession!

The audience had long turned silent at this time. Every single spectator was completely gobsmacked at the dramatic sights that they had witnessed.

The Sword Devil cut down Ivan Reid's ambitions!

Even if reattaching a smoothly-cut arm was not a difficult procedure, the recovery and rehabilitation process took at least a month even if the Heavensword Association utilized its best means!

Perhaps the Life Research Association had even better treatment options available, but as it was, Ivan Reid basically lost his ability to rely on his primary weapon arm to fight his subsequent matches!

[Victory... goes to the Cloudstriders!]

Although Ketis managed to take out the strongest Cloudstrider, there were four more disciples who sat out the remaining fight. Even though they looked completely lost at what had happened, the fact was that they were still battle effective while all of the Swordmaidens were no longer able to put up a fight!

Yet even as the audience reluctantly acknowledged that the Cloudstriders had won this match, they still felt that Ketis and the Swordmaidens were the true victors today!

Chapter 2899: Reversed

When Ketis woke up the next morning, she noticed she was not lying in a bed.

Instead, the liquid around her told her that she was immersed in a healing pod!

Warm liquid immersed her from every direction, soothing her muscle aches in order to restore them as quickly as possible.

It worked, but not effectively enough for her liking. She still felt as if her body had gone through a singularity. Her limbs aches and her body signalled that it was weary.

Augmented by lots of candy or not, the ordeal that she had just gone through was arduous on a whole other level.

Not just her body, but also her mind felt weary. A persistent strain affected her mind and spirit, causing her to feel as if she had exercised way too hard. Even though she felt as if her mind and mentality had expanded somehow, the extreme stretching and exertion also caused to feel as if she had been on the verge of breaking her mind.

It had been close.

As the hazy memories of her final attack came to her attention, she vaguely realized how much she risked in order to defeat Ivan Reid.

It was stupid. She shouldn't have risked so much to pull off something unprecedented. She came too close to breaking. Only her unyielding will kept her mind firm enough to successfully channel the Sword of Lydia.

Swish...

Sharpie slightly perked up after she woke, but her sword intent was pretty much in the same awful condition as herself. Even though its presence had become a lot larger and more substantial than before, Ketis clearly sensed it was in constant pain.

Just like her, Sharpie performed something so unprecedented in its existence that it irrevocably changed from the experience.

Swish... swish... swish...

Still, neither of them had regrets. Every ambitious person had to push their limits and go beyond their existing capabilities in order to achieve success. Risk always came with reward, and Ketis had a feeling that as long as Sharpie and her recovered, their expansion would stay behind.

After the doctors in the employ of the Infinity Guards pulled her out of the healing pod and gave her a thorough checkup, she was allowed to go free.

"In fact, you are far from recovering, but it can't be helped." Venerable Dise spoke as she accompanied Ketis on a slow walk through the garden of Angelique's villa. "Your participation in the group tournament may have come to an end yesterday, but you still have a chance to go further in the solo tournament. I don't want to make a decision on your behalf. You should be the one to decide how you wish to go forward."

On one hand, the condition of her body was bad. The Endurance Candies along with her other physical augmentations may have helped a lot, but any other person would have been bedridden for months if they hadn't outright died already!

As it was, she was already straining her physical body to the limits by going on a walk. Each step sent another jolt of pain through her body. Her breathing grew heavier and it became more difficult to keep herself upright.

She had been pulled out of her treatment program too early. If she had a few more days to recover, her enhanced physique would have made enough progress for her to run without causing her body collapse right afterwards!

Her next match was scheduled to begin in just a couple of hours, but the deadline to inform her willingness to make an appearance was only ten minutes away.

Ketis looked down on her body. She had to make a choice.

"It's not cowardice to admit your weakness." Venerable Dise softly spoke as her force of will, which was normally aggressive and firm, took on a softer and more harmonizing feel. "No one is immortal and no one is invincible. You have already done the improbable and defeated the heir of the Cloudstrider Sword School. The entire Heavensword Association is abuzz about your stellar performance against one of the best sword initiates in the state. Even if you have technically lost the group match, the Heavensworders all acknowledge you now. There can be no other outcome."

The Heavensworders were steeped in a culture that worshipped strong swordsmen. Although they were more strict about the moral character of their warriors, as long as

someone showed off enough strength to surpass the vast majority of swordsmen in the state, that person automatically became an idol to the people!

Ketis didn't care too much about this. The press and public vilified her so much that she never developed an affection for them. Why should she welcome their praise?

The only reason why she didn't intend to insult them at the first opportunity was because this development was favorable to the Swordmaidens and the Annihilator Sword School.

Venerable Dise smiled. "Our organizations are doing very well now. You not only fought splendidly, but truly debuted as a new sword initiate who truly possesses the strength to fight against the potential champions of the tournament. Many swordsmen and swordswomen have become enchanted by the unyielding spirit you have shown. Many more wish to be able to manifest the Sword of Lydia and cut through everything."

She spoke those last words in jest. Both Dise and Ketis knew that it was practically impossible for other Swordmaidens to replicate such an attack. Sword initiates and swordsmasters were very rare in the Heavensword Association for a reason! Too many people simply lacked the 'talent' to become anything more than a regular swordsman.

Only the most persevering among them might be able to push themselves to a pseudo-sword initiate by force, but that took decades of training. At least Fred Walinski was lucky enough to achieve some results while he still had some years left in his lifespan!

Even though it was rather deceptive to dangle the hope of being able to fight like Ketis when the odds were so small, many swordsmen nonetheless wished to try. Even if they ultimately fell short in the end, they still benefited from the journey!

"How many people did we scam this time?" Ketis asked with a wry smile.

"You can't imagine how many Heavensworders and foreigners have observed your match. We have already been flooded with hundreds of thousands of inquiries. While the vast majority of them are not serious, we estimate that we can absorb at least several hundred high-quality mech pilots and a thousand more swordswomen. Of course, each of them will need to undergo at least a few months of intensive training to convert them into Swordmaidens."

This was quite a lot of progress! The Swordmaiden's mech pilot roster only consisted of a single mech company, so the immediate addition of hundreds of female mech pilots who met Venerable Dise's standard was a crucial injection of strength!

Since the Heavensword Association was a second-rate state, its mech pilots were extremely well-trained and could easily pilot any second-class swordsman mech in battle!

"What about the Annihilator Sword School?" Ketis asked.

As the supposed head of this school, she had a responsibility to revive it. Even if she wasn't obliged to do so in order to fulfill her promise to Fred Walinski, her honor and sense of duty did not allow her to neglect this responsibility!

"Your sword school is much more popular than our mech force. Not everyone is a mech pilot, after all, and the Heavensworders are much more familiar with the structure and benefits of sword schools. While you're not a Swordmaster, the strength that you have shown has already indicated that you are qualified to teach the styles you know. There are thousands of swordsmen who are interested in learning how to annihilate obstacles. I'm not fully up to date with the numbers, and I don't determine how strict the thresholds should be. You should talk to Fred to know the details, but last I met him, he was bursting with joy."

"Those poor sods... Fred is about to hoodwink all of them. Of all of those thousands eager swordsmen and swordswomen, maybe one of them will actually be able to become a sword initiate. The rest..."

Venerable Dise looked down on a pond where a school of fish was leisurely swimming below the surface. "I don't feel bad about dangling this hope in front of people. What we are doing is no different from any other sword school in the state. We offer something more than just transcendence. Anyone who joins our sisterhood will gain comrades, undergo intensive training and travel to exciting new locations. The men and women who opted to join the Annihilator Sword School will be able to take on a fruitful career in the Larkinson Clan."

It was just like the mech piloting career. Few if any mech pilots would ever be able to become an expert pilot, but that did not stop an uncountable amount of hopeful people from stepping onto this path.

This realization allowed Ketis to feel less guilty about recruiting optimistic fools. As long as they knew what they signed up for, she would be happy to welcome them into her ranks.

She slightly shook her head. How her thoughts had changed. Responsibility was still too foreign to her. She never considered herself to be a leader like Ves. Yet now that the situation had forced her to step up, she was not willing to give up without giving it a serious try.

"Ketis." The expert pilot turned and faced the younger woman. "The reason why I'm telling you all of this is that you have essentially fulfilled our requirement. We are no longer short of recruits, and the praises that people have showered on you will not fade quickly. Even if you don't show up in the arena anymore, we still have confidence we can bring back at least a thousand battle-ready swordsmen mech pilots."

"We can do better, though."

Dise carefully placed her hand on Ketis' shoulder. "We can, but the question is whether it is wise to do so. Your body is still in a recovery phase. Every heavy exertion you make will delay your recovery or exacerbate your wounds. There is also the possibility of suffering permanent ailments, particularly if you put excessive strain on your brain. Mech pilots are especially prone to suffering neural damage, but the doctors say that you are at risk of suffering similar damage."

Time was running out. Ketis had to make a decision quickly. She looked down at her hands and tried to imagine swinging a sword again. The illusion evoked both pain and anticipation in her. Her hand clenched into a fist.

"I... can't stop like this. I still have some fight left in me. I want to challenge more Heavensworders. I want to beat more powerful swordsmen like Ivan Reid. I won't be able to return to this state after we have ended our visit, so this is the only opportunity I have to push myself against lots of diverse and well-trained swordsmen."

The unyielding spirit that she had embodied previously welled up in her mind again. Even though the pressure induced more pain in her, she was willing to bear it if it meant she could continue to fight!

Her will radiated from her body as she voiced her determination. Venerable Dise easily perceived this and gave Ketis a look of approval.

"If this is your choice, then I will inform the tournament operators that you will participate in the following match. You're lucky that your next opponent in the solo tournament is just a regular swordsman. While he's not a pushover in your current state, I hope you can quickly solve him in order to reduce the strain on your body and mind as much as possible."

Ketis nodded. "Understood."

The solo tournament schedule was not kind to those who suffered severe injuries. Even if she was able to defeat today's opponent, she would have to fight another one tomorrow and the day after. Failure was only one stumble away!

Chapter 2900: Horvast Trion

There was no time to undergo physical therapy or undergo any serious treatment. Ketis and the Swordmaidens had to board their shuttle and move to the arena in order to prepare for the next match.

At this point, there were still a few Swordmaidens left in the tournaments, but the average caliber of opponents that made it this far was quite formidable!

Even if some of the Swordmaidens had been lucky enough to draw weaker opponents, their luck would eventually run out, just like what happened yesterday.

The chance of bumping into strong swordsmen like the seeded competitors had become a lot bigger!

There were dozens more sword initiates like Ivan Reid in contention and hundreds more who were not that much weaker.

Even if notable veteran Swordmaidens such as Commander Sendra were very skilled at swordsmanship, their shallow heritage and tradition eventually lost out against the richer traditions of the sword schools.

The Swordmaidens weren't fighting against single swordsmen. They instead had to struggle against the entire swordsmanship tradition of the Heavensword Association!

Entire institutions along with a strong reinforcing culture pushed up the level of swordsmanship in the state to an amazing height! The Swordmaidens could only look up to that in awe.

In fact, the model of the Heavensword Association already gave their leader a lot of inspiration. Commander Sendra and some other Swordmaiden officers were constantly taking notes in their mind.

"When we go back, we should definitely foster a similar environment in the Larkinson Clan." Ketis muttered as she reluctantly suited up and got ready for her next appearance.

This was the first time she wanted to enact a large and substantial change in the clan. Previously, she was too preoccupied with progressing her mech design capabilities to care about any of that boring political stuff.

Yet now that she had become aware of how far the Swordmaidens was behind compared to a fantastic state like the Heavensword Association, she yearned to bring a part of it back to the Larkinsons!

While she did not expect Ves to convert his entire clan into a sword cult just because she asked nicely, she at least wanted to carve out a place for her fellow swordsmen!

The ambitious and hopeful glints in the eyes of the other Swordmaidens indicated that she was not the only person to hold these thoughts.

The Swordmaidens were previously content to stay in their own corner in the Larkinson Clan. They already knew they were too different to blend in with other Larkinsons.

Now, they were no longer satisfied with remaining isolated. Having tasted some of the benefits of living in a large society of sword fanatics, how could they not try to recreate their own little kingdom when they returned home!

Every single Swordmaiden that took part in this visit was willing to stand up and become politically active in order to achieve this new dream!

Fred Walinski walked up to her. "You're up soon, Ketis. Have you studied the details about your next opponent?"

"I already watched some footage of Horvast Trion in action. While I wasn't able to catch everything, I have a good idea how he fights. He's a solid swordsman but not a particularly inspiring one. I should be able to handle him if he fights in the same way as before."

"Don't look down on him too much. Horvast managed to make it this far without losing, so that counts for something. It is also possible that he has been hiding his strength up until now. You need to end this battle fast enough to minimize the damage to your body, but you also have to be careful enough to prevent falling into any traps."

This was a difficult balance to achieve. It all depended on how much force she was willing to utilize and how much resistance Horvast Trion put up. If Ketis wasn't able to finish the battle in time, she might have to end her tournament run with a whimper!

"I can't fold now."

She was fighting for more than just the Swordmaidens now. Within her heart, her unyielding will pushed her onwards. She wanted to push herself forward and make it as far as she could go! Even if her body screamed at her to take a rest, she did not wish to end this rare and unique opportunity to temper her swordsmanship!

"Let's go, Sharpie."

Swish...

When she stepped onto the arena, she was greeted by more welcoming cheers. It was a drastic change from the jeers and insults she received before.

"The Sword Devil is back! I knew she would get up again!"

"Ivan Reid is trash compared to her! No one has been able to display two separate sword styles as proficiently as her. She's a true genius!"

"Where is your big sword?"

Different from before, Ketis opted to bring a single weapon this time. Her current condition was so awful that every single gram of equipment counted.

While she couldn't do anything about the weight of her protective suit, she had made the hard decision to forgo her favorite CFA greatsword.

Unending alloy may be unimaginably tough, but its mass and density were not low by any means!

"I'll be relying on you this time, Shiva."

She slowly unsheathed her weapon and held it point downwards with both her hands.

The weight of the saber was bearable to her for now, but she knew that could easily change as long as the fight dragged out. She estimated that she wouldn't be able to maintain her combat effectiveness after just two or three minutes of intensive fighting.

Her opponent eventually showed up. Her eyes widened as she saw that Horvast Trion broke his pattern.

In his previous matches, Horvast wielded a typical longsword. He fought with a balanced sword style that emphasized both power and finesse in equal measure.

However, the Mandair Sword School he belonged to did not just teach how to fight with a longsword. The school specialized in teaching basic but solid sword styles to mech pilots.

This not only included swordsman mech pilots, but also knight mech pilots!

"Damn." Ketis softly cursed.

Horvast Trion came well-prepared. Instead of bringing just a longsword, he also brought a tower shield!

While it was rare for swordsmen to bring physical shields into the arena, it was allowed in the rules.

It was obvious that Mr. Trion took full advantage of this provision that was originally meant to ensure that knight mech specialists weren't excluded!

Horvast carefully kept his body behind his thick and massive shield. The tall and curved metal slab was so heavy that he couldn't help but rest it on the arena floor when stationary.

The man heroically pointed his sword forward even as he only revealed a sliver of his head from the side of his protective barrier!

"Sword Devil! You may have vanquished Ivan Reid, but today you shall fall before my blade! Let I, Horvast Trion, bring glory to the Mandair Sword School and be the first swordsman today to fell a sword initiate! Will you make the clever choice and admit defeat or shall I have to teach you how you never stood a chance in the first place?"

"..."

The audience was speechless for a moment.

"Shameless!"

"Get lost, Horvast! You're no sword initiate!"

"Don't be proud of picking up a bargain! You're just reaping Ivan's hard work!"

Even though Horvast Trion's approach to this match was absolutely shameless, Ketis had to applaud his ingenuity.

Instead of choosing to fight like a typical brainless swordsman, Horvast made an accurate prediction of her physical condition and altered his loadout as a result!

There was nothing wrong about exploiting someone's weakness. It happened all the time in real battles. Ketis just felt a bit sour because she was on the receiving end of this treatment this time!

When confronted with such a massive tower shield, Ketis knew that the best way to overcome this challenge was to outmaneuver her opponent and attack his unprotected sides.

This was why no one brought any tower shields in the single personal combat tournament up until now. While it had some tactical use in group combat, in a solo duel it was too easy for enemies to outflank its carrier!

Yet this time, Ketis did not have the ability to circle around Horvast's guard. She couldn't even run with all of the weight pressing down on her injured and overstrained body!

The only way for her to overcome her opponent was to attack him head-on, which also happened to be exactly what Horvast intended!

She looked at Shiva and tried to figure out whether she could evoke the power of Annihilation. Just thinking about it made her head hurt!

"Can you do it, Sharpie?"

...Swish... swish...

Her sword intent behaved like a deflated balloon. Even though it played a major role in allowing her to fight like a true sword initiate yesterday, it had clearly overdrafted its capabilities!

Her confidence flagged. Her weariness constantly increased with each second that passed while she was carrying all of her equipment. The combination of physical and mental weariness constantly depleted her condition and continually sapped her will to fight.

[Commence the match!]

No one moved. Ketis blinked for a time before she realized that she was in the rare position of being the lighter of the two combatants.

Previously, every opponent she faced beforehand carried lighter equipment than her. This time, her weight-saving measures along with Horvast's choice of equipment caused her to be the one who had to take the initiative this time!

Despite Horvast's wild boasts, he treated Ketis extremely seriously this time. Even if he gambled on her lack of recovery, he did not wish to make a move and bear more risks.

If Ketis kept standing, then she would forfeit the match by default. She had no choice but to approach.

Her steps were slow and hesitant. The more she looked at the shield, the more she felt as if she was tasked with accomplishing an impossible mission.

How the hell was she supposed to overcome this wall when she only retained a fraction of her combat power?

She knew that as long as she exposed her weakness, Horvast would definitely pounce and finish her off once her body started to droop!

"No! I can't think like this! A true Swordmaiden never folds this easily!"

She wasn't willing to accept defeat so quickly! She still had some fight left in her! As her determination surged, so did her will. As her will started to revive, Sharpie became a bit more energetic!

"So it's like this!"

Even as Ketis resisted the impulses that persuaded her to give up, she carefully sensed the changes in her mind. Even though she was unable to perceive as much as Ves, she still noticed that her willpower had a very strong effect on her condition.

Even the most desperate weaklings could unleash a surprising degree of strength when their willpower peaked!

Willpower also played a central role in enabling expert pilots to channel so much strength!

"My flesh may be weak, but my will is unyielding!"

Ketis purposefully aroused the same feelings and emotion as yesterday. Whatever she was doing was working. Her body felt a bit less weary than before and she felt as if she could put up an actual fight this time!

Swish swish swish!

Even Sharpie became a bit more energetic than before!

However, even as she drew upon her willpower, Ketis felt she couldn't sustain this state for long.

Nothing came for free. Even willpower had a price!

As her steps accelerated a bit, she looked down on Shiva yet again. She winced.

"Maybe I brought the wrong weapon."

Right now, her unyielding will was most compatible with the Swordmaiden Sword Style and her obsession for sharpness.

That meant she was in the right state to empower her greatsword!

Shiva was different. Due to Venerable Trey Walinski's influence, the heirloom weapon was only supposed to channel the Annihilator Sword Style!

"Damnit. How will I solve this problem?"