

Mech 2901

Chapter 2901: False Honor

As Ketis faced a dilemma, she tried to think about the nature of her new power.

She only went through an upgrade a short time ago. Her mental state in the last match was vastly different and she couldn't recall all of the details.

She only remembered that she had set aside most of her logic and forethought and relied completely on her will to see her through her fight against Ivan Reid!

Willpower was obviously the key to fueling her abilities as a sword initiate. A swordsman without a will was merely a dummy who collapsed at the first blow.

The problem right now was that her will largely matched the Swordmaiden Sword Style. This was not good news to her because it was the wrong choice to employ against Horvast Trion.

She not only lacked a greatsword, but also lacked the confidence to cut through the thick shield by relying on sharpness alone.

Different from annihilation, the power of sharpness still relied heavily on physical force to create a cut!

With her lacking strength, there was a significant chance that Shiva's blade would merely leave a chip on Horvast's tough and dense tower shield!

What she needed to do right now was to switch to the Annihilator Sword Style and try her best to leverage Shiva in the few minutes she had left!

"How do I do this?"

She then recalled the pivotal role that Sharpie played beforehand. Her sword intent unveiled several new abilities that completely changed the way she fought!

It was rather difficult for her to determine whether she was relying on an external source in order to accomplish the impossible or whether she was just harnessing her own capabilities.

Regardless, Sharpie opened a lot of new options to her that others didn't have!

"Sharpie... if you can, please enter annihilation mode."

Swish...

Although Sharpie was not in a good condition, the will that Ketis channeled slightly injected some strength in the spiritual construct.

It was a lot different than before! What happened yesterday represented a breakthrough! As a living entity, Sharpie grasped the opportunity to evolve beyond the confines of its initial design. It had grown and changed in a way that Ves would no longer be able to recognize!

Now, Sharpie altered its form and focus with much more ease than before.

Ketis' mindset changed. Her will still remained unyielding, but it had gained a different accent.

It was a bit difficult for her to explain everything that had changed in her mind. This was the disadvantage of relying on Sharpie. The strength it exhibited was not under her control. It was a black box that magically did what she wanted but did not explain how it was able to accomplish its effect.

She didn't care. Sharpie was more than just a pet or a mascot. It was an indivisible part of herself. She could not imagine living without its presence ever since it came into existence!

Her trust in Sharpie was so complete that she never thought about the possibility of betrayal. Unlike Ves, She simply couldn't imagine this possibility!

For now, her unrestricted trust in Sharpie paid off. Without any restraint on her part, Sharpie was able to affect her entire mind, causing her to become swept by the urge to destroy the shield that Horvast thought would deliver him victory!

Shiva began to take on a darker sheen. As Ketis and Sharpie continued to work together, a field formed around her that somewhat resembled a glow!

Previously, Ivan exhibited the capability of distorting his immediate surroundings with his will.

Now, Ketis and Sharpie replicated this feat!

Even if the actual effect was barely noticeable, Ketis still showed off one of the powers of a sword initiate. Any other sword initiate or swordmaster observing this match in person would definitely be able to perceive her empowered will!

Horvast Trion was no exception. While he was just an average disciple, he came in touch with several powerful swordsmen in the Mandair Sword School.

His confidence shook, but he stubbornly forced himself to remain put. Unless Ketis definitely showed she was able to defeat him, the opportunist insisted on trying to see if he could outlast his weakened opponent!

"Are you going to attack or not? My shield is waiting for you to unleash your futile blows! I bet you even be able won't be able to scratch its coating!"

The comment infuriated Ketis! No one liked to be belittled, but she especially disliked it. Ivan treated her like trash, but she eventually managed to end his ambitions to become a champion during this edition of the Greater Omanderie Festival!

"I can do it again. There is no reason why I should back off against this turtle."

She wanted to punch Horvast's smug grin off his face. She wanted to shatter the tower shield he invested so much confidence in. She wanted to inflict such a decisive defeat on him that her subsequent opponents would not dare to take her lightly anymore!

"Let me show you that you should never underestimate a Swordmaiden!"

Despite her muscles screaming at her, she accelerated her pace and closed in. She did not bother to circle around in order to attack Horvast's flank.

Instead, she raised Shiva above her head and resolutely chopped it straight against the surface of her opponent's solid shield!

Horvast became less certain about his current approach. The will that Ketis radiated pressed down on him as if he was an ant!

However, he was still a swordsman. His firm mind reasserted itself and he resolutely clung to his own determination to defeat one of the strongest sword initiate in the tournament!

"I shall never take a step back!"

Under this tense moment, Horvast's will rose against the pressure and underwent a minor evolution! The bottleneck that hampered his progress for years started to loosen as he tried to ready himself for his inevitable counterattack!

As long as he was able to endure the initial barrage of attacks, his victory was as good as assured!

Yet just as Horvast swelled with the thought of earning a lot of glory for 'overcoming' the Sword Devil, the saber she wielded briefly flared with black and ominous energy!

Trrrrrrrrrtch.

Hardly any sound escaped as Shiva's blackened edge effortlessly annihilated the metal in front of it. As Ketis continued to chop the weapon downwards, her arm practically did not encounter any physical resistance, which allowed her to complete her attack with relative ease!

Although the end result of Ketis' empowered attack was merely inflicting a thin vertical cut through Horvast's tower shield, her blade did not solely cut through metal.

It also happened to pass right through the arm which was strapped to the shield!

"GUUHHHAHAHAHA! IT HURTS!"

Horvast completely lost his composure as his tower shield tipped onto the arena floor! His body quickly followed as the straps were still in place!

The sight of his injury looked quite painful. Many people in the audience winced as the front side of Horvast's amputated forearm was fixed in place with one strap while the rest of his arm was attached with another strap!

This caused his affected limb to look disturbingly whole despite the very obvious gap in between!

Ketis had won the match with ease!

Despite her exhaustion, despite her interrupted recovery process, despite her overstretched mind, in the end she only had to summon enough willpower to channel the power of annihilation.

Ketis frowned even as the audience celebrated her 'easy' victory.

As she relaxed her mind and sheathed her saber, she puzzled over what had happened.

While this was not the first time she utilized the power of the Annihilator Sword Style, she never channeled it with so little effort!

Something had definitely changed. She had grown more powerful than she realized. Sharpie's degree of change was beyond her expectation!

It was not just the ease that confounded her. The strength of her attack also came as a surprise.

Every manifestation cost energy. Before she visited the Heavensword Association, she frequently exercised her superpower. She utilized normal butter knives and other weapons to cut through solid metal in order to master this power and gain a better feel for sharpness.

She was only able to cut through a couple of metal bars before she exhausted herself for the day!

Even a single attack was enough to drain her if she attempted to cut through something as solid and thick as Horvast's tower shield!

Yet even if she relied on the power of annihilation instead of the power of sharpness this time, she was somehow able to exhibit so much of the former that she completely avoided a long and exhausting attrition battle!

She returned to her fellow sisters and got rid of her protective suit as soon as possible. She laid down on a bench and endured the aches in her body as best as possible.

Oddly enough, despite investing so much will and effort into executing her annihilation attack, her mind did not feel that much worse! She could easily bear her current mental strain!

"Good job, Ketis. You proved everyone once and for all that you're the real deal." Fred congratulated her as he sat down on a nearby bench. "The Annihilator Sword School's revival is already set in stone. The casual way you disregarded Horvast Trion's protection is very impressive. Others might not know what you have accomplished, but I know better. You have gone further in our sword style in just a couple of days than I have ever reached while investing many decades in learning my brother's teachings!"

She felt ashamed at his praise. Sharpie took care of nearly everything. She merely had to supply the fuel to allow her sword intent to do all of the work.

She was not a natural inheritor of the Annihilator Sword School! The people who called her a genius were completely mistaken. What would Fred think if he knew the truth?

A swordswoman must be honest. She could not stand the thought of misleading the old scammer any longer. He deserved to know the truth.

A guilty expression appeared on her face. "Mr. Walinski... the thing is..."

His old but firm hand pressed on her shoulder. "Shhh. You don't need to explain anything. Just focus on your recovery. When I was as young as you, I too hoped to make it as far as possible in a tournament. This is your moment, so don't worry about anything."

"Fred, I'm being serious. I'm not a regular swordswoman. I went through a unique experience that changed something in me. I don't feel that I have truly learned the Annihilator Sword Style. My actual understanding of it is so shallow that you can't believe how little I understand how it works. I don't deserve to lead your sword school."

The former head of the Annihilator Sword School remained silent. His expression remained kind.

Several seconds passed before he revealed his thoughts.

"I'm not stupid, Miss Larkinson. Of course I realize that there is something deeply abnormal about you. No one in the Heavensword Association is able to master a true sword style within days. If the best Heavensworders can't accomplish this, then a young lady like you certainly won't be able to do anything better."

"You knew...? Why didn't you say anything?"

Fred chuckled a bit. "My stance towards you hasn't changed. After struggling for over three decades, my brother's sword school was on the verge of collapse. That has changed ever since you arrived. My brother's legacy is more alive than ever and I can look forward to passing it on to thousands of new and eager sword students! Aside from breaking through myself, I have obtained everything that I have dreamt of these last few decades. Why should I possibly quibble over whether you have actually mastered the Annihilator Sword Style or not? Even if you are merely a pretender, any of the sword disciples that we have attracted with your help might one day turn into the real deal! That is enough for me to die with peace knowing that I have not spent my life in vain!"

The old man's tolerance and acceptance warmed her heart. As their eyes continued to meet, she felt as if she had gained a true accord with the caretaker of the Annihilator Sword School.

She knew now that she could trust him. Perhaps she might even be able to enlist his help into figuring out her new abilities!

Chapter 2902: Systematic Inheritance vs Individual Development

A weight lifted off Ketis after she tacitly admitted her unusual ability to utilize the Annihilator Sword Style without actually mastering it. She increasingly felt guilty about misleading Fred and everyone else about her dedication to another sword style.

She felt like a fraud.

"Luckily, the worst hasn't come to pass."

Fred had lived over ninety years and invested at least half of it into mastering the sword style and propping up the associated sword school. He had turned from a powerful right-hand man to an expert pilot and swordmaster to a destitute old scammer who went deep into debt in order to keep the remnants of the school alive.

A swordsman who had spent years while enduring the lowest point of his life no longer clung to any illusionary values like pride, honesty and order.

He just wanted to make sure that his life's work was not in vain!

Therefore, Fred turned out to be surprisingly understanding of her unique conditions. No matter what unusual methods Ketis utilized to exceed Fred's ability to exhibit the Annihilator Sword Style, it was all fine to him as long as she used her unconventional power for the good of the sword school!

Both of them had come to an understanding after the match against Horvast Trion.

Ever since then, they began to work together to explore Ketis' unique advantages. At this point, she had only scratched the surface of what her upgraded mind could do. Her mind, will, design philosophy and most importantly Sharpie had all undergone drastic changes that caused her to become a lot less familiar with what she could do in her current state.

"We will need to remedy that." Fred stated as they entered a practice yard in the evening. "The essence of swordsmanship is to leverage your strengths in the most efficient and effective fashion in order to achieve your goals in combat. The precondition to this is that you must thoroughly understand your own capabilities. What are your advantages? What are your limitations? You must understand them both in order to develop your battle methods, or otherwise you will always be several steps behind from the likes of true sword initiates such as Ivan Reid."

The seeded competitors in the tournaments had undergone a lot more focused training than any of the Swordmaidens, Ketis included. The systematic structure of a sword school was simply too good at transforming average sword students into elite swordsmen with exquisite skill.

That wasn't all. The schools were not only good at imparting technical proficiency, but also excelled at molding the mentalities of its disciples. Strong pressure and constant training rapidly polished the wills of these aspiring swordmasters. To those who were tough and motivated enough to complete the harshest training, their willpower had long exceeded that of an average soldier!

Even if these swordsmen and mech pilots lacked the talent to transcend their mortal limits, they still represented the cream of the crop in their respective professions!

Just like how the Life Research Association's biotech industry ranked at the top in the star cluster, the Heavensword Association objectively trained the best swordsman mech pilots across an even larger region!

The state was so famed in this aspect that many foreigners who aspired to enjoy the best possible swordsman mech pilot training even went on long exchanges.

This was also one of the main 'export' products of the state. Wealthy foreign scions regularly paid the equivalent of billions of hex credits in order to receive some casual tips from an astute and insightful swordmaster.

Although Fred Walinski was nowhere near a swordmaster, he had at least eight decades worth of expertise under his belt.

His talent may be lacking, but his persistent hard work allowed him to develop a mastery of the basics that was impossible for youngsters to exceed.

All of this soon became clear as Fred earnestly began to tutor and help Ketis explore her new combat abilities.

Ketis looked emptily at the practice yard. "All of this is great, but I can't make use of the facilities here. I'm still aching everywhere and my previous bout against Horvast has already expended most of the energy in my body.

Her will might be abundant, but it was very hard to rely on it to prop up her depleted body. It acted more like an amplifier. It was hard for it to act on a shambling wreck.

"It's fine. We don't have to burden your body any further. You are already a trained swordswoman so there is not that much benefit to exercise your moves. My plan for today is to go over the fundamentals of the Annihilator Sword Style."

"How?"

"By starting with here." Fred smiled while tapping the side of his head. "Like any serious fighting discipline, swordsmanship is both a mental and physical journey. This is even more important for true sword styles because the mind and will are essential to make them work. Don't forget where they came from. Every swordsman who trained in one of those styles is essentially tracing some of the footsteps of the original sources."

While many founding expert pilots and swordmasters partially developed their extraordinary abilities on an instinctual basis after they broke through, by organizing their insights and mental evolution in a systematic format, it was possible for them to pass on their abilities to others!

In practice, this was not a common practice in the mech piloting community. Part of it was that the will and obsession of every expert pilot was deeply personal and unique. The MTA conducted many studies on this approach, and eventually came to a consensus that it led to the emergence of less expert pilots.

Even if training programs tried their best to deconstruct a mech pilot's original personality and reconstruct it in the image of an existing expert pilot, the process was always incomplete. Every human still retained enough unique aspects that they still had

to develop their own way to transcend their limitations, something which they were not very good at due to lacking practice in individual expression.

However, there were still advantages to the model adopted by the Heavensword Association. The Cloudstrider Sword School clearly illustrated the advantage of having multiple expert pilots or swordmasters inherit an existing style and continue to build on it over the generations.

Some of the most renowned sword schools in the Heavensword Association actually maintained an uninterrupted inheritance that went back millennia!

The continued development of human civilization had always been rooted on passing on knowledge and allowing subsequent generations to learn from their predecessors.

Yet when this approach was applied to mech piloting and swordsmanship, the issue of compatibility began to become increasingly more problematic!

It was already bad enough that it was harder for individuals who inherited a legacy to become expert pilots or swordmasters.

The biggest conclusion the MTA had made was that it was very hard for even the most talented ace pilots to complete the final step and advance to god pilot!

Of all of the known god pilots in human space, the overwhelming majority were singularly unique! Hardly any of them trained in a systematic inheritance!

This conclusion alone was enough for most people to abandon this approach. Even if the benefits of training in a systematic inheritance produced some of the most powerful expert pilots and ace pilots in the galaxy, few mech pilots wanted to lose their path to god pilot!

As Fred explained all of this to Ketis, she thought that the Heavensword Association's insistence on passing on its sword styles must be one of the main reasons why its citizens were exiled to the galactic rim.

"To sum it all up, the power of a swordsman is rooted in the mind rather than body." He said. "We Heavensworders aren't ignorant of the importance of fostering individual development. The newer sword schools like the Cloudstrider Sword School have been able to rise up because they allow for much greater individual development than the old and traditional sword schools. We have to adapt to the times as best as possible in order to avoid falling behind."

In fact, this was a major contradiction in the Heavensword Association, but this had little relation to Ketis right now. It was enough for her to know that a sword style did not have to be rigid.

Fred then uttered a very Ves-like statement.

"Sword styles are alive, Ketis. While they prescribe a single recipe, who says that you have to follow it to the letter? If you like your food to be a little spicier, then you can throw in a few chilis. If you are in an environment where you don't have access to wine, then use vinegar instead. Do what is best for you. Even if you have inherited my brother's work, don't assume you have to turn yourself into his clone. Instead, take what you have learned and use it to develop your own style."

This was essentially the same advice that Venerable Dise had given to her. True swordsmen and swordswomen were supposed to go beyond what they learned!

"That... sounds a bit too far to me. With the time that we have, I think I can deepen my proficiency in the Annihilator Sword Style, but I don't think I can make much progress in forming my own style."

In a way, Ketis was also a product of an inheritance, if only a shallow one. She lived and breathed the Swordmaiden Sword Style. Even if she had already developed a few moves that she felt comfortable with, it was not enough of a difference.

"I see. You aren't wrong. Let me pass you my own insights on the Annihilator Sword Style in order to get you up to speed on how it is supposed to be practiced. In order to break the rules, you have to learn them first."

This was a rather risky prospect, but Fred believed that Ketis was wise enough to stick to her own guns.

He unsheathed his own weapon and held it out. After a lot of effort, he managed to evoke the power of annihilation to slightly cover the blade.

"The heart of this sword style is the unquenching will to destroy any obstacle in your path. This does not just describe the method in which it works in a fight, but also the mindset that is necessary to drive it forward."

Ketis nodded in understanding. Sharpie already took care of that when he entered annihilation mode and infected her mind with its altered presence.

Now that she thought about it, this was actually a form of cheating. Since her 'pet' already took care of the hard work, Ketis previously thought it was unnecessary to make this switch herself.

She realized that she was wrong. Rather than rely on an improper solution, she should be altering her mentality by herself!

If she was able to adopt a destruction mindset by her own merits, then Sharpie's transformation into annihilation mode might achieve even greater results! After all, instead of fighting against her original state, it would complement her current form!

Perhaps she might even be able to achieve another form of resonance in this fashion!

Her eyes lit up as she felt this was a viable way for her to quickly improve her battle prowess. She had worked with resonance long enough to know it was a fantastic way to achieve greater results with limited resources!

She earnestly listened to Fred as the old man elaborated on his personal approach and philosophy towards the Annihilator Sword Style. The insights that had allowed a talentless swordsman like him to become a pseudo-sword initiate were worth their weight in exotics!

Since a part of Fred's teachings were not exclusive to any single sword style, Ketis gained more than she expected. Some of the lessons she learned could easily be applied to the Swordmaiden Sword Style as well!

As long as she digested what she learned, her combat performance would inevitably take a substantial leap forward!

Chapter 2903: Overcautious

As much as Ketis wanted to immerse herself in learning, she only had a limited amount of time available.

She still had to go back to her healing pod in order to resume her recovery. She also had to mitigate the effects from her previous exertions. It didn't matter if she managed to end her match against Horvast Trion quickly. Her body was in such a fragile state that just wearing the protective suit considerably worsened her condition!

Still, she didn't need to absorb too much theoretical knowledge and insights to improve her performance.

When she next stepped onto the arena with Shiva in hand, she faced a confident swordsman from another sword school.

Unlike her opponent from yesterday, her current adversary did not intend to rely on a passive strategy to win the match.

Gelic Rodomer held a typical fencing sword that was very popular in the Heavensword Association. The sword type may be a bit too thin and fragile when employed in mech combat, but it was a lot more practical in personal combat as long as the adversary wasn't wearing too much protection.

Also different from yesterday, Gelic did not talk too much. He merely bowed to Ketis before entering a fencing stance. Obviously, he learned deeply from the clown from yesterday and was determined to do better!

"Well, damn." She softly cursed.

Gelic clearly learned that exchanging words was pointless. It was better to secure a victory first before starting to boast. Anyone who reversed this order risked turning into a laughing stock like Horvast Trion!

She would have preferred to face another idiot who tried to rely on defense to outlast the opposition. With her Annihilation Sword Style, armor was basically invalid in front of her blade.

A wry smile appeared on her face as she held Shiva with a bit of difficulty. "I'll have to work harder for my win."

When the match commenced, Gelic patiently crept forward while maintaining his odd-looking stance. He looked ready to dash forward or step to the side at any moment if Ketis did anything unusual!

His light sword along with his explosive stance were highly conducive towards short, high-speed spurts of motion. Ketis could already tell that Gelic wanted to rely on his excellent dodging and evasion abilities to avoid her powerful annihilation attacks.

While the Annihilator Sword Style was able to exert a fantastic effect upon contact, it did not incorporate any good solutions against fast and agile opponents!

Not only did it lack a ranged technique or a means to extend her reach, it also did not include any moves that expressly countered these kinds of opponents.

Its practitioners essentially had to rely on their own skills and attributes to outfight those who excelled at avoiding powerful attacks!

Strangely enough, Ketis still looked fairly relaxed. While she recognized the difficulty of overcoming her current opponent, apparently she did not look that concerned!

"Will you come closer or not?" She impatiently asked.

Gelic abruptly darted and leaned forward to perform a stab!

Clang!

Ketis easily managed to deflect the opportunistic lunging attack, but she had to employ more strength than she was comfortable with. In other words, she had to pay a heavier price than Gelic.

Still, the other swordsman did not repeat his earlier attempt. Ketis could channel her annihilation power at any moment in order to cut his fencing sword!

In order to preserve his weapon and avoid getting eliminated by a single hit, Gelic had already concluded that he should employ a hit-and-run approach. His earlier attempt already confirmed that Ketis' ability to react against his attack was not strong!

He was not unaware that Ivan Reid adopted a similar approach, only to fail at the last moment. However, the Ketis back then was very different from the wounded and recovering woman before him. He also did not intend to give up any advantages in order to play with his food.

"I will win this match cleanly!"

He proceeded to enact his plan. He rapidly circled around and lunged forward in order to launch another attack.

Ketis changed the orientation of her body with some difficulty and managed to deflect the stab, but Gelic was already moving after he pulled his body back! He circled around again and repeated his earlier attacks!

While Ketis was barely able to deflect the simple stabs, her diminished stamina rapidly drained as she did so. Gelic actually expended a lot more energy, but his previous matches hadn't injured him so much, so his endurance was monstrous in comparison!

Everytime she attempted to launch a counterattack, Gelic had already pulled out of range long ago!

Since she was unable to perform a lunge herself, there was no way for her to get close enough to her nimble target.

What was even worse was that when Ketis and Sharpie entered annihilation mode and started to cover Shiva's blade with a dark corona, Gelic rapidly dashed back in order to open up a healthy distance.

There was no way for Ketis to make good use of the technique she performed when her target was this far away!

Gelic patiently stood still and waited as Ketis continually condensed her will in order to maintain her current state.

That bastard was deliberately forcing her to consume her willpower!

She sighed and let go. Shiva's blade lost its dark sheen as the power of annihilation had receded.

As soon as Gelic saw that she retracted her energy, he immediately closed the distance and resumed his circling attacks!

Ketis had enough of this. She originally wanted to exercise restraint and avoid revealing anything more, but her adversary was too clever for his own good!

"Enough!"

She commanded Sharpie to return to its original form. When the urge to destroy receded from her mind, she began to focus on her first sword style.

Her unyielding will surged and her spirit became sharper. She soon began to resonate with Sharpie, which was actively helping her condense her will in a form that was much more familiar to her. The changes caused her to exude a substantially different vibe!

Gelic grew cautious and immediately backed off by at least twenty paces. He was spooked!

"Are you a swordsman or a coward? Fight me!" Ketis barked like a Swordmaiden as she slowly began to step forward!

Gelic did not allow her to reduce the distance between them. He cautiously maintained his stance even as he inched back.

What a cautious swordsman!

Even the audience began to boo and jeer at Gelic. This time, the Heavensworders had no qualms in taking her side!

"You scaredy-cat! Why aren't you attacking her head-on? The Sword Devil is standing right there!"

"You're less of a Heavensworder than the Sword Devil!"

"A true warrior always welcomes the chance to fight against a sword initiate!"

Despite the many ill remarks, Gelic did not let himself get pressured by public opinion. Winning was more important than winning a popularity contest, and the best way to accomplish this was to stick to his own plan!

His behavior did not break her expectations. While she faintly hoped that he would come closer and make things a little easier for her, she had to make do with the current situation.

Her eyes exuded a sharp glint as she began to accumulate power. Her will continued to surge and the resonance between Sharpie and her grew more intense!

What was truly new was that Ketis even extended her will into Shiva!

Even though the weapon did not welcome any influence that was different from that of the founder of the Annihilator Sword School, Ketis did not let this hinder her attempt.

"Sharpie!"

Her living sword intent somehow connected with Shiva and managed to smooth over the difference. It helped that Ketis had already bonded to it numerous times.

Shiva began to resonate with her. A sharp, white corona began to form on its edge. The manifestation steadily grew brighter and brighter as Ketis continued to gather more power!

Several dozen paces away, Gelic began to grow concerned at what was happening. The Sword of Lydia that Ketis displayed before was incredibly scary!

Yet even if Ketis was able to extend the reach of her saber by three times, so what? He stood far enough away that she had no chance of getting close enough to land a hit!

Even so, Gelic's intuition began to sound increasingly more alarms. There was something deeply dangerous about what she was doing at the moment.

Perhaps he made a mistake by backing off and giving her the time to prepare her next maneuver!

"When all else fails, just step back."

The arena was quite wide, so Gelic had plenty of room to back off. Out of an abundance of caution, he continually pushed himself back. Even if Ketis was able to unleash an energy manifestation that was ten times longer than her saber, Gelic would be at least a hundred paces away!

Ketis was well aware of what her opponent was doing, but she did not alter her actions. She didn't even bother to step forward!

"It's no use!" She grinned as the glint in her eyes had grown sharp enough to kill! "Taste the attack that has cut straight through a mech formation! EXECUTIONER!"

The glow around Shiva rapidly grew brighter until she performed a horizontal stab!

The energy manifestation leapt from her saber and surged forward like a projectile!

The audience gasped while Gelic immediately sensed the danger. Even though the energy manifestation did not travel as fast as a gun projectile, at this distance he had very little time to react!

Seeing that the height of the broad and narrow energy attack was set to cut off his legs, he decided to leap into the air in order to jump over the deadly wave!

Ketis smirked. "Did you think I failed to account for this possibility? You're too naive!"

While Ketis was not capable of influencing her energy attack after she had released it, Sharpie was different! As the personification of her sword intent, it maintained an active connection to the energy wave.

It only took a brief spurt of effort for Sharpie to adjust the trajectory of the energy attack and angle upwards.

Stuck in mid-air, Gelic did not have any leverage to alter his orientation in the air. Although he was already trying to pull up his legs, there was too little time for him to complete this last-ditch effort!

Shhhhhhhrt!

The sharp energy wave brutally cut off both of Gelic's vulnerable legs just above the knees!

Unlike the instances where Ketis utilized the power of annihilation, this time the energy blade made a very loud cutting noise as it passed through several different barriers!

Neither the energy shield nor the protective suit was able to negate the power of this transcendent attack. At best, the energy wave had weakened a lot, but Ketis made sure to pump enough power in it to complete its mission!

As the energy attack harmlessly dissipated after Sharpie issued another command, several meaty thumps echoed across the arena as Gelic's body parts dropped onto the surface.

A copious amount of blood leaked from the cut sections before the protective suit automatically adjusted its shape to stem the bleeding!

"AAAHHH! I NEED A MEDIC!"

Ketis calmly sheathed Shiva and turned her back to her injured opponent. She was already moving to the exit even before the announcer declared her victory.

Her body was already aching a lot from all of the weight she was bearing.

To the spectators who witnessed her incredible actions, she looked incredibly cool at the moment!

"WHOOAAAH!"

"She can unleash sword energy! She's much farther ahead than I thought!"

"The Sword Devil is much more impressive than Ivan Reid!"

If her previous performance against Ivan Reid could be dismissed as a fluke, then the domineering way she dispatched Gelic Rodomer definitely cemented her as championship material! Reaching the top 100 was practically guaranteed as long as her body condition didn't worsen!

Chapter 2904: Realizing Potential

"Among swordsmen, the release of sword energy is one of the most important steps to becoming a sword god." Fred explained as Ketis returned from her match against the overcautious Gelic. "Some swordmasters are incapable of unleashing it. You can imagine how rare and difficult it is for sword initiates to accomplish something similar at their stage. If the higher ups of our state hasn't paid much attention to you before, then it is definitely different from now! Each sword initiate who can manifest an attack to this degree is a treasure!"

The old scammer was all smiles right now. He had plenty of reasons to be jubilant! The amazing prowess that Ketis had just displayed practically tripled the interest in his sword school!

There were countless people in the Heavensword Association who dreamt of unleashing energy attacks just by swinging their swords. It not only looked awesome, but also solved one of the greatest weaknesses of swordsmen and swordsman mech pilots: lack of range!

Ketis didn't look too happy, though. While she managed to minimize her physical exertion, the sword energy release set back her mental recovery. Sharpie felt a little more deflated than before and it became harder for her to focus her mind.

Everything had a price! Even mystical sword energy attacks had to come from somewhere!

The strange part about this was that she possessed a lot more energy than she expected. She also recharged fairly quickly. She chalked this up to yet another quirk of her unusual state.

That said, when Venerable Dise derived the Executioner technique from a Swordmaiden battle formation, her results were considerably worse.

Unlike the Sword of Lydia, the Executioner was a much more elaborate and advanced technique. It involved several difficult principles that Venerable Dise wouldn't have been able to grasp if she didn't have the luxury of referencing her battle formations!

The technique that Dise passed on to Ketis was very rudimentary and still a work in progress. One of its major flaws was its low efficiency. It took too much energy to unleash the Executioner!

Fred grinned. "I don't think your future opponents will allow you to pull off this technique again. You can count the number of sword initiates who can propagate sword energy on one hand, maybe two if a couple of them have done a good job at hiding their strength. This means that they will essentially turn themselves into target dummies if they stupidly maintain their distance while you are charging up your attack. They have to get close and keep you occupied."

"That also plays in my hands." Ketis confidently responded. "The entire reason why I pulled off the Executioner to begin with was because my previous opponent insisted on staying out of my reach. As long as my opponents get close, I can utilize both of my sword styles to cut them apart!"

Learning the Executioner attack neatly solved her greatest weakness in her current state!

She had already formed a complete system. With the extraordinary characteristics of her two sword styles, she was an incredibly formidable threat at point-blank range. Now that she had a ranged solution in her arsenal, not even the fast and mobile types like Ivan Reid posed an insurmountable threat to her anymore!

The matches continued. Each time she stepped onto the arena, she stood proudly and exuded an indomitable vibe. It was as if her silent posture already signalled that she was bound to win the match!

The opponents she faced in the next couple of days became increasingly stronger, but no outliers had appeared for the moment.

This meant that each of them had to face a very difficult dilemma. They could choose to employ a cautious strategy and attempt to leverage their mobility to evade Ketis' attacks. They could also choose to attack her head-on and attempt to take advantage of her temporary weakness to avoid getting hit by her blade.

They all failed.

Ketis was slowly recovering with each day that passed. Fred constantly taught her the ins and outs of how to cultivate her swordsmanship according to the methods of the Heavensword Association. It became easier and easier for her to empower her attacks!

Her mentality also shifted. She frequently switched between the Swordmaiden Sword Style and the Annihilator Sword Style. Both of them possessed their own charm, and channeling them over and over slowly allowed her to develop her own insights in swordsmanship!

The advantage of possessing two separate sword styles was the same as having access to two different design philosophies!

Ketis was able to compare the two. This not only highlighted their common strengths, but also revealed their shortcomings. The contrast was so clear that she could easily recognize what needed to be changed in order to plug the weaknesses of either sword style.

"Maybe... this is how I'll be able to develop my own sword style!"

She was already generating some ideas about this endeavor. Due to her personal inclinations, she still planned to retain much of the Swordmaiden Sword Style. This would always be her starting point and anchor.

Every other sword style should be subordinate to her original style. Ketis did not intend to adopt the Annihilator Sword Style wholesale. Instead, she was content with plucking the most comfortable and desirable fruits from this tree.

She had to be very careful about this. Fred already warned her that combining sword styles mostly failed because of lack of compatibility!

This was also why there was no habit of directly exchanging techniques between sword schools. At most, the scriptures of their rivals could be used as reference material.

She continued to study, listen and read. She not only learned a wealth of knowledge from Fred, but also worked together with Venerable Dise to refine her two empowered moves.

Both the Sword of Lydia and the Executioner techniques became more controllable!

While her performance in the arena did not shift that much, secretly her combat prowess had soared!

She did not magically gain a lot of additional strength.

Instead, she was making better use of her existing potential. Her previous 'breakthrough' substantially increased her capacity, but it took a lot of time and effort to get accustomed to the new possibilities.

"I'm not sure I can still call myself a fake sword initiate anymore."

At some point, Ketis was able to replicate some of the charm of her two sword styles without leveraging Sharpie's help!

This was something that swordsmen invested a lot of years to accomplish!

Fred became shocked when he saw Ketis cutting through a practice pillar with Shiva!

Even though the saber did not completely pass through the thick pillar, the progress she made was record-breaking!

"If this is what you can truly accomplish without relying on any tricks, then you have definitely reached the standard of a pseudo-sword initiate!" He said. "It's only a matter of time before you become a genuine sword initiate!"

Ketis shrugged. "I was only able to progress this quickly because I am constantly able to reference the end point of my journey. It's like having all of the answers of a school exam."

"I don't think it's that simple, Ketis. If you aren't a pure and genuine swordswoman, you wouldn't have been able to comprehend any of the essence of the Annihilator Sword Style to begin with. I can't count the number of spoiled brats I've met who tried and failed to master a sword style because they were too dependent on the help and tutelage of swordmasters. Those types exist in our state as well."

She felt a bit prouder after he said that. Her determination to prove that she was not a fraud pushed her into making a serious effort into comprehending the Annihilator Sword Style!

Being able to reference the strength of a late-stage sword initiate by making use of Sharpie allowed her to avoid many detours and dead-ends. This was actually one of the primary reasons why swordsmen progressed so slowly or not at all. It was very difficult for other swordsmen to pass on this kind of understanding because everyone's situation was unique.

Yet Ketis was essentially able to compare herself to a future version of herself!

Whether it was cheating or not, she no longer quibbled over this issue. Plenty of powerful swordsmen took advantage of their own unique peculiarities.

Some were born with insane natural reflexes.

A handful of tournament participants possessed superhuman endurance.

Others merely took advantage of their family relations in order to receive privileged instruction!

Therefore, absolute fairness was not a realistic notion in the Heavensword Association.

Her rapid improvement in swordsmanship caused her to cherish this moment. Even if she dropped out of the solo tournament right away, her visit to the Heavensword Association was already one of the best periods of her life!

She still missed the Larkinson Clan though. One of the aspects she missed about her life was designing mechs. The tight tournament schedule did not grant her any opportunity to resume her primary profession!

Ketis looked forward to returning to the expeditionary fleet with all of her gains. Even if it was difficult for her to directly translate her progress in swordsmanship to her mech design career, there should be at least a bit of overlap!

She even began to speculate whether it was possible to incorporate her masteries into her mech designs!

However, she was not ready to go back to her old routine. Even as the Greater Omanderie Festival and its associated tournaments entered its later stages, Ketis felt it was her duty as a swordswoman to reach the limit of her capabilities. She had become fully caught up in the competitive spirit of the occasion!

Eventually, the match that would allow her to enter the top 100 loomed close. She had already reached the top 1000 some time ago. Whether it was a coincidence or not, she did not encounter any top seeds.

Secretly, she wondered whether the tournament organizers deliberately shuffled the matchups to prevent her from smashing the proud sons and daughters too early.

She didn't complain. The lack of strong opponents granted her ample time to recover her physical and mental states without exacerbating her existing conditions!

The few opponents who were able to defeat the old Ketis from before entering the tournament no longer posed a challenge to her! The difference in strength between a regular swordsman and a sword initiate was as great as the gap between a regular mech pilot and an expert candidate!

In a one-on-one fight, a sword initiate was virtually invincible against opponents who failed to grasp the essence of a sword style!

Unfortunately, just before she was about to enter the top 100, she finally bumped into a proper challenge.

"It was inevitable for you to reach this point." Fred spoke after he entered her practice yard. "Millions of swordsmen took part in this tournament. Many of them are average and only sought to get as far as their luck and skill could bring them. By now, they have all been eliminated by their betters. The swordsmen who remain up to this point are either sword initiates, pseudo-sword initiates or freaks who enjoy abnormal advantages."

Ketis pretty much belonged to the latter category.

"Just cut to the chase. Who is my next opponent?"

Fred looked serious. "It's a woman this time. Scipia Pepperin is a sword initiate who is a few years older than you. She is a seeded competitor and most betting agencies rank her between fifth and fifteenth. While she isn't the favorite to win the tournament, she is definitely able to contend against the top seeds!"

Whether she was stronger or weaker than Ivan Reid, she would never look down on Ketis after what had happened to her rival. Scipia would definitely approach the fight seriously from the very start and not let up until she definitely secured victory!

Ketis did not feel afraid. Instead, excitement and anticipation welled up inside her. Different from before, she had already returned to her peak condition.

She would be able to fight Scipia on a level playing field!

Chapter 2905: Unrelenting Raider

The final matches took place in a different venue.

In order to accommodate the huge amount of Heavensworders and tourists who wanted to witness the exciting battles with their own eyes, the solo tournament moved to the grand and spacious First Sword Arena.

Despite its simple-sounding name, the First Sword Arena was the very first competitive venue of its kind on Omanderie III. It used to be a modest-sized structure that only accommodated a couple of thousand spectators at first.

Over the years and centuries, successive administrations renovated it in order to keep up with the growth of the planet.

At this point, the First Sword Arena was one of the biggest of its kind in the Heavensword Association! With a capacity of 5 million visitors, it was able to concentrate an immense amount of humans in a limited arena!

In order to fit so many people in a single venue and still allow them to obtain a decent view of the dueling swordsmen, its design incorporated a lot of verticality.

From the outside, the main building was shaped like a thick and massive sword that had been thrust halfway into the ground.

Inside this hollow sword, there were over a hundred floors where personal combat duels could be held.

This time, the First Sword Arena retracted all of those floors. Instead, only a single semi-transparent arena floor existed in the middle.

Those sitting in the stands at the bottom end of the public area would be able to look through the transparent floor and view the action from an unconventional perspective.

It went without saying that these seats were not very desirable. Their price was cheaper and the amount of space and comfort they provided was lower.

Nevertheless, lots of average citizens flocked to them! Too many Heavensworders never had the opportunity to see the best sword initiates in action. Opening up the lower seats was a good way to allow millions of people a chance of admiring the splendor of elite swordsmen!

Still, the best way to experience the thrilling sword duels was to occupy a seat on the upper half of the arena stands. Ticket prices for these seats cost so many sword coins they were firmly out of reach to the average household!

This was where the tournaments made a killing. The prices were high, but the demand was even greater. Aside from wealthy fans, many professional swordsmen and swordsman mech pilots were willing to pay years worth of salary to attend a single good match.

Viewing a match in person was much different from viewing it from a projection. The clash of wills, the outbursts of energy and the emotions of the crowd all contributed to an unforgettable experience that enriched any swordsman who understood the nuances of sword duels!

Every Heavensworder dreamed of getting inspired by what they managed to observe and feel from the matches. The direct and indirect benefits of witnessing great swordsmen in action had already been proven in numerous academic studies.

There were good reasons why the Heavensword Association organized so many tournaments!

Ketis readied herself up. She donned a familiar protective suit that projected the emblem of the Annihilator Sword School.

When she had to choose her weapon loadout, she briefly hesitated before deciding to bring both of her weapons to the arena for the first time since her match against Ivan Reid.

She had become slightly fond with the convenience of wielding Shiva. While she still favored her CFA greatsword, she did not oppose using other weapons, unlike some purists. She was quite practical in that regard.

"Does your sword have a name?" Fred asked.

"Huh?"

"Your greatsword. You're quite fond of it. I can tell."

She frowned. "Uhm, I never really named it. We don't have a tradition of doing so in the Swordmaidens."

"You should consider adopting it, then. When you invest so much care and attention to a weapon, it becomes more than a tool. It becomes your partner. The least you can do is to give it a name in order to make it yours."

Though Fred Walinski did not see life in objects like Ves, the Heavensworders developed their own romantic notions with swords. There were many locals who believed that swords would grow stronger or help them reach a higher level in swordsmanship if they earnestly took care of their weapons!

In any case, it was always good practice to maintain your weapon. Even if all of this attention didn't yield any extra benefits, the Heavensworders did not have a reason to stop this custom.

Ketis seriously looked at her greatsword. With the help of Sharpie, she sensed the life buried deep within. Although it was faint, she knew that she was responsible for fostering this living entity.

This caused her to feel a little mixed. She always adopted the perspective of a bystander whenever Ves expounded on his theories on how objects could obtain life.

Yet now that she had personally brought her most cherished weapon to life, it had become personal.

"This is my baby." She whispered.

She felt like a mother who became bewildered at the appearance of a new child. Even though she frequently handled her CFA greatsword for several years, she never thought about this outcome.

Now that she did, there was no justification to leave her close companion without a name. It deserved better.

She ran her hand across the smooth Unending alloy that covered the large and heavy blade. The dark metal seemed to welcome her touch. She felt as if she was petting a much more docile version of Lucky.

Still, try as she might, she failed to come up with a name that fit her greatsword.

"Naming a sword is a sacred custom. You don't have to rush it if you don't feel like it." Fred reassured her after he noticed her changing mood. "Wielding it in battle is a good way for you to discover a name that suits the character of your weapon."

"I'll try that, then."

Up until now, she hadn't fully unveiled the remarkable properties of her Unending greatsword. Her match against Ivan Reid mostly put her on the defensive. At the end, she relied on the manifested Sword of Lydia rather than the physical properties of her weapon to cut her opponent's limb.

She hoped that would change this match. Against average opponents, empowered techniques were virtually irresistible, but sword initiates definitely had plenty of means to resist such attacks!

Since channeling so much willpower and evoking so much energy was exhausting, sword initiates did not repeat their most powerful moves all the time. They had to ration their resources carefully. Therefore, plain swordsmanship still played a huge role in battles between top swordsmen.

After a lot of preparation, Ketis finally stepped into the sole battle floor of the First Sword Arena.

[On the left side, we have Interim Director Ketis Larkinson of the Annihilator Sword School! The Sword Devil needs no introduction. After dispatching the famed head disciple of the Cloudstrider Sword School, this foreign-born sword initiate has cemented her status as the greatest dark horse of this festival!]

The audience in the upper half of the stands roared so much that Ketis couldn't even discern any words! The sheer enthusiasm of millions of fans washed over her like a tide.

She had never drawn so much public admiration in her life! While she had already been accustomed to attracting cheers in her previous matches, the scale was different this time.

The millions of people that were stacked on top of each other showing their appreciation for her cemented her transformation into a public figure!

She was no longer Ketis the obscure Swordmaiden mech designer. Now, she had not only become the head of a sword school, but also a renowned sword initiate.

In the Larkinson Clan, these labels were enough to propel her into the middle-upper ranks of the hierarchy! No longer would people treat her like 'just' another Apprentice Mech Designer. No longer would her student-mentor relationship with Ves be the most eye-catching part about her identity.

It was only when she acknowledged the adoration of so many sword enthusiasts that she fully accepted her new status.

A faint induction allowed her to sense that there were even more people cheering her on from below.

The ground looked solid to her when she looked down, but she knew that it acted as a one-way window. Even though they needed the help of massive projections to gain a good view of the upcoming match, the people over there were even more rowdy due to their more modest backgrounds!

As she held her place, her opponent soon entered from the other side.

[Please welcome Head Disciple Scipia Pepperin of the Brevis Sword School! Known as the Unrelenting Raider, Miss Pepperin is one of the most skilled dual-wielding sword initiates in the tournament. Her twin blades have posed a nightmare to many challengers who wish to overcome her defenses.]

Many notable swordsmen and swordswomen acquired nicknames or titles over the course of their career. As long as they performed well enough or generated enough of fame, the press would automatically figure something out to embellish their image.

Of course, the recipients of these names usually didn't have a choice in how the public called them. This was one of the established rules regarding unofficial titles.

The reason why Scipia Pepperin became known as the Unrelenting Raider was because of her active fighting style.

"Hello, Sword Devil." She greeted Ketis after reaching her assigned spot.

"Hello, Unrelenting Raider."

"You don't have to call me that. It's an ungainly name. Just call me Scipia."

"Then you can call me Ketis."

Unlike her previous opponents, Scipia was the first person who stood on the same level as Ketis. Neither of them looked down on each other.

Since they respected each other's abilities, there was no harm in making friendly contact. If Ketis was a genuine Heavensworder, then she would probably get in touch with Scipia lots of times.

It was very hard for sword initiates to find worthy sparring partners. A typical sword school either had one or no sword initiates at all, so people like Scipia frequently had to look elsewhere to spar against a partner that was neither overwhelmingly strong or painfully weak.

Unfortunately, Ketis had no intentions of sticking around. She unsheathed Shiva and entered a battle-ready stance.

"I'd love to chat and all, but there are better ways of getting to know each other. Let's fight!"

"Aye. I suppose you're right!" Scipia grinned while she pulled out her identical shortswords.

As one of the stronger seeded competitors, her twin weapons were quite remarkable. While the public didn't know the full details about them, Scipia's swords were notable in their lightness and resilience.

The Unrelenting Raider's choice of weapons fully complemented her active fighting style!

Facing Scipia with a single weapon would be tough. While Ketis possessed enough strength to wield her CFA greatsword in one hand while holding Shiva with her other hand, she would be a fool to do so. She would lose far too much control and probably even risk losing her grip on one of her weapons!

As the countdown approached zero, Ketis held her saber in both hands.

[Commence the match!]

She pushed herself forward and boldly attempted to meet Scipia in battle right away!

"Hahaha! I knew you were similar to me. This will be a fun duel!" The other woman laughed as she stormed forward as well!

Clang!

Neither of the women empowered their techniques. Instead, they collided against each other before exchanging a flurry of attacks.

Though Ketis attempted to utilize force to break Scipia's guard, the inheritor of the Brevis Sword School crossed her swords and skillfully blocked and deflected every incoming strike.

It was as if Shiva kept getting entangled into a net!

When Ketis slowed down, Scipia seamlessly transitioned to an offensive posture!

This time, the Swordmaiden was struggling to fend off multiple attacks coming from different directions. She continually had to step back in order to evade the attacks that she wasn't able to block.

Even though there wasn't as much force behind her attacks, Scipia's attacks were very hard for Ketis to defend against!

Chapter 2906: Shackled Swordswoman

Ketis was glad that Scipia Pepperin treated her as a serious opponent.

Unlike the farce that took place in her match against the Cloudstriders, Ketis truly felt she was fighting a proper sword duel this time.

Yet her appreciation quickly made way for frustration as the reality of fighting against a strong and challenging opponent settled in. Unlike the lower-ranked swordsmen that folded after getting hit by a single empowered attack, Scipia was anything but a pushover!

"Heh! You're not bad!" Scipia complimented even as she executed a vicious stab just as her other sword locked Shiva in place.

"Same!" Ketis responded as she pushed herself back against Scipia's blade in order to evade the stab.

"Why do you lug around a greatsword?"

"It's my first weapon."

"Then why not fight it in the first place?"

"I don't want to defeat you too quickly."

"Then I will make sure to force you to draw out your real weapon!"

Scipia Pepperin was an excellent swordswoman. From the first few exchanges, she already recognized that Ketis was not entirely fluent in wielding a one-handed saber.

Even though the Swordmaiden mastered all of the basic moves, her battle consciousness with the weapon fell a bit behind. The difference was quite noticeable, and Scipia was a little disappointed with fighting against someone with less skill than she expected.

Although Ketis knew that she wasn't fighting at her best when wielding Shiva, she was still confident in her own skill. It didn't matter if she was having a hard time right now. As long as she held on, her proficiency in wielding a saber visibly grew better!

As a mech designer, Ketis did not wish to dedicate herself to designing swordsman mechs that excelled in wielding greatswords. While this would definitely become one of

her primary interests, she wanted to explore the possibilities of different swords and configurations.

With the rise of the Annihilator Sword School and the entry of thousands of new Swordmaiden mech pilots, Ketis wanted to meet the needs of all of them no matter what kind of weapon they excelled at! Wielding one-handed weapons like Shiva was just the first step in her journey to master every type of sword!

Although Ketis hadn't fully formulated her own sword style as of yet, she had already made a decision to move beyond the monolithic Swordmaiden Sword Style.

This mainly had to do with her unique advantages. Sharpie's existence allowed her to quickly pick up new sword styles. Even if she had to put in the hard effort to master the sword styles that Sharpie was somehow able to replicate, she possessed an undeniable edge on this front!

If she was just a pure swordswoman, then she would have probably chosen to dedicate herself to a single style, whether it was the Swordmaiden Sword Style or an adaptation of it. Yet because she needed to balance her needs as a swordswoman and a mech designer, she felt it was more beneficial for her if she broadened her scope and tried to attain enlightenment in swordsmanship by learning every style.

Her ultimate goal was to become the best swordsman mech designer in the cosmos! Perhaps some extremely dedicated mech designers might be able to surpass her in designing a single specific model, but Ketis wanted to be able to design excellent swordsman mechs that conformed to every sword style she mastered!

Of course, a part of that long and unending journey was to gain proficiency in dual-wielding styles like the Brevis Sword Style.

Even as Ketis continually struggled to block and evade Scipia's attacks, her eyes constantly shone with interest as she observed her opponent's actions.

From what she recalled of the Brevis Sword School, it was a two-century old institution that had built up a modest inheritance. Its situation was much better than that of the Annihilator Sword School.

As a newer and less conservative school, the Brevis Swordmasters were not sticklers for traditions. Each of them had successively altered and expanded the Brevis Sword Style with offensive, defensive and movement-oriented techniques.

Right now, Scipia only made use of ordinary swordsmanship moves, but Ketis sensed that her opponent was gathering momentum.

The Unrelenting Raider's had already launched more than a hundred attacks, but there was no sign that Scipia was flagging anytime soon!

Swordsmen at this level were heavily augmented without exception. Even if they looked like normal humans on the surface, underneath their skin their muscles were derived from powerful artificial genes. Here and there, foreign modules in the form of biological or mechanical implants specifically improved someone's endurance, force exertion, running speed, reaction time and more attributes.

Prominent sword initiates like Scipia Pepperin always received the most luxurious treatment when it came to augmenting their physical capabilities!

Therefore, Ketis soon found out that she barely won over when comparing physiques.

This was not outside her expectations. Ivan Reid similarly closed the gap to her on some points. What was frightening was that the Cloudstrider disciple vastly exceeded her in other areas such as speed!

Fortunately, Scipia apparently did not possess a similar advantage.

Even though the Brevis Sword Style was very active and mobile, it did not emphasize speed and evasion as much as the Cloudstrider Sword Style.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ketis continued to circle backwards as she hastily blocked a flurry of slashes. She had become more proficient at dealing with attacks coming from different directions. She began to incorporate more lateral movement in her steps. This allowed her to counterattack if the opportunity presented itself!

Still, it was not that easy for Ketis to land a hit on her opponent.

"Hah! I can read you from a star system away! The downside to holding one weapon at a time is that I don't have to split my attention too much!"

The character of the Brevis Sword Style became more clear to Ketis. It was not the fastest or most explosive of styles she encountered, but it was very hard to deal with. The Brevis Sword Style seemed as if it was designed to fight against tough opponents!

Ketis respected that. The Swordmaiden Sword Style was also geared towards defeating stronger and more powerful enemies.

Still, now that she was on the receiving end of this treatment, she did not feel good at all. No matter whether she slashed, chopped or lunged, either one of two shortsword would come and spoil her attempt without fail.

Scipia didn't even lose any sweat in the process!

A normal approach wasn't working. Shiva lacked the heft and reach of her CFA greatsword. If she wielded the latter, then she might have been able to apply more force to break Scipia's guard.

There was another way to break the pattern. Ketis briefly hesitated, but eventually decided to make the first move.

"Sharpie!"

Her living sword intent quickly embraced the Annihilator Sword Style. At the same time, Ketis actively changed her thought patterns so that her mind conformed to her newest sword style.

A slight resonance formed between Shiva, her mind, Sharpie.

"Destroyer's Blade!"

A dark corona surrounded Shiva's blade. It was as if some kind of black ink had stained its shiny metallic surface.

The desire to destroy Scipio's guard and ruin her annoying shortswords quickly welled up in her mind. Though Ketis respected her opponent, at this moment she wanted to do nothing more than to break the obstacles in her way!

Clang!

The crossed shortswords that blocked her empowered saber were also shining at this time!

"I was expecting that! It took you long enough to resort to this trick!"

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Even though Ketis had gone on the offensive, Scipia skillfully blocked and deflected the incoming attack without enduring any apparent strain. Her unrelenting will sustained the empowerment of her twin blades and granted them enough strength to resist the power of annihilation!

Ketis grimaced and decided to pull back and open up some distance. She needed to get her bearings and rethink her approach.

"You don't have much experience with fighting against sword initiates, do you?" Scipia taunted as she relaxed her posture a bit. She did not mind the small reprieve considering she had been intensively for several long minutes. "What was it like to live outside the Heavensword Association?"

"Well, we didn't have all this." Ketis gestured to the enormous audience who were all thrilled with what they had seen so far. "Swordsmen and swordswomen are seen as weirdos rather than honorable warriors. People just think there's no point in wielding swords when using rifles is much more effective most of the time."

"They aren't wrong. It may not look like it, but we do field mechs and soldiers armed with the same kind of rifles and cannons that are used outside our state. We just don't exhibit them all that much. As powerful as we are, there simply aren't enough sword initiates and swordmasters to cover every need."

Even the Heavensword Association had to bend to reality. If all of its mechs and soldiers only brought swords into the battlefield, then the state would have been overrun a long time ago by its neighbors!

"You're the first Heavensworder I've spoken to who openly acknowledges that. You guys aren't fans of ranged weapons."

Scipia smiled. "Not everyone has a sword up his backside like Ivan Reid. While I haven't traveled outside the Heavensword Association yet, I have entertained plenty of foreign guests."

"If you want, you can pay a visit to our Larkinson Clan. We welcome lots of outsiders. We would love to entertain a skilled sword initiate."

"I'll have to pass. I have too many responsibilities at my sword school to stay away for too long. I envy you a bit. You enjoy much more freedom than the rest of us disciples."

This was the life of someone who dedicated herself to a single sword style. They were investments that were supposed to deliver value to their sword schools. It took an incredible amount of money and resources to raise someone like Scipia to this point. If the Unrelenting Raider failed to advance to swordmaster, then much of the value put into her would go to waste!

For a moment, Ketis pitied Scipia. The latter clearly felt more constricted by the invisible bonds that kept her locked in place.

This did not mean that Ketis would go soft. She still had a match to win, and she could not allow her sympathy to muddle her purpose!

Scipia grew serious. Her shortwords glowed brighter. "Get ready. I'm about to show you the real Brevis Sword Style!"

She sprinted forward and began to wield her glowing blades in a distinctly different fashion!

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

Their blades continually met as Scipia turned into a whirling storm. She somehow swung her blades faster than before and the way she spun around in order to leverage her angular momentum made her attacks a lot more difficult for Ketis to block!

Stepping back no longer worked because Scipia had suddenly turned sticky. The two women clung together so much that it was as if they were bound together by a chain!

Ketis had to exert her blocking skills to a much greater degree as a result. Sometimes, a shortsword just managed to bypass Shiva. The Swordmaiden had to employ all of her strength in order to sidestep the threat at the last instance!

The Annihilator Sword Style became increasingly more cumbersome to Ketis!

As an rudimentary first-generation sword style that hadn't been worked on for many years, it lacked powerful defensive techniques. Ketis had to rely on her own swordsmanship in order to hold her ground!

She knew she had to change the variables. If this went on, then her guard would slip sooner or later. Even if Scipia was exerting herself to a much greater degree, her abundant stamina allowed her to sustain her offensive with ease!

Her will grew more condensed. Even as Ketis found it increasingly more difficult to fend off the flurry of attacks, her unyielding spirit grew more indignant.

A Swordmaiden should never be passive!

Chapter 2907: Rudimentary Innovations

When Venerable Trey Walinski advanced to expert pilot, he did not live long enough to complete the Annihilator Sword Style.

Oh sure, the basics were all there. Its repertoire even incorporated a couple of empowered techniques.

Yet after Ketis fought against numerous disciples of other sword schools, she recognized that the Annihilator Sword Style possessed too many gaps.

If Venerable Trey didn't die when he was at the prime of his life, he would have been able to flesh out his sword style.

As it was, he died before he could work out the defensive and movement techniques of his sword style.

This caused the Annihilator Sword Style to possess a purely offensive character. As long as Ketis was on the attack, then she could take full advantage of the power of annihilation to demolish the opposition.

Yet in situations where she was put on the defensive and the power of annihilation wasn't enough to break the deadlock, the sword style became a lot less impressive!

It was no wonder why the Annihilator Sword School failed to gain any inheritors after the death of its founder. The sword style it taught was too incomplete, causing it to become far too one-dimensional in practice.

This shortcoming had become especially obvious after Scipia launched her latest offensive!

"Hahaha! No one is able to last forever against my Whirling Dervish! Either my attacks will break you, or you will break mine!"

Ketis quickly figured out what made Scipia's Whirling Dervish technique so powerful.

The Unrelenting Raider was able to spin and build up her angular momentum with significantly greater ease than she should considering her physical prowess.

It was as if Scipia turned herself into a spinning top!

The worst part about this was that Scipia didn't slow down over time. She spun a little faster after completing a couple of revolutions. This not only increased the frequency of her attacks, but also put a lot more force behind the blows!

Ketis did not dare to block the shortwords head-on anymore. She had to leverage all of her skill and strength to deflect the incoming attacks and redirect all of the incoming force into the air.

Yet even as she fended the dervish, Ketis patiently accumulated energy. Her willingness to destroy grew stronger as she actively fed this desire. As Shiva's blade continued to grow darker, she finally judged that she had done enough to execute her first self-invented move!

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ketis deflected and diverted a couple more attacks before she keenly grasped the small window of opportunity where Scipia was still preoccupied with spinning around for another round of attacks.

While this window of opportunity was too short to allow Ketis to launch a conventional counterattack, the move she was about to pull off was much swifter!

"Release!"

Shiva rapidly slashed forward. As it swung in Scipia's direction, the dark energy that covered it loosened up and propelled forward as if Ketis had just whipped it off the blade!

A cloud of annihilation energy expanded as it continued to surge forward! If any of it landed onto an unprotected body, then the consequences would be dire, but Ketis was confident the protective measures in place could stop her move from going too far.

Before the energy shield had time to activate, Scipia had already formed her own countermeasure.

Even as she spun, she rapidly darted backwards. This bought her enough time to complete her spin while rapidly swinging her shortswords in a defensive posture.

Her quick actions generated a defensive barrier formed out of sword energy!

The glowing sword energy barrier only lasted for a brief amount of time, but it was more than sufficient to block the annihilation energy from going forward.

Ketis clicked her tongue at the sight. What a useful defensive technique!

"Damn, you almost killed me." Scipia joked. Despite her words, she did not sound as if she just avoided a brush with death. "I've long known you were able to project your sword energy, so I never let down my guard."

It was worth a try. The move she pulled off was quite simple. She simply borrowed some of the principles of the Executioner technique and applied them to the Annihilator Sword Style.

While the results were extremely rough, it still represented a change in the Annihilator Sword Style.

She had already begun to innovate!

Unfortunately, that was all she had. She lacked the time to create more sophisticated moves with the Annihilator Sword Style.

After taking a deep breath, she let go of her destroyer mindset and put Shiva back into her sheathe. She solemnly drew her CFA greatsword from her back.

A different kind of intensity began to well up from her mind. Her unyielding will grew sharp and strong. Scipia clearly sensed the distance and grew a little more serious.

"You're finally pulling out the big one. I've been waiting for this."

Ketis pinned Scipia with her sharp eyes. "The real fight starts now!"

She charged forward and chopped her greatsword in a way that forced her opponent to defend!

CLAAAANG!

Even if Scipia managed to cross her swords and meet the incoming attack, the force and momentum behind the blow was on another level.

This time, it was the Unrelenting Raider's turn to take a step back!

Ketis did not let up. She pulled back her greatsword and attacked as quickly as possible.

CLAAAANG!

It didn't matter to her that Scipia managed to block her obvious moves. Ketis merely repeated her actions and hacked down her sword at a slow but disturbing pace.

Though Scipia looked a bit aggrieved, she was unable to launch any counterattacks. Her swords were too short and she needed to spend a bit of time to get within reach.

This brief time interval was more to launch another counterattack!

As their wills increasingly pressed against each other, Scipia knew that she could not let the current situation go on like this further.

Without announcing her move in advance, the Unrelenting Raider blocked yet another heavy swing before she rapidly turned and swung her crossed blades forward.

This motion caused her to relieve the momentous glows that had previously covered her shortwords.

Ketis immediately recognized the threat and blocked the incoming sword energy waves with the flat of her CFA greatsword.

"Ooof!"

Though she successfully blocked the energy attacks, she failed to account for their momentum! Somehow, the illogical and poorly-understood sword energy conveyed a lot of momentum that completely pushed Ketis back!

"You're mine now!" The Unrelenting Raider grinned as she was already darting forward.

Ketis was in a very dangerous position right now! She had a lot of trouble with restoring her balance after feeling as if someone attempted to push her over!

Scipia approached faster than before. Her twin swords glowed brightly as was about to launch another flurry of attacks!

"I'm not falling for this trap!"

From what had happened before, Ketis knew that she would just get pushed back again and lose her balance if she dared to resist Scipia's empowered blades.

At this time, Ketis didn't have the time to pull off any big moves. That didn't stop her from channeling the power of sharpness over her entire blade!

In the past, this action would have exhausted her. Now, she could maintain state for quite a while due to all of the growth she had experienced in her mind.

Although Scipia suddenly became a lot more wary about clashing head-on against Ketis' sharpness-empowered sword, the Unrelenting Raider did not recede.

The heir of the Brevis Sword School was also a sword initiate! She had tangled against lots of sword styles. At her current state, she could easily resist the effects of different kinds of sword energy as long as she did not tangle against swordmasters.

Yet as the empowered CFA greatsword swung close, Scipia suddenly had a bad feeling about this. She quickly crossed her blade and switched to a defensive posture!

Schwing!

The collision sounds were different this time!

To Scipia's horror, the greatsword's glowing edge cut through the protective sword energy field and partially managed to leave some shallow cuts onto the shortwords!

"What the?! My swords! You hurt my swords!"

Ketis grinned as she saw that she succeeded in pulling off one of the moves she theorized.

This was another small innovation. As someone who was able to utilize multiple sword styles, she had gained a lot more insights about the nature of sword energy.

While different kinds of sword energy were able to resist each other for the most part, Ketis wondered whether she could break this pattern.

Her sharpness superpower was mainly derived from her mech designer occupation, not her swordsmanship occupation. This caused her to break the conventional rules concerning sword energy.

The Conceptual Cut she invented was basically an attempt to generate an edge that could cut conceptual and non-physical targets!

By leveraging her expertise as a mech designer, she utilized that to augment her original superpower to the point where it could theoretically cut through other forms of sword energy!

Although the results weren't as good as she hoped, her first attempt succeeded in catching Scipia off-guard!

The Unrelenting Raider grew a lot more grave once she saw the shallow cuts that Ketis had managed to inflict on the twin weapons.

"My swords... you'll pay for this!"

Scipia turned into a raging hellcat as her damaged shortswords glowed a lot brighter! Once she came close enough, she split her blades apart and threw them forward!

The sudden move took Ketis by surprise. She managed to deflect one of the projectiles, but the other shortsword slightly managed to bounce off her shoulder.

Ketis had been hit!

Although the move wasn't considered fatal, she had obviously lost a serious amount of points.

Scipia had leaned backwards again. She held out her hands and received the flying shortswords as if they had a mind of their own!

"I'm not done yet!"

The disciple of the Brevis Sword School brought her blades together and somehow caused them to fuse. The thick composite sword began to vibrate as the sword energy on it began to expand.

After a few seconds, a bright and nearly-solid energy blade had extended from the fused shortswords!

From the way that Scipia held the weapon, it was as if she was wielding a greatsword of her own!

"Taste my One Blade!"

As Scipia swung the greatsword that was partially made out of sword energy towards Ketis, a great amount of momentum propelled her attack.

Even if Ketis managed to block the incoming attack, she was certain that she would violently launch backwards!

Even though she had already exhibited the capacity to cut through sword energy, the One Blade exhibited by Scipia was too thick and powerful! The Unrelenting Raider had truly invested a lot of power in this finishing move!

Fortunately, Ketis had a finishing move of her own!

"Your sword is an imitation! Mine is much more real than yours will ever be!" She declared as she rapidly channeled the Sword of Lydia.

Although she lacked the time to accumulate a lot of power, Sharpie and her were already working at their peak.

The resonance they formed with Ketis' greatsword was also spiking!

As her CFA greatsword became more alive, Ketis roared as a large and formidable sword energy blade extended out of its tip!

BANG!

A bright explosion of light erupted as the two energy blades collided against each other!

Sword energy clashed head-on against sword energy!

An unyielding will pushed right against an unrelenting will!

Although this contest sounded even a first, one side quickly managed to gain the upper hand.

A single greatsword flung out of a swordswoman's grip and landed on the ground!

That 'greatsword' had long lost its energy extension. As it clattered to the floor, it split apart into two damaged shortwords.

Meanwhile, the CFA greatsword that had completely overpowered Scipia's weapon had lost its sword energy edge as well.

Ketis pulled it back the moment she managed to disarm her opponent. As it was, the tip of her greatsword was too far away to cut off one of Scipia's limbs.

"The match is over." She spoke with absolute certainty.

The woman known as the Unrelenting Raider began to deflate. Her forceful momentum had been interrupted and her intensity had begun to fade.

She looked regretfully at her fallen sword before turning back to Ketis.

"Yes. It's over. You've won."

Although the audience was still confused at what had happened at the final moment, that did not change the fact that Ketis was feeling immensely satisfied right now!

Unlike her previous victories, this was the first time that she had won a proper sword duel against a proper opponent!

Not only did she achieve a clean victory, she also proved that she was good enough to vie for the championship!

"The top 100 is not enough!"

Chapter 2908: Difficult Match

Ketis had reached the top 100 of the single personal combat tournament of the Greater Omanderie Festival!

Out of a body of millions of swordsmen, Ketis had fought her way through both the strong and weak. She not only mowed her way through dozens of small fry, but also vanquished strong disciples of famed and renowned sword schools.

Her clean and convincing victory against the Scipia Pepperin of the Brevis Sword School earned her a huge amount of glory!

Naturally, the Swordmaidens organized a private celebration to mark this stellar accomplishment!

"Cheers for Ketis!"

"Cheers for defeating the Unrelenting Raider!"

"Cheers for reaching the top 100!"

The old Swordmaiden veterans all raised their frothy mugs and clinked them together, not caring if half of the drinks inside got spilled!

The women rarely let themselves go, but they were ultimately human, not emotionless bots. It felt good that one of their own had reached the finals of one of the tournaments!

Commander Sendra smiled in satisfaction as she observed the happy faces among her close comrades.

Ever since the Swordmaidens lost hundreds of mech pilots and many other sisters, a cloud of loss and lack of confidence had settled over them all. Joining the Larkinson Clan didn't help, as they were unlike the other mech forces who could instantly expand their ranks by accepting general recruits.

It was different now. The decent performance of the Swordmaidens along with the continuous wins secured by Ketis had secured the revival of their sisterhood!

If not for the fact that Sendra wanted to make sure that Ketis wouldn't be too distracted, she could have easily let in several hundred qualified recruits to the villa.

Each of them were formidable swordsman mech pilots or swordswomen who learnt about the Swordmaidens after observing Ketis in the arena!

"The Larkinsons will become quite surprised once we return to the fleet." She grinned.

Although it wouldn't be easy to integrate total strangers into the Swordmaidens, she was confident that her sisters could deal with the changes. They all wanted their sisterhood to rise again, and with the help of stars like Venerable Dise and Ketis, none of the newcomers would be stupid enough to throw their weight around!

"Ketis, do you think you can earn the trophy?"

The woman at the center of the celebration responded with a modest smile. "I have a chance, I think. I dare not say anything more."

"Hah! The championship is already yours! No sword initiate can show off so much power as you! The Sword of Lydia alone is enough to cut through every fancy trick!"

The Swordmaiden mech designer continued to smile, but inwardly she shook her head. Her swordsmanship wasn't comprehensive like that of the top seeds. She possessed obvious strengths and glaring weaknesses. She dare not say she could defeat every possible opponent.

She calmly drank a glass of nutrient drink. While she wanted to partake in alcohol like the rest of her sisters, it was irresponsible for her to do so when she had to make another appearance soon.

In fact, her enhanced physique could easily break down alcohol before it severely affected her judgement, but she did not wish to leave anything to chance. A warrior who vied to be the best must always be disciplined. This was both a mental and physical requirement.

As she thought of the challenges she overcame and how much she had grown, Ketis could hardly recognize herself now. Sharpie's presence had grown a lot more vigorous than before and her will equaled that of an expert candidate for some reason.

It was a pity that she wouldn't be staying around forever. The Heavensword Association would always remain as just one destination among many in her life. As a prominent member of the Larkinson Clan, her future lay in the greater sea of stars. A single second-rate state in the galactic rim could never possibly allow her to design the best swordsman mechs.

"There should be more states like the Heavensword Association in this galaxy and the next. I will have numerous opportunities to learn from different societies as long as I am taking part in the grand expedition."

She had already learned that the Heavensword Association was not the only state or group that managed to preserve a portion of humanity's swordsmanship tradition. Perhaps the other organizations weren't as large and well-organized as a state that was free to do what it wanted on the edge of human space, but there were others who also managed to keep their inheritances alive.

Ketis yearned to explore them! Even if she wouldn't be able to learn these inheritances, she at least wanted to get in touch with them so she could find some inspiration.

At this point in her swordsmanship progression, she had already begun to step outside the confines of her two sword styles and forge her own unique style!

As Ketis mused about her current repertoire of moves, Angelique Harcourt approached her side and bumped her arm. "I never imagined that a mech designer like you would go this far. Top 100... do you know how much my friends envy you for achieving this dream? It would have been even better if you were a part of the local industry!"

The fact that Ketis was also a mech designer did not attract much attention from the public. Only other mech designers were aware of how difficult it was for them to reach this height!

Of course, many mech designers also speculated that Ketis would eventually forsake her mech design career in order to become a swordmaster. Her attainments in both the Swordmaiden Sword Style and the Annihilator Sword Style were far more impressive than the shabby swordsman mechs she had designed up until this point.

Billions of Heavensworders admired and respected her swordsmanship, but hardly anyone thought she was a good mech designer!

This mainly had to do with lack of fame. Ketis hadn't published any solid mech designs or achieved commercial success in a mech market yet. She was far removed from Ves in this aspect.

Still, she did not intend to remain obscure forever. The gains she made during this visit had increased her confidence and swelled her ambition.

She was not resigned to staying in the background any longer!

"You know, I originally agreed to host you Swordmaidens because I wanted an opportunity to collaborate with the famed Mr. Larkinson, but now I am wondering if I should cooperate with a more suitable devil."

Ketis jerked at that. "I'm still an Apprentice."

Angelique's eyes shimmered. The Journeyman beheld the Swordmaiden mech designer as if she was appraising a treasure.

"You're a much more interesting person to me. Mr. Larkinson isn't famed for designing swordsman mech. You on the other hand possess a much greater insight into swordsmanship than pretty much any other mech designers. Even the Masters in our state have never come close to becoming a sword initiate. You are truly unique and well worth befriending."

She did not bother to hide her motivations. She may be a mech designer, but she was also a swordswoman, if not a particularly excellent one. When facing someone who made a lot more attainments in swordsmanship, Angelique truly did not feel she could rely on her mech designer rank to get her way.

This was how the Heavensword Association worked. Swordsmen and swordmasters always held more sway in the state. Mech designers solely existed to serve the warrior class.

As someone who straddled this line, Ketis didn't know how she should feel about this. If she possessed the genetic aptitude to pilot a mech, then her situation would become even more astounding!

"Will you not consider joining the Larkinson Clan?" She offered again. "We always have room for Journeymen like you. Our Design Department is so swamped with design projects that we need more lead designers to share the burden."

Angelique softly laughed. "My answer stays the same. While the prospect of going on an adventure sounds alluring, I can't abandon my home and foundation."

As the two women continued to chat, Commander Sendra's comm beeped. Her face changed as she read through the priority message.

"Ketis!" she called!

The boisterous atmosphere quickly muted as Commander Sendra marched to the central table. "I've just received word of your next opponent. He's a familiar face."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Ivan Reid of the Cloudstrider Sword School."

"What?!"

"Didn't he lose a limb?!"

"Wait, I remember that he chose to graft a temporary arm to his shoulder. I never thought he would be able to get into the top 100 with hardly any physical therapy and adjustment!"

Commander Sendra projected Ivan Reid's most recent match. The man looked a lot more serious and intense than before. As soon as the battle commenced, he went into action straight away and overwhelmed his opponent with a flurry of unending attacks!

Although the Swordmaidens were keen enough to notice that Ivan Reid's fighting style had changed in several ways, the amount of strength he was able to show was quite impressive for a crippled swordsman!

"This guy..."

"His physical strength hasn't changed, but he's a lot more focused now."

While Ivan Reid wasn't able to return to his peak condition after losing his sword arm, he compensated for this drop by adopting a much more serious mindset!

Ketis could already feel a portion of his intensity through observing the recordings of his fights. The Cloudstrider head disciple had become a new man. He no longer talked and he no longer played to the crowd. Instead, it seemed he had been taking lessons from Ketis and fought to end a match as quickly as possible!

"He's really my next opponent?" She dubiously asked.

Sendra nodded. "Yes. In fact, from what the media says about him, the entire reason why he chose to delay the regrowth of his arm and opt to graft a battle-ready bionic arm to his body was because he wanted to continue to climb in the solo tournament. His goal is to have a rematch!"

Ivan was targeting Ketis!

She felt even weirder than before. What was going on? Why did Ivan obsess over her so much? Did he want to wash away his shame of getting beaten by his own arrogance?

Whatever the case, Ketis felt that her next fight might be the most arduous in the tournament!

Unlike any other sword initiate she might meet in the arena, Ivan Reid was clearly gunning for her. The intense expression on his face during his matches already made that clear.

His will and determination caused him to squeeze his entire potential in order to get into the top 100! Perhaps the championship didn't matter to him anymore. At this moment, all he wanted to accomplish was to fight a proper duel against Ketis!

Every Swordmaiden looked concerned. They were well aware of how strong feelings could transform someone's battle performance. Ivan Reid looked like a man possessed! He would never rest until he defeated Ketis and proved that his swordsmanship was stronger!

Ketis snarled. "Well, I'm not a girl he can repeatedly bully around. If he wants another fight, then let him! I've grown a lot since then. There is no way I will fold against someone who fights with a bionic arm!"

Although she did not seek another confrontation against Ivan Reid, she did not stay meek when someone issued a challenge against her. She was a Swordmaiden! Backing down was not an option!

The media already began to hype the rematch. Both Ketis and Ivan were strong sword initiates who had undergone a lot of changes over the course of the festival.

They should definitely be able to push each other to their limits! Many pundits already predicted that they would show their full strength in order to overcome their greatest rival!

Ketis grimaced as she estimated her chances against the current incarnation of Ivan Reid. Even with the help of Sharpie, she still foresaw a very difficult battle!

Chapter 2909: Fated Match

The 'rematch' between Ketis Larkinson and Ivan Reid had become one of the hottest topics in the Omanderie System!

Everyone sensed that a spectacle was about to occur. The battle where Ketis almost lost against Ivan was already so legendary that those who missed it felt endless regret.

If not for the fact that the tickets to the rematch between the two sword initiates were already sold out months ago, a lot of people would have been willing to exchange a seat with enough money to buy a new mech!

Several different narratives formed in the media.

Some pundits predicted that if Ketis had already defeated Ivan once, she could do it again.

Others thought differently.

"Just look at Ivan Reid's eyes. Those are the eyes of a driven warrior. After suffering a preventable loss, he could have wallowed in self-pity or let himself be consumed by his resentment. Instead, he quickly picked himself up and completely reformed his behavior. He's no longer as spoiled as before and has truly shown the potential of a future swordmaster!"

The setbacks that Ivan suffered seemed to have served as a wakeup call to him. As a scion of the powerful Cloudstrider Sword School, he was anything but a useless bum. Talent alone was not enough to reach his level of strength. It took a lot of hard work and determination to grasp the essence of a true sword style.

It was just that his long string of successes had caused him to become too full of himself. Swordsmen were human as well, and it was easy for any person to get complacent after enjoying a smooth ride.

Ketis was the first obstacle that Ivan bumped against in a very long time. Although he suffered a disgraceful fall, his accident also happened to wake him up and correct his path.

As she prepared for the next match, Ketis constantly felt troubled by this situation. She felt as if she had become the villain in a budget drama. After beating up the protagonist, the hero of the story reflected on himself and managed to revive his sword heart. Now, the main character had risen up again and sought to vanquish the evil witch!

She shook her head as she made her preparations in the backstage area of the First Sword Arena. "This is not a contrived story. This is the real deal."

It didn't matter who she fought against. Anyone who stood opposite to her had to be defeated, even if her adversity happened to possess a familiar face!

Venerable Dise, Commander Sendra, Angelique Harcourt and Fred Walinski had all helped her study her opponent and formulate a strategy.

Despite all of the gains Ketis had made, she was still a power-oriented fighter. A mobility-oriented swordsman like Ivan Reid still enjoyed a significant advantage as long as he stayed on the move.

Ivan's bionic arm may have forced Ivan to relearn his sword moves, but there was nothing wrong with his legs!

He was just as fast as before. In fact, Ivan had become even more elusive due to his determination not to get hit!

Fred approached her just as she was deciding which weapon to take into battle.

"Go serious." He spoke. "You don't have to take Shiva with you if it will only pose a hindrance."

Ketis turned and raised an eyebrow. "You're okay with that?"

"A swordsmith specifically forged Shiva for my brother. It fits best in his hand, not yours. Although I am grateful for allowing a piece of my brother to taste battle again, you should not overdo it. Let Shiva take a break this time and start off on your best foot."

She briefly considered his argument. Although wielding a shorter and lighter blade was more advantageous against someone as fast as Ivan, she didn't specialize in it. She was much more comfortable with wielding her greatsword.

Although the weapon definitely had its shortcomings, Ketis possessed enough strength and skill to mitigate most of them. With her rapid growth in combat prowess, she did not believe she would end up as sorry as before!

"You're right. I should bring the only weapon I need."

Carrying multiple weapons didn't matter before. The opponents she fought against were still in a tolerable range. If the fight became more difficult, then she could always toss aside Shiva and fight with her first weapon.

However, carrying multiple swords was a sign that Ketis lacked focus. By choosing to bring her main weapon and nothing else, she essentially declared that she wished to rely on her original sword style to win the upcoming match!

Time continued to pass. As the match preceding her own one ended in a dramatic fashion, Ketis and Ivan finally entered the stage.

Both of them ignored the noise in the crowd. They paid no attention to the hype generated by the announcers.

People could say whatever they want about swordsmen, but at their level, their wills were too firm to get affected by external opinion.

As Ketis stared at the dour-faced swordsman who had previously given her a very hard time, her eyes inevitably drew towards the artificial limb.

The bionic arm was mostly covered by the standard protective suit issued to every tournament participant, but Ketis could still observe plenty of details due to her technical background.

It was not forbidden for participants to do what Ivan had done. It was just unusual. Most swordsmen who incurred heavy injuries would usually acknowledge the reality of the situation and drop out of any remaining tournaments.

Yet in order to get a chance to fight against Ketis a second time, Ivan made the difficult and costly decision to fight with a bionic arm!

There were many issues with fighting with an artificial limb. While there were plenty of arm models that were much stronger and tougher than human arms, the tournament did not allow competitors to replace their limbs with stronger versions.

No matter if their arms and legs were biological or mechanical, their strength and other physical properties could not be weaker than their natural state!

Otherwise, everyone who yearned to be a champion would voluntarily amputate all of their limbs and turn themselves into cyborgs in order to compete!

After half a minute of staring, Ivan finally spoke up. "It's been weeks since you taught me a lesson."

His voice was much calmer and more measured than before. Ketis could sense the will in his tone. The Cloudstrider disciple had always remained highly focused on his own goal!

"Are you dissatisfied?" Ketis asked as she straightforwardly drew her greatsword.

Surprisingly, Ivan shook his head. "Not at all. I deserved to get vanquished for how lightly I took the group match. I examined my behavior many times after my defeat. I didn't know how to process what had happened until the swordmasters of my school counseled me. Every victory is precious, but every defeat is even more valuable. It is only when we fail that we have the opportunity to recognize our weaknesses. You have painfully torn off my mask and exposed everything that is ugly behind it. I decided I didn't like what I saw in the mirror, so I changed myself so that I can be proud of myself again."

She grasped the key point of his voluntary explanation. The swordmasters of the Cloudstrider School played a key role in getting his head back together!

The Cloudstriders invested a lot of attention and resources in him. How could they stand by and watch their costly investment get ruined? It was more than worth it for the aloof swordmasters to devote their personal attention to fixing Ivan.

"Well, I'm glad you managed to pick yourself up, but why insist on pushing yourself to this point? Do you know that grafting a bionic arm to your body will delay and complicate your real recovery?"

"I'm aware of that, Miss Ketis, but I have already decided to live with my mistake. I won't be getting rid of this bionic arm."

"What?!"

Not just Ketis, but the entire audience that listened in on their conversation reacted with shock as well.

Swordsmen always preferred to fight with their own limbs! Even if they augmented it in various ways, they always believed it was best to maintain enough purity to prevent alienation and lack of compatibility.

Yet Ivan resolutely decided to stick with his current arrangement! I seemed as if he wanted to carry a reminder of the consequences of giving in to his arrogance.

Yet as Ketis clearly sensed a spike in his will, she knew that this was not a handicap to him. It was a source of strength. Every swordsman clung to certain rules or principles in order to hone their will. This was another instance of that.

Ketis grew more serious as she discovered the extent of Ivan's rebirth. Compared to a confident sword initiate like Scipia Pepperin, the man in front of her was much more determined!

She lowered her stance and reconsidered her approach to this duel.

Ivan held his new fencing sword and looked as if he was ready to sprint.

Their eyes met each other and sparked. Their wills flowed from their bodies and ran through their weapons. Neither of them wanted to lose this battle.

For Ivan Reid, it was a matter of correcting his mistake and redeeming himself.

For Ketis, it was a matter of pride and ambition.

[Commence the match!]

No one moved. Even as the people in the vertical stands expected an explosion of action to occur, the two sword initiates didn't appear to be in a hurry to make a move!

Instead, they kept staring at each other as if they were waging a mental battle.

Eventually, Ketis grew impatient. "You worked so hard to get a chance to confront me in battle. Are you just going to waste this opportunity?"

"What do you fight for?" Ivan suddenly asked.

This question again. Several swordsmen had asked her this question. For some reason, they all wanted to pry into her personal motivations. She didn't know why.

"I fight for my sisters. I fight to improve my comprehension of sharpness. I fight in order to design better mechs."

Ivan raised his eyebrow when he heard the latter. "Ah, yes. You're also a mech designer. It's difficult for me to equate that to your current appearance. Look anything but bookish."

"I am a genuine mech designer! I will not allow you to belittle my accomplishments in this field!"

She grew angry at Ivan. His patronizing tone made it sound as if she was merely dabbling at designing mechs. The truth was anything but! She would not allow anyone to question her competence in her primary profession!

"Let's fight already!" She said and began to step forward while holding her greatsword at the ready.

Right now, she just wanted to chop apart Ivan's new limb and teach him not to mess with her dreams!

"Heh! That's the spirit! That is the vanquisher that I was hoping to fight!"

Ivan became more excited as he started to move forward. Though his pace was still slow, every step he took caused his momentum to become more imposing.

Once they came close enough, they sprinted forward and collided their weapons against each other!

Clang!

Ivan's body immediately bounced backwards after losing out on their first confrontation.

"Sure enough, your strength is quite formidable!"

They had just been testing each other just then. Ivan confirmed that he would not be able to overpower his opponent by force. Ketis on the other hand saw that the man had regained all of his mobility.

After Ivan recovered his stance, his body began to shake in a peculiar fashion. At some point, sweat began to form on his skin that somehow evaporated into mist.

The nature of this mist looked very odd to Ketis. Baseline humans shouldn't have been capable of generating so much fog from their own bodies!

As Ivan's will wrapped around the cloud made out of his own sweat, his body grew more red as if it had entered an overloaded state.

"Cloud Cascade!"

Ivan launched himself forward while dragging his self-generation mist forward. With all of the condensation in the way, Ketis was unable to observe her opponent's weapon!

Chapter 2910: New Moves

A rush of white fog surged forward as if it wanted to engulf Ketis!

Though the woman wondered how she was supposed to block an incoming attack when she was unable to maintain vision on her opponent's sword, an even greater priority occupied her mind.

"Eww! I am not about to let you submerge me in your own sweat!"

Disgust and indignation welled in her. Although she was not a woman who cared too much about girly stuff, there were some lines that shouldn't be crossed!

"Get away you disgusting creep!"

Her greatsword resonated with Sharpie and her will. A sharp energy formed around it, which Ketis quickly launched forward with a simple slash.

This was the Beheader, a simplified version of the Executioner technique!

The sharp and thin energy wave she unleashed did not possess the grandness of the original technique. In exchange for giving up a lot of power, the Beheader condensed a lot faster, demanded much less energy and did not require as much concentration.

However, as her sword energy attack entered into the foggy cloud, nothing happened. It was as if the attack she unleashed had disappeared.

"Huh?"

The Cloud Cascade had already rushed up to her! Ketis had no choice but to set her bewilderment aside and enter a blocking stance while she hastily stepped back.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ivan's fencing sword spontaneously emerged out of the fog and slashed at Ketis from different directions.

There were two reasons why Ketis managed to block the incoming blows despite the lack of time to react.

First, her large and wide greatsword could cover a lot of angles without needing to move too much.

Second, Ketis relied on her intuition and other senses to determine where Ivan would launch his next attack!

While this sounded easy, Ivan put Ketis under a lot of pressure with this move. It was several times harder to fight against an opponent who was able to keep his body hidden!

The properties of the cloud surrounding Ivan were too strange. She knew the fog didn't consist of ordinary sweat.

"I need to blow it away somehow!"

Yet when she thought about which technique she could utilize to remove the annoying cloud screen, she came up empty.

None of her attacks was able to affect such a large area!

As Ketis continued to remain on the defense, Ivan slowly gained momentum. Since this trick was effective against his opponent, he had no reason to drop it at this point!

Seeing that Ivan was more than willing to stick to a single winning strategy, she grew more grim. She jumped back and executed another Beheader!

Even though she swore that Ivan was hiding in the fog right in front of her, when her quick energy attack sank into the cloud without generating any sound, she became dismayed.

There had to be a way to deal with this odd technique!

She unleashed a couple of more Beheaders. However, it seemed that each of her attacks missed Ivan again and again.

Not only that, but as time went by, the cloud continued to expand. It first encompassed a width that was just thrice Ivan's body. After a minute had passed, it was as wide as six humans standing side by side!

"Damn! Did your entire body transform into sweat or something?!"

Of course, Ivan was not stupid enough to respond and give his position away.

After Ketis unleashed her fifth attack, she suddenly frowned.

What was she doing?

Why was she wasting her energy on ineffective sword energy attacks?

As her rationality reasserted itself, she realized that she had fallen into a trap. She allowed herself to get swept up in her heated emotions. While that was usually not a problem, this time she had unknowingly entered into a losing exchange!

So far, aside from generating and maintaining his so-called Cloud Cascade, Ivan had done nothing but approach and launch some simple attacks behind his unique form of concealment.

From her understanding of energy, she recognized that Ivan was actively channeling his will over an area around him in order to maintain his unnatural cloud.

Therefore, under the premise that she could not eliminate him in her current condition, her best choice was to stall and adopt a more conservative approach!

Though she felt tempted to switch to annihilation mode and release a glob of annihilation energy, the move was quite wasteful. It wasn't worth it to expend so much effort to get rid of some trivial sweat.

Ketis decisively drew back. This forced Ivan to move forward, dragging his misty fog with him if he wanted to remain under concealment.

She grinned. "Huh. So that's how it works."

The sight encouraged her to keep stepping back and avoiding a confrontation. She made conscious use of one of the conventional dueling rules. Since her loadout was heavier, she was under no obligation to approach her opponent.

It was different for Ivan! If he did not actively engage Ketis in combat for a certain duration of time, then he would forfeit the match by default!

Normally, this shouldn't be a big deal for a swordsman who possessed superior speed, but the problem right now was that he had to expend a lot of effort to bring his cloud forward!

Eventually, Ivan recognized Ketis' solution and the futility to fight against it. He retracted his will and let his sweat dissipate.

Ivan huffed and breathed heavily. His skin was still red from discharging so much sweat at once. Even though this action should have cooled his body down, Ketis could sense his body was still in an overheated state.

"You should lie down and take a rest." Ketis kindly suggested.

"Ah, this is nothing but a warm up to me. I didn't think you would be so clever. Every other swordsman I confronted with this move in the past tried to do their best to break it by force."

"Well, now you know what it is like to fight against a mech designer. Dispense with the tricks!"

Ivan smiled as his battle intent grew stronger despite his failed gambit. "As you wish!"

He darted forward in a familiar oblique fashion. Ketis had to move quickly in order to block the incoming attack.

Clang!

However, she barely had time to turn around before Ivan swept past again!

Clang!

Numerous exchanges like this happened every second or so. It seemed that his previous injuries hadn't affected his stamina at all. He continued to run as if he had turned himself into a breeze and performed quick and difficult-to-intercept attacks that quickly put Ketis on the backfoot again.

This time, Ketis wasn't content to remain in a passive position.

When Ivan was about to make his next attack pass, Ketis lurched her body to the side and boldly attempted to tackle her opponent!

Ivan reacted quickly though and turned and danced around Ketis, not forgetting to make a quick swipe, only to get blocked by her greatsword.

"Damn! That was dangerous!"

The Cloudstrider disciple stopped performing his Breeze Steps after a while. Even if Ketis was too slow to intercept him after he behaved more cautiously, all of his attacks were blocked without fail.

Ketis was too good to fall for this approach!

He decided to enter into a direct confrontation, which was outside of Ketis' expectation. His fencing sword glowed as he directly lunged at Ketis!

Though Ketis managed to deflect the stab with ease, Ivan was not done yet. A familiar disturbance swept her body and mind as she blocked the next incoming attack.

Though she really wanted to counterattack, Ivan did not let up on the pressure. He continually lunged and stabbed at her at different points.

Each time he did so, a bit of wind picked up. At the same time, Ketis felt some sort of pressure acting on her mind.

Ivan was summoning the hurricane again!

Yet different from last time, Ketis did not experience any disorientation. Her mental fortitude had grown by leaps and bounds. Her will might not be as solid as that of an expert pilot, but she was considerably stronger than before!

Even so, Ivan did not give up on his plan. As his flurry of stabs continued, the raging breeze slowly turned into the beginnings of a storm.

As Ketis grew more and more annoyed at the accumulating winds, she decided enough was enough.

Her greatsword glowed as she performed a counterattack, heedless of her fencing sword heading in her direction.

In any case, her weapon had greater reach, so Ivan would definitely be the first to suffer!

Though the Cloudstrider skillfully evaded the swinging greatsword, Ketis did not miss her attack.

Attacking Ivan was just an opportunistic attempt. Her real goal was to break something else!

"Conceptual Cut!"

Although her glowing greatsword only cut through empty air, the supernatural storm that Ivan had accumulated with persistent effort suddenly died down!

Only a gentle breeze remained as much of the power that Ivan previously invested in the storm had forcefully dissipated!

This time, Ivan had truly become surprised! "I didn't know you could do that!"

"There is nothing that I can't cut! Even energy fields don't stand a chance against my blade!"

Spotting an opening, Ketis rushed forward and began to hack at her opponent. Her greatsword still glowed with sharpness, but Ivan still managed to negate her strikes without incurring any significant damage.

A part of that had to do with his odd defensive technique. In the few times that Ketis managed to pull off a feint, Ivan's body spontaneously pulled back as if he was grasped by a giant hand.

Most of the time, Ivan merely evaded her attacks. His dodging capabilities were so good that he even found chances to counterattack!

As the clash increasingly favored Ivan, he began to accumulate power in a different fashion.

Instead of expanding his will to the immediate environment in order to generate extra wind, he kept his power within his body.

Slowly but surely, Ketis felt as if Ivan was growing stronger and faster by the second. Even though Ivan's body shook a few times, the strength and speed he exhibited became increasingly unnatural!

"Face my strongest state!" Ivan roared as he lunged forward and struck out with his fencing blade three times faster than before!

Ketis felt a lot of threat from this sudden attack. She wasn't able to move her greatsword fast enough to block the accelerated strike!

Her will spiked as Sharpie suddenly released a large amount of power at once!

A strange field formed around Ketis just as Ivan's empowered sword was about to stab through her shoulder.

The field partially blocked Ivan's sinister's move!

"What!?"

Not only did the energy field slow down Ivan's sword to the point where Ketis gained enough time to move her body aside, it also attacked and damaged the weapon in question!

When Ivan pulled back his sword, he noticed that a portion of the tip looked worn.

That was dangerous!

Though Ketis was happy at the result, she winced at how much energy she expended. It took a lot from Sharpie to generate this strange new field!

The fight wasn't over, though. Ketis took back the initiative and pressured Ivan with repeated attacks. Though Ketis did not try very hard at trying to outmaneuver a nimbler opponent, the force she put behind her blows caused Ivan to feel a lot of distress!

However, when he attempted to pull back and open up some distance, Ketis smirked and began to accumulate power.

She did not unleash a cheap Beheader this time. Instead, she intended to go all the way and unleash a full Executioner!

Ivan recognized the threat. "How powerful!"

In order to prevent his opponent from completing her power move, Ivan dashed forward while also circling towards the side.

This forced Ketis to unleash her attack prematurely. Even though the Executioner she released was a bit weaker, it was still powerful enough to knock Ivan out of the tournament if he got struck!

"Oh no you don't!" Ivan roared!

To her surprise, the Cloudstrider's will spiked as he forcefully jumped and stepped onto the air!

Even though he was only able to step on the air twice, he managed to gain enough height to completely jump over the lethal sword energy attack despite its last-second course correction.

As Ivan's will continued to flare, some sort of wind propelled his body forward. He dived down onto Ketis with his sword ready to overcome her defenses by force!