Michele’s ears pricked at the strong, distinct sounds weaved together along with a focused tone underneath its wraps. She forced open her eyes, grabbing onto a flower vase sitting at her side when she noticed an unruly strawberry blonde haired man wearing a sleeveless white robe and baggy black pants sitting in front of the piano keyboard. She knew that music at once - the first of its kind to be able to play in a different way from the conventional classical setting. The impact was so strong that the musician who pioneered the style became busy with requests from kings of various lands. To think that the musician’s influence stretched far enough to land onto the hands of a trainee knight…

“That’s enough already, Klavier! You’ve been playing the piano for hours!” Themis yanked him by the cheek, forcing him back to the infirmary bed.

“Damn, you don’t hold back, do you?” he rubbed his swollen cheek.

“That’s because you’re the most injured in the group,” she folded her arms, her eyebrows arched together to form a “V”. “I won’t cast any more of my healing magic if you insist on playing when you’ve yet to recover fully!”

“Fine…”

“Now, to administer the drips to the rest,” she pulled up a silver tray full of transparent bags filled with crystal clear water from the trolley on her side. “Oh, hey Michele. How are you?”

“I was fine until you two twerps disturbed my peace,” her eyebrows twitched.

“I’m sorry, milady. Didn’t mean to disturb you!” Themis bowed apologetically.

“Whatever, just shut up already. Anyway,” she touched Themis’s chin, forcing her cold stare at her. “Don’t think I didn’t notice you toiling day and night taking care of us. You should take a rest soon if you don’t want to burn out later.”

“Gee,” Themis shuffled her feet. “I don’t know what to say…”

“Themis,” Klavier said, looking out at the window by his side. “Why are the soldiers here?”

“Those creeps again. Hold on,” she swapped out the empty sachet of Michele’s drip. “Hold on, I’ll deal with them.”

She stomped out of the room, leaving both Michele and Klavier in a daze. They were separated by a row of beds, each of them filled with people who were injured in the battle against Luther. Many were heavily bandaged and still unconscious, but thankfully, there were no signs of imminent death on any of them. Amy was on her side, still in a vegetable state and appeared somewhat pale. A small, square box that was connected to her beeped away on an interval. Michele stared at the green numbers displayed on the black screen, raising an eyebrow as she watched the device chart a massively crooked line across.

“The heck is this supposed to mean?” Michele poked at it.

“Best not to touch it,” Klavier said. “It’s something that shows whether a person’s vitals are still working.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve been reading. So, are you feeling better now?”

“Sort of. So who beaten his ass?”

“Someone who looks like me,” he folded his arms, looking up at the ceiling at avoid her inquiring stare. “Apparently he blew almost everything up defeating Luther.”

“That guy’s got to be strong,” she scratched her head.

“Yeah,” he leaned back against his pillow.

Themis burst through the door, a sour expression left on her face as a giant man clad in purple-black armor followed right behind her.

“You can’t imprison me yet,” she said. “I’ve got thirty-six patients to take care of!”

“It’s the king’s orders, ma’am…”

“I don’t care! These people’s lives are still on the line!”

“Are they?” a voice with a repulsive tone said. Michele sat upright, looking at a man wearing black-purple samurai armor carrying a metal staff with an orange jewel on its tip. An air of unholy aura surrounded him as he towered over her menacingly. “They can become my subjects while you serve your term.”

“Shida,” Themis gritted her teeth. “How are you still alive?”

“I wouldn’t allow some lowly swordsman to kill me so easily, no? I’ve still a lot of experiments to carry out, and I’m just getting started. Guards, take her away. These guys are mine,” he licked his lips wickedly.

“Hold up,” a petite, black haired lady entered the room. She had her hair tied into two ponytails, carrying a dual-scythe on one hand that emitted an intimidating vibe. She wore an ankle-length largely red cloak with hints of gold designs that suggested royalty in it.

“Second princess,” Shida gave a bow as she walked past him. “How nice to see you. What brings you here?”

“It’s none of your business, Shida,” she turned to Klavier. “You. You’re coming with me.”

“What?”

“It’s an order,” she pointed her scythe at him.

“Whoa there,” he stared at the sharp edges. “Okay, I’ll go. I’ll go. So don’t point that thing at me, please.”

“Don’t worry,” she smashed the blunt edge of her dual scythe on his neck, the impact strong enough to make him lose consciousness. “I’ll take care of him.”

“Grrr! Let go of him!” Themis bounced out of the guards’ grasp only to be stopped by even more of them. The second princess jumped out of the window along with the unconscious Klavier on her shoulder, leaving the group with the rest for Shida to play with.

“You know what to do,” Shida snapped his fingers, prompting a dark figure to step forward. “Iikuto Ryuuga.”

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His vision was foggy, almost as though he was looking through murky water. Clangs and bangs filled his hearing, amidst the chaos were soft murmuring among people around him. He opened his eyes, tasting the bitterness of metal in the sand below his chin. A dash of red ran across his eyes then a soft thud gave way to a window of silence.

“Please understand, Klavier, this is for the child,” her soothing voice calmed him momentarily.

Wait, what child? He bounced up to his feet, staring back at the hundreds sitting in a large ring of elevated platforms, cheering and chanting the name “Alice” in every succession. Right before him was another lady who appeared a little like one who took him, her body yet to grow out of the childhood stage, her violet eyes empty of emotion. On her hands was an oversized scythe, emitting the same repulsive aura, only more vicious which sent chills down his spine.

“Target confirmed,” she changed her stance. “Eliminate.”

Klavier reached out for his sword stashed on his waist when she kicked up a sandstorm with a single swing of the deadly weapon. He somersaulted back, landing softly on his feet, ignoring the loud roars of excitement that filled the air.

“Kill him! Kill him!” the spectators shouted.

It felt as though he went through this event before even though it was the first time standing in the arena pit with an opponent to deal with. It was blazing hot, the sun rays burning through his skin so much that it threatened to cook the flesh to a good roast. But there was no time to fret about the scorching heat - the scythe girl whom the spectators called Alice moved to him so fast that it was akin to teleporting. Klavier pulled the white sword out of its scabbard, blocking the incoming attack that nearly sliced through his body. But he was a bit late in his reaction - the tip of the scythe found its way to his neck, doing nothing more than a soft poke that allowed blood to escape from the wound. It was then he recognized that Alice wasn’t one to be messed with even if she was just a kid.

Klavier pushed the weapon out of his neck, smashing her foot onto her abdomen that pushed her back to a relatively safe distance. In a blink of an eye, Alice moved in right before his eyes, swinging a long round-about attack towards Klavier. He raised his blade, parrying against the strike but the tip of the scythe continued to race towards him.

Klavier dived down, evading it but barely. He seized Alice by the thigh, pushing himself to her side and used the shoulders as a support to lift her off the ground. With her master arm locked in his grasp, he collapsed backwards, smashing her right back down to the sand for a crippling blow to the back.

Pain was written all over her face as she forced herself up. But it wasn’t about time for him to show mercy to his opponent. He swung his blade across, smashing it against the back edge of her scythe that kicked up a powerful storm around them. But the heavy opposing force faded as fast as it got to him. He lowered his sword, cursing at the blinding sand that surrounding him for obscuring his vision. A yellowish silhouette figure formed in front of him, the tip of the scythe shining brightly even in the perceived darkness. Klavier swerved to the right, evading the incoming attack effortlessly as he smashed his blade right on her abdomen that sent her crashing across the sandy arena.

Alice somersaulted, smashing her hand onto the ground that forced her to a halt. Klavier burst into a sprint, swinging his blade forward with all his might only to be stopped by an equally stubborn force with her weapon.

“That blade,” she glanced at the shiny back edge of his sword. “What kind of blade is that?”

“Concentrate on the battle, girl,” Klavier forced his sword upwards, breaking the deadlock between them. Alice was thrown off by the impact, leaving absolutely no time for her to recover from the stagger as Klavier thrust his blade forward that found its way to her heart. But the sword’s edge refused to sink below the cloth, hurling her across the space like a tiny barrel rolling on its sides.

“Enough,” a low-pitched voice said just as he was about to deal the finishing blow.

“Who are you?” Klavier stared back at a sage-looking man wearing the dark purple cloak, sheathing his sword lest it threatened the elder.

“Alice still has a long way to go,” the man pulled the unconscious kid up. “She’s still too soft. Elza, training’s over. Turn off the simulation.”

“Yes, father,” her voice echoed in the room as it deconstructed the environment back to a metallic set of walls around them.

“Father?” Klavier asked but the old man vanished in thin air.

“I apologize for the trouble you had to go through,” the same woman wearing the red cloak approached him, giving an apologetic bow.

“It’s no biggie. So, where am I?”

“Bariura Palace. Father ordered that I send you here to help train the child. We witnessed first-hand your true powers, mister Klavier and would like your help her get into form.”

“What if I don’t comply?”

“I’m afraid I’ll need to silence you. But we’ll try to avoid it as much as possible.”

“Fine,” he dug his ear. “So, princess Elza, please bring me to my cell.”

“Aren’t you a pessimistic fella? Father told me to get you a special place since he needs you to be healthy,” she led the way out of the metal confines.

“I see. Please send him my thanks.”

Gardeners filled the area, keeping the plants green while butlers kept the daily guests busy in their house. The sheer number of people in the castle already suggested the kind of extravagant lifestyle they got to lead. The palace was not restricted to that large plot of land; it extended so far and wide that he could see the two inner walls surrounding it where the inhabitants were most probably either the nobles or the filthy rich. But there was an air of tension everywhere, almost like they were living in absolute fear under the king’s leadership.

Even on the dinner table with the king, people remained reserved in their thoughts, eating away in the massive feast on the long tables. Alice sat by Klavier’s side, munching away in an emotionless state. The silence was killing him. But he could do little but to follow the norm just to get away from unnecessary punishment.

It was like escaping a boring lecture when he left the dining hall. He couldn’t stand the way how the king was staring at him intensely, lost in his internal thought. Klavier’s intuition tugged him on the shoulder, crying out to him in babbles as though it was trying to warn him of a dire consequences for messing around the king’s affairs. He could try bailing out now, but it wouldn’t do him justice since it would be off with his head if he didn’t make a proper planning for the escape.

His dormitory was situated at the tower. The space was not normally used except when there were special guests of the empire that required them to stay for a period of time longer than a month. Klavier could almost taste the privilege behind the thoughts of the emperor but his subconscious squashed it. With so much time given to him for rest, he could just well use it to plan his escape. The thought sent chills down his spine, his mind screaming at him to create the flawless action plan at once. But the hype died down the moment Elza stood in front of the door, leaning against the ledge with her hand supporting her head as she looked at the twinkling night sky dreamily.

“G-Good evening, miss,” he bowed.

“What is it like to be free?” she mumbled.

“Excuse me?” he tilted his head to the side.

“I’m sorry. I was just a bit tired. So how’s the food?”

“Better than anything that I’ve tasted, that’s for sure.”

“That’s good to hear,” a slight smile dashed across her lips.

“What brings you here?”

“That blade of yours. Why did it not cut Alice?”

“As far as fighting is concerned, I’ll try not kill if I can. Besides, I wouldn’t want to see my own sibling get hurt by some stranger in a set up battle.”

“You’ve got a point,” the tips of her lips lifted. “In any case, please take care of her.”

“Sure,” a sad smile illuminated on his face under the moonlight as he closed the door on her.

Elza’s devotion towards Alice was something to reckon with. He sensed a strong desire coming from her but couldn’t make out what exactly that was. All he knew was that she wanted Alice to be safe. He recalled experiencing a similar event, where he and his sister shared a similar relationship. Unlike Alice, his sister was hounded by an unknown disease, causing her to cough blood out at random times of the day. It was a miracle that she was alive for a very long time; stories of those infected by it didn’t end well - their victims living at most for just two weeks. She somewhat resembled Elza, most notably with the ponytail hairstyle and strong blood eyes.

A myriad of emotions stirred in him as her face became clearer in his head. She had to be alive, at least that was what his hopeful self would tell him. The unsettled feelings would definitely leave him to stare at the wall rather than fall asleep if he continued dwelling in it. He pulled open the door, checking the flanks just to make sure Elza was not near him before he moved towards the palace.

Contrary to his initial belief, the palace was not very tight in its security. In fact, the employees were allowed to roam about the place so long as they did not enter the restricted areas guarded by heavily armored pike men. But it wasn’t time to get comfortable with the life in there, he maintained his incognito approach in his search for a piano until he found one in a ballroom just below the tower he was situated at.

He started with a gentle, soft tune, slowly giving way to a ballad, the whole time maintaining his mental gaze on the smiling face of his sister. It was all coming back to him. The days he spent taking care of her as a newborn, protecting her from bullies, the moments when she broke the news of her disease to the family to the final days on her deathbed. As he put the song to a close, a bittersweet feeling lingered on.

“Wow, that was good,” he heard a familiar voice.

“Elza, milady!” he jumped out of the seat. “What brings you here?”

“Nothing much,” Elza maintained a genuine grin. “It takes a lot of courage to play a song from the depths of your heart, doesn’t it?”

“You were listening?”

“The whole time.”

“I’m honored,” he scratched his head.

“There’s no need to be,” she cracked a giggle. “Will it create inconvenience if I were to request you to teach me how to master the piano?”

“Um, okay,” he beckoned her over. “It’s a bit complicated but once you get it, it gets easy. As for everything, you need to know the boring basics before you can start playing any song you want. So here’s how…”