The deafening clangs of their blades was music to his ears. Klavier and Ryuuga, locked in a wild dance of sword fighting, their swords coloring the air with a good mix of black and white. But Ryuuga was faster, swinging his sword with nearly unparalleled competence, tearing Klavier up bit by bit with every successful small cut that pierced through his tight defense. Ryuuga’s blade stuck with his stubbornly, threatening to overpower Klavier with his unquenchable thirst for his blood. Klavier broke the clash between them, swinging his sword up so much that Ryuuga tipped off from his balance. He grabbed his scabbard, lunging it onto Ryuuga’s stomach along with a head splitting smash to the head with the blade.

“Since when did you start fighting like that?” Ryuuga asked, wiping the blood off his mouth.

“When I wielded this sword. I now have the choice that most swordsmen don’t,” Klavier replied, raising the blade over his shoulders and leaned forward, leveraging the weight of his metal extension against his legs to maximize sprinting efficiency.

“No wonder it doesn’t feel the same as compared to the last time.”

“I see, so you noticed already. So what if it feels different?” Klavier zoomed past Ryuuga. But he did more than just get past him - there were abrasion cuts on Ryuuga’s limbs and at the middle of his torso.

“You, how did you…?”

“Is there any more need to explain the move?” he rested the blade on his shoulder. “I would’ve chopped your limbs off and cut your chest open if not for this reversed blade.”

“Showing mercy to your own opponent. Just how stupid can you get?”

“Would you rather lose your life or lose your pride?” He sheathed his blade, his left hand hovering slightly above the handle in anticipation of Ryuuga’s next strike.

“I told you already. It’s kill or be killed!” Ryuuga thrust his sword forward.

Klavier wasn’t about to fall for another attack under the same kind of stance Ryuuga used that broke his other sword into two. Ryuuga’s blade screamed at his ear as it closed in, supposedly trying to invoke fear to shake him up. But this instance of ignorance was bliss - Klavier pulled his sword out so hard and fast that the draw speed out speed his opponent’s swing, landing a brutal hit across his body that thrown him high in the air before he could lose his head. Ryuuga touched down onto the floor, the impact of his fall created a small crater around him, his eyes rolled up and his mouth wide open.

Klavier dreaded using that technique - one that guaranteed the death of his opponent regardless of how prepared he was for the attack. Even his armor could not stand against the power exerted from the attack, shattering into bits and pieces of metal before his blade created a deep, wide slash across his body. If it was that potent with a dull edge, it would be even scarier to think about it when Klavier pulled it off with a normal cutting edge.

“Now, to back Michele and Themis up,” Klavier mumbled as he sheathed the sword.

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“Target hostile. Engage,” Alice said.

Bursting forth in mid-air at a breakneck speed, she head-butted Michele on the torso, sending her into the air and crashing through the brick floor. Michele smashed her axes down, forcing herself to a grinding stop, blood oozing out from a tiny wound on the head. Alice came down so quickly that the air around her appeared to give way. But Michele was faster, she raised her axes in a fraction of a second just in time to parry Alice’s attack. Michele pummeled her foot forward, pushing Alice by the side that sent her crashing onto a hovel.

“Where are you going?” Alice’s voice shook Michele to the core.

Horror and amazement bit her neck, her eyes burning as she watched Alice return to her feet. Alice couldn’t have been this powerful for a child. Impossible, just impossible that any kid could still be alive from that deathblow.

It didn’t matter; the battle had to end quickly. Michele dashed forward at the fastest her legs would allow her to go. Alice raised her scythe, blocking the attack effortlessly. The force was supposed to sway her foundation yet she stood firm against it. Alice shot a glare at Michele, piercing right through her as she broke Michele’s weakening defense with a mighty upward cut of the scythe.

“This is the result of Klavier’s training?” Michele mumbled. To think that a person younger than her could have such a resolve, Michele couldn’t help but to doubt her own resolve.

“I’ll defeat you and take him back home,” Alice said, raising her scythe at Michele.

“Home? What home?”

“An outsider doesn’t need to know,” Alice thrust her weapon forward that landed flat on Michele’s chest which sent her crashing across the floor.

“I can tell you this much,” Michele said as she struggled to get back up. “Klavier’s trying to get home but your dad isn’t allowing him to.”

“Father’s word is absolute, take him back or execute him.”

“Do you even get what I mean? What your father’s doing is trying to coop him up here for his own benefit!”

“Nonsense. Father won’t do such a thing.”

“Then why is it that he wants you to execute him if you can’t take him back?”

“What?” Alice’s eyes narrowed.

“You heard me, didn’t you?” Michele rose to her feet. “Your dad wants him dead.”

“Are you questioning father’s authority?” she smashed her scythe against Michele’s axes. The strength was real; Alice was capable of bringing Michele down to knees.

“I’m questioning the rationale behind that order!” Michele swung her axes, overpowering her opponent just before the scythe blade could sink into her shoulder.

She wasn’t about to let some power drain get the better of her. Michele swerved to the side, ignoring the burning sensation as the scythe’s sharp blade slid across her arm, tearing apart the delicate ball dress that left her sleeve in tatters. She grabbed Alice by the head, smashing her head against hers, the force strong enough to kick Alice down to the floor. Most people wouldn’t be able to recover immediately from that devastating attack too since Michele was known for being a hard head. Even so, her forehead throbbed with that unpleasant feeling.

“You sure are tough for a kid,” Michele commented as Alice supported herself up with the scythe.

“Michele!” she heard a familiar voice from behind. She turned around, staring at an already worn out Klavier.

“You’re pretty beat up.”

“I know.”

“Stand back, this is my fight,” she raised her axes. “That kid will learn not to mess with me.”

It was for the best. She couldn’t stand thinking about the scenario of him shouldering all the weight on his own, not after he dealt with an opponent that left him in a bad state.

“Klavier?” Alice’s expression softened, lowering her weapon as he approached. “It is you! Come, father is waiting for your return. He will spare all of you if you listen to his-”

“I’m sorry, Alice but I’m not going to comply,” his gentle but sharp stare shot through her.

“Why?” she tightened her grip on the scythe. “I must eliminate you if you don’t listen…!”

“You’ll have to get past me first, chum,” Michele stepped in front of Alice. “Come on, throw everything you’ve got at me.”

“Fine,” Alice shifted her stance. “You’ll regret crossing the line.”

She swung her right arm out, her scythe levitated off the ground, a pool of purple-black aura forming around it. As if she wasn’t unfortunate enough, Michele was also surrounded by thousands of black balls. A dark, bitter feeling filled her heart - not because of the exceedingly dire situation she had found herself in, but because she had somehow seen Alice pull off those actions before. Alice clenched her fist, forcing the balls to explode into fireworks on and around Michele. Michele dug her axes to the ground, her legs wobbly from the impact that rendered her incapacitated.

“Michele!” Klavier’s voice rung in her ears.

“I’m fine,” she pushed him away, forcing herself back up. The kid’s attack won’t get the better of her.

But her body told her otherwise. She slouched forward, clutching onto her stomach as she unloaded a great deal of blood onto the floor, forcing her on her knees from the sudden massive loss. So the training was real. Klavier did raise Alice to become a fearsome fighter. But giving up was the last thing that should come true. Michele would rather be killed than to concede defeat to someone younger than her.

“You’ve done enough,” Klavier rested his hand on her shoulder, wrapping his bloody white robe on her body now that her dress was completely blown up from the destruction. “Come on, take a rest already.”

She opened her mouth, wanting to protest against the move when her eyes caught sight of a dragon tattoo on his back. Its body was orange, taking the image of a long, winded, scaly snake with four legs. But it wasn’t only the tattoo that caught her attention. He had a slender body that had barely enough muscle to show off, a far cry from the usual buffed and beefy kind of figures expected of warriors. Scars dotted on his body, the worst being a long slash across his back. He couldn’t have been the youthful man his face claimed to be with that many injuries in the past.

“Stay down, okay? I’ll take care of this,” he said, dropping his hand to the handle of the white sword.

“Target switch,” Alice said. “Eliminate.”

“I believe I didn’t teach you to fight in that way, did I?” Klavier blocked the incoming attack with little effort.

It felt as though the standoff was nothing more than a training session. Alice struggled to keep up with Klavier’s pace, but he refused to land any blows onto her even though there were plenty of opportunities to do so. That wasn’t what worried Michele. The small, fresh cuts from the previous battle started to open up, making way for more blood to seep out. His stupidity would lead him down to the abyss. Michele pulled the axes out of the floor, taking a step forward when Klavier shot a glare that got her back down on her knees.

*Don’t interfere.* Those were the words conveyed through his unspoken language.

“You’re holding back,” Klavier said.

“No, I’m not!” Alice said.

“Then why is it that I sense hesitation from your blade?”

“That’s…”

“Never mind.”

Klavier sheathed his sword, his hand near the handle of the blade. Alice slid her foot forward, cold sweat running down her cheek. The air around them stilled, almost as though it read the intensity of their concentration. Before long, Alice took off, swinging her heavy scythe towards Klavier with all her might. Yet as the danger drew close, he simply stood there, appearing indifferent at the situation before him.

Two lights, one black-purple and the other white collided with one another before a sound of a blunt metal bumping into flesh filled Michele’s ear. A silhouette overshadowed the moonlight, along with shards of metal that rained down from the heavens. Michele looked up, staring at an Alice that was launched high in the air, her body marked with a large, angry abrasion across. She and the scythe came crashing down without any form of resistance, crumpling up on the floor, screaming at the top of her lungs.

His body leaned forward at an angle that didn’t fit the normal walking position. As if Michele knew what to do the whole time, she wrapped her arms around him, holding against the overwhelming force that threatened to break her balance.

“You’re pretty heavy for your kind of size,” Michele commented. “Anyway, what happened to you? Why’re you so beat up?”

“My bad,” he returned a weak smile. “I just overdid it.”

“Idiot. You’d better stay alive so I can whoop your ass for not taking care of yourself. Come on, let’s get out of here already.”

“No, don’t go,” Michele’s ears pricked at the sound of soft sobs in between those words. She looked down, staring back at a tearful Alice who held onto her leg in a desperate move to stop them.

“Grr, get off me!” she shook her leg, forcing her to let go.

“Please don’t…!” Alice’s sobs got louder.

“Michele, hold on a second,” Klavier let go of her support.

He wasn’t about to comfort that kid, was he? She reached out for his shoulder. But she was too late - he wrapped his arms around the devastated child as though Alice was his own. The image of compassion burned in Michele’s mind. It was absurd; No sane man would dare expose his vulnerabilities even to a crying youngster in this field of death. So, how was it that he could still do it?

“Sorry about that,” Klavier said. “I'll find Vanros Klavier and then return. Till then, wait for me. Michele, let's go."