Maroma couldn’t accept it. Her mother was hugging a complete stranger as if she knew him for so long, and then she identified that man to be her father. Granted, he was a gentle person, but the sudden revelation that that young looking fellow was her dad? No way. Mother couldn’t have married a person so much younger than her.

It didn’t matter. It was getting dark already but she wasn’t ready to return home after running away from him. The only companion with her was the excessively heavy cloak he gave her and the sword that she forged earlier. But she wasn’t used to the incoming darkness, frightened at the thought of meeting beings of the dark, devils, demons and what not. She dragged her feet across, the desire to return home reignited. But it didn’t feel like she was alone sitting on the swing of the rundown playground. She scanned her environment only to find an owl staring back at her from the safety of the trees.

She increased her pace, driven by the adrenaline fueling her as the lights around her flickered. She turned around, but not a single soul appeared to be following her. So what was it that was making her feel worked up? The environment around her started to heat up. At the same time, pain twisted her heart so much that she fell to her knees.

When she came to, a giant centaur cloaked in fire was right before her, its breath steaming hot. Her hand dropped to her sword. It squinted at that sight, letting out a roar so loud that she was forced to cover her ears. It charged towards her, swinging its fiery axe when a line of black intercepted it.

In front of it was the heavily scarred man her mother called ‘dad’. The fury of the flames triggered by the charge showed no signs of pulling him down as he slashed through the monster effortlessly. Its body decomposed, melting away under its own flames, leaving only burnt ashes and a red emblem on the ground.

“Whoa,” she mumbled, a mix of surprise and adoration stirred in her heart.

“Are you okay?” Klavier offered his hand.

“Um, yeah, I guess,” she accepted his hand. “How did you know I was here?”

“Your mom told me,” he sheathed his sword. “She got worried that you weren’t back when you were supposed to. She’s down with housework, so she sent me to fetch you.”

It felt more like an excuse by her mom to have some interaction time with him. After all, they just met and were blood related. As much as his presence irked her, she could not discount the fact that he saved her from certain death. Any normal person would celebrate their victory. Instead, Klavier remained quiet, his eyes focused on the dark, lonely road ahead of them.

Not a word about that incident was uttered by Klavier’s mouth once they returned home. He simply greeted mother with a gentle but exhausted smile before stashing away all the dangerous tools on him. He dragged his feet away to one of the rooms, retiring for the night. Things ought to have lightened up now that they were altogether but that thought was squashed when mother looked on at the tired man with even more worry.

“Maroma,” Ana said. “What happened to your dad?”

“He’s just a little tired,” she replied dismissively.

“It’s not just ‘a little’,” Ana’s eyebrows arched inwards. “He always looks like that whenever he carries a sword.”

The words throbbed in her head. “How did you know?”

“I just know. Maroma,” she clutched her sleeves. “Please. Please take care of him.”

“Geez, why are you so worried about him? It’s not like he’s going to die.”

“But you don’t know *when* he is going to,” she let go of Maroma, now lost in her own miasma of thoughts.

What was the big deal? He just subdued a giant monster with a single slash. Surely he could do it again. Since then, the family’s happiness dulled – mother was constantly looking out for Klavier as he went on playing the piano for hours, trying to perfect a song that sounded impossible to be done with just one person. She was tired of the tense atmosphere at home. She had that sword stashed on her waist for a long time already but not a single moment did she draw it out. If she took on a request that required her to display her strength, would that man acknowledge her presence and get out of the house?

It was worth the gamble. Maroma went into one of the most prominent taverns in La Veda, famous for their top quality booze and countless requests by townsfolk. She looked through the list, ranging from crop pillagers to exterminations of gods that plagued the land outside of La Veda. It was time to show just how good she really was. She grabbed the most difficult mission offered possible, grabbing the attention of the entire townsfolk in the tavern.

“Hey,” a knight carrying a giant sword said. “Are you sure you want to do that?”

“Who are you?” Maroma asked.

“Aem. If it’s me,” he lifted his helmet, revealing wavy white hair and sharp blue eyes. “Surely you’re not going to do it alone, are you?”

“Don’t stick your nose to other people’s business.”

“Look, I’m saying that you will need help. This is not a fight that one man can do alone.”

“I told you already,” she turned her back on him. “It’s none of your business.”

“Wait, please just listen to this old man.”

She shut the door behind her before he could say anymore. Anyone would tell her it was reckless of her to take on it. But when she could prove it to them, they’ll be biting the dust. They’ll have to recognize her as the new almighty figure and with that power, maybe she could show Klavier whose boss.

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It was nothing but Maroma in his mind. There were numerous experiences of a person who was so driven to chase him out, but not of the intensity that Maroma displayed. Her heart was shut off from any words of advice he could give. But that doesn’t mean that he should just give up.

“Klavier,” Ana said as he stashed the two swords on his waist. “Are you going to look for her again?”

“Yeah. I can’t just sit here and do nothing while she finds ways to drive me out and get hurt in the process. Lilith, Themis, please take care of Ana while I go look for Maroma.”

“You sure about it?” Themis asked. “You know she hates you to the core.”

“I know. But what good will it do if I just run away from the problem?”

“Well, okay. Be sure to come back.”

“No doubt,” he flashed a genuinely pleased smile for a moment before heading out.

“Klavier!” Aem charged towards him so fast that he didn’t have time to react. “Klavier! Bad news.”

“Hold your horses, what’s going on?”

“There’s this girl,” Aem said. “Who wants to fight the Sibyl Sisters that are based in the mountains just outside of La Veda.”

“The Sibyl Sisters? You mean the goddesses Eliza, Madia and Paula that tried to destroy us humans in the ancient times?”

“Yes. Rumors have it that they’re awakened recently and has been causing disturbance to the mountain trekkers. Thus the request to exterminate them. That girl, she wants to take them on alone.”

“Who is the girl?”

“She has strawberry blonde hair and strong hazel eyes. She looks very much like you.”

All of the color drained from his face. “Maroma…”

“Sir, if you will, I will-”

Before Aem could complete his sentence, Klavier burst into a panicked sprint towards the mountains. He could hear Aem shout his name but he couldn’t care any less. That girl was completely out of her mind, trying to take on goddesses that had more than enough experience to destroy even the best fighters humanity had to offer.

Klavier braved through the tough terrain, ignoring the cries of his body to slow down. As if that wasn’t bad enough, the path upwards was filled with monsters that attacked the moment they saw him. It was as if the goddesses were using them to protect themselves. Either that was true, or that it was a means to wear down anyone that crossed through this place before fighting the Sibyl Sisters themselves.

The road eventually widened into a massive open space, large enough to host an epic scale arena battle. On the middle of the area were the three Sibyl Sisters, one that had ice blue hair, another sat on an exaggeratingly large rose and the last one had black angel wings.

In front of them was a woman that was just like what Aem described – strawberry blonde hair and carried a sword. She swung her weapon across, only for it to be intercepted effortlessly by the blue haired goddess. But the block did more than just stop the attack. Her weapon snapped into two, leaving no chance for her to counterattack.

Klavier couldn’t just stand there. He dashed towards them at the fastest his legs could allow him, stepping right in between the two fighters before the fight could conclude.

“Dad?! What are you doing here?” Maroma asked.

“The same question I want to ask you. What in the world are you thinking, pointing your sword at these brutal goddesses?”

“But…”

“You and I will have a good talk later.”

“Do you really think we’ll let you come out alive?” the ice goddess asked.

“Try me, Eliza,” Klavier pointed his white sword at her.

“Sisters,” she raised her arm across before they could intervene. “This is my fight. I think it’ll be far more interesting than that girl.”

“Three seconds,” Klavier said as he sheathed the sword. “I only need three seconds.”

“I’d like to see you try!” she burst forth into a sprint.

That arrogance was going to be her downfall. Eliza wielded her two sinister swords out, mumbling a spell under her breath as she unleashed a pillar of dark crystalized ice towards him. He tumbled to the side, but she was already right in front of him.

Before the blades could sink into his flesh, he ripped his weapon out at a speed that took Eliza by surprise. The cutting edge sunk deep into her body but it refused to shed blood as she was flung high into the air, leaving nothing more than a deep abrasion across. She touched down hard onto the ground without any form of cushioning, her eyes rolled up and mouth wide open.

“Eliza?” the goddess sitting on the rose said, horror written all over her face.

“Now is your turn, Paula,” Klavier said, all traces of warmth taken over by intense bloodlust in his eyes.

It was a mere façade. His body was aching all over after using that technique. If Themis was around, she’d probably scold him again for over-stressing his body. Showing fatigue to the opponent was not an option. He had to end this battle quick if he were to hope to fight the last one without revealing his apparent lack of stamina.

Paula was different from Eliza. Unlike the ice goddess, she was far more cautious in attacking, maintaining a distance between them. To make things worse, each time he tried to get close, she would push him back, ripping his body with countless thorns of the rose that blended well into her wind strikes. He knew right then that a frontal assault would not work against the play-it-safe goddess.

Having lost enough blood from her harassment, the change of strategy was needed. He closed his eyes, sheathed his sword as he allowed his ears to pick up the sound of the violent air rushing towards him. As it started to scream at his ear, he popped the white sword out of its scabbard. The blade met some resistance, followed by a grunt that gave away her actual location. He turned to the side where he heard her, staring at the goddess. The once confident opponent was now brought down by probably the most intense fear that she had experienced as he threw her off her comfortable rose seat to experience the hard ground.

“Checkmate,” Klavier said as he swung his sword down her shoulder so hard that she collapsed from the smash, knocked out senseless from it.

“For a mere human to knock the lights out of my sisters single-handedly, you are definitely not an ordinary one,” the goddess with the black wings said as she walked past her fallen comrades. “I believe you know who I am, mortal.”

“Madia, the leader of this group,” Klavier replied, turning to face his final adversary.

“What are you going to do, fight me in that condition?”

“All I ask is that we get out of this place. In return, we will tell the townsfolk not to hurt you.”

“You care about negotiating after what you’ve done to my sisters? Hah, you’re a cheeky one,” she summoned a dark ball that hovered in front of her, her eyes filled with nothing but bloodlust.

This was bad. His vision was starting to get blurry from all the fighting and now he was forced into another one with virtually no rest. But giving up was not an option. They had to return home, and that meant that he must survive no matter what.

“You’re making a mistake, Madia,” Klavier said as he evaded her projectiles. “I didn’t come here to slaughter you.”

“I told you already, there’s no use negotiating,” she moved in so close that their noses almost touched. Fear took a hold of him as Madia’s weapon shined with a blue twinkle, unleashing a water cannon at his face. He rolled across the ground, the grains of the sand sinking into his skin before getting his head smashed against an earth wall.

Blood rushed down his face, the sheer volume so great that it momentarily blocked his sight. His head was spinning from the intense impact, nearly losing his footing once as he forced himself back up. This had to be the fury of the goddess for taking down her sisters. Had Maroma take such a deadly hit, her survival would most definitely be uncertain. He pulled the heavy sword out of the ground, leveraging the weight to his front as he tipped forward. All he needed was just one hit and it would be all over.

But no, Madia disappeared from his sight, breaking the much needed concentration for the technique he was about to use. He turned around, his eyes set upon the dark starry ball on her hands as she mouthed the words ‘Extinction’. A dark, bitter feeling filled in his heart – not because of the increasingly dire situation that he found himself in, but because it somehow felt as if Madia executed that attack to him before.

She unloaded a wealth of sharp earth at him, piercing through his feeble defense like a hot sword through butter. Just as he expected it, the final attack was the one that overwhelmed him. Before long, he collapsed, losing every means to struggle his way back up.

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The man mother called ‘dad’ was thrown high into the air, the white sword spinning out of his grasp as he landed hard on the ground. He would get up even if it hurts, but this time, he didn’t. She crawled forward, ignoring the increasingly intense pain that culminated on her shoulder. But the man, as resilient as he was, laid there motionless, his eyes rolled up and mouth wide open. His robe was blown into bits, revealing a body that was thoroughly scourged by Paula’s thorny attacks and Madia’s relentless pounding.

This couldn’t be happening. All she wanted was to prove to him that she was strong, that she didn’t need him or mother to worry over her. She didn’t just drive him away. She murdered him using the hands of the ruthless goddesses. A bitter feeling ripped through her, tears flowing out against her will.

The sudden realization of her malicious acts gave way to a kind of pain that would not subside regardless of how loud she screamed it out. Images of the gentle smile of Klavier’s flooded in her mind as if the guilty mind was punishing her for killing her father.

“Does it sting?” Madia asked as she closed in on Maroma. “Does it sting so much that you want to end it right now?”

“S-Stay away,” she picked up her broken sword, crawling back until she bumped onto a wall.

“What are you going to do now that your protector is dead? Hmm? Slay me?”

“Klavier!” a loud, husky voice shattered the silence between them. Maroma turned to the source of the noise, watching the same man that warned her earlier about the request rush into battle with his great sword. Before he could land a strike on Madia, she teleported away, distancing herself from the swordsman.

“Aem?” Maroma asked. “What are you doing here?”

“Helping you, of course. I’ve called for reinforcements so they’ll be here soon. Klavier, where is he?”

Her chest tightened as she pointed at where he laid.

“You demon,” rage swirled in his eyes as he turned to the goddess. “What have you done to him?!”

“I was just defending myself, no?” a sinister smile surfaced on Madia’s face.

“What has defending himself got to do with murdering?”

“Everything. Be gone, mortal,” she raised her hand, unleashing earth shards in the midst of water and a pool of darkness all in one combination. He raised his sword, blocking the attack with all his might, sliding across the ground as the force overwhelmed him. But before he could attempt to retaliate, Madia was already in front of him, unloading the deadly water cannon that sent him crashing to the wall. Even as mortality dragged Aem down, he picked up his mighty sword, engaging into battle only to be pushed down again.

*It’s only a nightmare*, another voice whispered at her ear as Aem took another brutal blow to the face before collapsing to the ground. This time, Aem didn’t get up. Blood flowed freely out of his body, forming a small pool around him.

“That settles the other,” Madia turned to Maroma once more, looking even more determined to destroy her once and for all. Just as she was about to strike down the helpless woman, the place lit with a white light so bright that it forced them to cover their eyes.

She turned to the source of the light, staring at Klavier’s body that was hunching forward and back on his feet, supported by a white lion a few times larger than him. It spread its wings out, looking at Maroma briefly before merging itself with Klavier, leaving a white aura surrounding his body in its wake.

Not a single word was uttered. Not a single movement was felt as the supposedly dead Klavier rolled his eyes back to look at Madia, his face reflecting the fury of a tiger.

“So you decided to play dead for a while, eh?” Madia asked. “So, how shall I destroy you?”