“Klavier!” a loud, husky voice shattered the silence between them. Maroma turned to the source of the noise, watching an armored man that warned her earlier about the request dive 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. 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 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. It wasn’t about to stop him anytime soon, he stood right back up but not without a little bit of difficulty. He picked up his weapon, sending a wave of light just before his opponent could attempt slay him. It wasn’t near enough to stop her; Madia maneuvered around the wave, sending a crippling kick to the side that sent him into the air again.

“You wouldn’t stay down, would you?” Madia asked as Aem rose to his feet.

“It’s not a matter of whether I’ll win or not,” Aem choked as blood filled his mouth. “There’s somebody I need to protect.”

“How delusional can you get?” Madia grabbed him by the neck, lifting him off the ground.

As if his beliefs were only an illusion. Aem thrust the back of sword handle onto her face, twisting the nose off its original shape. She let go of him, curling up on the ground as she writhed in pain. But before he could finish her off, she unleashed a barrage of earth shards. Unlike the one that struck Klavier, the projectiles pierced through the thick armor and into his body. He reached out for one of the shards, attempting to pull out one of them when she slapped him on the face with her boot.

“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 as the supposedly dead Klavier rolled his eyes back to look at Madia, his face reflecting the fury of a tiger. Before anyone could say anything, he let out a piercing cry that shook Aem awake. He glanced at Maroma for a split second, softening his expression probably in an attempt to quell the panic that stirred her up in that rally shout, returning to the same fearsome appearance when he looked back at Madia.

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

Klavier blazed through the sandy ground, kicking up a sandstorm at the swing of the sword as he got closer to his adversary. Madia took a step back, releasing a flurry of earth shards at him. He tilted to the side, evading most of the projectiles, unfazed by those that poked him as he struck her orb on its middle. He grabbed onto her arm before she could land a punch to the face, countering it with a head-butt that caused Madia to fall on her knees for a second.

He took a few steps back, sheathing his weapon as he waited for the goddess to get back up on her feet. The anger resonated with her opponent, now blinded by her own madness as she charged towards him, her cracked orb summoning the best that she could conjure at point blank range. Dodging would be impossible. Instead, he pulled his sword out faster than the earth missiles could move, catching her just before the shards could hit him.

But that was all that he could manage. Exhaustion seeped in, draining him of all the adrenaline that kept him going for so long. He dug the blade to the ground, using it to help him resist the gravity that was trying to pull him down.

“You really aren’t an ordinary human being,” Madia said as she got right back up. “But that’s all that you can do.”

He was more than ready to counter-attack Madia, but handling so many battles before this thoroughly squeezed him dry of all the energy he needed to keep going. It couldn’t just end with some comeback and then getting crushed once more. Madia was already in front of him, just as bloody as he was but far more combat-healthy. A thick ball of water materialized on the starry night orb of hers. This time, it was taking a little longer, probably since he damaged it a little earlier. He raised his sword, readying himself of the incoming attack when a ball of light hovered in between them.

Before he could react, the ball of light shifted shapes, and as if materializing out of thin air, a woman emerged from it. A blinding aura danced above her brow and she wore shimmering silver armor with engraved designs that could only have come from the gods. Klavier’s stomach churned as he stared into her face. Long, lime hair, immaculately smooth skin and sky blue eyes – an appearance that wouldn’t be possible for typical humans to achieve. She had to be an angel, or at least a divine messenger.

“What in the world?” Klavier blurted out.

“Cease this fighting, Madia,” the woman said.

“You again,” Madia’s expression darkened. “Do you not know how to mind your own business, Sola?”

“Sola? The Ray Sibyl?” Klavier asked.

“That’s right,” the tips of her lips lifted slightly.

“Get out of my way,” Madia said, the spell that conjured on her hands growing bigger by the second.

“Stop this madness, Madia! I’m not here to fight!”

Such a cry fell onto deaf ears. Hesitation took hold of Sola as her sister charged forward relentlessly. Klavier picked himself up, silencing his inner voice of defeat as he pulled the black sword out of its scabbard. He pointed the weapon at Madia, imploring to the gods that sided humanity to grant him just one more ounce of power.

“Bellow, Sirkius!” the sword lit up with intense black flames, directed at the insane Madia.

But no, Sola stood in front of Madia, her arms spread out in total surrender as she got blasted away by the fury of Sirkius’s power. She fell to her knees, her armor thoroughly charred by the flames, revealing the horror on Madia’s face.

“Damn, I’m totally spent,” Klavier mumbled, looking at the black blade, the life that once flowed in it was now replaced with a cold touch of the metal.

“Your intervention was unnecessary, Sola,” Madia stepped over her.

“Imbecile,” Klavier gritted his teeth. “Is that how you treat your sister?”

“Who are you to tell me off, human?”

“Isn’t it something that you gods and goddess should know yourselves?” Klavier picked himself up once more. “That compassion and mercy were what you taught us? We were not believing a lie, were we?”

It was no use. Not a single trace of remorse in her eyes as she wielded her nearly broken orb in a desperate bid to kill him off. She swung her hand authoritatively, unleashing a massive barrage of earth shards that flew towards him. But she had already executed it once and that would not fool Klavier again. He slid towards her, keeping his body low enough to avoid all the projectiles before grabbing Madia by the thigh.

He pushed himself to her side and used the shoulders as a support to lift her off the ground. With her arms locked in his grasp, he collapsed backwards, smashing her right back down to the sand for a crippling blow to the back.

But he could do no more. His body was aching all over from both the wounds inflicted and the tiresome workout he had throughout the journey. It was so bad that he could barely lift his head up.

“Klavier!” he heard a man’s voice, then the rushed stomps of the foot that increased in intensity. That had to be Aem coming to his aid. “Hoi Klavier! Keep it together!”

“I’m not dead yet, fool,” he replied.

“Thank the heavens you’re still awake,” Aem’s lips cracked open into a relieved smile. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be of much help.”

“It’s fine. You took care of my daughter when I’m fighting there. Let’s go home already…” the fatigue finally got the better of him, forcing his heavy eyelids closed as he fell into a deep slumber.

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Two months passed since that day but the incident was still as fresh in her head like it happened the day before. It could well be a blessing that such an experienced medic was lurking in their house for a long time, for Themis was the one who cared for Klavier who remained in a vegetable state for a month. She never mentioned anything about what she could truly do, leaving Maroma the impression that she was just a high school girl trying to get taller.

She awoke in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat. Her mind had done it again, replaying the bitter memories of how Klavier refused to wake up after knocking the lights out of Madia, leaving Aem to support him as they made their way back home. She got off the bed, cursing her past self for making her go through that.

It was all but silent. Her ears picked the sounds of a slow, soothing piano song. She followed the traces of the music, leading her out of the stuffy room and into the living room where the heavily bandaged Klavier sat in front of the instrument. But he wasn’t alone. Themis sat by his side, hugging a small pillow, her body swaying to the music.

“I see you’re up,” Klavier said as he slowed the pace to a stop.

“How did you know I’m here?” Maroma asked.

“Your footsteps gave it away,” he turned around, pulling a ‘surprised-you-eh’ smile.

“You’re supposed to be sleeping,” Themis said. “If not, you’ll not grow taller.”

“But I can’t sleep,” Maroma looked down on the floor.

“Okay,” he said slowly.

“You know,” Themis said. “I’ve been itching to ask for a while already.”

“What is it?” Klavier asked.

“Err, how did you mistake Maroma to be a boy?”

“It’s a long story you know,” he scratched his head uncomfortably. “But the short version of it is that mom told me she’s a boy at birth.”

“Why’s that?”

“Maroma’s the only surviving child in the family. She was supposed to be the third child, but the other two didn’t survive later than the age of five,” he heaved a sigh.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Shouldn’t have asked.”

“Now that I thought of it, mom probably told me that Maroma’s a boy to save myself the glares from the elders. You know, the tradition of males taking over the lordship that I hold.”

It was then Maroma realized that he was thinking of his family the whole time even when he was away from home. Guilt welled up in her heart. Had she known the pain he went through to return home, she wouldn’t have treated him so badly.

“I’m sorry,” Maroma clenched her fists tight. “I shouldn’t have…”

“That thing is the past. You can do something about the future though.”

“You’re lucky to have a dad like him,” Themis pulled his cheek. “He always charges into battle without considering his own safety.”

“Get off me!” Klavier poked her forehead.

“You know, mother won’t like this,” Maroma looked at them with the half-closed eyes.

“I know,” Themis let go of his cheek. “Well, knock us out already. I can’t sleep too you know.”

“As you wish,” his eyebrows twitched for a moment.

For once, Maroma looked forward to the kind of music that Klavier played. He lowered his hands to the keyboard, taking a deep breath before starting on his first piece. It was just like mother said, he played the songs with so much passion and fervor that it raised the hair at the back of her neck. It wasn’t long before her eyelids started to get heavy under the constantly flowing music. Before she knew it, she was already asleep.

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Eliza didn’t know if she should be thankful that the human whom she fought earlier spared her life. It was a great insult to her pride, but it wasn’t like she wanted to throw her life away just like that either. There wasn’t a single drop of blood shed by the sword that struck her, only deep abrasions that still stung even after hours had passed. But it didn’t hurt as much as when she was first hit by it, giving her the strength she needed to get back up to check on her sisters. She nudged Paula, who moaned in pain as she opened her eyes.

“Eliza?” she said softly.

“I’m here,” Eliza returned an assuring smile.

“We’re not dead, are we?”

Paula wrapped her arms around her. But it wasn’t any normal hug, Paula was trembling, sniffing away as her nose got blocked by the snot.

“I was scared,” she croaked, unable to hold back the tears of fear. “I thought he was going to kill me…”

“It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have…”

“Urrgh,” a voice said from the distance.

“Madia,” Eliza couldn’t hide the pleasure in her words. “You’re okay!”

“What? Of course I’m okay. Who do you think I am, huh?”

“I got worried for once. That man wielded more than enough power to slay gods.”

“He definitely isn’t an ordinary human to be able to command the Keeper of Order.”

“Leorone,” Eliza and Paula echoed darkly.

“Well, at least we got away with our lives,” Madia shrugged. “But legend says that when Leorone revives a person, it does so by taking the extra life force left on him.”

“What?”

“In other words, the one who gets revived will have drastically lowered strength and vigor. In the long run, that is.”

“So what do we do now?” Eliza asked. “My senses tell me he isn’t pursuing us.”

“We’ll strike while his guard is down,” Madia licked her lips wickedly. “This time, we’ll not be alone.”

Eliza’s heart sunk. “Are you sure about this? Attacking the humans will provoke Freya and Zele.”

“Who cares? They’re to be exterminated, as the higher ranking gods said.”

For once, Eliza was inclined to disagree.