Klavier was losing strength. It would normally take one slash to take down an elder tree. This time, however, he took two and it drained a lot of stamina from him. It probably had something to do with his inactivity from the coma, but there was that nagging feeling that it was more than that. It would be best not to tell anybody about this weakening condition on him, especially to Ana.

He returned home just before dawn broke, the sound of metal cutting the air ringing in his ears. It had to be Maroma perfecting her standard swing. There was far more conviction in each attempt since that day she managed to get away with her life. He would have done the same in her shoes, not wanting to experience the helplessness she had when the people around her were dying by the enemy’s hands. He entered his room, barely visible with the lack of candlelight. His eyes made out the silhouette of a person a head shorter than him, bumping into various equipment as though it was blind in the darkness. The person grunted as silently as it could, his ears picking up a voice similar to Themis.

“Themis,” he rested his hand on his hip. “What the hell are you doing in my room?”

“That voice,” she turned her head to where he was. “Oh, it’s you. I was just checking the magical signatures left behind by your robe.”

“What about it?”

“There’s a powerful dark energy in that robe that’s not coming from you. I assume it’s just the aftermath of your fight against the Sibyl Sisters but it’s not the case.”

“Err, simple words please.”

“The Sibyl Sisters are still alive.”

“Um, yeah. What about it?”

“I get a very sinister vibe from them. Like they’re sending a warning to us.”

“What warning?”

“I don’t know. But I can’t seem to decipher the message.”

“Why not we get specialists to check on it? It’ll speed up the process. More so especially if it’s very bad news.”

“Oh. I guess you’re right. In that case, we should meet Will. He knows where all the finest magicians are in La Veda, among those is one who reads the stars to tell the individual’s fortunes. It turns out to be quite accurate.”

“Do you know his name?”

“Amul, she is otherwise known as Maiden Amul.”

“A she…”

“Yeah. In any case, let’s go find him so we can see this person.”

“What about Ana?”

“Lilith will take care of her. Let’s get going while it’s still dark.”

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It had been a long time since she walked along with Klavier without Will and Aem accompanying her. He normally would give a cold shoulder whenever they were alone, lost in his own train of thoughts over god-knows-what.

Themis couldn’t take her eyes off him, not because of any form of attraction growing between them, but rather, the once youthful-looking Klavier was now lost to a significantly older appearance. Despite the changes, he was yet to lose his flexibility and agility in combat, which he still had with great mastery in their encounters with lurking monsters in the path.

The sun was already in the highest point of the sky when they arrived to the capital of La Veda. Klavier put on a straw hat the moment they stepped into the city as if it was to hide his face from the face of the crowd. She raised an eyebrow, but all he did was to place his finger on his lips with a cheeky smile behind it. He must have done something despicable to force him to hide his face, but she couldn’t really bother asking about it.

Away from the bustling city life was a more disciplined area where only armed men and women walked on. They were greeted with cold stares as they went past, sometimes even getting stopped because of Klavier’s shady appearance. She cursed under her breath, taking the hat off to reveal his ageing face.

Beyond the flight of stairs they moved up was a massive, plain tiled area where hundreds of knights clad in simple leather armor populated the place. It reeked with body odor and sweat, the stench so strong that Themis couldn’t help but to cover her nose. Klavier looked on as though he was hypnotized by the scene, watching the commanders whip the trainees to shape. The constant shouts of, “I can’t hear you!” bang her eardrums to the point of irritation. She tugged him by the sleeve, dragging him away before the powerful scent could drive her crazy.

Klavier stopped on his tracks, unable to take his eyes off a peculiar knight in the midst. She was relatively small in size, wearing a red headband over her thick curly hair. She swung the decorative bastard sword, slicing the training dummy into two, leaving no trace of stray wood in its wake.

“Can we get going already? I can’t stand the smell!” Themis said.

“A clean cut, eh?” Klavier walked over to that young lady as though he was magnetized to her.

“Hoi!” she pinched his cheek. “Are you listening?!”

“I am! I am! Just that this young lady displayed fine swordsmanship.”

“I did? Thanks mister,” the knight shuffled her feet, looking down at the floor.

“Alma! That was a great shot!” a buffed man tackled the knight from the side, resting the giant axe handle on his huge shoulders.

“You could a bit more gentle dad!” Alma scoffed.

“Hogar, is that you?” Klavier asked.

“Klavier?”

They exchanged an intense set of stares for a good few seconds, stirring nothing but discomfort in the atmosphere around them. Themis was about to drag Klavier away when the two wrestled each other like how bears would in their duels. But it was all for show; they let go of each other, laughing their hearts out at a reunion that had not happened for probably several years.

“Look at you, age sure is catching up to you fast, Lord Dragon!” Hogar rested his hand on Klavier’s shoulder. “But heck, you still possess that intimidating aura even until now!”

“Dad? Who is that guy you’re talking to?” Alma asked.

“Oh. My bad,” Hogar pushed Alma forward. “Klavier, this is my daughter, Alma. Alma, this is Lord Dragon, Vanros Klavier.”

“Lord Dragon in the flesh?!”

“Hey,” Klavier said. “Don’t go boasting my title without my approval.”

“Is it true?” she tugged his shoulder. “You’re the Lord Dragon?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you show just one move of yours? Please?”

“I would love to,” he patted Alma’s head. “But no. The only reason why I carry these swords is to protect my people, not for fame or money.”

“Alma,” Hogar said. “He’s like that. Best to keep danger away, after all. So, what are you doing here?”

“We must talk to Knight Will,” Themis said. “It’s between us only.”

“Okay,” Hogar said slowly. “Don’t injure yourself, old buddy. Come on, Alma. Mom’s waiting.”

It was about time. Themis was literally melting under the hot sun. Sometimes she wondered how the fighters didn’t mind the sizzling heat. She trotted into the shelter, heaving a sigh of relief now that the shade provided her with the much needed cool air. After what felt like a minute had past, she walked on into the office, ignoring the hostile stares that bored down on her as she approached Will and Aem.

“Hello Will,” she placed her hands on her back, a smile surfacing on her face as he turned around. “It’s been a while.”

“Themis? Klavier? What are you guys doing here?”

“We’re here to meet with this fortune teller named Amul,” Klavier said. “Do you know where she is?”

“In the shrine located in the mountains, praying. I would advise you to see her this evening. So what is this about?”

“It’s Klavier’s robe,” Themis took it off him. “Touch it. You’ll sense a dark energy from it.”

“You’re right,” Will said after holding onto it for a brief second. “I see a dark goddess’s wicked smile along with the energy.”

“It has to be bad news,” Klavier said. “We need to confirm the message with Amul right away.”

“Very well. I’ll alert her at once.”

“What? We need to walk all there?” Themis asked.

“We will go by carriage. But we must ascend by foot,” Will said, putting on his helmet. “Aem, I’ll trust that you’ll cover me while I’m away.”

“Very well,” Aem said as they set off.

“You know, I’m surprised you have your own carriage,” Themis said. “We should ride it more often.”

“I don’t hear you complain very often. How long did you walk?” Will asked.

“Five hours,” Klavier said. “My village resides just beside the mountain and there’s no form of convenience like this.”

“Wait. So Themis is living with you?”

“I sold my apartment before I left,” she puffed her cheeks. “I never thought I will return to this place.”

“Oh. Okay. The carriage will cut short the time taken.”

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The long climb up was no stranger to Klavier. The path reminded him of the anxiety that ripped his heart when he heard from Aem’s mouth of Maroma’s actions. Monsters still lurked in every corner of the mountains, but they were not as aggressive as they used to be. At the summit was a well maintained shrine. It wasn’t anywhere near as noisy or stuffy as the city, giving an air of peace and serenity that people would yearn to have from the busyness of city life. Klavier dusted his garments, giving a gentle bow to the altar as he entered before the shrine maidens rushed over to their assistance. Many of them wore clothing that resembled the typical kimono, a white robe and a red skirt that covered just about everything.

“Good day to you sir,” one of the younger looking maidens said. “What brings you to this humble ground?”

“Is Miss Amul around?” Will asked. “I have business that I must speak with her personally.”

“Amul is in the training grounds in the forest. You may find her there,” she pointed at a path into the woods. “But please be careful. There are a lot of strong monsters waiting to kill you.”

“She’s got guts to enter into danger like that,” Klavier said. “Come on, let’s go.”

“You have my most heartfelt thanks,” Will said with a smile. “Klavier, you will do well to save your energy. I’ll take point.”

“Very well.”

“You have my thanks,” Klavier said.

“Err, if I may,” the maiden said. “What do you intend to do when you meet her?”

“It’s about this robe I’m wearing. It’s got the message from the gods but I’m unable to read it even with the help of this sorceress. So, is it alright to lead us to her?”

“Sure.”

It was not without a bit of reluctance. Maybe it was how Klavier dressed, or the way how he spoke that made the maidens look at him with suspicion and scorn, but whatever it was, he couldn’t really pay attention to it. They walked across a path already carved out by the parted grass, leading them straight to the place that the maiden mentioned.

The sound of an agonized scream filled the air. Klavier’s hand dropped to the handle of the black sword, rushing to the site where he last heard it. In front of him was a massive grizzly bear, its menacingly claws lifted high into the air towards a person dressed similarly to the maiden that was escorting them. But she remained unfazed at the onslaught, swinging her short blade with complete control, chipping off a part of its talons.

Her clean strike made the monster stagger, but it wasn’t near enough to properly subdue it. In a fit of rage, the bear leapt towards her once more, this time, its fangs bared out for all to see. Klavier stood in front of the maiden, mumbling a spell under his breath as he forced the black sword out of its scabbard. The cutting edge slid across its firm flesh albeit only a shallow one that spilled little blood.

“Are you alright?” Klavier asked, maintaining his focus on the opponent before him.

“Umm, yeah,” the maiden replied.

“That is why you shouldn’t wander off into the forest on your own,” Themis summoned her jewel staff.

“Should we finish it off or let it go?”

“Why, of course we should kill it,” Themis said. “It threatened her life.”

“Never mind, I shouldn’t have asked,” Klavier flipped the sword as he struck its neck.

It collapsed under the single fell swoop, sending shockwaves across the immediate area that knocked them off balance. He sheathed his sword, returning his attention to the shrine girl.

“My most humble apologies for the intrusion, Amul,” he said. “I am in need of your help urgently.”

“But why will Lord Dragon want a help from someone like me?” the maiden asked.

“Well,” Themis took the blue robe off him. “That’s because it’s got something to do with magic. I’m not sure what the message is but I get a bad feeling about it.”

“I see what you mean. But first, let’s get back,” Amul said.