

Even though I didn't have Stigma in my hands, I was brimming with confidence. Sakura had caught me off guard last time – but there were some major differences now. She was also lacking her legendary weapon, though Sakura had somehow managed to power her way through the front gate while still wearing her armour. That wasn't much of an operative issue to me. I could clock her once with a good punch and have her out cold easily enough.

Even worse for her was how my skills had developed since that last meeting. I'd slain a dragon in the intervening time and gained twenty levels or so. My already outrageous stats had been boosted yet again. The hand-axe she had just pilfered from the broken display wasn't going to do enough damage to chew its way through my HP pool. I considered stealing one for myself, but Sakura was already running up on me before I could make a selection.

I dodged back as she swung down with a vertical swing, the sharp edge clattering off of the marble floor and throwing sparks everywhere. I had to curse Dalston for teaching this girl anything at all – because it was clear that she had a lot of malicious ideas in her head. A flurry of swings failed to make contact with me, smashing even more glass as they missed the mark.

“Stop moving!”

I smirked, “I'll stop moving when you stop attacking me!”

She did. Sakura skidded to a halt and held the axe aloft with a scowl on her face, “Why aren't you fighting back?”

“I could blow you out in one shot.”

“Try it.”

I set my feet firmly on the ground and moved in with a swiftness that defied human limits. I could feel the corded muscle beneath my skin winding up as my left hand curved through the air like a bullet. Sakura's eyes widened in slow motion as she saw the attack coming down upon her head. Before my knuckles could strike her cheekbone, the axe's blade was placed between us. There was a loud clang as I hit the blunt side which she had decided to use as a shield.

But I put all of my weight into it. Sakura slid back across the floor as the impact was transferred through the surface and into her head. The wooden hilt twisted and snapped into a shower of wooden splinters. As her arms and legs fell limp against the floor, I found myself asking what all of the big talk was about. I'd cleaned her clock just as I expected to. That was until she twitched back to life with a gasp.

“What? You managed to stay conscious through that?”

Sakura staggered back to her feet and clutched her bruised face, “Knockout damage... I knew that it'd be dangerous fighting you like this. One of the first things that I did after you beat me was to find one of these.” She tugged on the metal chain that ran around the back of her neck; “It increases the threshold you need to need to KO me.”

“Lucky you, but that just means I need to hit you a few more times. You can't beat me like this.”

Sakura adjusted the cuffs of her bracers, “Defensive strategies never work in the long run. Alright. I didn't want to show my hand so soon – but I'm not going to win using this trash.” She twisted one of them around and revealed a complicated looking mechanism that had been attached to the bottom, which extended outwards into a trigger like mechanism. It was a catalyst launcher – one that had

been carefully concealed from the guard at the gate. She hooked her finger around it and held it up in the air.

“[Recall!]”

With a blast of energy the air above her shattered into spectral pieces of glass. From the swirling void of purple energy emerged the hilt of a sword, which she reached up for using the same hand. Dislodging it from the void, I recognised it as Veritas. She had used a teleportation spell to mark it, and then used the catalyst launcher to summon it to her person. It was a very expensive way of moving something from one place to another, and under most circumstances it was too loud to make use of as a thief.

With her cover blown and the commotion already unleashed, Sakura had no reason to hide it from me. She could use everything she had to try and win, or she could hold back and most certainly lose. Veritas was a unique weapon, but our present environment posed a significant disadvantage. The foundations of the building would not allow roots and branches through to hold me down. Additionally, with the chamber in her Catalyst emptied – she couldn’t cast another offensive spell to try and catch me off guard. I thought it was an intelligent trade. The sword was more reliable than a fireball. None of the weapons in the building would deal as much damage; they were antiques with faded wood and old construction.

“You know, the main character doesn’t tend to win until the third fight. So how about we call this one good and stop trying to kill each other?”

“I haven’t even started trying yet,” Sakura insisted, “Let me show you how much I’ve grown!” I really didn’t care about how much she’d grown. I wanted her to get out of my hair so that I could complete my mission. Now that I took a second look at what she was wearing, I started noticing that her armour and equipment was configured in a specific way. She had multiple rings on her fingers, hidden beneath the leather gloves that covered her palms. They were affixed, all of them.

That extended to her armour and clothes, they were all from different sources and taken for the specific reasoning that they had affixes on them. Sakura had let on that she was an experienced RPG and light novel consumer. She had taken a page out of my book and made a build, but unlike mine – this was significantly more sophisticated. While I worried about extending the clock and keeping the authorities off my back, she had been galivanting to each corner of the country in search of items she could use against me.

I put up my dukes and got ready for trouble. Sakura’s full ability was about to be showcased. She had built everything about using Veritas. Sakura charged at me again with a more familiar weapon in hand, I didn’t have time to smash a display and grab one for myself with her baring down on me. I didn’t know how much damage one swing would do – but a legendary sword like Veritas was no joke. Even my inflated health pool could be chipped away with enough hits.

I ducked another swipe and tried to open a gap between us. With a sword in hand she had the superior range. She was the one controlling the engagement when I got too close. Sakura showed a blatant disregard for the condition of her surroundings, slicing through wood and destroying glass. Derian was going to have an aneurism when he came in to assess the damage.

Sakura stopped in place again. We’d moved halfway across the showhouse floor without her landing a single blow on me. Within minutes a group of watchmen would be busting through the still-open doors and trying to arrest her for theft. Like most petty crimes in this world, the punishment would be severe. Sakura didn’t seem to care. I was starting to understand how and why she had collected

so many affixed items. It was easy to get your way when you didn't care about being a wanted woman.

"This is just a system, Ren. If there's one thing I'm good at – it's breaking systems. So why can't I hit you?"

"I don't follow the rules."

"That much is obvious. I didn't know you were such a coward when it came to fighting!"

"Being brave is for people who don't value their lives. Between you and me, it's all because you got a comfortable second chance. Now you just want to throw it away by getting involved in shit like this. Don't you feel a damn thing for your parents?"

Her gaze darkened, "They're not my parents, Ren. They're NPCs. All of this is just set dressing! A convincing illusion to trick us into behaving a certain way. I have a role to play; I'm going to be the hero. With all that in mind, what's to say we won't just respawn when we die?"

"And what's to say we will? Feel free to try and find out for yourself, but leave me out of it."

I was done with Sakura. I had already warned her the last time we fought, but it was plain to see that she hadn't listened to a word I had said. There was something wrong with this girl and she was clearly trying to kill me. I saw nothing wrong with killing her back. I wasn't going to show her mercy just because she was sent from Earth like me – if anything she should have known better.

There was another angle I wanted to play. If I could knock her out and hand her over to Derian, I might just get closer to finding out where the contraband was. Surely, he'd reward his new best friend with a favour for helping to protect his precious collection from a rampaging thief. But to do that I'd need to press the offensive. With Sakura discovering that it was almost impossible for her to pin me down without magic, I had given myself that window of opportunity.

"That sword looks a little heavy, struggling to lift it?"

She gripped the hilt tight as I started to approach her from the front. Sakura pulled it into her body and lunged forwards with a diving stab which I easily dodged by stepping aside. I reached out and grabbed her sword hand by the wrist, pulling her into my body and turning her inside out with a clothesline. Sakura was wily to my grappling. She kept hold of Veritas and scrambled away before I could follow it up with a kick to the head while she was down.

I did it again, closing the gap with my longer strides and batting aside another attack. My punch missed the mark and turned down at a shallow angle, striking her in the chest and sending her back as the breath was robbed from her lungs. I pressed the advantage, following her in lockstep and throwing more haymakers in her direction. Sakura was hardier than I expected. She withstood multiple direct hits, even as the bruises started to form and her nose leaked a trickle of blood.

I stopped for a second as she struggled to stay standing. Yet she remained conscious. Sakura's eyes were filled with bloodlust. She shook the fog from her head and coughed; "You don't know what these things do. This fight isn't over."

"Enlighten me."

Sakura *moved*. One second, she was a few feet away from me, the next she was up in my face; her arms heaving the weight of Veritas up towards the bottom of my torso. It was so fast that my brain couldn't comprehend what was happening. My reaction was purely driven by base instinct. I needed

to get out of the way or my guts would be all over the patterned floor. I willed my body to move faster but it still wasn't enough. I'd made a vital mistake. Sakura had an affix that I myself had utilised just a few months before. I had damaged her enough to trigger them, a boost to her damage and speed that allowed her to keep up with me for just a few seconds. That was all she needed.

The tip of the blade touched my abdomen and caught the bottom edge of Medalie's chest plate – and then it kept going. The small fracture that I had dismissed as an inconvenience was actually much more, it was a fundamental crack in the structural integrity of its structure. It split clean in two as Veritas' penetrative power made a complete joke of the Stormsteel alloy. Up and up, cutting through steel, fabric and skin. Only at the apex of her swing did the sword's momentum pull her back from lodging it into my chest cavity.

But the strength of the blow was what really caught me off-guard. My feet left the ground as the force carried me up and into the air. I tumbled back and landed onto the hard tiles with a groan of pain and a loud thud. I glanced down at the long wound that snaked up from my stomach and ended below my pectoral muscles. My entire body was drench in a blanket of fresh blood. I clutched the bisected pieces of my formerly invulnerable armour with a mouth held open by disbelief. Sakura looked pleased like a pig in muck.

"Alright," I shouted, "If that's how you want to play."

I wrenched the broken armour from my shoulders and tossed it aside.

She wanted to see my full power? I was going to give it to her.