

Sakura looked over the spoils of war with the eye on an experienced RPG player. It had taken her a long time to get this far, months of collecting experience from strong enemies, enhancing her gear and skills, and stealing affixed items so that she could construct an unstoppable build. It was just as she had done dozens of times before in her past life; the one that was taken from her so suddenly. Sakura could not assign blame to the 'parents' who had raised her from birth once again, but her mind searched for anyone to give responsibility. She had lost everything and everyone that she cared about, to be sent into a new world that felt like a faint parody of greater stories she had read before.

None of the guards could put up much of a fight, and the owners of the homes had never toiled for a day in their lives. Sakura found it mind-numbingly simple to sneak into the various tours they held, smashing and grabbing whatever she pleased. She'd be away and heading towards her forest hideout before they could even hope of catching her. They had never once wized up to her schemes, not until now. It was of little consequence. Sakura had already collected enough items to put together the next stage of her plan.

"Emma."

She was so engrossed in her chores that she didn't hear the footsteps approaching her location. She grabbed her sword and turned to face the intruder, feeling a flash of anger in her chest when she discovered that it was the old man. He'd done nothing but doubt her ability from the start. His kind words and platitudes were worth less than the air he used to speak them. He took her for a fool; a moronic child who would be placated with the bare minimum.

"Why are you here?" she demanded, her voice sharpened like a dagger.

Dalston regarded the camp which Sakura had established. There was a small tent connected to two trees, a firepit surrounded by stones, and an overturned trunk being used as a seat. She had been here for some time. Her fingerprints had been left all over the area, which made it easy for the tall woman to track her down once they caught wind of it.

"I came to take you back home. What else?"

Sakura had heard the same story over and over again. She grunted and pointed Veritas in his direction, "How many times do I need to tell you that I'm not following your orders? You never believed in what I said, or what I was capable of. You were happy to keep me caged up in that city – never wanting me to step outside. Now that I have, you're playing nice. Where was that compromise back then?"

Dalston approached cautiously, each step bringing him closer to the tip of the blade. "I was just concerned for your safety. You're a young girl, and the world isn't a peaceful place."

"Your concern is noted, but unnecessary. I'm already strong enough to look after myself."

"That might be true, but what about your family? Don't you miss them?"

Sakura's face fell, "I do. But there's no way for me to see them again."

"There is. All you have to do is come back – they won't be angry at you!"

"I never said I was talking about them, or you."

Dalston remembered what Ren had said to him before. Sakura was an outworlder. He hadn't believed it the first time, but the pieces were starting to fall into place. How could he have been so

foolish as to not notice this before? Her talent, her knowledge, her ambition; they were all driven by experiences that had happened before she was even born. Sakura felt no kinship with him or her own parents, that was why she refused to come back to Blackwake. It was a hurtful realisation for Dalston.

“Do you seriously feel nothing for them?” he asked, hoping above all else that there was a single spark of affection in her heart. His hopes would be disappointed as Sakura turned away from him and stared out into the woods beyond.

“I don’t know. Perhaps I do, but that would change nothing. You or them – that isn’t enough to bring me back to Blackwake. I have a greater purpose. I was brought into this world for a reason, I was given this sword for a reason. You always refused to listen to me. You thought I was nothing more than a stupid girl living flights of fancy in her mind.”

“That’s not true. I always knew you were strong! But I couldn’t just let you run away from your parents like that. They’re devastated! You... you might not feel anything for them, but they do for you. You’re their daughter for goodness sake.”

“I’m not running away. I’m facing my destiny, this is for the good of the world. If you can’t see that, then leave me be.”

Dalston needed to change his plan, he knew that now. Ren was right. Sakura didn’t respect what he had to say, nor did she believe that his concerns were genuine. For a no-good thief, he was certainly perceptive to what other people were thinking. The thought outraged him, but he was angry with himself the most. He’d discarded Ren’s words and advice because of his nature; but never sought to confirm them for himself. Now he was face to face with reality.

“Is there anything that would convince you? It doesn’t have to be permanent, they just want to see you again, to know that you’re safe.”

“I see no reason to do that. Can’t you tell them that I’m okay?”

In truth, Dalston was not certain that they trusted him anymore.

“You keep talking about destiny, what do you mean by that?”

Sakura turned back and smiled, “Every era has a hero, and every era has a villain. I was blessed with this second chance at life, given the abilities and weapons to fight. Does it not make sense that I’m the one burdened with grand purpose? For what other reason would I be given Veritas? This is a sword that needs be used to protect the innocent.”

“You’ve been robbing people.”

“Just the means to an end, and surely you don’t think that those wealthy individuals are actually innocent? I’m sure they’ve all done something terrible in their lives – so what harm does stealing a few things from them really do?”

“How can you make that judgement without evidence? You’re assuming things but failing to reach a proper conclusion, both that, and your destiny.”

Sakura held up her sword, “This is all the evidence I need. This is a legendary weapon. It was given to me for a reason. Now leave. I don’t need to hear any more of this from you.”

Dalston didn't want to. Ren was waiting in the wings to come down and fight her again, and that ran the risk of having her being injured or killed. He wouldn't hold back for his sake. Ren and Sakura were fighting for real – their lives were on the line. But the decision was not his to make.

We pressed through the treeline and walked to the camp where Dalston had confronted Sakura. His attempts to reason with her had failed yet again, which meant that our only recourse was to take her down with force. Dalston tried to get in my way, but he soon realised that such an action was only delaying the inevitable. He stepped away and allowed me to see her face to face once more. She was not pleased to see me. I had ruined her carefully constructed narrative by seeking her out first.

"You should have taken his offer and put that thing down," I said, "We could have ended this without any more violence."

"What kind of moron would give up her only weapon? You're just going to stab me in the back the first chance you get."

"Why?"

"You're my rival. That's why."

I shrugged, "To be honest, taking you alive would actually make my life much easier. Part of me was hoping that you'd just agree to my scheme and we could be on our way. I'm not here for the bounty, I'm just here for you."

I had already made plans with Tahar and Cali to take Sakura down. Tahar was going to try and distract her with long ranged attacks, Cali would keep her pinned using her reach, and I would go in and try to mop up while she was overwhelmed. I wasn't happy to drag them in with me, given how dangerous Sakura really was – but they insisted on being included this time around. Cali had rightly pointed to my method of stacking the deck as much as possible. This was no time to hold back all of the cards I held and run the risk of losing. I reached back and drew Stigma. Sakura remained still, not even seeing the need to move before I took my first step.

But when she decided that I wasn't bluffing, she moved very quickly. I was immediately put onto the defensive as she charged forward and came down at me with an overhead slash. I deflected it. Sakura leaned back and barely avoided taking the tip of Cali's halberd to her cheek. She staggered through the fallen leaves, kicking them up into the air as she tried to regain her footing. The second she did, an arrow flew through the air and struck her chestplate from behind.

Tahar was already moving to another location. She spun on her heel and summoned the power of Veritas, which glowed with a large burst of energy. Roots sprouted from beneath her feet and gave chase, but the long range and the risk of us attacking her again kept her from holding Tahar down. She was forced to abandon her attempt as she heard me running up from behind. We clashed, almost falling down to the ground as our bodies collided at full velocity. Sakura stumbled as the full weight of my inhuman strength forced her feet to leave the ground for a split second.

"Three on one hardly seems fair!"

"Life isn't fair, get used to it."

Dalston could only hide behind a nearby tree and watch as the battle unfolded. It was beyond anything he had seen during his years in the army. Sakura and I were moving with immense speed, and striking with incredible strength. He could barely keep up with it. This was the full extent of what

Sakura had done, her ability to kill was no longer in doubt. The only question left was whether I was enough to stop her here and now. He winced with each clatter of metal on metal. Each singular attack had enough power to shatter bone into a thousand pieces, but we both continued as if it weren't enough to phase us.

In truth, it hurt like a bitch every time Sakura struck me even if I blocked the sharp end. With her strength and build even a sword could be turned into a blunt weapon. Like a hammer and anvil, I was placing Stigma between her edge and my bone. I ran the risk of becoming seriously injured even without a direct hit. Cali did her level best to keep things tilted in our favour. She'd interject with precise and potentially deadly pokes from a safe distance. Sakura wouldn't dare move over to attack her with me still in the picture. I'd take that opportunity to cut her down at the knee and end the fight as soon as possible.

More arrows. Sakura was already adjusting her strategy to try and get away from us. She put as many trees between herself and Tahar's firing line as possible, using her footwork to drag us along with her. She'd intersperse her assaults with more branch magic, trying to trip us up and lay traps to delay our advance. Tahar wasn't a fool. She was already repositioning to put her under constant pressure. It was getting to her. I could see the sweat on her brow and the desperation in her eyes. If we could separate her from her weapon, then the battle would be won, I'd have a live criminal to bait Derian with, and I'd be one step closer to getting my hands on the cursed relic.

Cali and I were working together like a well oiled machine. She lurked on the periphery of our fight like a viper, only stepping in with a thrust when it was opportune for me. It was strange. This was the first time we had to fight in such close proximity against the same opponent. Perhaps there was something to her idea that we had a connection. Sakura was on the back foot now. I returned the favour and struck her guard repeatedly, injuring her arms and making her movements slower in the process.

I could feel my own bones creaking in the process. Each and every attack stung my muscles and filled my mouth with acid. I could go for a very long time – but the effects I felt were similar to how they always were. It was difficult to judge just how fatigued I really was. I swung upwards, Sakura scrambling backwards with a messy dodge. Cali followed on with a strike around the head from the shaft of her halberd. Sakura bumped into a tree and ducked as another huge arrow shattered the bark next to her head. Several small cuts started to bleed as a result of the shrapnel glancing her skin.

That only served to enrage her further. She made some space between us and held her sword up in the air, as I approached to try and keep things moving – she came down again and used [Power Strike.] I held Stigma's blade at an angle and tried to deflect it, but the force behind the attack still sent me flying off to the side, landing in the dirt with a heavy thud. Sakura used the opportunity to throw her roots at Cali, who was unable to get away at such close range. It seemed that there were limitations on how far and fast she could manipulate them.

The hit had really hurt me, but at least it wasn't enough to break Stigma into pieces. Whatever these legendary swords were treated with made them extremely durable. My only thought at that moment was putting myself between Sakura and Cali. She was still trying to cut herself free of the stubborn roots using her knife. I dashed at Sakura and swung before she could take advantage and kill my partner in crime.

"You really don't want to hurt her," I growled, "It's just a bad idea."

“All’s fair in love and war!”

We squared off again. Tahar hadn’t yet got into a position where she could attack from a blind spot. We charged again – making our first moves in confidence that our blows would be the ones that landed on target. The minute adjustments of our bodies’ mid-strike allowed us to barely avoid the tip of the other’s sword. It was a dance. A deadly one, but a dance nonetheless. Sakura had the edge over me in swordplay, but the ever-present threat of my allies meant that she could not overextend and dedicate herself solely to defeating me.

Sakura tried to sweep my legs, but I hopped over her attack and responded with a punishing backhand to her already bleeding cheek. That irritated the cut further, resulting in a fresh batch of blood to seep outwards, so much so that it was starting to get into her eyes and obstruct her vision. That was why she did see the next arrow coming. It struck the gauntlet on her sword hand and knocked it loose as a shockwave travelled through her muscles. I acted fast and rolled towards it, kicking it away before she could grab it and keep fighting.

Sakura stopped, I stopped. We stared at each other as a gust of wind rustled the trees above us.

“It’s over. Just give it up.”

“I’m not letting you get in the way of my destiny.”

“There is no destiny! Sometimes things happen to us for reasons that we can’t even begin to understand. We’re just small pieces in an infinitely complicated machine.”

Dalston ran up to us, “He’s right. He’s right! Just stop fighting, please!”

I hiked my sword into the air and stabbed it into the dirt by my feet. Cali and Tahar were still on guard now that Sakura didn’t have the ability to control her roots. How was this going to end? I had no idea. Sakura was so deep into this obsession of hers that reason was not something that would be effective. She saw me and Dalston as people merely trying to stop her from meeting her potential, her destiny, even when there was no evidence to suggest such a thing existed. Dalston was going to try one more time regardless. He crowded around her and tried to wipe the blood from her face with a rag. She didn’t resist his attention, but her eyes remained locked onto me.

When he was done cleaning away the mess, he patted her down and put his hands on her shoulders; “Come home, take a break. I’ll make sure that nobody lays a finger on you.”

Sakura’s hands moved. Her left arm pulled Dalston into her body while the other pulled the catalyst from her pocket. Time slowed to a crawl as I watched her take aim at Cali. I willed myself to move and charged at her as she opened her mouth to cast the spell. Dalston tried to struggle free, but she was too strong for him now. I flipped Stigma upside down and wielded the hilt like a club, swinging from around the side of his head and clocking her above the ear. At the same time – Tahar had acted on her own. The heavy wooden curve of her bow slammed against the back of her skull with a sickening crack.

Being struck from two sides by two blunt weapons was enough to surpass the protection of her amulet, and she crumbled to the floor in a heap. I took a deep breath and tried to still my beating heart. That was way too close for comfort. Dalston fell to his knees and clutched her unconscious body in his arms. I was furious, and he knew it.

“What the hell was that? You nearly got Cali killed! I told you to stay out of the way!”

Dalston winced with each piercing accusation, “Don’t kill her, please. She’s all I have left.”

I was tempted, so very tempted, to plunge my sword into her and be done with this whole affair for good. He could tell what I was thinking but he couldn't do anything about it. He'd seen how good I was in a fight, he understood that it wouldn't be much of a battle at all if he tried to stand against me. But my better nature won out in the end, what was left of the moral, conscientious me from the old world. There was no need to kill her now. I sheathed Stigma and scowled. Dalston continued to beg and plead with me.

"Please, don't kill her. Please!"

It was the first time I'd seen the prideful swordsman in such a vulnerable state. There was no doubting the sincerity of his words now. His voice cracked at the apex of each appeal to mercy.

"Tie her up."

Tahar retrieved a small piece of rope and bound her hands together and Cali took Veritas for safekeeping. I wasn't completely happy with how things had turned out, but I had been thinking to myself for some time – there was one way that I could keep Sakura from causing trouble for me, an ability that I had yet to use on anyone else. But she'd need to be awake for that. There was plenty of time for me to explain my plan while we were on the road back to town. The search for her camp had taken a long time, and we'd need to sleep out again to avoid travelling in the dark.

"I'm not going to kill her now, but it all depends on what she says when she wakes up."

She was just too dangerous to be left alone.