

Derian got the picture that he wasn't going to see Sakura until I saw the cursed relic – so a day after foiling his ambush plan, Philip returned to me with his tail tucked firmly between his legs and offered a meeting with him at a nearby location that evening. I accepted, but knew that things weren't going to be so simple with someone such as him at the helm. He was going to try and screw me over again, I could just feel it in my bones. I needed to come up with my own plan to ensure that we got it from him. So I added some conditions for the handover. We would both get to see our respective sides of the bargain first and confirm their authenticity, we'd then swap them in the middle and call it even.

Except Derian had no intention of calling things even. Give a man the power to come back from the dead and of course he's going to do everything in his power to cling onto it. Derian was self-absorbed and greedy, the thought of being resistant to the ill-will of others was too good for him to pass up. The easiest way for him to do that would be to attack us at the meeting point, or try to pass off a fake item as the real deal. He wasn't aware that Stigma had the ability to detect the pieces of herself, unless the personality within the relic had warned him. Given how stubborn Stigma could be when she was 'incomplete' it was unlikely that she had dispensed with that titbit of information. All I needed to do was get close enough and have her confirm if it was the real deal.

From there, I wasn't certain what I wanted to do. Derian was being a cheap bastard with the bounty he was offering, and it was more attractive to kill him off instead of letting him handle Sakura. If he tried to screw me over, the choice was going to be obvious. I'd have to deal with the potential consequences of having the finger pointed at me for his killing if it came to that. Gerry was anxiously pacing back and forth in his living room as we gathered to prepare.

"You're going to make the last of your hair turn white if you keep doing that," I quipped.

"I would have felt a lot better if you weren't bloody tangling with the richest man in town."

"That's too bad. I don't have a choice in the matter, he has something that I need, and that I can't get anywhere else."

"What are we going to do?" Cali asked.

"I want Tahar to keep an overwatch on the meeting area, and we'll need to clear all of the angles and make sure that there aren't any archers trying to shoot at us. The area is fairly open, so there shouldn't be too many places for them to hide from us. Cali, I want you to hold Sakura's leash while we make the trade."

Sakura scoffed at my description and turned away in her chair. Her hands had remained firmly tied behind her back the entire time, though Gerry has been courteous in allowing her to sleep in one of the spare rooms instead of the shed. Dalston had avoided succumbing to temptation and trying to release her thus far. We made sure that they were both kept away from each other as often as possible, but now he insisted on coming along with us to make sure that nothing happened to her.

"Are you actually giving Sakura to him?" Dalston scowled.

"I wouldn't count on it. Derian knows about how valuable the relic is – he's not going to want to give it up in the first place. Cali can just cut Sakura loose if he starts trying to play any funny tricks. As long as I get the relic off of him, I don't care what you two decide to do after that."

Dalston and Sakura both looked like they didn't believe a word I said. It was immaterial to me in the end, they could choose to believe it or not, it wouldn't impact how our plan was going to be executed when the time came. I'd already been down to the designated patch and investigated it for myself so I could make more specific arrangements for when we arrived. The other big question was

whether to get there first or second. If we arrived first, we would have time to set up our own measures before Derian could; but if we arrived second, we could have Tahar clear them before approaching. We would also have a better view of where all of his men were standing guard. I decided that we should go slightly later just to be safe.

With that established and everyone knowing their roles in the scheme, we waited until nightfall to head to the meeting place.

Derian had selected a quiet plaza on the east side of town. A few three-story commercial buildings were in the proximity, but with such a great distance from the park it would make it difficult for even a skilled archer to hit us in the square. Tahar clambered up onto the roofs and used her enhanced vision to look out for enemy targets. She gave us the all clear to approach where Derian and his men were waiting. I'd placed a bag over Sakura's head to seed some doubt into Derian. Part of my process was for both sides to show that the object or person they were exchanging was legit.

He tensed up as we passed through the fence and approached him as a gang of four. He was surrounded by several armed guards, though notably they seemed to be men and women who were already on his payroll. The mercenaries would talk with each other about him and how little he was offering for their service, weighted against the difficulty of fighting against me. It never paid to be dishonest with a mercenary – bad employers didn't get good employees.

"I see that you decided to keep your end of the bargain, Ren."

"I did; I've yet to be convinced that you'll keep yours."

"Don't make such confident accusations when you yourself have sought to deceive me from the very beginning. You'll see your relic soon enough."

One of the servants approached and revealed a finely crafted wooden casket that was much taller and wider than I had anticipated. Even if he had hidden it in the secret compartment in his warehouse, it wouldn't have fit. A moment passed where everyone remained still and refused to be the first to move closer. I took a deep breath and escorted the still-blinded Sakura to the centre of the courtyard. His servant did the same in concert. When we were a safe distance away from each other, we held our hands over the bag and lid, pulling them upwards at the same time.

Stigma was quick, like the crack of a whip; "That's it. That's the real thing."

The black iron construction was unmistakable, as were the various red runes that glowed with a gentle maliciousness. It was a chestplate with a high collar, and intricate floral designs engraved into the body in bronze. It matched the description of what I had been looking for. Derian was making the same appraisal of my captive. When he was happy that she was the real thing and not just a lookalike, he crossed his arms and tried to drive a hard bargain with me.

"I'd be willing to up my offer of payment significantly in order to keep this piece in my collection. So long as it does not exceed the price I paid originally."

"Is it really worth that much to you?" I asked.

"That it is. I highly doubt that one such as yourself would be capable of appreciating it for what it is really worth!" he sniped. For a man who had bitten his own tongue off a few days before, he certainly hadn't gained humility when it came to running his mouth. Derian was going to regret saying anything by the time I was done.

“That chestplate is worth more than any money you could offer me, so don’t assume I don’t accept its value. I wouldn’t have tracked Sakura down if not for that. I already made it clear that there’s going to be no more bargaining on this. You offered me it in exchange for Sakura – and that’s what I came here to do.”

That wasn’t the answer Derian hoped to hear. His money would come back in time, but a piece like the cursed relic was rare and irreplaceable. He wanted to have his cake and eat, he wanted Sakura and the relic to himself. He wasn’t going to give up the promise of immortality so easily, so I decided to reveal the truth to him.

“You know, the magic that you seem so attached to is just that – magic. When you came back the first time, it used a huge amount of your internal spirit to regenerate a relatively small piece of your body. What do you suppose would happen if I were to remove something larger than your tongue?”

Derian frowned, “What do you mean?”

“If you want that piece because of the power it offers you, then you’d be better off just giving it to me. If you use it in the same way again you’ll burn your soul into nothingness.”

He scoffed at my warning, “Bah. Idle chatter is by no means evidence of your claim. You mean to mislead me with your words, and I will not fall for them again. The time for trust has long since passed. Hand her over to me and be done with it!”

Knowing that I wasn’t going to budge on getting my reward, Derian acquiesced and ordered his servant to approach me. We came into striking distance, I accepted the casket from him with a smug grin, before pushing Sakura in his direction. “Nice doing business with you, Sir Rivers.”

“My name sounds like dirt in your mouth – never speak it to me again, for goodness sake.”

Several things then happened all at once.

Additional men closed in at the other exit to the park to block us off. Cali quickly put herself between them and Dalston while the man in front of me made a mad grasp for the casket that he had just given over. I lashed out with a kick, striking him in the stomach and sending him flying several feet backwards towards Derian, who looked at the now injured manservant with shock and horror. The hidden dagger I carried slid down from beneath my sleeve and sliced through the ropes binding Sakura into place. Now free – she turned on me, only for her aggression to peter out into naught by visual disdain at the sight of me.

I shrugged, “He broke his end of the bargain. Do what you please.” Sakura needed someone to take her anger out on, so she settled for the next best thing; the jabbering nobleman who was now trying to hide behind a wall of his equally worried hired hands. Things had descended into total chaos as Derian’s hopeless plan to double-cross me fell apart in seconds. Sakura didn’t need Veritas to make a mess of the people trying to get in her way. Two men were snapped back so hard by her punches that I thought they broke their damn necks in the process.

Derian turned tail and tried to run for it, but Sakura was already on top of him with nothing that the others could do to help. He cried out as she yanked him back by the collar of his shirt and wrapped her forearm around his neck, applying a suffocating amount of pressure in the process. I was occupied fighting off the better armed members of his cohort, but they put up little resistance. I spared them by knocking them out with the blunt end of my sword – there was no need to have them die for Derian’s benefit now.

When I was finally done taking care of that, things had calmed down again. Cali and Tahar had made short work of their respective pursuers, but Cali showed them much less mercy than we did. Sakura had dragged Derian behind a nearby tree. I leaned down and grabbed the casket again before approaching. Derian was swearing up a storm at the young girl.

“Who do you think you are? When the watchmen hear of this, they’ll have your damned head!”

Sakura gripped him by his chin and held him aloft, “You aren’t going to get the chance. I’m taking care of you, and the bounty that you put on me.”

Derian’s anger turned into pleas of forgiveness very quickly – especially when he saw me and the rest of the gang walking up to witness the spectacle. “Ren! Old friend! Surely you don’t mean to let this psychopath have her way with me!”

I held up the casket and smiled, “I’m afraid that our business is concluded, Derian. It’s a shame – if you hadn’t arranged this pointless ambush, I might have decided to let you live.”

“I’ll give you anything you want, money, power – I can give you it all! I’ll give you my life’s savings, just don’t let her kill me!” It was a pathetic sight as he started to become more and more desperate. Sakura was relishing every second of it and letting him stew in his own terror. Even if he believed that he could come back from the dead again, the pain he felt was still very much present and accounted for.

“Aren’t you going to stop me?” Sakura asked with finality.

I scoffed, “Do what you please. I’m done with this.”

Sakura had stolen a dagger from one of his men. She plunged it into his gut and allowed him to slide down the side of the tree, before delivering several more downwards blows into his chest just to make sure. Derian would not come back from that – he no longer had the soul to spare for such a thing. She set her attention on me and Cali, holding out her hands.

“Give me Veritas.”

I shook my head, “No. I don’t think we will.”

“It’s my sword!” she roared furiously.

I cut her off by holding Stigma up to her face, “And now it’s ours. You can’t do anything to stop me.”

Dalston put himself between me and her, waving his arms frantically; “Can we please not fight any more! We need to leave before someone comes to see what all the fuss is about!”

“I’m not leaving without my sword,” Sakura repeated, “You won’t even use it, and it won’t respond to your commands anyway.”

Cali backed away as Sakura tried to take it back from her. I grabbed Sakura by the arm and restrained her with a scowl, “I’m not going to use it, I just want to keep it away from you. If you think I’m playing along with this hero act, you’ve got another thing coming. You’re lucky I didn’t just cut your head off and drag your corpse here.” Sakura knew that she couldn’t do anything about it now. The vow protected me alone – but she understood that putting her hands on Cali was essentially suicide. I’d fight back, and she couldn’t attack me in return.

She backed away and pointed at me, “That’s mine. It’ll return to me one way or another.”

I shrugged, "We'll see."

Sakura stormed away, not waiting for Dalston to stop and appeal to her long-lost sense of reason. Dalston bowed his head to me in thanks and chased after her, presumably to try and convince her to visit her parents in Blackwake. I was just glad to see the back of them after having to deal with them for so long. A major obstacle had been removed from my path now. I had the next relic and had bound Sakura to a vow of non-harm. I hoisted the chest up onto my shoulder and turned to my companions.

"All's well that ends well, I suppose."

Cali sneered, "Where do they find these people? They didn't even put up a fight." She pocketed the blood-stained rag she used to clean her blade and led the way as we left the plaza. Tahar landed on the street and followed along merrily.

"What are we going to do now?" Tahar inquired.

"Back to the city. I'm sure that Adelbern has something else lined up for us."

If not, there was still unfinished business to take care of. What the mercenary had said had started to worry me. Had Benadora been besmirching my pristine reputation while I wasn't there to contest her story? The proof would be the reaction upon my arrival. There'd be hell to pay if that was the case. I didn't care about many things, but getting harassed on the street was a personal pet peeve of mine.