

Stigma explained how the next power worked in greater detail.

The ability to regenerate parts of the body or come back from the dead was extremely expensive in terms of magical energy. The amount spent was almost directly proportional to the number of years 'returned' in kind. Derian didn't know it, but he'd put himself back on death's door almost immediately upon choosing to kill himself and escape our clutches. He'd traded his soul to come back, and that meant he'd burned as many years as he would have lived otherwise.

The only reason that he hadn't burned himself to nothing was because of the injury he'd incurred. His death was recent enough that he didn't require too much magic to get things running again. Physical elements were also a factor. Regenerating a tongue was cheaper than an arm or a leg. In Stigma's own words – to regenerate a limb would require twenty percent of a person's lifespan plus change, because regenerating twenty percent of their body and supporting its existence for that time was the full price demanded. If I split someone in two and regenerated half of their body, I'd be giving them some sixty years as an initial investment and then supporting it through their lifetime.

Not only did I have to worry about him giving my name and face to the watchmen, thus making my life harder for as long as they were willing to chase me, but I was now under time pressure to get the answer out of him before he kicked the bucket out of nowhere. I was so shell-shocked by his showing up at the tavern that it was only when he'd left the building that I remembered brainwashing him was the easiest option. By the time I ran out into the road to try and catch him, he was gone.

There was no way in hell that Derian was going to give me anything for the effort of finding and killing Sakura. There was nothing stopping him from running to the first guard he could find the moment I declared that the job was done. That way he could keep his precious immortality, and his collection intact. I had a hard choice to make. How could I get to him without exposing my identity? Was it worth hunting Sakura down and taking care of her just to see if he'd follow through? I'd need to deal with her eventually – and I wasn't confident that the next fight would go my way after the last one. While I was stuck in this wild goose chase, she was preparing herself. She was gathering items and affixes, and using some methodology to rapidly ascend through the levels and accumulate skills.

In short, I was furious.

Cali and Tahar watched with worry as I paced back and forth in our inn room like a man possessed. This was the worst possible scenario for someone like me. I hated the idea of being exposed as a criminal so much that almost everything I'd done for the past two decades was about giving myself as much plausible deniability as possible. There was no coming back from having a big bounty plastered on your head; and Derian could put up a lot of money to make my life a living hell. I thought that some of the previous situations I encountered were bad, this was a whole new level of shit, shovelled directly into my face.

"When I get my hands on him, he's going to wish he stayed dead!" He was laughing at me, holed up in his mansion with as many people watching the perimeter as humanly possible. I just knew it. The thought of him getting any enjoyment out of my predicament made my blood run even hotter than before.

Tahar tried to be the voice of reason. "Answers will not come to a discordant mind. You must calm yourself, Ren." While she was correct, it was very hard to manipulate my emotions in such a direct

way. I sat down on the bed and tried to take a deep breath. My foot tapped against the floor impatiently.

Cali offered a plan of action, "Finding Sakura is the best thing to do. Derian would need to confirm that she is dead with his own two eyes. We can draw him out of hiding or gain access to his position by providing evidence of her death."

I grunted, "Maybe, but I think he'll just send one of his agents to do it for him. He isn't going to let us get close that easily." Derian had claimed he liked to see things with his own eyes before he bought them, but would that same paranoia be extended to turning in a bounty? His survivalist instinct would win the day in that situation. He was willing to kill himself so long as he was confident that he could come back later. Either he didn't understand the nature of the power, or he simply didn't care. I wondered what the fragment of Stigma inside of the relic thought of that.

"Should we find Dalston?" Cali suggested, "He might know where she is."

"That guy couldn't find someone if they hit him over the back of the head. He's only good for running into me when I don't want to deal with him."

"Then you should use your powers and summon him. We might not be able to brainwash Derian without being caught, but we can at least make moves to rid ourselves of a problematic foe."

Cali had convinced me to at least give it a try. I grabbed my gear and considered where I might find him. I'd heard rumblings about more robberies that had occurred just days before, so Sakura was probably still out there causing trouble. If she was causing problems – some of the victims would put money up for a bounty. The bounty board would be a good place to start.

"Let's go."

The clock was ticking, after all.

It was something of a struggle to find the watch house, but it was close enough to the inn that it only took half-an-hour of wandering to find it. The bounty board out front was seldom utilised in a peaceful, well-off town like this. There were only two names printed out onto several pieces of darkened parchment. Sakura, and another criminal named John Wells. Sakura's bounty had ballooned to several times that of John's. Ten gold bars were being given to whoever could prove her capture or death.

Standing beside the board was Dalston. I stood and observed him for a time, but he refused to move from his spot. Was he trying to ward away any enterprising bounty hunters, or even hoping to tag along and find her location? His eyes hardened as he finally spotted me. I walked up with an equally sour expression on my face.

"Is this what you've been doing for the past week?" I asked.

Dalston must have been utterly miserable. The weather had been variable and somewhat unkind. He hadn't bathed himself properly, or shaved. He looked ragged like he'd run three marathons in a row without rest. I would have thought that a wise man such as himself would take a more measured approach to finding her; but his emotions were running high. Panic was the antithesis of good planning.

"Did you come to gloat? Be gone, you damned jackal. I'd rather have my bones picked clean by the birds than listen to the likes of you."

"I can tell that I'm wasting my time already. I'm presuming you haven't seen hide or hair of Sakura since you arrived?"

He pointed at me, "Even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. You said it yourself; you're out to kill the poor girl. I won't have any blood on my hands from giving you information about where she is."

Dalston wasn't going to share. The fact that he was lingering at the bounty board instead of following a real lead was something of a relief. It meant that I didn't have to navigate between helping and hindering him. No need to spend any time or energy hashing out a deal or interrogating him, or exchanging favours. Dalston didn't know a thing as he always did. How could a man who spent most of his time watching Sakura not understand anything about her? She must have done a very good job of fitting in. It didn't help that Dalston was a total pushover, always giving her the benefit of the doubt when it was totally unearned.

"You look like a serious sad sack right now. How long have you been standing out here?"

"I'm making sure that nobody starts tracking her down."

"Really? So you've been picking fights with bounty hunters and trying to wrestle the posters from them?"

Dalston smirked, "None of them have even tried it yet. They're clearly intimidated by me."

"No. There just aren't many bounty hunters around in a slow town like this. The watchmen will be sending them out to neighbouring cities to drum up some interest. The point is that you're wasting your time. I'm sure a few guys picked up on the cash reward already and are on their way here." Dalston's face dropped like a stone as I explained how the system worked. Standing guard at the board wasn't going to do him any good, not that he would've deterred anyone in the first place.

"They're already looking for her?"

"For God's sake man, I thought you knew this already."

"I don't know anything about bounty hunting, why would I?"

"You've never heard anyone talking about it? I thought you were a swordsman!"

Cali stepped between us, "While this comedy is surely amusing to someone – you are both starting to stray from the topic at hand. Ren wants to find Sakura, that's why we came to see you. Would you be completely unwilling to assist us, even if we promised to refrain from harming her?"

Dalston crossed his arms, "I don't trust you to stick to your word."

I put my hand on Cali's shoulder and sneered, "It doesn't matter, Cali. He doesn't know where she is anyway. We may as well search for her ourselves." I made a show of turning to leave, but Dalston called out and stopped us.

"W-Wait! I do know something."

"Something you're willing to share with us?"

Dalston inhaled and averted his eyes. He was conflicted about telling us, but he needed my help with something. He couldn't get to Sakura for whatever reason, not without my assistance. That made me scratch my head. Where could she have gone that Dalston couldn't reach her? He was no slouch with a weapon, having taught Sakura everything she knew. I'd seen his handiwork through her.

“If you promise, and I really mean it, to not hurt her.”

“I promise.” My lack of hesitation sealed the deal, though in reality I was lying through my teeth just to get him on my side. I was going to do whatever I needed to in order to find that relic. If Derian wanted her head on a platter he was going to get it. “I don’t need to kill her to get what I want, but it ultimately depends on how she reacts to seeing us. I’m not going to sit back and let her kill me just for your sake. Do you understand that?”

Dalston couldn’t argue that it was unfair. Sakura had already tried to kill me twice.

“I just want to speak with her. There’s no need for you to endanger yourself. I could talk her down – it’ll be like water under the bridge. Why would you refuse?”

Aside from the fact that Dalston had been nothing but an asshole to me since we first met? I wasn’t doing this as a favour to him. I put my foot down and made my position clear; “I know that it isn’t going to work. Sakura already made it obvious that she wants the next meeting to be our last – and she wants to make sure that it’s appropriately dramatic at that.”

Dalston shook his head, “You make it sound like she’s directing... a play.”

I nodded, “She is. She’s trying to construct a story. Have you ever heard of a three-act structure? Rise, fall, triumph. We’ve fought twice already, but even if it doesn’t line up perfectly; I get the feeling that she’s trying to triumph with the next battle.”

Dalston was more shocked by my knowledge of literary devices than my explanation of Sakura trying to manipulate real life to follow them. He sighed and turned away with a frustrated expression, “Damn it all.”

“I’m going to give you that chance, Dalston. I’m going to stay out of sight and listen in. If you’re so confident that you can talk her out of this quest of hers, then I’ll give you that opportunity to prove it.”

Dalston was full of bravado. He believed so earnestly in Sakura’s better nature that this diplomatic approach soothed his irritated ego better than any healing salve. A man with no options left was easy to manipulate. He was emotionally compromised and only had me left to reach out a hand and rescue him.

“Don’t worry yourself one bit, Ren. Once I have a chance to speak with her, everything will be smoothed over.”

“You’ll owe me. I need her to come with me.”

“Of course. As long as she’s still breathing at the end of it.” He reached out a shaking hand, which I took and gave a firm shake. A verbal agreement was no good to me. I needed to see his sincerity in action before I gave him a single iota of my trust.

“Alright Dalston – where is she?”