

Ren Kageyama
Level 86 Grandmaster Mercenary
[Cursed]
HP: 302/450
Strength: 134
Intelligence: 150
Endurance: 157
Perception: 175

I inspected my own stats while I had the chance. Sakura had blown a serious amount of my HP away with that last hit. Things would have been even worse if it had hit a critical area and increased the damage scaling even more. This was the combined effect of a legendary sword and whatever affix buffs she had accumulated to make it stronger. Any normal person would have been killed in one blow. I survived only through the grace of being some kind of demon.

Now it was time to get serious.

Whether I wanted to admit it or not, I was pulling my punches in the hopes that she'd see sense. I had learned my lesson the hard way – Sakura wasn't going to listen to reason or rhetoric. The only objective on her mind was making away with one of Derian's items, and perhaps killing me in the process of doing so. We were at crossed purposes. Capturing her would ingratiate me with Derian and let me potentially scout his home even further than I already had.

Aside from that, it would also mean that a serious obstacle would be out of my way for the foreseeable future. I had underestimated her and she had spent that time away creating a build that could potentially kill me. I didn't expect any of the inquisitors to understand the real power of those magical runes, and I had believed that she was too passive to come after me.

Sakura braced herself and held her sword aloft, ready to bring it down at a moment's notice. She had the speed and the damage to fend me off. This was going to be a tough fight. I studied her form for an opening but found naught to exploit; Dalston had taught her well. Despite their rocky relationship she had absorbed everything he had shown her. The biggest issue was defending myself from her sword. The leather and cloth that remained on my body wasn't going to stop anything.

Sakura had split the Stormsteel plate clean in two. Medalie didn't have enough to make two full sides, so the front facing aspect was much larger than the back. A mangle pile of leather straps and discarded scraps lay at my feet. I was too hasty when I threw the pieces away. A lightbulb flickered in my head as a new idea came to me.

I stamped my foot down on the curved edge of one side and kicked it up into the air, catching it with my left hand. Sakura flinched – expecting me to throw it at her, or use it as a crude weapon. While it may have served me better than any of the pig-iron antiques that surrounded us, I had a much more practical use for the fractured structure. The leather strap was just long enough to tie it around my forearm. A makeshift shield done dirty and done cheap. It was unwieldy, but that was nothing new or novel to the likes of me. I was a man who wielded a horse-killing sword like a duelling rapier.

I couldn't rely on it to be perfect, but if it even threw Sakura off-balance for one second it would be worth it. People who didn't take every advantage they could get were the ones who were destined to lose in the end. She eyed the crooked edge nervously as I started to approach her. Was I going to try and stab her with it? The uncertainty was gnawing at her. She had no clue as to what I was

scheming. The truth was, I wasn't. I'd left most of my equipment at home and a plan relied on *resources*. This was a straight fight between me and her.

Sakura attacked first. Her sword hand came down at a diagonal angle. I quickly threw up my new shield and pushed back with every bit of my strength. The sword couldn't pierce the plate from such a shallow angle, and the force of my resistance forced her to keep going down towards the floor below. With her head and face exposed, my other hand swung around from the left and clocked her across the bridge of her nose. Blood flew as a cut formed, thanks to my knuckles glancing across the skin.

Sakura moved back quickly – not intent on letting me pummel her for the mistake. If it had taken anything out of her, I couldn't see it. She was still just as aware as she was before. The amulet she was wearing was paying dividends. The longer it took me to hit her again, the more time she had to recover. There must have been another card she was holding to her chest. A simple damage reduction wasn't enough to resist my power.

I tried again. Sakura changed tact and stepped into me with a lunging stab. I batted it aside and swung at her, but she was already leaning back. Her hair fluttered as my flying fist blasted a powerful air current past her head. Sakura had curved away so much that she fell back-first onto the floor. I leapt and tried to catch her out with a stomp, but she was already rolling away from me. Dust and porcelain filled the air as my boot broke through the tiles with a loud crack. I shocked myself; it was easy to forget the incredible strength that had been packed into my body.

Sakura came back at me with a series of desperate attempts. The tip of her sword came dangerously close to catching me again – but without the damage bonus given by being hit with a certain window, it would do less to my HP than her first hit. I dodged back again and again as adrenaline started to pump through my system and heighten my senses. Forget fighting dragons, Sakura had proven herself to be a more daunting prospect.

We continued to dogfight. As the seconds passed by, I came to understand that Sakura wasn't afraid of being caught. She was more than happy to run on the wrong side of the law. I was in no position to chastise her for it, but being caught in the act was an entirely different thing. She didn't understand the full consequences of it. She thought that she could kill or bribe her way out of it; but the weight of an entire society bearing down on you couldn't be removed that easily. For all of the terrible things people did, they still didn't like murderers.

I hit her again, her body being thrown into one of the glass cabinets and shattering it into pieces. Sakura roared in anger and swung at me in retaliation. The fight had long since devolved into a bloody brawl. My own crimson essence had spilled outwards onto the floor, creating a treacherous slippery patch that I almost fell over. Sakura wasn't looking too great either. A huge black and purple bruise had started to spread from where the axe had hit her. The cut on her brow threatened to blind her with a mask of blood.

These weren't fatal injuries, but they were gruesome. Enough had been drawn between us to rob a man's legs of their strength. I could feel my muscles burning as they poured outwards with an acid reflex. I put my arm up and shied away as she came down upon me again like a swooping predator. This was my fault for underestimating what she could do. She had tilted the odds in her favour by landing the first blow. Success begets success.

She kept cutting and nipping at me, but what was the tipping point going to be? I couldn't control the range of our fight without stealing a weapon for myself, but Sakura would take the opportunity

to hit me again if I turned away. I needed to stay on the defensive. Sakura tried to faint me with an aborted overhead chop, but I was too wise to that kind of trick. I stepped in and threw another speculative punch at her chest. No luck again. I couldn't hit her like this.

Which was why what happened next felt like divine intervention. A clatter of feet against the floor caught my attention, and moments later a tall figure skidded around the edge of the weapon case and stopped next to me. It was Tahar! Somehow, she had gotten past the guards and entered the building. Even better, she was carrying Stigma with her. Her chest heaved as she tried to catch her breath from such a mad dash.

Sakura stepped away. She didn't like the idea of fighting one versus two. What other options did she have? The guards were surely close to following Tahar inside now. The only thing she could do was run away.

"Why the hell are you here?" I asked.

"I was worried; I followed you..." Tahar admitted sheepishly.

I smirked, "It's a good thing you did. Sword!"

Tahar hefted it over to me with a strained underarm throw. I grabbed the hilt and threw the sheathe onto the ground without regard for its condition. Sakura was already coming at me again. I held up the flat edge and blocked an onward thrust from the tip of Veritas. Sakura's indecision had put her in a bad position. She could only hold up her sword and try to stop the full force of my next swing. There was a terrible clatter of steel on steel as I used all of my remaining strength to bat her back. Sakura's smaller body flew through the air and landed hard on the ground several feet down the aisle.

Knocked for a loop, the only thing she could do was crawl on her hands and knees out of sight. Tahar moved to go after her – but I pulled on the back of her clothes and prevented her from giving chase. I collapsed down against her leg and shook my head. My entire body had shut down all at once.

"Don't. She's too dangerous."

"But--"

"Sorry. That sword... I don't want you to fight her."

Tahar was torn between listening to me and exacting revenge. It wasn't her choice to make in the end. Several other warm bodies piled through the main door and flooded the museum in search of the renegade. There was nothing left to find. Sakura had absconded from the building and taken the axe-head with her. She was going to use it to enhance her build even more than it already was. And just as I had predicted, Derian Rivers turned pale as a sheet at the grisly sight we'd left behind.

"What on... are you okay?" he asked.

I took a deep breath as Tahar helped me back to my feet, "A healing potion will see me right."

Derian turned to one of his private guards, "You heard the man. Take one of them from the medicine cabinet."

"Yes sir."

He was desperate to know more about *why* I was covered in my own blood; "Did that damnable thief really do this to you? Who was she?"

I didn't want to reveal too much to him, but this was the perfect chance to earn some of his trust. I kept things vague, "I've had a run in with her before. As you can see – we're not on friendly terms. I didn't realise that she was stealing from places like this, or I would have said something earlier."

"Think nothing of it! You've risked life and limb for my sake already."

He had no clue that I was going to pay it back in full later...

Derian whisked himself away to see to the search. Sakura had picked up some new tricks. They couldn't find any sign of her. The guard returned and gave me a free healing potion for the effort, which I gratefully downed in one go. That would stitch the cut on my chest and some of the other wounds, but recovering my lost blood would take more time and rest. There wasn't a way to generate more of it using magic.

Tahar escorted me out of the building and towards the exterior fence, where a large crowd of onlookers had gathered to see what the commotion was about. Guards held back the braying tide with harsh words and stiff forearms. Even a simple robbery was capable of stirring up the populace into a frenzy. Many things in the new world were different but the people were the same as ever; self-interested and overly curious. I looked a sobering sight indeed. Torn, blood-soaked clothes and pieces of shredded metal hanging from my body. Tahar offered a paralyzing glare to any of the mob who tried to get close to us, which was more than enough to keep them away.

We came to a stop at the foot of the fence some distance away. I sat down on the stone foundation and sighed wearily. Of all the places that she could turn up, why was it always right on top of me? And where Sakura went, her old teacher was almost certain to follow. A figure burst forth from the crowd and walked over to us with a scowl on his weathered features.

I groaned, "Dalston. To what do I owe the displeasure?"

"You already know, you rotten bastard."

What a charmer.