



It was time for Noburu to finish the job. He and Seonmi made their final plans in their rented accommodation. Their charisma and skills had paid off; not only had they gotten an impression of the key they needed, which they used to create a replica via a contact Seonmi knew, but they also managed to identify the exact box containing the target artefact.

Why would a pair of old daggers be worth so much, anyway?

“Are you sure your ability can last?” Seonmi asked, blinking at him with her brilliant blood-orange eyes. “It’ll take at least ten minutes. Every breath you take will exhaust you.”

“It’s easier in the city. I’ll manage it,” Noburu affirmed. He’d tested his blessing enough to know it was mostly the presence of the ghost plants that exhausted him. Down in the slums, the ghost world was full of ethereal plant life, but up here in the city, it was less present. Something about demon activity and the presence of aetherlights discouraged their spread.

They reviewed their plan one more time, and then, with the chiming of the midnight bell, it was time.

Noburu slipped out and made his way to an alleyway near the academy. He took a few deep breaths before activating his blessing. With a loud snap and a subtle jerking sensation, Noburu was again within the ghost world.

The alleyway was full of semi-translucent plant life, so Noburu quickly exited to the main street where there was none. The aetherlights in the lampposts lining the street didn’t shine in the ghostworld, but they did give off soft bursts of vivid colours, as if celebrating his arrival. The sepia world gave him a sense of comfort. Here, no one could find him.

He glanced up, comforting himself in the glow of the Blue Moon. The moon was crisscrossed with geological activity in the real world, but in the ghost world, it was perfectly smooth and uniform in colour. Sometimes, if he looked at it for

long enough, Noburu's eyes would begin playing tricks, and he would see strange shadows appear across its surface.

Now wasn't the time for moon gazing.

Noburu strode quickly to the academy gates. They were closed. He climbed them as his lungs began to protest. It was difficult to affect real-world objects from within the ghost world. If he tried, only a small amount of force could be transferred. Even as he climbed aggressively and dropped down the other side of the academy's gates, they would wobble only slightly to a real-world onlooker.

The gate guards didn't notice a thing.

His lungs were burning. Noburu gasped, taking another breath. To his left and right, the academy's gardens and forested areas were overlaid with a jungle of ghostly flora. In front of him, the main path, where students and staff walked dozens of times a day, was largely empty of alien plant life. Only a few weed-like plants flourished between the stones; their semi-translucent leaves waved rhythmically to a wind Noburu couldn't feel.

A guard patrol was near his left. Something about the guards seemed more *colourful* than how people typically looked in the ghost world. Was it because they were warriors and he was seeing their aura? Yasuji, the guard who demanded protection money every month, didn't seem anywhere near as colourful in the ghost world as these academy guards.

That man was surely lying about being an aura-user.

It took Noburu a few more breaths to reach the academy doors, where four guards stood, each with varying levels of *colour*. It was nerve-racking to sneak between them. Noburu had verified that people could feel him in the other world, even if the tactile feedback was minimal. Unlike the ghost plants that could move *through* someone, Noburu found he couldn't do that.

If he could, what would happen if he exited the ghost world while moving through someone?

Making it through, Noburu walked into the academy, down the main thoroughway, as far as he could before taking another deep breath. Unlike the real world, where

pace yourself and controlling your breathing would make logical sense, in the ghost world, he became exhausted quickly when using that method. For some reason, when he took a large breath here, he could hold it far longer than in the real world.

Navigating through the corridors, Noburu traced the learned route he'd previously travelled only twice. Reaching the storage room, Noburu took out the key. Placing it in the lock, he gritted his teeth and used both hands to put as much torque as possible into the key. Only a tiny amount of force was transferred between the two worlds, so it took all his strength to get the lock to disengage.

Noburu could bring items into the ghost world, but those items, like himself, struggled to affect the real world. It was disappointing that it worked like that. Otherwise, he would probably have swung a metal bar at Yasuji's head by now.

With the door open, Noburu removed the key and placed it in a pocket. Taking another breath, he began to shoulder-barge the door. Even using his full weight, it took half a dozen attempts, aimed at the furthest part from the door's hinges, for it to begin to move. Elated, he continued his efforts, building on his created momentum until the door was opened enough for him to slip through.

Another breath, and he started to feel the telltale signs of exhaustion. The throbbing in his head. The pressure in his chest. Thankfully, the academy was empty of ghostly, energy-draining flora. If he were surrounded by plant life, he would have collapsed by now.

With tremendous effort, he was able to close the door from the other side. The physical exertion didn't help, and Noburu took even more breaths in the process, further tiring himself.

He made his way down the steps to the storage room. The aetherlights were turned off, but Noburu could still see well enough. Darkness didn't exist in the ghost world; everything was lit under the same neutral sepia tones, even if it was an enclosed basement.

He made his way to the section near where they'd been working earlier that day. It was the period covering the Three Sisters' War in the early fourth century. It was in this section that Seonmi charmed the archivist, Takumi, into showing her

weapons. Incredibly, the daggers they'd been contracted to steal were discovered almost immediately.

A lucky sign, surely.

Looking at that very same box, Noburu resisted a sigh. There was no way to get access to it in the ghost world. The box was nestled between others on a shelf, sitting about shoulder height. Even using his full weight, he wouldn't be able to get it off the shelf. It was frustrating but not unexpected, and there was a simple solution.

Releasing his blessing, Noburu returned to the real world with a snap.

It was pitch black, and the familiar smell of burning toast lingered in the air. Noburu was forced to wait thirty seconds until his eyes adapted to the darkness. As he did so, he felt hunger building. He wasn't ravenous, but he would need to eat something relatively soon. The pressure in his head and chest eased slightly, but he wouldn't have the luxury of waiting to be fully recovered. Who knew if an academy guard heard the mysterious snapping sound and was on their way now?

It took Noburu another thirty seconds to pull down the box, open it, and bundle the pair of daggers in cloth. Then, he closed the box and placed it back on the shelf. This way, no one would discover any theft until the box was opened again. Sure, the restorationists' disappearance after a single day of work might seem suspicious, and if they investigated, they would find that their identification and travel documents were forged, but by then, they would be long gone.

No one would look for them in Asamaywa's shadow.

Noburu took a few deep breaths and, with a grimace, activated his blessing and snapped into the ghost world. Doing it again so quickly took its toll – the headache and pressure increased dramatically. It didn't help that he was bringing the pair of daggers in with him. Bringing in items took far more energy.

He should still be fine.

Noburu came to the steps of the storage room, looking up at the closed door. He somewhat regretted closing it, but he did so to prevent any passing guard from

noticing the open door. Unfortunately, it meant he had to expend the energy to open it again.

After he'd done so, the pressure in his chest intensified. The throbbing pain in his head became sharp and distracting. As he closed the door and finished the mighty effort of locking it again with the key, Noburu wanted to throw up. Would he be able to leave the grounds? Get back to the alley?

He would have to.

He took another breath, this one harder than before, and began making his way out of the academy. Turning a corner, he retraced his steps in his mind. He was in the left wing and just needed to navigate to the main thoroughway, and then it was a straight line to—

There was a woman in front of him.

All thoughts suddenly tumbled out of his head, clearing his mind. No longer did he feel the sharp pain of his headache or the burning pressure in his chest. His mind had thrown a cold bucket of water over everything as his adrenaline surged and redirected every mental process to one terrible, horrible, unavoidable fact.

There was a woman in front of him.

Not in the real world, where Noburu could walk around or otherwise avoid her. She was *here*. Noburu had *never* seen another person in the ghost world. He'd thought he was the only one!

She was looking at him.

Every instinct screamed for him to run, yet he couldn't move. One part of his mind, the rational part, raised a question that bore through his adrenaline-fuelled brain, blocking his fight-or-flight instincts.

Why did she look like a maid?

He tried to think of something to say. A set of words that could benefit him. A string of lies that would get him out of this situation. He opened his mouth, but the woman dressed as a maid spoke first.

"Mistwalker. Identify yourself, otherwise..." The woman thrust her hand to the side, where a sinister-looking spear *manifested* itself from nothing. At first, it was semi-translucent, similar to the ghostly plants, until it solidified into something very *real*. "...You'll die," the woman finished, tilting her head slightly.

Enough thinking. Noburu turned and ran.

"...What?" He heard the woman behind him mutter in confusion as if she hadn't expected his choice of action.

Good. Let her be confused until the moons fall! Noburu didn't know who that woman was or why she was there. What he did know was that she seemed completely comfortable in the ghost world and called him a *Mistwalker*. She obviously knew far more about this place than he did, and she was evidently *hostile*.

Noburu could scrap well enough; he'd gotten into plenty of fights over the years in the slums.

But not in a ghostly world that drained his energy with every breath.

He sprinted down the hallway, his body reflexively tensing as if, at any moment, that spear would plunge through his back, ending his sorry life. He didn't think he would make it to the corner, but somehow he did. What was she doing? As he turned the corner, Noburu glanced to his side and down the hallway.

Oh, moons! She'd begun to run after him! And she still had that spear!

Noburu poured everything into his legs. He took huge breaths, ignoring the growing exhaustion that was setting in, overriding the adrenaline. He turned another corner, then another. He eventually came across a passage he recognised! Thank the Empress! Ahead, he just needed to turn left into the main thoroughway, and then it was a straight line to the academy's doors! He could outrun this woman! He could—

"You're too weak to be an assassin, aren't you?"

The cool, cold voice in his ear made him scream. How did she get right next to him!? His feet tangled, and he crashed into the floor, bouncing until he slammed

between a cabinet and a wall. Damn it! He'd made it to the main thoroughway! He could see the gates from here! Two students were walking towards him! Should he leave the ghost world and beg for help? What if the woman with the spear followed him to the real world?

He turned back to find the maid had stopped. She was frowning, looking awkwardly at the wall next to her. No, she wasn't looking at the wall. She was looking *through* it at the two students around the corner and down the hallway, coming their way. How could she sense them through the wall? Her eyes snapped back to Noburu, and he grew cold under her gaze.

"I can't be seen, but I can still kill you from here, vile interloper." The woman raised her spear, poised to throw it.

"W-wait!" Noburu hastily climbed to his feet. "This is a misunderstanding!"

Then, another voice spoke out. The slower passage of time in the real world made it muffled and quiet, but somehow, it still sounded sweet.

"In that space... a man is hiding."

Noburu turned his head to see one of the students – no, she wasn't a student, she wore an instructor's uniform -- with shining crimson eyes, pointing and glaring at him.

She could see him!

Where were all these women coming from!?

"Tsk!" The maid began to move, throwing her spear.

Raw panic filled his body as he raised his arms to defend himself against the incoming death. His mind filled with the image of the spear moving through the air, coming to end his life.

"No!" he yelled.

And then, nothing. He wasn't dead. The spear hadn't reached him. The maid was gone.

He'd reflexively deactivated his blessing.

Noburu was back in the real world!

He didn't hesitate. Who knew when that maid was going to exit the ghost world and attack? Noburu turned, gathering the last of his strength, and began running down the hallway, away from where the maid was and the instructor who could see him.

Only to crash into a shimmering wall that sent him crumpling to the ground.

"A-an assassin!" the instructor cried out, pointing directly at him.

"No! Please!" Noburu yelled, frantically pointing to the spot where the maid was. "There's—" he continued before stopping. No, the maid could be anywhere by now. Didn't she say she couldn't be seen? She might kill not only Noburu but also this instructor and her student as well!

"Where did she go?" Noburu frantically asked. If this golden-haired instructor could see him in the ghost world, she might also be able to see the maid! "Be careful!" His mind was exhausted. His head pounded, and his body felt like it was going to rip itself apart. Only adrenaline was keeping him going. "She could appear at any—"

"Hrmph!" the instructor declared, cracking her knuckles. Focusing on the sound, only now could Noburu see this instructor properly. Judging from her crimson eyes and golden hair, he had thought she was a Samino demon with some Cerulean heritage, but now he saw the truth. She had no horns sprouting from her head!

She was a human!

"Nice ploy, assassin!" the human triumphantly declared. "What are those daggers for? Cutting my steak!? Admit it, you're here to finish the job, aren't you!? They must have been desperate to send someone capable of entering the Shimmer! Don't even *think* about Speaking!"

What in the Seven Hells was this human talking about!?

"No!" Noburu protested. "You got it wrong! There's a maid—"

"Silence!" the human interrupted. She turned her head, looking at the student next to her. Noburu, despite being exhausted, followed her gaze. This student was a demon, visibly glowing with orange hues that danced along her skin.

So that's what aura looks like, he thought. He'd seen it from a distance earlier that day, but being this close, he could see how beautiful it was.

"See!?" the human instructor exclaimed to the student, her voice dripping with glee.

"See what?" the student replied, keeping her eyes on Noburu. The student moved to a nearby wall and pulled off one of the display swords, pointing it at Noburu. As she did, her aura seemed to *crawl* up the sword, coating it in the same shimmering light as her body.

"I caught one!" the human exclaimed, throwing a thumbs up towards the student.

"I caught an assassin!"

"Amelia..." the student tentatively began, not moving her eyes from Noburu. "I'm not sure he's an assassin."

"I'm not! I'm not an assassin! I'm..." Noburu trailed off. What could he say? He usually had a talent for using his words to escape a tight situation, but now, his mind wasn't working after everything. Damn it! He was starting to feel ravenous. He would collapse soon if he didn't eat something.

"A-are you sure?" Amelia asked, peering closely at Noburu. "I suppose he isn't dressed like the last one."

Last one?

"And..." The student pointed at the daggers that had fallen to the ground. "Those look like they'll break if they were used. I don't see any actual weapons. I think..." Her head tilted to the side, a subtle frown forming. "This is a thief."

"A thief!?" Amelia's mouth opened in awe. "Mmm... Now I look at him properly, he's not a Speaker, is he? Hell, he isn't even a mage! I don't think..." She trailed off, raising a finger to her chin in thought. "Then how was he in the Shimmer...?"

The Shimmer? Was that what she called the ghost world?

"There was someone else in the... the Shimmer!" Noburu shouted. He waved his arm to try to gesture, but it collided with the shimmering walls that were boxing him in. "I wasn't lying! You could see me, right? There's a woman! Dressed like a maid! She was.... She was hunting me! She might appear at any time! Keep an eye out! She's dangerous!"

"Hmm..." Amelia's crimson eyes flashed with some kind of energy. She turned slowly on the spot. "I don't see anyone."

"A maid?" the student questioned, a deep frown on her forehead. "Why does that sound so familiar?"

"Look! I'm a victim here!" Noburu declared, finding the strength in his voice. "I just came here to get some work done! I'm not a bad person! I didn't hurt anyone! Please, let me go home! I have children to look after!" There was a chance this approach might work. A minute chance. Humans were easily manipulated, weren't they? If he could get this instructor to just let him go...

"Mmm! I believe you!"

What! That easily!?

"I've got good intuition on these things, you see. However!" The human called Amelia pointed dramatically at him. "I've already gone through something like this before, and..." Her eyes suddenly looked sad. "...I've come to understand that even good people can do bad things under the wrong conditions."

"Wait..." Noburu protested.

"So," Amelia continued. The human turned and waved to the door guards already descending the hallway. Amelia turned back, her golden hair waving. "I'm going to capture you, alright? I've already been involved in enough situations here, and I

want to wait at least *one*, no, *two* weeks before getting into another!
Understand?"

Those crimson eyes twinkled, and Noburu panicked. He tried to activate his blessing but found he couldn't. He was too exhausted. Then, something colourful erupted from the woman, striking and then sinking into Noburu's body.

Magic, he thought, as his eyelids forcefully closed and an unnatural sleep engulfed his mind.

Kiku... I should have listened to you...