

Chapter 3

Briardon. A lively port city of brass and steam in the southwest continent of Nazir. In the heart of the Entertainment District stands an establishment with an elaborate black facade and red lights embedded into the trim around the tall, iron door with glass windows. To the right side of the door is a sign that reads “Scarlett’s Circle.”

Inside? A quiet, classy little hostess club with walls and tables of deep red and smoky black trimming around the main room, a bit of gold embroidering in the seats. Luminite Crystals give the room light, their blue glow tinted by off-white shades. Guests of all types sit at the curved booths. Some clean up more nicely than others, appearing as suave businessmen in their best attire. Others, though... well, Nazir is a harsh place. A land of cutthroats and pirates. They can’t all look like bluebloods. Yet every customer, whatever their walk of life, has one thing in common. Distraction. So mesmerized are they by the woman atop the stage that they pay no mind to the pouting hostesses actually assigned to their tables.

A pale-skinned beauty with midnight black hair and narrow eyes flows atop the stage, clad in a violet half-kimono. One could easily miss that her irises have an inhuman, golden color. Not as easily missed, yet seemingly easily forgotten, are the delicate horns protruding from her forehead. None seems to pay it any mind as her svelte body floats across the stage as fluidly as water. Every motion, every step, from the most reserved to the most energetic, flows effortlessly into the next. Until her dance finally comes to its end and she concludes her performances with a bow, met by applause from the audience.

The young hostess glides down from the stage as she makes her way back to her table. There sit a handful of characters - an assortment of ‘businessmen,’ some white-collar, others...

not so much. The lot of them continue to applaud her all the way to her seat. “No matter how many times I see your dance, Miss Iri, it never gets any less beautiful,” one of the more clean-cut gentlemen says as she sits. “And, might I add, neither do you.”

Iri shakes her head with a playful “*Tonde mo nai!*”

One of the burlier men sits back, throwing his feet up on the table. “Aye, it wasn’t bad for an imp.” He picks up and shakes his empty glass. “Do me a favor, luv, and pour me another drink, would ya? And none of that *sake*² piss. Let’s have something with a little more bite in it, this time, huh?”

An exasperated sigh joins an equally exasperated “Don’t mind Bradley,” from the mouth of the gentleman who’d first welcomed Iri back. “He’s an old sea dog. Stuck in his ways. Doesn’t appreciate the finer things.”

Iri takes a casual sip of her own drink from a wide-mouthed cup in front of her, more shaped like a small dish. “It’s no trouble at all,” she says. She rises, flashing a benevolent smile as she grabs one of the bottles on the table and walks around to fill Bradley’s shot glass with rum. “I’m certain he meant nothing by it. After all, it would be most unwise to insult the person pouring your drinks. *Ne*³, Bradley-sama?”

Bradley laughs as he picks up his glass. “Now I see why ya like this’un, Eddie.”

“It’s Edward, you old dog,” the gentleman says. Iri makes her way to him, presenting the bottle of rum. But he holds up a hand. “No thank you, my dear. The *sake* is perfectly fine. And, if it’s all the same, I’d like to buy you another glass, as well.”

¹ “Not at all.”

² Japanese (or, in this case, Sunakan) Rice Wine.

³ A verbal tic. A part of speech used to ask for agreement “...isn’t it?” Can also be used to get someone’s attention.

“Of course,” Iri says. With the snap of her fingers, sparking embers and ash appear in mid air at her side, spinning and swirling into an actual form. A large bottle gourd. From which she pours refills for Edward and herself.

“Smart as a whip, she is,” Bradley continues. “But I’d be careful.”

Iri cocks her head to the side. “Oh?”

Knocking back his rum and setting his glass down, Bradley leans in over the table and nods. “Aye. From what I hear, Imps’ve been disappearing, ‘round these parts, lately.”

A coy smile makes its way across the young hostess’s face and she brings her hand over her mouth. “*Ara ara*⁴. Are you worried about me, Bradley-sama?”

“Would you look at that,” Edward says, taking a sip of his drink. “The old sea dog actually has a heart? That or it’s the rum talking.”

Bradley scoffs. “I’m only sayin’ it’s dangerous out there. I know ones like these. Pulling people off the streets, out of the blue. They look at a dainty thing like yerself, all they see’s a target. Easy money. And the guards aren’t likely to help a lass with horns.”

Iri giggles to herself. “Ah. *Arigatou*⁵, Bardley-sama. I’ll be sure to stay vigilant.”

A moment later, Bradley finds his attention taken away by a dazzling ruby necklace, stopping by their table. Certainly a trinket worth a lofty sum. But who in their right mind would wear something like that to a place like this? At least... that’s the initial thought. Then he takes a gander at the picture attached to it. A tall woman, gorgeous as a painting, with strawberry blonde hair and steely blue eyes, draped in a fine red dress with a rather low neckline and a slit down the left leg. She gives off an unmistakably professional air, as well as a certain degree of cold

⁴ Another verbal tic. Basically “Oh my!”

⁵ “Thanks.”

distance. “Good evening, gentlemen,” she says with a cool smile, removing a folding fan from the sleeve of her dark red jacket and putting it to use. “I trust my hostess is treating you well?”

“Ah. Miss Scarlett.” Edward raises his glass. “Yes, she’s been sublime. Always a delight to speak with such an enchanting lady.”

Iri gives a coy shrug and a dismissive glance, away from the table. “It’s as they say. Miss Iri loves company. Is something the matter, *Okaasan*⁶? Or did you just come to check on me?”

Scarlett turns her back to the table. “There’s a client that would like Iri’s private attention. Would you gentlemen be content with one of our other hostesses?”

“Hmph,” Bradley sneers. “Long as they can pour liquor, I can’t care less.”

“Of course you couldn’t,” Edward sighs. “Either way, I suppose it can’t be helped. Miss Iri is rather popular, after all. And it’s not difficult to see why. Though I suppose the timing is appropriate. My associates and I had some business to discuss. We wouldn’t wish to bore your delightful hostess with our chatter. You understand.”

Iri stands and steps away from the table before turning back and bowing to her many guests. “Please enjoy the remainder of your visit,” she says, waving over her shoulder as she departs with Scarlett. “*Jaa matane*⁷.” She takes a quick glance at the red-faced Bradley, hardly able to keep himself upright, then looks to Scarlett. “I think you may have another regular. He’s quite the drinker.”

“I’ll look forward to his bill.”

The two women make their way to a door at the back of the club. Inside is a round booth like those outside. But sitting at the table is a lone man with short, brown hair and sharp, brown

⁶ A respectful way for Iri to refer to Scarlett. Literally “Mother.”

⁷ “See you.”

eyes, and roguish features, clad in a fine doublet. He scratches his clean-shaven chin as he sits, poring over a document in front of him. Upon hearing the opening and closing of the door to his flank, a smile graces his lips. A sly “Ah. There she is,” slides from his lips on his smooth voice and he sets down his wine glass. “Thank you, Scarlett. Hello, Iri, my dear.”

“*Konbanwa*⁸, Shaw,” Iri says, taking a seat beside her patron. “How may I assist my favorite client, today?”

Scarlett takes a seat across from the both of them, Iri filling a wine glass for her. Red wine, of course. “Yes. To what do we owe this visit from the great Gladeon Shaw?”

Shaw laughs and folds his legs as he slides the document before him across the table. “I have a job opportunity to discuss. One with quite the payday.” He gestures to the paper and Scarlett picks it up, reading over it. “I was able to... ‘procure’ several containers of stolen Old World tech for a buyer, overseas. Now I need to get it to them. It’s the standard ‘no looking in the cargo’ arrangement. Our client is paying us a handsome amount to deliver it to them. A smuggling run, essentially.”

Scarlett rolls up the document, leveling a flat stare at the rogue. “We’re not a delivery service, Shaw. Certainly not smugglers. And I’m beginning to grow impatient.”

A drop of sweat forms on Shaw’s brow and he backs into his seat so much that if he went any further, he may well pass through it. “Ever the tough customer, ‘ey, Scarlett?” But he bounces back with nary a trace of waning confidence. “Of course you’re not. It’s just a bit of context, madame. I’ve already secured the transportation. As you can imagine, it’s not difficult to

⁸ “Good evening.”

find greedy people with access to a boat, around these parts. No, that won't be necessary. But I'm sure you can imagine why I'd want the help of Miss Iri, specifically."

Scarlett folds her arms and sits back. "You want her to talk to someone."

"Her powers of negotiation are unmatched, after all," Shaw continues.

Iri pours Shaw more sake from her gourd bottle and, with the snap of her fingers, it vanishes in the same manner that it appeared - in a cloud of embers and ash that fade like mist.

"If you don't mind my asking, Shaw. Who is this buyer? And where, overseas, are they?"

"The paper mentioned Etrium. Which brings me to my next question..." Scarlett narrows her eyes. Oh. There it is. That eagle-eyed look. A gaze that could make cower even the burliest of pirates and craftiest of scoundrels. "Shaw. Is there a reason you need to send Iri - specifically Iri - to one of the worst places in all of Gaea to be a Djinn? Perhaps I'm just being paranoid, but that sounds just a bit risky."

Shaw gulps. "Ah... well, the client is in the infamous Port City Coyote. It's under Etrium control, yes, but the government in that town's been bought out by Nazirite businesses for generations. They don't care about the Djinn, there. Not really. So there's no danger to Iri, whatsoever." Scarlett... doesn't seem convinced. Not in the slightest. A reality that rattles Shaw, forcing him to look away from her. Naturally, he plays it cool, spreading his arms over the back of the booth, tipping down his head in a bid to look as suave as possible. "He's one of the most notable people in not just Etrium's underworld, but all of Ferroth's. Reinarch, Kirstland, even Eurale. All of it."

Iri leans against Shaw, resting her head upon his shoulder, giving Scarlett a rather innocent look. "Now, *Okaasan*, I'm sure Shaw would never knowingly send me anywhere he

wasn't certain I'd be safe. Still..." She touches a finger to his chest and turns to him with a provocative gleam in her eye. "Maybe if I know what the job needs of me, I can decide?"

Though Iri's proximity to him makes him fidget, Shaw does what he can to play it down, clearing his throat. "I was just getting to that. Obviously, securing a friend in Etrium - especially such a valuable one - would be beneficial to our operation. The most powerful region, run by the most powerful of the Ten Creeds and we don't have any influence there? If this is going to expand from a small business to an empire, we've got to do better than that, wouldn't you say?"

Scarlett, already looking back over the document, sighs. "Of course. Without a foothold in Etrium, let alone the rest of Ferroth, operations like this don't have a prayer of sustaining themselves long."

Shaw nods. "Precisely. Setting up connections in Croix was an excellent start. It secured us some very useful connections. Ones you can be certain I have every intention of exploiting. So I'd like to borrow your lovely hostess's talents, yet again." He gestures to Iri, who picks up his wine glass and offers it to him, returning to her position snugly pressed up against him when he accepts it. "All the job needs is for her to accompany the transport and meet with the client. There, I'd like her to arrange for a more... long-term relationship between him and us. Simple. More than perfectly doable for a woman of her talents, I'd say." And with that said and done, Shaw takes another sip of his drink.

Iri sits upright, folds her arms, and tips her head up at the thought. "Hm. Doable, yes. *Demo*⁹..." Shaw's face falls, going flush as Iri moves herself away from him and touches a hand

⁹ "But..."

to her cheek. “Perhaps *Okaasan* is correct. This does sound quite dangerous. Plus it’s another trip overseas. Boats are...”

Shaw interject, a desperate “I can arrange for double the rate from last time,” leaving him like a bolt. Her back to Shaw, Iri smirks as he continues. “Half up-front as usual, and half upon your return.”

Iri suts Shaw a sly glance through the corner of her eye, then sits back again, settling her head on his shoulder, once more. “Do you really want to be rid of me that badly, Shaw?” Such an uncharacteristically pitiful tone carries every word from her lips.

“W-what? I... no. Never!” Shaw proclaims, his whole head turning beet red.

Iri laughs to herself. “Ah, *gomen*¹⁰, *gomen*,” she says, taking his arm and wrapping it over her shoulder herself. “You’re too cute. I had to tease you a little. I’ll do it. Don’t hate me, okay?”

Scarlett coughs into her fist and stands, facing the door. “Right. Shaw, if that’s everything, my hostess can’t spend the entire day toying with you. Her time is my money, after all. Unless you’d like to actually pay for her company?”

“Toying with-?” Shaw turns back to Iri, who sports a coy expression, looking off to the side of the room and away from him with a clearly amused smirk. He grimaces and collects himself, standing and adjusting his sleeves. “As lovely as that sounds, I’ll unfortunately have to pass, for now. I need to finish with the arrangements. It’s been a pleasure as always, Scarlett. Iri.”

¹⁰ “Sorry.”

Shaw leaves the room as Scarlett holds the door open for him, Iri following suit. “I trust that kept you entertained?” she says as Iri passes on by. But Iri gives a brief shrug and a giggle on her way back to the club’s main floor.

The midnight bell tolls through Briardon, its low tones signaling the awakening of the town’s nightlife. Scarlett glances down at her ruby-encrusted, gold pocket watch, then nods to Iri from across the room. Iri turns to her guests - now a different lot from the last - and stands with a polite bow. “*Gomen ’nasai*¹¹. It seems that my time with you is up.”

“Aw, can’t we pay you to stay longer, babe?” One of her more easygoing guests asks with rosy cheeks and a thick, Azeti accent.

Iri’s inviting smile becomes a mischievous smirk. “Ara. Well, if you want me to stay that badly, we could always make an arrangement.”

The temperature in the room rises ever so slightly as she speaks. Yet the tone in her voice chills the man to his core. As her sharp, golden eyes peer into his soul, he breaks out into a cold sweat, eventually standing from his seat. “I just remembered I have to go buy some... uh...”

“*Huevos*¹², boss?” one of his cronies asks.

“At midnight?” another one remarks, only for his friend to lightly smack him over the back of the head. “Ooooh. Right. *Huevos*.”

“Yeah! *Huevos*! Let’s go, boys!”

The man shoves his hands into his pockets and proceeds to step away from the booth. He takes the long way, making sure to place as much distance between himself and Iri as possible on

¹¹ A more formal form of “I’m sorry.”

¹² “Eggs.” Basically the Spanish equivalent of how “balls” is used in English

his way to the door. All the while, she watches with an impish grin. The others jump up and scramble to the door as her gaze drifts to them from their boss.

Iri waves as they disappear through the door, a playful “*Arigatou*,” on her lips.

As Iri makes her way over to Scarlett at the bar, the club owner pours herself a glass. “I take it that lot won’t be coming back?”

Iri giggles. “*Gomen ne*. At least they bought a lot of drinks.”

Scarlett gives Iri a flat stare, then sighs and takes a sip of her drink. “At least try not to scare off every one that annoys you. I’m still trying to run a business, here. In any case, you’re headed out now, I take it?”

“I wouldn’t want to impose more than I already do.”

Scarlett and Iri makes their way to another door in the back of the club. “It’s not imposing if I’m the one who offered,” Scarlett says. “I still have rooms free upstairs. You know you’re more than welcome to one.”

Iri opens the door to Scarlett’s office. Lying across a sofa to the side of the room is a small child, no older than ten, fast asleep. She’s wrapped in a short, pink robe that’s perhaps a bit big on her, secured at the waist with a red obi. Poking out from beneath her black bangs is a pair of short, still-developing horns, one longer than the other. Iri smiles and steps into the room.

“Thank you, *Okaasan*. But we’ll be fine. Ah. I hope she didn’t give you any trouble.”

Scarlett brings a hand to her hip. “She’s an angel. You know that.”

Iri lightly shakes the little thing by the shoulder, speaking to her in a hushed tone.

“Kotori. Kotori, it’s time to go.”

The child - Kotori - groans as she turns over, stirring from her slumber. She opens her eyes, albeit barely. “*Onee-chan*¹³?”

“Come on. Let’s get you home,” Iri says, helping her sister to her feet. She takes Kotori by the hand and turns to Scarlett on her way to the door. “*Jaa ne*¹⁴, *Okaasan*.” And thus she leaves, guiding her sister out.

Once the pair is gone, Scarlett leans against her desk and lowers her head with an exasperated sigh, muttering to herself. “And stop calling me that.”

Across town, Iri and Kotori walk down the street under the cool midnight air, the gleam of the moon joined by the warm light of the Sky Fire, above. Iri has her groggy sister by the hand, guiding her through the door to their apartment. “All right,” she says, giving the girl a little nudge. “Off to bed.”

Kotori yawns, bearing her more developed Djinn canines. She’s hardly able to hold her eyes open beyond a squint, let alone keep the rest of her upright. Her body is heavy and slumped forward as she slides her little feet across the floor on the way to her room as she grunts to Iri in response. As she lies down and rests her head, Iri pulls the sheets over her, a drowsy and slurred “*Oyasuminasai*¹⁵,” clumsily trickling out of her mouth.

Iri smiles as the girl drifts off. “*Oyasumi*, Kotori.”

She quietly closes the door behind her as she leaves the room. Later, she steps into the living area from the kitchen with a cup of steaming tea. Without a sound, she moves across the tatami flooring, pulling a book from the shelves on the far end of the space. On the wall behind

¹³ “Big sister.”

¹⁴ A shortened form of *Ja matane*.

¹⁵ “Goodnight.” Informal; *Oyasumi*

her hangs a beautiful Sunakan woodblock print of a snow-topped mountain. With her book and tea in hand, she takes a seat at the kotatsu in the center of the room. She yawns a bit, herself, as she thumbs through the pages.

Some hours later, Iri lies curled up on the floor, practically out cold, her book open at her side. A sudden motion causes her to stir, if only slightly. What is this? An earthquake? It couldn't have waited five more minutes? But no. This shaking is something else entirely, soon joined by a high-pitched noise. Iri winces and turns over, unable to hear it clearly, at first. But it only persists and the shaking grows more violent. Until... "*Onee-can. Onee-chan*, wake up!"

Kotori. Right. Iri opens her eyes to the onslaught of light being sent to torment her by the sun, cursing the blasted thing in her mind. Eventually, she flings herself up into a sitting position, legs crossed and rubbing her eyes with one hand. "I'm up..." she groans.

Kotori cheers, throwing her hands into the air. "*Onee-chan!*" The girl leans into her elder sister's face with a wide, toothy grin, canines and all, making Iri lean back a bit. "You said we could go to the market together today, remember?"

Iri blinks as Kotori beams at her with those large, deep red eyes of hers. "*H-hai*¹⁶," she says, laughing a bit nervously to herself. "I did say that, didn't I?"

Like that, little Kotori springs to her feet. "*Yatta*¹⁷!"

"But you have to get cleaned up first."

Kotori pouts, turning away from her sister with all of that exuberant energy suddenly gone in a flash. "*Hai*..."

¹⁶ "Yes."

¹⁷ "Hooray!"

Iri yawns, covering her mouth with her hand. “If you do it really fast, we can eat out for breakfast. How’s that sound?”

Kotori snaps back to her sister. “*Honto ni?!¹⁸*”

When Iri nods, Kotori pivots to take off for the bathroom. But before she can, Iri reaches out and grabs her by the wrist. “Kotori,” she says. When the girl turns back around, Iri meets her with a loving smile. “*Ohayo.¹⁹*”

Kotori grins, returning a cheerful “*Ohayougozaimashita!*”

A bit later that morning, Iri and Kotori sit in the open-air section of Heart’s - a new family cafe with a strawberry theme. Kotori bounces in her chair, swaying from side to side and singing to herself. “Strawberry, strawberry. Hurry and get in my belly!”

The server brings them their menus and Kotori’s mouth hangs open upon seeing the pictures, almost drooling with stars in her eyes. Iri extends a rather amused smile her way. *I wonder if she likes this place.*

The young waitress leans over Iri a bit, speaking with a thick, southern Alonian drawl. “Our special t’day is the Queen of Heart’s,” the young lady says, pointing out a picture on the back cover. “It’s a right huge mountain of pancakes, topped with a snow white whip cream ceilin’ and dotted with only the freshest strawberries, plucked right from the fields. All coated in our signature strawberry syrup.”

¹⁸ “Really?”

¹⁹ “Good morning.” Formal; *Ohayougozaimashita*

The excitement in Kotori's eyes is mirrored by the abject terror in Iri's. *If she eats that, she's not going to sleep for a week.* Iri glances up to see Kotori giving her a puppy dog gaze and grimaces, looking immediately back down.

“*Onee-chan...*”

Iri nips the one in the bud at once with a blunt “No,” shutting her menu hard. Kotori sits back in her seat, puffing her little cheek with her arms crossed and looking off to one side. She huffs but Iri pays her no mind. “She’ll have a kids’ plate. Three small pancakes, a modest whipped cream topping, drizzled in strawberry syrup. Also, a side of eggs and bacon.” She hands Kotori’s menu to the server, cutting the woman a cold glance.

The server feels the heat emanating from the elder Djinn and puts on a smile, shakily taking the menu from her with a nervous laugh. “Uh... r-right. Yes ma’am. A-and what about yerself, if ya don’t mind my askin’?”

In an instant, the heat dies down and Iri returns to her more pleasant demeanor, looking back down at her own menu. “Hm... maybe just an omelet and a strawberry crepe.” Then she hands over the menu with a smile that shows the complete reversal of her attitude. “*Yoroshiku*²⁰.”

Later, the waitress brings the Djinn sisters their food. Kotori lights back up upon seeing the strawberry-laden plate before her. She immediately reaches for a fork, only to feel a chill down her spine. Across the table, Iri stares at her with an arched eyebrow. The girl instantly sits back, clapping her hands together and bowing her head. “*Itadakimsau*²¹!” the sisters say together. Then Kotori glances back across the table. Iri nods and the girl snatches up her fork, proceeding to stuff her face.

²⁰ Similar to “Please and thank you.”

²¹ Similar to “Let’s eat/Thanks for the meal.”

Iri takes a sip of her coffee. “Kotori,” she says. “I’m going to be away for a while. On a... business trip.”

Kotori tilts her head as she pauses in the middle of scarfing down pancakes, her fork stuck in her mouth. “Eh?” She gulps down her food and blinks. “Another one? Where’re you going this time?!”

“Overseas. It shouldn’t take long. About a week. I was asked to take care of something.”

“That didn’t answer my question.” Kotori pouts. Then she springs to her feet, leaning over the table with sparkling eyes. “Can I go with you?!”

“*Ie*²².” Shut down with all the bluntness of a stone and the grace of a spring breeze. She simply sits there, sipping her coffee without so much as looking up.

Kotori deflates, dropping back into her seat. “Well, you can at least get me one of those souvenirs you always do, right?”

Iri’s face falls, thinking about it. The last few places she’d been to? Sure. But the Djinn were at least free, there. Etrium, though... a different story entirely. *Ah. I got careless, didn’t I?* For a moment, she curses herself, setting that kind of expectation. “This... isn’t that kind of trip, Kotori. *Gomen ne.*”

Kotori remains silent for a moment. Eventually she reaches to the table, picks up her fork, and continues eating, albeit more slowly. “*Wakarimashita*²³...”

Not long after breakfast, Iri and Kotori stroll through the outdoor market. On Kotori’s back is a basket, filled with fruits and vegetables. Iri carries a bag of her own, likewise full of

²² “No.”

²³ “Understood/I understand.”

groceries. Her sister bounces along ahead of her with a wide smile, swinging her arms and humming a cheerful tune. But Iri is lost in her own head until Kotori turns on her heels and calls out with an energetic “Onee-chan, Onee-chan!”

Iri snaps out of it, looking down at her sister. “Eh? *N-nandesu ka*²⁴?”

“What’s next?!”

Iri blinks, then tips up her head as she thinks, a finger to her chin. “Ah. All right, Kotori. Next on the treasure hunt is...” With the snap of her fingers, she brings her head back down with a sweet smile. “Something that loves water.”

With a cheek-to-cheek grin, Kotori brings her hand up in a playful salute. “*Ryoukai*²⁵!” Then she spins back around and runs off to a nearby cart. When Iri catches up, Kotori points out the selection. A large assortment of fresh fish. “It was fish, right?”

Iri nods and pats Kotori on the head. “*Hai. Yoku dekimashita*²⁶, Kotori. How about I let you pick which one you want for dinner?”

“*Honto ni?*” Kotori asks, eyes wide. “Salmon!”

Iri turns to the vendor, pointing to the salmon on display. “Well, you heard her. Two Nazirite Salmon, please. Oh, and some seaweed.”

“What next, Onee-chan?”

Iri looks over her list as the vendor hands her the bag. “Hm... next up is... ah. The last thing on the list! And I put some in my coffee, this morning.”

²⁴ “What is it?”

²⁵ “Roger.”

²⁶ “Good job.”

Kotori perks up instantly. “Milk!” she cheers, dashing off. Iri follows, though she pauses one the way as her eye catches something at a nearby stand. When she finally catches up, Kotori is waving to her. “Onee-chan! What took so long?”

Iri laughs. “I wonder. You found the milk?”

“*Hai!*”

Iri takes the bottle and tucks it away into her bag before handing the vendor a few coins. “*Arigatou,*” she says. Then she kneels down to her sister. “And that concludes our treasure hunt for the day. Did you have fun?”

Kotori’s cheerfulness fizzles a bit. “*Hai...*” she says, her eyes averted.

“Hm? What’s the matter, Kotori? Do you not want your prize?”

Naturally, the effect of those words on an unsuspecting child is instant. Kotori’s entire demeanor adjusts in a split second. “Prize?”

Iri holds out a small box in front of her sister. When Kotori opens it, her eyes glaze over, her jaw falls open, and the girl could almost swear she hears a heavenly choir singing in the background. Inside is a small batch of chocolate-dipped strawberries. Before she can take the box, however, Iri stands upright and holds it above her head, well out of the little one’s reach. “Four now, four after lunch, four after dinner. Deal?”

“*Hai!*” Kotori says, jumping to try and reach.

Iri lowers the box and Kotori’s hand moves faster than any normal eye would be able to track, nabbing four of the treats and instantly popping one into her mouth. Even with her voice

muffled by her mouth cradling the fruity treat, an elated “*Umai*²⁷!” squeals out on her tiny voice as she holds a hand to her cheek.

Iri closes the box and tucks it in her bag, watching her sister enjoy herself. A faint, almost somber “*Gomen ne, Kotori,*” slipping out under her breath. Soon she looks up to the nearby clocktower that stands tall over the market square. “Ah. Almost noon. Kotori, let’s go. We have to get everything home and put away before we go to *Okaasan’s*.”

On the way out, the market begins to flood with the midday throng. Iri finds herself weaving and bobbing through people. Eventually she grabs Kotori’s wrist so that the poor child doesn’t end up lost in the crowd. Though the fastest ways out are clogged with groups of people. She sneers and looks around, spotting an alleyway, leading her sister towards it. Kotori gulps down the last of her strawberry treats. “Where are we going?”

“We’re taking a shortcut,” Iri says, though something - a sense of others nearby - gives her a moment’s pause, leading her to turn. A pair of rough-looking men stand at the end of the alley they’d just entered through. When Iri turns forward, another pair steps out through doors connecting to the alley, itself. Her eyes narrow. “*Mazui*²⁸...” She comes to a stop, bringing Kotori around to her side.

“Oi,” one of the ruffians says. “What’s a nice pair of imps like you ladies doin’ in a rough part of town like this?”

Kotori buries herself under her sister’s arm. A frightened “*Onee-chan?*” squeaking out.

“Aw. Well isn’t the small one a cutie?” another of the thugs says.

²⁷ In this context, similar to “delicious.”

²⁸ An expression of frustration or disgust.

Iri sizes up the supposed leader of this little gang, then glances down at her scared sister, pondering her options. Taking it all in, she puts on her most cordial face, as if entertaining guests at the club. “We’re just heading home, is all.” Keeping with the coy act, she brings a hand to her mouth with a giggle. “We barely got caught by the lunch rush, though. You know how it is.”

“Yeah? Well, maybe my men and I can escort you. It’s not safe on the streets, ma’am,” the man says, getting closer to the pair. “We insist. Ain’tcha heard? ‘Bout all’a those imps goin’ missin’ around here, lately? Would hate to see that happen to a pair of nice ladies, like yourselves. Sure some scoundrel out there would pay quite the price for ones like you. Safety’s important and all.”

“Yeah. We like to call it the buddy system,” one of the goons interjects.

“Shut up, idiot.”

“Aye, boss...”

The leader looks Iri up and down, now that much closer. Iri doesn’t flinch. Of course, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out what he’s doing. The way his eyes show how... enticed he is, the further down they travel. So very easy. It’s enough to make Iri mentally scoff, all the while keeping up her genial facade. “So whataya say, luv? We just wanna offer ya some protection.”

“I bet...” Iri says under her breath. “Ah. Thank you for your offer, but it won’t be necessary. If you’ll excuse us, I have work at Scarlett’s Circle, tonight, so if you’d kindly let us by, we’ll be on our way.”

The leader looks around to his underlinds. “Oh. Ya hear that, men? She works for Miss Scarlett. Isn’t that somethin’?”

“Ain’t that the hag what kicked you outta her club last week, boss?”

The leader places a cigar in his mouth with a seedy grin. “That she is. Can’t say that felt too fair. What kind of whorehouse doesn’t let ya touch the whores? But, come to think of it, I do recognize you, luv. And who’s this? You trainin’ this’un? They start that young?” He kneels down to Kotori’s level. “Why, ‘ello poppet.”

Kotori clings to Iri even tighter. Suddenly the thug feels... damp. Bringing up his head, he wipes his brow to find it covered in sweat. Heat. Oven-like heat builds throughout that alleyway as Iri glares down at him, her entire friendly persona melting away like ice. “Oi. Step away from my sister.” The man looks up at her. Those narrow, golden eyes. They cut like blades. “And let us pass. I don’t intend to repeat myself again.”

“What was that? Did you just-? Did this imp just threaten us, boys?”

“Sure sounded like she did, boss!”

The leader nods, dropping his cigar to the ground and stomping it out. “The nerve of whores, these days,” he says. He turns around and, in one swift motion, pulls a switchblade from his pocket, its dark metal edges glimmering with traces of tiny blue dust. Iri eyes the weapon. Something that doesn’t go unnoticed. The brute chuckles. “That’s it. Ya know what that is, don’tchu, luv? A beauty, i’nnit? Simple iron, nothin’ special. But laced with the blue stuff. Just for dealin’ with you and your kin.” He flourishes the knife but Iri remains completely unflinching. “Can’t say I know anyone would want a mouthy broad like you. Maybe we cut your vocal chords. See if that fixes it.”

Iri stares at the man as he lunges toward her, taking a wide swing at her throat. Just before the moment of contact, Iri bows her head with a sigh. Then everything stops. The twisted grin of the sleaze across from Iri slips away. Now only shock adorns his ugly mug. Iri stands

perfectly unharmed, having just slightly moved her head. “Announcing where you intend to strike?” Iri says, a rather superior tone carried on her voice as she narrows her eyes at the terrified goon. “Rather bold for someone so slow.”

Before any of the thugs realize she’s even moved, Iri brings up her foot... and strikes gold, punting the man directly where the sun don’t shine. The knife flies from his hand as his voice takes off into the stratosphere. A catty grin makes its way across Iri’s lips. “Ooh, it rang. Do I win a prize?” As she backs up, the man doubles over, collapsing to the ground in a fetal position and writhing in pain.

“Holy-!” one of the others says.

“She got the boss!”

With the leader dealt with, Iri glances up to the thug across from her, then over her shoulder to the two at her rear. “We’ll be leaving now. Unless you gentlemen have a problem with that.”

“N-no ma’am!”

And that’s that. Iri takes her sister by the wrist and guides her off down the alley. As the two of them near the exit into the streets, Kotori tugs on her big sister’s sleeve. “*Onee-chan?*”

“*Nan deshou*²⁹?”

“What’s a whore?”

Iri freezes in place. Her eye twitches and she slowly turns her head to Kotori, who stares back at her with big, innocent eyes. “I’ll... tell you when you’re older,” she says, leading Kotori off into town.

²⁹ “What could it possibly be?”