

Chapter 6

Kotori sits upon the sofa in Scarlett's office, kicking her feet as she takes a sip from a glass of juice. At her side is a bag of luggage for the next few days. Scarlett stands in the doorway across from Iri, arms folded. The elder of the Djinn sisters extends her a polite bow. "It appears I must thank you for watching after Kotori, yet again, Okaasan."

Scarlett shrugs, leaning against the doorframe. "Of course. But, Iri... are you sure about this job? It isn't Croix or Alo, you know. Etrium's the Templars' playground."

Iri puts on a coy grin, bringing her hand to her mouth. "Heehh? Okaasan, are you worried for me? So sweet."

"Don't get cute. You're my best hostess, after all. It'd be a shame to lose such a valuable investment," Scarlett says, flipping her hair with her usual disinterested facade. "And I suppose you have your other good points." She feels the eyes on the back of her neck and glances over her shoulder at little Kotori, watching the two of them chat and averting her own eyes when she catches Scarlett's steely gaze on her. "Kotori. Don't you have something you wanted to say?"

Kotori hops up from the sofa, seemingly wound tight as a toy soldier. "H-hai!" Her little legs carry her over to the door and across from her sister. "Onee-chan, have a nice trip."

Iri kneels down and pats her sister on the head. "Arigatou, Kotori. I'll try my best. It'll be pretty hard without you, though."

Right then, Iri just about has the wind knocked out of her as Kotori throws herself into her big sister's chest. Huh. Strong for being so small. Even for a Djinn. Someone's blooming quickly. The surprise now worn off, Iri smiles and returns Kotori's hug. "Ne... Onee-chan."

"Hm?"

Kotori unburies her face from Iri and looks her in the eye. “You better miss me.”

Iri sits back and brings a finger to her chin, looking off into space. “Heeh? I dunno. I’ll be so busy, I might not have time to think of you at all.”

What a thing to say! Taken aback by that devilishly coy remark, Kotori puffs up her cheeks and balls her fists, lightly punching into them into her sister’s chest. Repeatedly. It doesn’t hurt, of course. In fact, Iri can’t help but giggle. *Ehehe... kawaii.*

A shrill “That’s mean, Onee-chan!” whines out from Kotori’s little throat as she leans into Iri’s space, forcing her to lean back with a playful smile and her hands up. Then she sits back, turning her nose up and away from her sister, only peeking at Iri through the corner of her eye on occasion.

“Gomen, gomen,” Iri says, waving both hands to her sister. But Kotori keeps her head turned up, away from her. And then... she brings it out. “Kotori.” That tone. Not a hint of mischief remains in her voice. That catty smile turns sincere at the drop of a hat. Reluctant though she may be, Kotori turns back to her sister, only for Iri to lean forward and catch her off-guard with a peck on the forehead, dispelling all the girl’s anger in an instant. “I’ll make sure to miss you every single moment.”

Kotori beams. “Honto ni? You promise?”

“I promise. And if I break it, you can have as many strawberry pancakes as you can eat. How’s that sound? Do we have a deal?”

With eyes now sparkling like the night sky, Kotori flings herself at her sister once again, nearly knocking the woman over. “Hai!”

Scarlett stands in the doorway, a ticking pocket watch in hand. “All right, all right. This has been very sweet, and all, but I have to open at some point and you have a boat to catch, Miss Iri. Let’s get you out of here.”

Still clinging to the adorable child in her arms, Iri feigns disappointment with a mocking pout. “Hmph. I see you’re just as coldhearted as ever, Okaasan.” But, of course, she relents, letting Kotori go and tapping her on the nose. “Kotori. Be good for Okaasan while I’m gone.”

The girl grins, bearing those large canines of hers and hops into a cute little salute. “Hai!”

“*Ittekimasu*¹,” Iri says. She doesn’t grab... anything on her way to the door. Not one item. She simply glides her way across the empty mid-day floor of the club and vanishes into the afternoon bustle of the streets, making for the port.

Some time later, a large boat leaves the Briardon docks, manned by a full crew of the most seasoned sailors in the city - pirates, all of them. A full ship of almost nothing but rough, surly men and women. As the ship sails, they all fulfill their roles to see that she has as smooth a journey as possible, if only to preserve the cargo. They work with the precision of a well-oiled machine, some swabbing the deck, others manning the sails. The gentle ebb and flow of the waves has no effect on these sea-legged mercenaries. Iri, however...

Iri is not one of them. The dainty Djinn remains locked in her quarters. Even the faintest sound is like someone taking a hammer to her skull. Every motion of the boat churns her entire stomach. And she doesn’t dare open her eyes, lest the whole room begin to spin like a top. No, Iri rests, splayed out across her cot in the guest quarters of the ship, towards the back, her face

¹ Essentially a way of saying “I’m going and I will be back.”

buried in her pillow, one arm hung over the side with a hand resting on a bucket... just for good measure. This... this is not at all her element.

A knock on the door inspires a ghastly wail from her as she tries to bury her face even further into the pillow. One of the crew steps inside. A rather out-of-place young woman with short, blonde hair, barely visible beneath the cover of the hood on her green cloak. Tall. Possibly even taller than Iri, minus the horns. But she's so small. And the way she carries herself. Nothing about the girl screams "pirate." Not that Iri is in any condition to care. The woman speaks up, her tone flat. "Captain Grey wants a word with you."

"I'm a guest on her ship," Iri groans. "Shouldn't she be coming to me?"

The woman pauses on her way to shutting the door, looking back through the corner of her eye, and signs. "I'm not a secretary. Grow a pair of sea legs and so see her in her quarters." Thus she leaves, slamming the door behind her and sending every vibration straight up Iri's spine as if there was an earthquake in her head.

Slowly but surely, she rises from the cot, her usually fair, pale skin now tinted a sickly green. "Shaw, you are paying me triple for this," she grumbles. She swings her legs over the edge of the cot. But standing is clearly a mistake as it seems the gravity, itself, eagerly wishes to greet her and introduce her to its old friend, the floor. Iri reaches down and picks up the bucket before wobbling her way to the door. *What did I do with that medicine? Ergh...*

On the deck, Iri glances out over the open sea, grimacing at not just the water, but the dark clouds massing on the horizon. "*Iya...*"² she sneers. Eventually she makes her way to the captain's quarters as instructed and braces herself against the door, taking a deep breath, then waving to her... gracious host. "*K-konbanwa...*"

² An expression of disgust.

The captain sits back in her chair, feet up on her desk as she polishes a pistol. Iri's eyes are drawn to the narrow scar running down the right side of her face. She glowers at the thought of this tall, solid woman being so at peace with this environment, seeming to have usurped all of the grace she, herself, usually exudes. It just doesn't seem fair.

The captain glances up upon noticing the Djinn woman in her door. "Ah. The imp. You've got good timing." She looks Iri up and down, leaning forward that a small vial of blue liquid around her neck swings under her chin, reminding Iri of the medicine she so wished she had with her. "You sick?"

"The ocean and I are... not very compatible." Iri maintains her composed image with a forced smile for just a moment, only to nearly gag, clenching the bucket in her hand. Not here. Not in front of this woman. Thankfully, it passes and allows her to keep up her facade. "Did you need me for something? *Senchow*³?"

Grey gives Iri a flat stare then leans forward in her seat, folding her hands and resting her chin upon them. "Your friend, Shaw. Seems pretty keen on working with me and my people. I've never heard of this 'Inner Circle' he talked about, though. I take it you lot are small fish?"

"The best organizations are often the ones you've never heard of," Iri says, still bracing herself against the doorframe with a smile.

"Right... So tell me something. How'd a no-name bunch like you manage to get in good with the walking bank accounts in Croix, of all places?"

If only momentarily, the tone behind Iri's smile... changes. Such an underappreciated craft, the art of negotiation. There's a certain satisfaction that comes with hearing about those deals that turned out successful. The best are those where the negotiator is certain that only they

³ Captain

could have bore results. And that pride shows up clear across Iri's face. Along with a hint of something... else. Amusement, perhaps? Regardless, she responds with that playful demeanor she's so mastered. "By being very persuasive."

Grey laughs, sitting back in her seat. "Really? So I take it that's where you come in? You 'persuade' people?"

Iri shrugs. "What can I say? I know how to make a deal."

The waters churn away with a violent force beneath the hull of the ship, tossing it about beneath the blanket of black clouds overhead. The crewmen dash back and forth, fighting to stay at their positions against the howling winds that would otherwise carry them away. The cannons roll to and fro, several crewmen chasing them up and down the deck to secure them. Meanwhile, Iri remains inside, clung to her cot like a child to its mother. Even when the cot, itself, slides across the room, she doesn't give an inch.

The door swings open and a crewman braces himself against the door. "Oi, Imp!" he shouts, Iri groaning at the noise. "One of the sails is undone! Make yerself useful and get us some rope from the storeroom!" Iri's head rises from her pillow with a glare that could cut through steel, sending a cold chill down the man's spine even as waves of heat visibly ripple throughout the room. "P-please?"

Eventually, Iri pulls herself out of bed. Taking her bucket with her, she stumbles across the room, holding herself up against the wall. Her legs wobble with each step, in danger of slipping out from under her. But she gradually makes her way below deck, where she at least

doesn't have to look at the sea. But she still steadies herself against anything she can get a hold of until she reaches the storeroom. Walls, wooden beams, whatever works.

Iri takes a breath and reaches for the knob of the storeroom door when she's hit by a dizzy spell that knocks her to her knees and seems to bring all of her insides up to her throat. Bringing the bucket to her face, she heaves out practically all of her soul before reaching up and grabbing hold of the knob. Without looking, she throws the door open. But as she turns to look inside, she comes to a dead stop.

Staring back at her are a wide pair of reddish eyes, belonging to a tiny, rather familiar body, sitting atop a barrel that's been tied down. Kotori? Indeed it is. The girl doesn't move a muscle, nor does she dare to breathe. She remains still as a rock, perhaps hoping against hope that not moving would make her invisible.

Without a word, Iri brings herself to her feet. She shambles across the storeroom and Kotori braces herself as if she's being approached by a monster. But nevermind that. The small vial of red liquid in her hands! When Iri finally reaches her, she snatches the vial from the girl, her eyes glazed over with a ravenous satisfaction. In an instant she downs the entire vial, giving a relieved sigh once it's all gone. It's like an elixir from the heavens, themselves. She regains her balance and the throbbing in her head disappears completely. "*Yokatta*⁴!" she squeals.

But. That elation dies a rather harsh and abrupt death, turning to irritation as she snap-turns to the little person in the room. "Kotori..."

The child gulps and puts on a nervous smile, holding her hands up in feigned celebration. "Y-you found me, Onee-chan!" she whimpers, covering for it with a forced laugh.

⁴ An expression similar to "Thank god" or "I'm so glad."

“That’s funny,” Iri continues, her tone becoming chillingly casual. “I wasn’t supposed to be seeing my sister again for about a week. So either I’m in the wrong place... or she is.” She proceeds to look around as if confused. “Well, this doesn’t look like Okaasan’s place. It appears to be a boat.” And then that razor gaze finds its way right back to Kotori. No, through her. “So I’d love to hear her try to explain this.”

Kotori hops down from the barrel as Iri folds her arms, hiding behind it. Her eyes dart around, desperately trying to latch onto literally anything but her sister. “W-well... um... y-you see... I came to bring you the seasickness potion you left and, uh... the boat... left. Before I could get off. So I hid here. That way you wouldn’t be mad. S-surpriiiiise...”

“Oh, I’m not mad,” Iri says.

“Y-you’re not?”

“I’m absolutely livid.”

Oh. That’s not better. That’s not better at all. Before long, Iri emerges from the storeroom with a rope in one hand and her sister in the other. On the deck, she tosses the rope to one of the burly crewmen, dragging Kotori along behind her. “There’s your rope,” she says, the force of what had looked like a light toss nearly knocking the large man over. Kotori sulks with a helpless expression as she lags behind her sister on the way to her doom. Their room. On the way to their room. “We have a stowaway. I’m dealing with it.”

Iri opens the door to the guest quarters, shoving the little sneak inside with one hand. As Kotori stumbles forward and catches herself against the cot, Iri folds her arms. “Kotori, I’m only going to say this one time. Stay put. We’ll talk when I get back.” Oh, those words come with a sinking feeling fit to make the girl writhe in place. The kind of feeling one only gets when they

know, good and well, that they've messed up. And thus, the door slams shut as Iri exits, leaving Kotori to ball up on the cot, awaiting her imminent punishment.

Outside, the storm rages overhead. Though no matter the intensity, every droplet of water turns to steam against Iri's skin. The crewmen man the sails as the captain steers the ship into the direction of the largest waves, her booming voice rolling over the entire deck. "Full speed ahead, ladies! I want those sails open!"

At the heart of the quarterdeck stands that woman from earlier, her cloak waving in the wind. Floating in the air, just across from her is... a book? It casts a bright green glow in all directions. She's saying something, but Iri can't make it out. Not that she can't hear it. On the contrary. Her Djinn ears pick up every syllable. No, this is simply a language that seems entirely alien, not just to her, but to this very world. *So that's it. A Channeler. Magic.* That's useful. Perhaps to make the storm die down a bit? That would certainly have to be a powerful spell. But no. That isn't the picture she's getting.

Iri glances around. Everything is just finishing being secured. The ship is at full sail. And the crewmen are... bracing themselves? Wait. Then what is this absence of wind, pounding away at the deck, all of a sudden despite the still-churning waters all around them? Iri lifts her head and that's when it hits. The ship sits in the middle of a swirling air pocket. A dome of wind surrounding them on all sides. Oh.

Iri rushes to her quarters and throws open the door. "Kotori, hold onto something!"

Right then, the Channeler points toward the sails. The swirling winds around the ship implode onto the deck and a massive gust fills the sails. The ship streaks forward, crashing

through waves and forcing Iri to leap across the guest quarters, grabbing hold of Kotori and using herself as a cushion.

The ship advances toward an enormous wave on the horizon and the captain dons a smug grin. “Well aren’t you a big’un?” The rickety old boat climbs the wave as the wind from the Channeler keeps it surging forward. At its apex, the heavy, wooden vessel breaks through, rising into the air for a moment before slamming back down into the ocean surface.

The storm isn’t nearly over, but the ship continues forward at blazing speed, carried along by the magical gusts of the woman on the quarterdeck. Iri loosens her hold on Kotori, having stopped the cot from sliding into the two of them with one hand. Kotori clings to her sister, shaking and squeezing her eyes shut as tightly as she can. The sight brings a warm smile to Iri’s face, reminding her of such warm memories. Days when this tiny person - this helpless little life would run to her whenever she was afraid. And she’d always fall asleep a little while after. The girl fit so easily in Iri’s arm’s back then. Iri pets her sister on the head with a soft, even maternal voice. “*Daijoubu desu.*”

Some time later, the storm has blown over. Still powered by the magical wind of the channeler, the ship treads onward through the peaceful sea. The Sky Fire nearly vanishes amidst the blazing hue of the setting sun. In their quarters, Kotori sits on the cot, her head down and her hands folded in her lap as she twiddles her thumbs. Standing across from her with her arms folded is Iri, her face marked with disappointment. “Do you have anything to say, Kotori?”

Kotori winces at the subtle sting in her sister’s voice. “I just wanted to help...” she murmurs, keeping her head down.

Iri sighs. “Honestly, Kotori, what am I going to do with you? What were you thinking, anyway? And what about *Okaasan*? Don’t you think she’s concerned, right now?” Kotori’s eyes spring wide open. “So you hadn’t thought of that. Do you have any idea how dangerous this little stunt of yours was? She’s probably worried to death. And that’s to say nothing of...” Iri catches herself as Kotori’s body trembles and she spots a glimpse of water, trailing down the girl’s cheek.

The elder sister strolls across the room and kneels down at the edge of the cot, bring a hand to the girl’s chin to catch the tear, then tipping her head up. “Kotori,” she says. “I just want you to be safe. If anything happened to you...”

At that, the little Djinn throws herself into her sister’s arms and clings tight, bawling her eyes out. “*Gomen’nasai, Oneechan!*” she cries.

Iri hugs her sister close, rocking back and forth with her to calm her down, wiping the child’s still-watering eyes. “As long as you understand.

“Hai...”

“Good. Which is why there won’t be any sweets for a month.”

“Eh? Eeeh?!”

Iri bends down and gives Kotori a light pluck on the nose. “You heard me. No sweets. And especially no strawberries. One month. I think that sounds fair. *Ne*, Kotori?”

Kotori pouts and sits down hard on the cot, turning her back to Iri. “*Wakarimashita...*”

At that moment, the door swings open. Iri glances behind her to glimpse the captain, standing there with her hands on her hips. “Imp,” she says. “I heard we had a stowaway.” Iri sighs and stands up, meeting the taller woman eye-to-eye with her composure unwavering.

“Hai, *Senchou*. This is my little sister. Kotori?”

Kotori springs up from the cot and gives a respectful bow, both her arms tight to her side as a toy soldier’s. “*H-hajimemashite*⁵!”

The captain stares down at the girl with eyes of sheer contempt. She scoffs and returns her attention to Iri. “You know what we do with stowaways around here, imp?” Bending down to eye-level with the child, the captain puts on a twisted smirk and chuckles. “Normally we put ‘em to work. Sometimes, though, if we’re bored and want some good entertainment, we throw ‘em overboard for the sharks. You look awfully small and cute. Probably a good little appetizer, eh?”

Kotori whimpers and dives behind her sister, peaking out with a little shudder. Iri, on the other hand, is completely unfazed... and even more unamused. “*Senchou...*” she says. When the captain cranes her neck back to look up at Iri, it’s like being struck by a javelin, forcing her to stumble back. Despite the elder Djinn’s pleasantly smiling face, this feeling is sheer menace. An aura so black, the deepest trench in the sea couldn’t match it.

“K-kidding, imp. I’m just kidding.”

Iri scoots Kotori back to the cot, behind them. “You’ve had a long day. Get some rest,” she says, her attention returning to the captain. “My sister is usually rather well-behaved. She’ll cause no trouble. Especially with me around. The job can proceed as planned.”

“Sure,” the captain says, rising and turning back through the door. “The channeler needs a break. We’ll give her ‘til morning to rest and she’ll be back out there, giving us a good wind. Should arrive in less than 48 hours, at that rate. Make sure the anklebiter’s not a problem.”

⁵ A greeting used when meeting someone for the first time.

Iri performs a mocking bow, a dismissive “Of course, *Senchou*. As you command,” gracing her lips.

Grey narrows her eyes at Iri, but shows herself out nonetheless. With her gone, Iri shuts the door and sighs. Kotori lies out on the cot, staring up at the ceiling, eyes wide open. “Onee-chan,” she squeaks.

“*Nani?*”

“I’m not sleepy.”

“Heeeh?” Iri trots over to the cot, taking a seat beside her sister and playfully poking the girl in the cheek. “Did the captain scare you that much?”

Kotori turns over, facing the wall with her cheeks puffed out and eyes dim. “*Hidoi...*⁶” she grumbles, getting her sister to giggle.

“*Gomen.*” Though all sense of mirth leaves her as she continues, replaced by a solemn atmosphere. “In that case... you’re excited to be here?” No answer. Kotori simply curls herself up further on the cot as if a turtle retreating into its shell. The two of them fall silent again. “*Ja...*⁷ Let’s try getting you something to eat. There should be some food around.” And so Iri takes her sister by the hand and leads her out.

As expected, the trip lasts for just over a day, thanks in no small part to the magic winds provided by the ship’s channeler. The captain stands in the crow’s nest, a spyglass to her face as her mouth stretches into a wide grin. “Land ho!” she shouts, swinging down on a rope. “Ready the anchor and get your land legs ready, boys!”

⁶ An expression that can be used to call someone terrible/mean/awful/etc.

⁷ A part of speech essentially used to say “Well.../Well then.../So.../Then...”

Inside, Iri and Kotori sit on their cot, eating from two bowls of rice in near perfect sync, Kotori mirroring every one of her sister's movements. As they finish, the commotion outside catches Iri's attention. "Sounds like we're nearly there," she says, setting her bowl down.

"Onee-chan? Where are we going?"

Iri glances down at Kotori and laughs to herself, taking her napkin and wiping a bit of rice from the girl's cheeks and the corners of her mouth. "A place called Port Coyote. It's at the southern tip of Etrium."

"Can I-?"

"Nope," Iri interjects, turning away from her sister with her head tilted up.

"That's not fair, Onee-chan!" Kotori whines.

But Kotori's apprehension fades in a flash as her sister rests her head atop her own. "It's not safe, Kotori," Iri laments. "Even I don't particularly want to go. You and I - the Djinn - we're not welcome here."

"Then... what about all the Djinn down below?"

Iri's eyes spring open. "Down... below?"

"The ones in those big boxes, below deck. Where are they coming if they're not welcome here?" Kotori gasps and leans toward her sister. "Did they all stow away too?!"

Sitting straight up, Iri grabs Kotori by the shoulders and looks her dead in the eye, her vibrant, sisterly warmth completely absorbed by a cold sense of dire urgency. "Show me."

Moments later, Kotori leads Iri into the hold, tightly packed with rows of large, metal crates. Iri presses her ear to the side of one, noting that the metal is unusually warm. "No," she

breathes and repeats back to herself several times as she races around to the door, swinging it open for her.

“I came down here when I was looking for a place to hide. I broke one of the locks and that’s when I found all these guys.”

Iri’s heart sinks at what she finds inside. No less than twenty people, all with horns protruding from their heads. They’re chained to the floor and bound with blue, metal collars. Among them are elders, women, even children, all lethargic beyond the ability to recognize that she’s even there.

Gritting her teeth, Iri makes her way to another of the tens of crates in the hold. Through sheer strength, she rips apart the lock on one and yanks open the doors. The remains of the lock slip from her hands as she finds another of the exact same sight. “*Doushite*⁸?” she says, her voice marked with a tremble of disbelief as she backs away.

“Onee-chan, *daijoubu*⁹?”

Iri turns and grabs Kotori by the wrist, pulling her to the deck. “Back to the room. Now.”

Once they’re back at the guest quarters, Iri shoves Kotori inside and shuts the door, then approaches the captain on the deck. “A word.”

Back in the captain’s quarters, the two women stand across from one another, the captain leaning over her desk and Iri with her arms folded, calm as can be. “Wait, wait, wait,” the captain says. “You found what in the cargo?”

⁸ “Why?/How come?/For what reason?”

⁹ In this context, “Are you all right?”

“Must I repeat myself? They were all heavily sedated and wearing collars of tempered luminite to strip them of their powers. All while we’re headed for the capital of Djinn slavery. I think it’s safe to say they aren’t stowaways like my sister. We were played.”

Grey grunts and plops herself down in her chair. “Well, I hope you’re not planning to pin this on me.”

“Of course not. Pirates are opportunists, by nature. If you had anything to do with this, or were clever enough to figure it out on your own, you’d have thrown me in the hold with them while I was wrestling seasickness.”

The captain glowers at Iri, likely not appreciating that little jab. “Well, aren’t you clever.” Either way, she sits herself back. “So what do you want me to do about it? We’re less than an hour from the port, now. No way we’re turning around. And then there’s the matter of pay.”

A disinterested “*Yappari ne...¹⁰*” slides through Iri’s teeth.

“Speak Basic, imp.”

Iri levels a bored stare at the captain, the power dynamic between the two of them fully clear. But then she leans back against the desk, herself. “I suppose we’ll have to come up with some sort of plan. Shaw won’t want to be part of any arrangement like this. We’re smugglers, not slavers. But I can’t say I appreciate being conned. So I’d say something that gets us out of this crooked deal while still giving us the pay we came for would be best.” Iri sighs, though her lips curl into a grin and a devilishly playful gleam fills her eyes. “So bothersome. *Ne, Senchou*. I know how we can deal with this.”

“Is that right?”

Iri brings a finger to her chin and glances back at Grey. “*Hai*. Let’s negotiate.”

¹⁰ “I thought so.”