

## Chapter 9

Iri stands aboard the deck of the ship as the pirates unload their cargo onto the docks of the loud and lively port city, gulls squawking overhead and the pungent smell of the salty sea air settling around them. The channeler from before uses her magic to hoist the large metal containers on a cushion of wind, gently setting them down in the loading area nearby. Leaning against the ship's railing with a hand to her cheek, Iri watches, breathing a disinterested "Hmm? Magic really is handy, isn't it?"

Heavy footfalls alert her to the presence of Captain Grey, behind her. "Imp. We're almost done, here. Get ready to head out for the meet-up."

Iri sighs and pushes off of the railing. She stretches a bit, looking to the good captain over her shoulder. "As you say, *Senchou*."

Then she walks off, soon returning to her quarters, where Kotori sits on their cot, kicking her feet and swaying from side-to-side, singing a song in *Sungo*. The blissful tune brings a smile to Iri's face as she shuts the door behind her. Though the sound of the door closing catches Kotori unawares. "Eh? Ah! *Onee-chan*! W-what is it?"

"That was very good, Kotori."

"D-don't make fun of me!"

Iri giggles, her hand held over her mouth. But her light tone falls away at the drop of a hat and a more serious expression spreads across her face. "Kotori, you're staying here, on the ship. Do you understand?"

Kotori blinks. "*Nande*?"

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<sup>1</sup> "Why?"

“The place we’re in, right now... it’s very dangerous. Especially for us. I have some work to deal with, so I won’t be here and I want you to be safe. I expect you to listen, this time. Are we clear?”

“*H-hai.*”

The worry in Kotori’s voice rings in Iri’s ears and her smile resurfaces. She takes Kotori by the shoulders and pulls the girl into a warm hug. The kind only the Djinn can share. “That’s my girl. And don’t worry! *Onee-chan* has everything under control. It’ll be fine.” Then she stands and opens the door. “Now, I’m off. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“*Ryokai!*” Kotori says with a chipper salute.

As Kotori disappears from view, Iri approaches Grey, assuming her much more typical business persona, complete with a playful smile. “*Gomen’nasai, Senchou.* I’m ready to go, now.”

“You seem to be in a better mood...”

“*Hai.* It’s as I said. The ocean and I are rather incompatible. I’ll be fine here, on land.”

The captain scoffs. “Right. Well, lead the way.”

Iri nods, guiding Grey and her men off to the meeting site.

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Before long, Iri’s group arrives at a warehouse on the opposite end of the docks. A lanky man with greedy eyes and the grin of a con artist walks to the center of the room from the back office. “Welcome! Welcome, friends.” Behind him several more bodies enter, all of them clad in full Templar armor, blocking off the entrances and exits, with others standing atop scaffolding.

Iri maintains her composure, but every pirate in the room pulls a cutlass. “Oh, don’t mind them. They’re bought. Safety protocol. You understand. I, uh... assume that you’re all here about that little order I placed in Nazir?”

Iri looks the man over and nods. “*Hai*,” she says with a polite bow. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Iri – an associate of Gladeon Shaw, who runs this... goods acquisition service. On his behalf, I’d like to thank you for doing business with us.”

“I must say, I’m impressed. You blokes got here with my shipment in record time, ya did. First rule of business, luv – punctuality.”

Iri raises her head. “We aim only to please.”

“Speak for yourself, imp,” Captain Grey says, stepping forward. She glares at the trader, arms folded. “I aim to make coin. So where is it?”

“Patience, mate. You’ll have your coin once I get a proper look at the cargo. Want to make sure there’s no... damaged goods. You know how it is. I take it Shaw sent the lovely one, there, to oversee this little transaction?”

“Correct. And he believes it would be beneficial to both our businesses to continue a working relationship in the future. We gain a foothold in Ferroth and you gain connections to our other clientele, through us. Including those in Croix. Quite the bargain, wouldn’t you say? Many would give an arm and a leg for such an arrangement.”

The trader approaches one of the containers. “Does sound like a beauty of an agreement, indeed,” he says. He turns back to Iri, clearly eyeing her horns. And she absolutely notices. “But I don’t know. Seems a bit too good to be true. Surely there’s risks.”

Iri tilts her head down, closing her eyes with a sly smile. A test, then. How quaint. “Of course. But all good business ventures come with risks of some form or another.” Such an easy answer. On that note, she knowingly meets him eye-to-eye. “We’d never look to put one over on you by implying the entire thing was risk-free. But I understand if you’ll need more convincing. If you’ll allow it, I’d be happy to converse with you further when we’re done, here. All I’d like... is your time.” With that, she extends her hand to him. “Do we have a deal?”

The trader stares Iri right in her piercing, golden eyes, then chuckles and reaches with his own hand. “All right, luv. Deal.” There it is. The smile on Iri’s lips nearly widens as a faint spark of red light arcs along her index finger. But before the pair can exchange grips, the sound of a loading gun gives the trader pause.

Grey’s commanding voice barks out from Iri’s left. “Don’t let her touch you.”

Iri glances to the side, where she finds the business end of Grey’s flintlock held to her temple. Though she seems unconcerned by it. “*Heehh? Senchou?* What ever are you doing?” Such a bitingly, unapologetically unsurprised tone. Iri’s composure isn’t shaken in the least.

“What do you think, imp?”

“Gasp! I’ve been betrayed by a pirate? Oh dear, who ever could have foreseen this shocking turn of events?” Iri keeps with her playfulness, bringing her hand to her cheek and feigning shock. But Grey is not at all amused.

The trader backs up and the Templars around the room all draw their own blades in response. “Oi! What’s all this about?!”

Grey doesn’t take her eye off of Iri as she addresses the weasel of a man, barking in outrage like a small dog. “She knows everything. On the way here, she took a peek in the cargo.

She even hatched a plan to empty it out before we brought it here, then take it back to Nazir.”

She nods at the container and two of her men open it, revealing the Djinn inside, prompting Iri to roll her eyes. Of course. “I can’t say I enjoy bein’ made a fool of, mate. We were told this job was smuggling scraps of Old World Tech, not private slaves. That’s really risky work, it is. Plateheads don’t much like enterprising individuals muscling in on their game. This little bit of misinformation’s gonna cost you extra.”

“Is that right?”

“And I’ll even throw this one in at a discount price,” Grey adds, shoving Iri forward.

“How’s that for a deal?”

Iri sighs. “You’re certainly quite the negotiator, *Senchou*.”

“Oi, shut your gob. If you think I’m walkin’ away from this job without my coin because of your conscience, you’re outta your mind.”

“Ho?” Iri levels a dull stare at the captain, by now just looking bored. Conscience, huh?

“As a matter of fact, we can even sweeten the deal. How would you like a complete set?”

Grey asks. “This one’s a pretty thing, right? Tall, exotic, even looking as slim as she is, Djinn are stronger’n us mere mortals, right? So she can definitely still be useful. Well, it just so happens that we have another one.”

Iri’s heart sinks like a boulder, her calm demeanor utterly sundered as the doors to the warehouse swing open. *No...*

True to Iri’s fears, another pirate barges in, dragging a struggling Kotori into the room by her hair. “Let go! Let go of me! *Onee-chan* said to stay on the ship!”

“Kotori!”

When Iri tries to run to her sister, she finds Grey's gun pressed firmly against her skull and she stops in her tracks. A bold grin stretches across the captain's face. "What was that about, imp? Not so coolheaded, anymore, are ya?" The woman takes Iri by the chin and turns her head to force eye contact when she doesn't respond. "Oi. Why so quiet, all of a sudden? Don't ya have any more of that sass left?" But she immediately tears her hand away, Iri's skin burning her to the touch. "Yah! You little- that hurt!" But Iri still doesn't respond, or even look up, a grim shadow concealing her eyes.

"All right, all right, settle down," the trader says, getting between them. He takes a moment to look the crying, sniffling child up and down, a hand to his chin "Hm... The little ones go for a lot. Younger means they can work longer. And the imps live long, anyway." He proceeds to walk around Iri, looking her over. All the while, she continues to hold her head down. "Aw, don't look so glum, luv. I'll make sure she's taken care of. However... I'm afraid troublemakers like yourself tend to be bad for business. You understand. Captain, I won't be having any use for this one." Grey shrugs, holding her gun on Iri's skull once again.

"Kotori," Iri finally says.

"What's going on?! You guys leave *Onee-chan* alone!" Kotori cries.

"Kotori, close your eyes and cover your ears."

At this odd request, Kotori quiets down a bit and turns to her sister, every bone in her body rattling and shaking. "*N-nani?*"

"Do it."

Without any further hesitation, Kotori does as she's told. Both Grey and the trader look to one another, then back at Iri. "Well, that's rather considerate of you, imp. You really are a good

big sister, yeah? I guess we wouldn't want to traumatize the girl. It might hurt her market value. Still... bit of a dull choice of last words. How 'bout I give ya one more breath at it?"

But something stops her. A giggle that can only be described as... eerie. "*Ara ara...*" Iri says, then raising her head to reveal a disturbingly serene, mocking smile on her lips.

Then a disturbing blend of sounds reverberates through the walls of the warehouse. The crackle of fire and the guttural tear of metal, rending through flesh. The captain's eyes shoot wide open. Slowly, she looks down and, to her and everyone else's horror, she finds a stained-red blade protruding from her chest cavity, a fountain of blood pooling around it. The steel belongs to a large man, looming over her from behind, clad in mercenary armor. His eyes are empty, solid black voids. "H-how?"

"Very good, Banor," Iri says. Templars and pirates alike all rush toward the scene. "Brutus. Dissuade them." Then comes a bright flash of flame and soot behind her. The unholy mixture swirls into a towering body, soon settling into the shape of a man even larger than Banor, clad in full armor with a horned helmet, the shade of which obscures his face. But easily visible is the massive, spiked, iron club he wields in only one hand despite it being half his size.

Iri dusts herself off as another ghastly cloud takes shape to her right flank, assuming the form of a man in samurai armor with blank eyes, just like the others. "Masamune, take Kotori outside." Heeding her command, the samurai bows, taking the child and carrying her out.

Then Iri stands directly across from Grey and taps the protruding blade with her finger, sending a rigid shock throughout the woman's body at the pain. "Ah. That looks rather uncomfortable. Banor, do try to help her get cozy." The husk of a man grunts, going on to twist the blade still in the captain's chest – violently – forcing the woman to convulse and every

muscle in her body to tense. Iri laughs aloud. “Just like a wind-up toy! Now then... Banor, I’d like that gun, please.”

Banor yanks the blade out from Grey’s chest and she collapses to the warehouse floor. She tries to shuffle back, blood gushing from her wound and her mouth. But she aims the gun up at him as he lumbers toward her, sword in hand. Her arm trembles but before she can even pull the trigger, a swift sound like slashing wind stops her. The next thing she sees, Gregor’s sword is repositioned and a red ring forms around her arm, just above the wrist. One beat later, the hand isn’t there anymore. In shock, the woman can’t even bring herself to scream at the pain.

Iri saunters over to where the hand falls, reaching down and picking up the flintlock, then shaking it loose of the severed appendage that still grips it. She opens the chamber, emptying the bullets and looking them over, then giving a rather disappointed sigh. “I really was being cautious for nothing.” Then she strolls over to the captain, lying on the floor. “You don’t have much experience fighting my kind, do you?”

The captain glares at Iri, choking and gagging on her own blood. “W-what?”

Iri puts one bullet back in the gun and returns to the captain with an amused grin.

“Go ahead. I’ll give you one shot.”

Still trembling, the captain holds the gun to Iri’s skull and pulls the trigger. The bang seems to halt time, itself, as all the pirates and Templars, still completely paralyzed with fear, gasp in hope that that would be the end of it. But much to their and the captain’s dismay, Iri is completely unfazed, still smiling, almost pityingly... or perhaps she’s simply amused. As she holds up her hand, the captain’s eyes widen. There, between the Djinn’s fingers is the hot lead ball from the gun. An awed “W-what the hell?” is all that can leave the woman’s lungs.

Iri presses the bullet to Grey's cheek, drawing a burn mark onto the woman's face. "I must say I'm disappointed in you, *Senchou*," she says, her tone accentuated with a teasing pout. "The pirate who goes for the instant payday, instead of seeing the big picture is just so... boringly predictable." She drops the bullet as the captain grows ever hazier, then reaches out and takes the woman by the chin. "I bet I know how you're feeling. Afraid, right? Powerless? Like you've lost any and all control?" A sultry tone drips from each and every word out of Iri's mouth.

In a panic, Grey uses her free hand to snatch the string from her neck, popping open the small, blue vial at the end of it. But before it can be brought to her mouth, Banor's sword stabs through her hand and she screams in agony. The vial drops to the floor and Iri steps on it, crushing it under her bare foot with the same unnerving smile. "Oh no! How clumsy of me." One look at her face says it all for the captain. Iri is enjoying this. Grey quakes in place. This... this creature that she'd provoked is more than a mere imp. She's a genuine demon.

Finally, Iri giggles again. "It's fun, playing with you, *Senchou*. Too bad you break so easily." She holds her hand over to the side of the captain's head, holding a gentle hand to her cheek. For as much heat as this woman's touch burns, the captain shivers, a cold chill washing over her. As if the tears welling in her eyes might freeze. Then Iri's fingers daintily curl. With a mere pluck, the captain's head is instantly twisted to the sound of a loud... pop. "See?"

Iri rises over the captain's corpse, then turns her head, looking to the men, standing around the room, all broken out into a cold sweat. Quite a few of them seem to be wearing darker pants than they were a moment ago. They don't even appear to be breathing. Perhaps praying, as Kotori once did, that if they don't move, Iri can't see them. "Boo," she says, sending them all scrambling to escape. Iri watches them all run in panic and heaves a flippant sigh.

Soon, sparks appear at every exit, spewing brimstone over any others trying to flee. The ash and embers give form to all manner of infernal warriors, not unlike Banor and Brutus, with the same hollow, black eyes. They sport various weapons and appear to come from different backgrounds; an Eastern Ninja Warrior, an Archer from the North, and more. “It’s rude to leave without tipping your hostess.”

Her eye catches the trader responsible for the deal, trying to climb his way up to a window for an escape amidst the cacophony of terrified screams. “Ho?” Iri holds out her hand. Embers spark to life in her grasp, materializing a whip. With a flick of the wrist, she uses it to catch the fool by the ankle, dragging him down from the scaffolding he’d climbed and pulling him to her feet. “I don’t believe our transaction was complete.”

The trader turns over, shuffling back with his nose bloodied from the fall. “P-please! Please let me go! Mercy! Have mercy!”

Iri brings a hand to her face in delight as he pleads for his life. “Begging is such a beautiful sound, don’t you think?” she says, seeming to drift off into her own sadistic pleasure. “The complete surrender of control. Surely a slave trader understands what I mean.” Iri reaches down and lifts the man up to eye-level by his jaw, staring into his frantic, darting eyes with her own cold, golden gaze. “Of course, I always find they’re the ones whose begging sounds the sweetest. Something about the way they plead, it’s so... cute.”

“I’ll do anything! Anything you ask, you can have it!”

Iri cocks her head, continuing to smile that unsettlingly easygoing smile. “Heeh? And what could I possibly want from a useless little creature, like you?” When the trader can offer no

response, Iri, throws him across the warehouse like a toy, through a handful of shelves that all collapse on top of him in a loud crash.

She stands atop the mound of fallen supplies, her whip disappearing back into a mist of infernal embers. In its place, she summons a pair of curved daggers as the trader tries to crawl out and away. But no sooner does he escape from beneath the debris than he finds his lower half overwhelmed with a terrible stinging pain as Iri's plunges both blades clean through his knees and into the floor beneath him. His scream doesn't inspire the slightest shred of sympathy. Only further amusement for the orchestrator of his misery. "Ah ah, no running."

"P-please... I have-"

"A family?" Iri asks, her voice flat, lacking the sultry, playful tone she's maintained up until this point. For that brief moment, any and all mirth the woman had, just completely vanished, without a trace. But it quickly returns with a giggle and an uncaring "*Dakara*?" She pulls both daggers out of his knees. Slowly. "I have one too, you know. A precious and adorable little sister. *Ne*, slave trader... what would you do if someone threatened your family?"

Iri reads every bead of sweat as it rolls from his brow and drips from his chin. Like words streaming from the page. His breaths are short, his face flushed of all color. "Aren't businessmen supposed to have a good poker face? I can guess your answer so easily. Still, though... it's a good one." She grabs him by the collar and lifts him into the air with one hand. "But you never did answer my question. What could I possibly want from a useless, worthless, rotten little creature like you?"

With a single, uninvested motion, Iri tosses the man behind her and he slams into the side of one of the cargo containers, leaving a dent in it and forcing him to cough up blood as it knocks

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<sup>2</sup> "So?/And?"

the wind from his lungs. Choking to get some air back into him, the trader sits up, only to find his face forcibly bashed back into the container under Iri's heel, her looking down on him. She removes her foot from the back of his skull, allowing him to fall over. "Your soul's a filthy, ugly, pitiful thing. I even feel dirty, just touching you, because of it," Iri says, mocking the fool with feigned disappointment in her voice. "No... you'd make a terrible tool."

"Money," the man whimpers, spitting out blood and turning himself over to face his tormentor. Though, if anything, Iri is more surprised that he can still move, let alone talk. It's dull surprise, but... "I can get you money. And connections! Information! Just please don't kill me!"

Iri laughs in the man's face, sinking any remaining slivers of hope he may have tricked himself into harboring. The woman kneels down to her victim, grabbing him by his battered cheeks. "Ah, you really tell the best jokes, slave trader." Her words gush with mirth, and yet there's the sting of contempt. "Hm. Maybe that's what you can offer me. Entertainment!"

She stands, still holding the trader's face in her claw grip, only to carelessly throw him aside. "Brutus." The largest of her shade warriors grunts and drops his iron club, catching the slave trader in a bear hug. Tighter and tighter the behemoth squeezes. With every passing moment, the trader's screams grow louder, yet never quite loud enough to completely drown out the horrible crunch of bones. One rib. Two ribs. Then a third. A fourth...

"Hmm. A bit off-key, *ne*, slave trader? Your bones are making such wonderful music. But your singing voice... Such an awful noise." With no warning, whatsoever, Iri thrusts her hand forward, jabbing the man perfectly in the throat and silencing him on his own broken

larynx. “Much better.” The trader gags helplessly, still puking up blood as Iri steps back.

“You’ve been such a gracious guest. But I do think my time with you is nearing its end.”

As the trader’s head slumps forward, Iri tips it back up. “Now, now. No slouching,” she says in a soft voice, making absolutely certain she’s the last thing he sees before his vision completely fades to black. “Honestly, slave trader, this entire thing could have been avoided if you’d just given me your time. Oh well. *Sayonara*.” What light is left in the trader’s eyes grows dimmer with every passing moment. Then it all comes to an abrupt end. Brutus makes one last squeeze, punctuated with even more of that stomach-churning crunch of bone. But louder. Like hearing them being ground into a powder amidst the soup that’d become of his other innards.

With that finally over, Brutus drops the mangled corpse and Iri turns, making her way to the nearest exit. “Return.” With that one word, every one of the shades in the room disappears into ashen clouds. The warehouse around her is painted in spatters and smears of her dripping red paint, with bodies and parts of bodies strewn about like some manner of abstract artwork. And she has barely a drop on her.

“Stop,” a weak voice calls out to her.

Iri peers over her shoulder in its direction. “Hmm?” There, lying on the floor near the exit is a blonde woman in pirate garbs, covered in blood. She’s pinned to the floor, nailed through with pipes – one in her abdomen and another in her chest. And clearly Brutus had gotten to her, as her legs were bent in ways they certainly shouldn’t be. Iri blinks at the woman. “You’re... the channeler from the pirate crew, right? So you’re still alive.”

“Monster... you monster. I’ll kill... I’m gonna kill...”

Iri silences the woman with a finger to the mouth. “*Ara ara*. Such vulgar sounds from such a sweet face. All this talk about killing me, taking revenge against me. It’s always the same. And always from someone in as sorry a state as you. *Ne*, channeler... if you really think you can actually kill me, do it before I reach that door and leave you here to bleed out.”

As Iri stands and walks away, the channeler lies there in a growing pool of her own blood. She grits her teeth and clenches her fist as tears well in her eyes and her vision grows foggy. Then, just as Iri reaches the door... “Wait,” she says. Iri looks back, still sporting her amused little smirk. “Didn’t want... anything to do with this. Afraid. Captain would’ve... killed me. She killed any deserters. My brother. Stop... make it stop. Hurts... so much. Scared. Please. Don’t want... to die.”

“Are you... begging?” Iri strolls back over to the channeler on the floor, lowering herself and caressing the poor thing’s face. A faint spark ignites in her golden eyes as her hand comes alight with a warm flame against the channeler’s bruised skin. “Of course I can save you. *Demo...*” She takes the girl by the chin, tilting her head up to let her look Iri in the eye. “It won’t be free. In return, you’re mine. Everything you are – mind, body... and soul – all belong to me. That is my bargain.”

“E-every... everything I am?”

“*Hai*,” Iri says, leaning in close to the dying woman. “Do we... have a deal?”

Blackness begins to overcome the channeler’s vision, closing in around Iri’s face. Her body grows heavy and the only thing she can feel, anymore, is the warm touch of Iri’s flaming hand against her face. How strange that it doesn’t burn. “Yes,” she says, before she can fade away. “Everything.”

The woman's body then evaporates into brimstone and embers, the same as Iri's shades. "I see. So your name is Erin. You're a strong one. My first channeler." Iri giggles and rises to her feet. "A pleasure doing business with you." She glances back at the transport containers, many of them beaten up from the fight. Right. And then there's this pain. "Hm. Erin?"

Fire and ash coalesce into the form of Iri's newest shade, her body completely restored. Like the others, her eyes are blackened voids. "Master. What do you need?" she asks, drawing a curious face out of Iri.

"Ho? You can still speak? You really are strong. Free the Djinn in those containers."

"Right away," Erin says, dashing off to her task.

Iri proceeds to the front door while Erin tends to that matter. Once outside, she takes a deep breath, followed by an even deeper sigh. There Masamune waits with Kotori until he too evaporates into ash and embers, leaving the child to look around until she spots her sister.

"*Onee-chan!*" Kotori cries, rushing headlong into Iri, knocking the wind out of the woman and bawling uncontrollably. "*Onee-chan! Onee-chan!* I was so scared, *Onee-chan!* I stayed on the boat like you said, but they grabbed me and wouldn't let me go!"

Iri looks upon her sister and a smile graces her lips, this one many times warmer than any she'd worn while in that warehouse. She pats Kotori on the head, tears rolling down her own cheeks as well. "*Daijoubudesu.*" Her voice even cracks a bit. "I'm glad you're safe, Kotori."

Yes... safe. Iri looks back over the warehouse as the would-be slaves begin to exit the building, many of them shielding their eyes from the daylight they've not seen in so long. Erin steps out behind them all and bows to Iri before vanishing into ash. However, much to Iri's disdain, the freed Djinn begin to gather around her and her sister, leading her to glower at her

circumstances. One thing is for certain. None of them are lucid enough to sail a boat, assuming they even knew how. And they can't afford to stick around. The events of the day hadn't exactly been quiet. Someone's bound to show up soon to investigate. Iri sighs. What an awful trip this has spiraled into. Taking a deep breath, she lets out loud "Ooooi!" over the crowd. "If you don't want to be a slave, follow me!"

"Eh?! *Onee-chan*?!"

"Kotori, we're leaving."

The two sisters join hands and Iri leads them off, along with the flock of displaced Djinn. But as they depart, Kotori looks behind her at the warehouse. Her eyes then trail over to the Djinn following them – following her sister. And she says nothing, being content to simply wipe the tears from her face.

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Some days later, a small camp stands on the outskirts of town. Iri's doing, of course. The rest of the Djinn are making a steady recovery while she uses her shades to do some hunting and safeguard the area in case any straight Templars showed up. Thankfully, the ones in Coyote seem to all be bought by Nazir's colorful... "business owners." They don't particularly like Djinn, but they don't seem interested in arresting Iri on sight, whenever she went into town for information or supplies, at least. Which also means no one's connected her to the warehouse. Yet. But she's been out and there have been rumblings about it. A slaughter like that doesn't go unnoticed.

On this particular evening, she takes it upon herself to go out. Kotori, having not left her side since that day on the ship, follows. Though she trails behind her sister a bit, rather than cling

to her like she normally would. The hazy, distracted look in her eyes makes it perfectly evident. The poor girl is still... processing, bouncing from one thing to the next in the back of her mind – the ship, the warehouse, the sneaking around. And then she comes back to the would-be slaves. The ones that Iri rescued. That she’s been taking care of, all this time. “*Onee-chan?*”

“*Nani?*” Iri says without stopping as the pair stroll through the woods.

Kotori opens her mouth to speak, but remains silent. A moment’s hesitation before lowering her head. “When can we go home?”

“*Maa ne*<sup>3</sup>... *shiranai*<sup>4</sup>. I’m hoping we can find someone to take us back by speaking to people around town.”

“The others too?”

A beat goes by in silence. “*Hai.*”

Kotori looks up at the back of her sister’s head. Iri hadn’t missed a step. She moved forward with absolute purpose. Yet her response... she hesitated. “*Sou ka...*”

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The sisters arrive in town where they walk into a local tavern and inn. All around them sit people of variable unavoriness. Kotori squirms as she takes in the company, the skin-crawling sensation of eyes shifting towards them from all directions making her spine tingle the moment they step inside. One person in particular, sporting a hood, turns their head the instant Kotori sees them, causing the girl to shudder and grab hold of Iri’s hand. But the elder sister naturally remains as cool as can be, approaching the bar with a hand raised. “Excuse me”

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<sup>3</sup> A part of speech used when someone asks a question and the answer is something bad so you’d rather not say.

<sup>4</sup> “I don’t know.”

“Ah, an Easterner. Sunakan or Niharan, I wonder? Not that it matters,” the innkeeper says, dropping what he’s doing as he welcomes Iri in. “How may I help you, miss?”

“Would you happen to know if any of these... fine people plan to go to Nazir, any time soon? Or if any of them take passengers?”

The innkeeper scratches at his stubbled chin. “Can’t say for certain if any of the blokes in here would. I make it a habit not to ask about... you know... ‘business.’ Easy tip to live longer. Especially when it has to do with Nazir.” That distinction catches Kotori’s ear, getting a somewhat perplexed look out of her. Nazir? Why mention that? No. Best to keep quiet, she decides. “Plenty of fishermen, though. But I doubt you’d wanna make a trip like that in those dinghies they call ships.”

Iri sighs, leaning against the bar with her free hand to her forehead. “*Zan’nen*<sup>5</sup>...” she mutters. “You don’t mind if I ask around a bit, do you?”

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Later, Iri and Kotori leave the inn, opting to roam around town for a bit, asking anyone who looks like they might have what they’re looking for. Eventually the two of them pass through an outdoor market, where they stop to get a bit to eat at a food stall, selling plates of fish and chips. Looking at it, it certainly isn’t baked salmon. “*Itadakimasu...*” Iri says, her tone as dry as the food looks. She pops a broken piece of the fish into her mouth and her face lights up. “*Umai!*” she exclaims, mouth still full. The salty, flaky treat melts in her mouth. It’s enough to make even her blush. She breaks off another piece and holds it out. “Kotori, try this!”

Kotori snaps out of her daze as her sister’s hand waves food in front of her face. “H-hai.” She takes and stares at it for a moment before nibbling at it. Yet she instantly shoves the rest into

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<sup>5</sup> A way of saying “That’s a shame/pity.”

her mouth the second she bites down. “*Umai*,” she says, though not in nearly as excited a tone as she ordinarily would. In fact, her expression seems to suggest an active effort not to look elated, prompting her sister to lean down to get a closer look at her.

“Kotori? *Daijoubudesuka?*” Iri asks.

“Eh? Ah... *daijoubu*.”

Iri watches Kotori, whose typically glimmering eyes now seem distant. Her exuberance has vanished and she moves more sluggishly. Iri pops another piece of fish into her mouth, then sighs in bliss. “Who knew Feroth had such delicious food? I may have to convince that vendor to give me their recipe! To think your sneaking along means you get to try all of this,” Iri says in a playful tone. Then she drops it. “Though I still can’t say I condone you sneaking around, the way you did.”

“*G-gomen nasai...*” Kotori says, turtling up.

“Well... at least you’re good at it.” Iri shrugs before stopping cold. “This person, on the other hand...” She grabs Kotori and moves the girl in front of her before cutting a glare over her shoulder. “Not so much.”

“Eh?! You’re the person from the inn!” Kotori shouts from around her sister, who turns to face their shadow.

Standing there across from them is a brown-skinned woman in light, roguish clothing with a blue capelet, the hood of which is over her head. But she pulls it back the instant she’s called out, letting down her ponytail of silver hair. “No way! How’d you know?!”

“Pirate!” Kotori shouts, pointing out the patch over the woman’s left eye.

“Wha-?! Look here, ya little scamp! I am NOT a pirate! I’m a thief!”

An awkward breeze passes between the trio. Iri and Kotori both give the woman a flat, completely flummoxed stare. “A-are you sure? I can’t think of any self-respecting thief who’d loudly declare that in the middle of the square.”

“Hm? What of it? You’re a Djinn in Etrium and you’re not toiling away in shackles. Welcome to Port Coyote, where only Nazirite rules need apply. Everyone here’s a liar, crook, or scoundrel. No one cares, long as ya don’t get caught.”

There it is again. Another weird statement about Nazir. It’s enough to bring that contemplative look right back to the little Djinn’s face. People keep talking about Nazir like it’s some sort of pit. Sure, there are some rough people, but...

Iri scoffs. Yeah, that sounded about right. Though it didn’t exactly explain how someone so terrible at being sneaky can be a thief. “Well? Who are you, and what do you want?”

The woman places her hands on her hips. “The name’s Jill. Jill Panzer. And I hear you had a pretty eventful first day in town.” Iri narrows her eyes. Such a dangerous implication. But Jill holds up her hands. “Relax. I’m not gonna stir up any trouble. Hell, part of me wants to give you a hug. I’m not the only one impressed with you, either. My boss wants a word. You can bring the tyke if ya want. He likes kids.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m afraid I’m not looking for work, right now.” With that, Iri turns herself and her sister back around to continue on their merry way. But...

“Not even if it gets you back to Nazir?” Jill says, nibbling on a chip.

Iri stops to ponder, letting her attention drift over to Kotori, who definitely isn’t looking at all convinced. But on the other hand... it’d been nearly a week and they’d found no luck. Of course there were people who could take them. But they were all pirates. And Iri had had her fill

of pirates for the foreseeable future. Here they have their first good lead. And given the woman's disgust at the mere suggestion that she was a pirate, it was the best they had. Eventually Iri relents. "Very well."

Jill nods and pops the remainder of the chip into her mouth. "Good choice!" Before she leads the two off, she stops and pivots back around. "Whoops. You can have these back." She then hands Iri her carton of chips with a mischievous smile, much to both Iri and Kotori's mutual surprise.

"Wha-? Wait!" *I... I didn't even sense her. How...?* "When did you-?"

Jill snickers with her back to the two girls, grinning at them over her shoulder with her hands folded behind her head. Then, without another word, she leads them off.

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Before long, they arrive at a brewery on the west side of town. Once there, Jill knocks on the back door. "I found her."

A suave voice slides its way out from behind the door. "What's the password?"

Jill scowls from their side. "I think it went something like 'If Dodger doesn't open this door now, I'll knock it down on top of him!' Am I close?"

"Yeah, that's you, all right," the voice says before the door opens.

Inside, two men sit at a table, engaged in a tight game of cards. The one closer to the door is a younger man, around the same age as Iri and Jill, with a charming air about him. He feigns a salute as Iri enters the room. But the other is a slightly older man, a dim look on his face with his fist to his temple in the thick of the game. He sets down his cards and removes the cigarette from his mouth to welcome his guests. "So you're the one, eh?" this gentleman says, leaning back in

his chair and blowing out a puff of smoke. His eye catches Kotori, hiding behind her sister. “The warehouse on the east side. That was you?”

Iri glances down at Kotori, then offers a dismissive shrug. “More or less.”

The man sits upright. “Rainer. The blonde idiot is Dodger.”

“How do you do?” Dodger says with a wave, keeping his eyes glued to his cards.

“And you already met our one-eyed idiot,” Rainer continues as Jill nods. “We heard about what you did. And that someone’s lookin’ for a ticket back to Nazir. I think we can help each other out.”

Iri leans over Dodger, peeking at his hand of cards with a rather curious face about her. “Heehh? Those two things don’t seem particularly linked,” she says, feigning surprise at Dodger’s hand as he draws another card. She glances back across the table at Rainer. “How does my helping you get me back to Nazir?”

Rainer stares at Iri, his face completely stagnant, and his cigarette lodged in the corner of his mouth. He sits back, running his free hand through his greasy, brown hair and looks over his cards. “Jill probably already told you we’re thieves, right? That’s technically true, but our side job is something more... charitable.”

“We work with Freedom,” Jill adds. “It’s a network of secret routes and safe houses throughout Feroth, used to help Djinn slaves and fugitives get away from the Templars. And it even has bases overseas.”

Rainer takes out his cigarette again. “Including Nazir. We have a boat already set up to meet with us here, in a month, to finalize a job. If you want, you can just wait here for it and go with the rest of the Djinn you’ve got hiding at that little campsite you built, out in the woods.” At

that assertion, Iri does a double take. That place is hidden. How did he know about...? “But, if I had to guess, I’d say you had business with that weasel, right? Then you found out he duped you, so you dealt with him. Which means you didn’t get paid. Do you really wanna go back without what you’re due?” Rainer puts down his cards and Dodger drops his head to the table. All the while, Iri stands there in complete shock. This man...

After a time, Iri giggles. “Very nice. I suppose that is a valid point. Though it seems odd that you’d be offering me money to help with something of this nature.”

Rainer writes something down on a slip of paper and slides it across the table to Iri. “This one falls a bit outside of our usual area of operation. We didn’t decide to do it on our own. We were asked. But we’ll need some extra help. It’s in Paragon. And before you let that set off alarm bells, that’s the share you’ll get if you help us out.”

Iri winces at the mention of this cursed land’s capital city, but takes the paper and gives it a once over, regardless. Professional though she may be, even she can’t help but gawk at the number written. Even with Shaw and Scarlett’s cuts factored in, this has to be more money than she’d probably touched across her entire life. “It’s... certainly tempting. However, I can’t afford to be thinking of myself, right now. I have to look out for my sister.”

“She can stay with the other Djinn, and-”

Before Rainer can venture to finish that sentence, Kotori latches onto Iri again and her sister pats her on the head. “Well, the little one has spoken, it seems. To be honest, I don’t really trust anyone else to watch after her, anyway. The only other person in the world I do is probably already worried to death about her, back home.”

But as Iri says this, Kotori unburies her face from her sister's kimono. "You should do it, *Onee-chan*."

"Eh? K-Kotori, I don't think you understand."

Iri watches Kotori. She's not beaming up at her like usual. She's looking off into space, a dim expression that seems entirely alien on this girl's face. A thoughtful gaze uncharacteristic of the usually jubilant child. "Mm..." Kotori says before letting go of her sister and turning away, shaking her head. "*Wakaranai*<sup>6</sup>."

Iri's entire demeanor shifts, wrinkles of worry making up the lines against her smooth features. "Kotori..." she murmurs, then turning back to Rainer. "I'll... sleep on it and be back with my answer tomorrow." She bows and takes Kotori's hand as Jill opens the door for the two of them to leave.

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Later, on their way to the camp, Kotori continues to lag a bit behind, her mind still a jumbled mess. Pirates, thieves, Templars, freedom fighters... so much to take in and so little of it makes any sense to her. Yet the one constant in all of it was her sister. Even now, as Iri walks beside a shade that Kotori swears she's seen before in a different context, the gears churn away in her head. "Kotori? Don't fall too far behind."

"*H-hai!*" Kotori squeaks, closing some of the distance between them.

Iri glances back at her sister as she catches up, then resumes conversation with Erin. "So, you were saying?"

"Unfortunately, I don't have any spells for long-distance communication, Master. But I can work on it."

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<sup>6</sup> In this context an admission of lacking understanding. "I don't understand."

Iri gives Erin a dismissive wave. “*Hai, hai*. You do that. I can’t make heads or tails of the magical this-and-that in your skull, anyway, so you may as well.” And thus Erin bows her head before fading away, once more. With her gone, Iri sighs. “The sooner I can let *Okaasan* know we’re all right, the better. Knowing her, she’s liable to turn all of Briardon upside down.”

“*Onee-chan*.” Kotori stops as her sister continues ahead.

“*Nani?*” Once again Kotori opens her mouth to speak and the words get stuck at the back of her throat. Iri notes the sudden absence of a second set of footfalls and looks back to her sister, stuck there in place. “Kotori? *Daijoubu?* You’ve been acting strange, these past few days.” She flashes one of her warm smiles and turns back down the trail. “Ah. I bet I know what it is. You’re feeling homesick. Don’t worry. We’ll be home before you know it.”

Kotori grimaces at the thought of her words being quashed as Iri begins to walk again. But she grits her teeth. “*Ano*<sup>7</sup>...! *Onee-chan*! Are you... are you a bad guy?”

And with those words, Iri comes to a complete halt. She doesn’t turn around or even look at her sister. She stands there in a total deadlock, marked by a stunned expression and inability to string together any kind of response as gracefully as she usually would. In that moment, she doesn’t even seem to breathe. And neither does Kotori. It’s just a prolonged period of unbearable, suffocating quiet. Then... “*Ikimashou*,” Iri says, at last breaking the silence and continuing onward. Her tone is as kind as it ever is with her sister. But something about it is off. The warmth isn’t there. Only an unsettling hollowness.

Kotori reaches out to Iri as her sister walks off, getting farther, yet farther. Eventually she lets her arm fall and follows. “*Hai*...”

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<sup>7</sup> A term used similarly to “Um...” in English.

The next morning, Kotori nibbles at a scone as she and Iri walk through the port city. They soon arrive at the brewery from yesterday's meeting. Leaning against the wall just outside the door to the back is Jill, her hands in her pockets. "Wow, you're back early."

The door opens, Dodger standing behind it to usher Iri inside. "T'would seem she's made up her mind rather quickly, boss." As Iri and Kotori step inside, he pulls up chairs for them both and Jill closes the door behind them, folding her arms.

"Guess it didn't take that much thought, after all. So, boss... how 'bout those ten notes you owe us?" Jill leans into Rainer's space, reaching out her hand as if to accept a prize.

"Shut it, you idiots," Rainer says, as he goes about lighting his cigarette. "So what'd you decide to do?"

Iri's eyes dart around the room to those in her company. She then takes a deep breath before putting on a smile. "*Shouganai*<sup>8</sup>..." she sighs, capped with a bit of a giggle.

At this, Kotori pauses – mid-bite – into her scone, eyes going wide. "You certainly know how to negotiate, Rainer-san."

Both Jill and Dodger balk at that response. "Hold on!" Dodger says.

"You mean..." Jill continues.

Rainer leans back in his chair, tipping his head down with a smile that says he knew, well ahead of time, what the answer would be. Meanwhile, Iri reaches for the cards on the table. "*Hai*," she says, completely unflinching as she looks over the cards in her hand and Rainer picks up his own. The light floods back into Kotori's eyes, returning to their usual sparkle that could blind a crowd as she beams at her sister. "I'll help you. But... if you do anything to harm me or my sister... Well..."

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<sup>8</sup> "It can't be helped."

Rainer chuckles and sets down his cards, taking out his cigarette and letting out another puff of smoke as she shows her own hand. His loss. "Welcome aboard." Then he looks to Dodger and Jill, both of whom instantly avoid eye contact. That paradoxically dull and sharp look of his returns and out stretches his open hand. "Now pay up, you clowns."