

World in Chaos224 OutcastsThe world was chaos and doubt, and so she climbed. Misaki Katanaka scaled crumbling brickwork, watched by alien constellations. A restless energy powered her higher, fueled by lungfuls of cold city air and a gnawing anger she couldn't escape. She prowled the top of the bell tower among the gaping gargoyles and raptor filth, seeking clarity amid the rough, stone heights. In her charcoal gray silks and with her long, black plait tied up, only her beautiful, pale face and jade eyes stood out in the shadows. Exertion burned her blood, her breath steaming silver in the moonlight. She was free up here, away from the demands of the Trading House and the Ten Thunders. Free to explore the mystical energy that had coursed through her veins the moment she'd arrived in this wonderful, terrifying place, an energy that channelled through her to make her one of the most fearsome fighters Malifaux had known. Up here, with the world at her feet, she felt like a god. Misaki stopped, a flare of light in the nightscape snaring her hunter's eye. Another Guild train puncturing the Breach between the worlds. A lead downspout looked secure, and she swung across to a ledge thick with droppings. Always moving on. Far below, the city's lights burned blue and yellow in the dark, a dark that held more than its fair share of monsters and nightmares and terrible things. A cloud passed over the moon and she stole its shadow to flit unseen, stepping silently up a crow-stepped gable. Ever upwards. The stern lights of the night boats glittered off the river that split the city in two. Dark docks and unlit piers hid midnight commerce from prying Guild eyes and behind them lay Little Kingdom. The Gateless City-within-a-city, part of it but always apart. She knew what that felt like. And at the heart of Little Kingdom lay the Katanaka Trading House, her headquarters and the base of operations for the Ten Thunders in Malifaux. And now it also held her Brothers, arrived just this week from Earthside. She had not been back there since they came. With the thought returned the anger, and Misaki raced down the gutter and leapt, suspended for a moment between twinkling lights above and below, landing with a whisper on a bronzed eave. Her bisento, a long-hafted weapon with a wicked blade, had been on her back when she started the leap and in her hands when she touched down. The blade hummed the soft song of steel as she held it outstretched, chest heaving, the razor-point motionless in the dark. Control. In a cruel and random world, control was everything. But she could not control her feelings the same way she could her bisento, and the choice before her seemed an impossible one. One way lay the path of family, duty, and loyalty. Obey her father, the Oyabun. Pursue the interests of the Ten Thunders, and do what she knew was right. The other – the other was a path that struck out on its own. It led up and kept on going, knew no summits or heights, and its call had grown stronger with every passing day. But it was a path that would take her away from her family, and there could be no going back. Once more the city below tugged at her, calling out duties and responsibilities. The liquid fires of the newly-installed Geissler tubes atop the Katanaka Trading House bathed the rooftops around them, the familiar kanji letters burning in electric shades of red, green and blue. Modern, lurid and expensive – her Brothers would have slapped each other on the back when they first saw them. Her Brothers, who had swaggered unwanted and unannounced through the Breach, made no effort to pay their respects, and wrecked so much in a single night. Always, no matter how high she climbed, they pulled her back down. She descended into the chaos of the city, to greet them. RCtM The night was cold, but so was the sake – the Trading House was serving them the good stuff.

Aki Taoka of the Ten Thunders emptied the choko, then returned the small porcelain cup to the bamboo mat. His silence told the serving girl she could continue, and soon Aki and his eleven Brothers were toasting one another and calling loudly for more. The fight with the Dervish Swords had ended only a few hours before, but soon it was so embellished and gilded in the telling and re-telling that few of the Brothers could agree on anything except that they had fought bravely against impossible odds. Satoru Moriya's shoulder had been cut near the bone by one of the Dervish Swords' hired muscle, and he was struggling to raise his arm to the toasts. Seeing this, the others redoubled the number of toasts, the serving girl came round again in the blink of an eye, and the sake flowed as Satoru groaned. "And where is Big Sister?" Aki Taoka demanded, slamming his choko down, his face red. "Huh?" he barked, as his head up and down the long, low table nodded in sympathy. All but one. "She is supposed to be in charge here. Does she pay her respects to her Brothers? Does she tend to our wounded?" Heads shook. All but one. All but Shigeo Inagawa, a young man whose handsome, tattooed face looked haggard and worn. He wiped sake from his moustache and gestured at the empty seat at the head of the table. "Big Sister--" "is probably working on her back at the Qi and Gong!" roared Hideki Tsukasa from behind his dripping, black beard, slamming the table with his fist as he choked with laughter. Others doubled up and hammered their cups also, while the serving girl skilfully refilled them without spilling a drop. With a black, glowering frown Shigeo ignored the belly-laughs around him and carried on. "Big Sister holds our Oyabun's seat at this table, and must have the same respect--" The table creaked as Aki leaned across to Shigeo, real anger in his watery, blue eyes now. "And maybe she'll have it, the day she remembers her place and stops waving that horse-cleaver around like she--" But a stunned silence had fallen, and Aki and Shigeo turned their heads to see why. The serving girl. She had filled the only unused cup in the room and then sat down before it, at the head of the table. Misaki Katanaka untied her white serving apron, handed it to the slack-jawed Hirofumi Nomura on her left and downed the sake she had just poured. Beside her, in an iron stand, her trademark bisento stood, and not one man present could remember how it had got there. She drew a cold look across them all, and then nodded her head a fraction, not taking her eyes off them. They were trapped, and they knew it. They had criticised a superior to her face, while accepting her hospitality. As social taboos went in the Ten Thunders, well – fingers had been cut off for far less. Misaki had outmaneuvered them, but she felt no great satisfaction in it – dealing with them was simple compared to the adversaries she faced daily in Malifaux. The real serving girl hurried in, placing a bowl of cherries in front of Misaki. She slowly savored a handful, giving Aki Taoka her full attention as she spat the stones into a cup. Despite the sake, he retained enough good sense not to look her in the eye. None of them did. "I hear you all won a great victory over our rivals tonight," Misaki said, in the manner of a spider to a fly trapped in its web. "You are to be congratulated. From the sound of it, the Dervish Swords are no more, and the stragglers have been run out of Malifaux with your katanas jabbing their fat behinds. Is this true?" Aki paused, and then grunted, "No." "I see." Misaki downed another cup, the sake as cool as her voice. "Then they have at least been put out of business, and I will never have to concern myself with their enforcers taking protection money that should be going to my Trading House?" Another pause. "No." Aki's eyes were trying to drill a hole in the wooden table before him. "Indeed. Then your attack on them struck a mortal blow, and our Ronin can deal with what's left without any significant unpleasantness?" A longer pause. "No." Aki's mouth flapped open and shut a few times before, "Also, we lost the Ronin tonight."

"So, allow me to draw fact from the fiction I heard earlier. You attacked the Dervish Swords tonight, disregarding the careful plans I had laid for dealing with them. Your attack failed utterly, the Dervish Swords are not only still a threat but are alert to our intentions toward them, and you got my Ronin killed. I had intended to take over their operations, and their best people, and you have just turned what was an opportunity for expansion into open warfare. Am I being unfair in my assessment?" "They had fifty swords--!" Aki began. "You were unprepared and hasty." "--and our Brother Satoru has been badly injured!" As if a desire for vengeance would redirect Misaki's anger. She smiled coldly. "You'll all think yourselves lucky if you reach morning with an injury like Satoru's. Very lucky." Shigeo Inagawa was the first to realise what she meant. He looked up at her. "We're going back? Now?" Misaki stood in one fluid motion. She had always liked Shigeo. He had been one of the few who'd sent congratulations when her father had appointed her his First Lieutenant in the new dominion of Malifaux. "What you don't know, since you're all new and stupid, is that the Dervish Swords have been busy making friends in low places. Dangerous friends. Right now, they are running to those friends and demanding support against Ten Thunders' aggression." Before her Brothers could blink, she snapped up her bisento and brought it scything down over her head. The enchanted blade stopped dead an inch above the heavy wooden table, which split in two down its length with a crack like thunder, the cups and mats flying in the air. Misaki grinned a snake's smile. "They have no idea. We're going to show them just what Ten Thunders' aggression looks like, and this time we'll do it my way." RCTM Ramos could barely make the woman out. In the red glow from the distant furnaces she was little more than embers and shadow, smoldering beneath the enormous, dark crucible. Oblivious to his presence she moved, raising a hand to touch the cold skin of the smelting vessel that hung above her like the belly of an iron giant. This forge had been closed down for repairs, and the unpoured zinc in that vessel was cold and hard. Ramos waited, willing her on. His companion held patiently beside him as the woman stood unmoving, as still as the machinery dwarfing them in the disused forge. From the other forge halls beyond the firebreaks and baffles, distant sounds of heavy industry roared and rang. Ramos shook his head. Despite the soulstone harness, and his training, she still lacked the raw power. Then, a smile crept across his face as a ruddy light glimmered into being from the lip of the smelting vessel. A moment later, he had to turn his head as white-hot metal spilled from the gaping spigot and splashed in a waterfall of eye-searing stars and sparks into the empty mold tracks below. Sweltering heat filled the forge. The woman approached, seeming to emerge from the infernal glow itself, and stopped in front of him and his companion. Her usually pale face was flushed with effort, glistening with sweat beneath her short, blonde hair and her eyes filled with an exhilarating light. Ramos fancied he could see embers dancing in their depths. "Impressive," he said, "and timely. Certain friends in the city have asked for aid. I thought of you." Ramos indicated the other man, his face hidden behind a set of polished goggles. Elaborate pistols hung from a leather harness. "This is 74 Victor. You may find him useful." The woman turned to the gunman, and the light from the cascading metal was blotted out as brass wings sprang from her back and flexed purposefully, eagerly. She leaned forward, the smell of smoke and blistered steel like perfume. "So. 74 Victor. Are you in?" RCTM There were two ways into the Dervish Swords' warehouse complex; by well-guarded canals from the

river, or through the front operation – Madame Chin's Teahouse. Either way, Misaki knew, they would be waiting. Reckless and hasty they might be, but her Brothers were also proud and fierce warriors who had served the Ten Thunders faithfully for years, and Misaki had no desire to see any of them cut to pieces in the dark, winding waterways, or in a frontal assault. But even if they got in, they had no idea what awaited them in that warehouse. They were skilled, fearless fighters, that much was true, but that was not enough amid the perils of Malifaux. Where these Brothers had come, soon her father would send more, and more, and they would always need her to get them out of situations like this. She would never be free. It was still dark, and from her vantage point atop Stricken Mews clock tower, she watched by gaslight as the two-hand carts made their way along the cobbles towards Madame Chin's. On the open backs of each cart, nestled in thick straw, sat branded barrels of sake, fresh from Earthside. The runners moved cautiously: fine sake needed careful handling, and was sensitive to bumps and jolts. Much like gunpowder, mused Misaki, as the runners deposited the carts outside the teahouse, lit the hidden fuses and sprinted away. Too late, shots were fired at them from the dark windows of the teahouse and then the ornate wooden building vanished in a billowing column of dark smoke. The thump of the blast arrived a fraction of a second later, and Misaki felt it in her chest. Glass shattered up and down the street, and the bell in the clock tower rang softly. As thick pieces of timber rained like rice at a wedding, her Brothers broke from hiding and raced towards the fresh ruin, their battle cries thin on the night breeze. Shigeo and Aki were vying for the lead, Shigeo with his battered katana and blunderbuss pistol, and Aki waving a long-handled cleaver in each hand. The other ten Brothers followed close behind, screaming and brandishing naginatas, clubs, chain-scythes and pistols. They vanished amidst the smoke and the cries of the wounded. Misaki leapt from the clock tower. There was a third way in, although only birds, the wind and Misaki herself could use it. She landed running, flitting silently across a tiled ridge like a rogue breeze. She hadn't told them the whole truth, of course. A row of weathered statues provided a series of steppingstones beneath a copper-sheeted eave. There was something black at the heart of the Dervish Swords. She jumped across the gap between buildings, springing off a crumbling course of projecting brickwork on the opposite wall and climbed quickly up a series of ornate corbels carved with crows. There was a reason Baojun Katanaka, her father and Oyabun of the Ten Thunders, wanted to expand into Malifaux. A reason beyond money. A darkness had infected the Three Kingdoms, a darkness that no outsider was permitted to know, and one that her father wanted no part of. A bird does not twitch at a falling leaf, and Misaki ran right past a row of pigeons before they even noticed she was there. With a leap she landed on the sloping, tiled roof of the Dervish Swords' warehouse, clinging on as her feet threatened to slip on the polished surface. She had to know if that darkness had come here, too. And that was why she was up here while her Brothers were in the thick of it. They would draw out the poison, if it was here, and she would lance it. The night still shuddered to the gunpowder blast, and the cracks and booms of the still-collapsing teahouse would lead the Guild right to them. Time was tight. Just audible, coming through the skylight nearby, were the sounds of battle from the warehouse floor below. Misaki prised the wooden lid open and lowered herself inside for a proper look. The warehouse was sprawling and dark, lit intermittently by gas lamps strung around iron pillars that held up the broad roof. Piles of bales and crates dotted the timber floor. Off to her left, yellow gaslight glimmered on water where the narrow canals came right into the warehouse, and to her right, smoke billowed from numerous doorways and passages leading towards the stricken teahouse.

Her Brothers were almost directly below her, and she could not help the stab of pride and relief to see they were all still standing, although bloodied. Back to back, the twelve held their ground in a tight knot, surrounded on all sides by the foot soldiers and hired hands of the Dervish Swords. Beyond them, Misaki could just make out a woman and a man, standing together in the shadows, but before she could position herself for a better look, the Oyabun of the Dervish Swords arrived. As soon as she saw him, she felt a sour taste in her mouth, and a pain behind her green eyes. Her father had been right. The poison had spread to the Dervish Swords. The Thirsty Glass was here. The Oyabun was naked and shackled, his frail, white body covered with self-inflicted wounds and weeping sores, but that was the least of it. He was held behind glass, four thick walls to make a cage carried on the shoulders of four sturdy slaves, the inside smeared with blood both fresh and dried. There was something embedded in the glass she could not quite make out. The slaves placed the cage on a stone plinth and moved to surround it, one standing on each side facing outwards. The Oyabun raved wordlessly within, as the Dervish Swords around fell silent. Misaki could not help noticing that they kept their distance from their own Oyabun. Then she looked closer at the slaves and recoiled in disgust. Each had a hole the size of a fist in their chest where their hearts should be. Leading from the ragged black wound, a gossamer-thin cable led behind them and into the glass of the Oyabun's cage. More gas lamps were lit, and Misaki could see what was embedded in the glass. Four hearts, red, raw, and beating. The Oyabun placed one trembling palm on the glass, above one of the living hearts. It convulsed, but kept beating. The slave linked to it spoke at once, his words jumbling and tangled.

--"weaving and dancing but now the dance is over KILL be-fore midnight chimes once and the last names are recalled-of those who remain--" The Oyabun cried out and flailed against the walls, and the slave fell silent. One of the Dervish Swords spoke up, a Korean giant with arcane tattoos across his cruel face, addressing the surrounded Ten Thunders. Misaki recognised him as Ssang Kal, the second in command. "The Oyabun is generous. He will grant a swift and honorable death to those who put down their weapons now." The Oyabun placed a hand on a different heart. The slave's head snapped up.

--"tale carved thrice is true KILL even from a liar's tongue--" Ssang Kal spoke again when the Oyabun stopped. "Select one of your number to live. He will return to your master with a message from the Dervish Swords." He drew a wicked-looking knife and leered. "His tongue will be cut out, and the message carved into his flesh, but he will live." Shigeo stepped forward, an insolent smirk on his face. He had lost his pistol, and his katana was a little more battered than before, but he rested the bloody blade on his shoulder in an insultingly casual manner as he looked at the giant and tapped his chest. The giant Dervish Sword spat. "A volunteer? So these are the mighty Ten Thunders we heard so much about? I had not thought you could be such cowards." Shigeo's smirk vanished and he whipped the tip of his sword round to point at Ssang Kal. "I volunteer to be the one to cut your head from your shoulders, unless Big Sister takes it

first." --"to a girl who runs and runs but KILL cries when her hair is cut--" No sooner had the slave fallen silent than Ssang Kal threw his arms wide and crowed, "And where is the Lady Misaki, the Oyabun asks? Where has she vanished to?" The Dervish Swords howled in derision, brandishing their weapons. "I think she has fled, rather than face

the." --"tigerspider turning burning KILL on the wall--" One of the Oyabun's slaves was looking right at her, and Misaki didn't need a tattooed giant to translate. She was already moving,

dropping fast, her sandals scraping against one side of an iron pillar while her bisento held fast against the other. Ten feet above the floor she kicked off, cartwheeling through the air to land, crouched, at the feet of a shocked Ssang Kal, her bisento held straight out behind her.

A hush fell over the assembled Dervish Swords. A hush that seemed to grow as a single drop of blood swelled at the tip of Misaki's weapon, holding the attention of everyone in the warehouse, until it finally dropped. When it hit the sawdust, chaos erupted as Ssang Kal's body toppled to the floor, preceded only moments earlier by his severed head. Several things happened at once. Shigeo and the other Ten Thunders drew round, red objects from beneath their robes and hurled them at the feet of the Dervish Swords. They exploded on the warehouse floor in a flash of fire and smoke, blinding their enemies, as Misaki's Brothers charged. The man and woman standing back in the shadow exchanged a glance and split up without a word, a matter-of-fact look of determination on the face of the man, and a barely contained look of excitement on the woman's. The man's cloak flicked open to reveal an array of weapons holstered on his wiry frame, complicated optics glinting in brass tubes. Misaki ignored them and pointed herself at the Oyabun, racing forward towards the towering glass cage. A howling Dervish Sword got in her path, and she cut him from shoulder to groin. She smashed the iron-shod butt of the weapon into the bearded face of another on the return swing, and then used his collapsing body as a springboard to leap high above the fray. She emerged from a column of acrid smoke, dark coils trailing from her charcoal silks and drove the point of her weapon into the glass of the Oyabun's cage. It did not even scratch the surface. Undaunted, she landed with another strike already underway, and brought the long blade of the bisento scything down overhead. Once again, it rebounded from the glass, and she had to duck and roll to avoid a hooked blade on the end of a chain as it sought her out. A lunging thrust pierced the lungs of the man on the other end of the chain, and he died with blood frothing at his

lips."--hold within the fire that burns KILL time only ending will sto-pit--"The slaves reached for her, jabbering their nonsense, but they were too slow and Misaki easily evaded their clumsy swipes."--overly broken KILL mark the limit of--"The glass was clearly enchanted, if it was glass at all. A glimpse of the gossamer threads joining the slaves to their master gave her an idea, and she cleaved the head of the nearest slave from crown to breastbone. He collapsed immediately, blood fountaining from his cloven face. Immediately, the glass around the heart cracked. Misaki was fast, lightning fast, but the Oyabun was prepared. His hand was over the heart before the slave had fallen and the crack sealed up a fraction of a second before the bisento struck it. Again the blade bounced off. At Misaki's feet, the slave's sundered flesh and shattered bone re-knitted, and he stood back up, babbling anew. Three Dervish Swords rushed her at once, one swinging a machete, one a nail-studded club, and the other with matched sai daggers. She cut the club in half, along with both arms wielding it, while she kicked the one holding the machete in the throat. She had to leap backwards as the twin daggers stabbed at her face, and the slave behind wrapped his arms around her."--while the iron is hot KILL now now now ME--"Misaki froze in her struggle, twisting round to look at the slave. Had it really said that? Its empty face continued to babble as the Oyabun looked on, chewing the ragged tatters of his own

lips."--fabric unravelling KILL crumbling to dust no room in the blood US--"The two remaining Dervish Swords renewed their assault as Misaki spun her weapon to break the slave's grip

and ducked away from the blows. She sent the bisento lancing backwards, and it spitted both men through their bellies. With a twist and a wrench, she loosed their innards and pulled the blade and haft free. With the slave's words ringing in her ears she set off, racing around the glass cage on its pedestal faster than the wind, her weapon joining her in a blur of leaping, spinning, deadly motion. She flowed through the fray like water through reeds and her strikes were like lightning, but as fast as she killed the slaves and fractured the heart-glass, the Oyabun re-knitted them and healed his protective

cage. Heads split and chests ripped asunder once, twice, three times and more. Faster and faster she sped, the blade of her bisento humming a lethal song, but still the frail madman kept his defenses renewed, and a drooling grin spread across his quaking features. And then, instead of making the last strike, she hurled her weapon away like a bullet from a gun. It struck one of the iron columns side on, perfectly balanced, the hardwood haft bending like a bow, before streaking back through the air towards her. Towards the heart pumping in the cage and the Oyabun's grinning, insane face. A fraction of a second before it reached its target, she brought a wooden-sandaled foot sweeping around and crushed the skull of the slave standing before her. As he died a crack appeared in the glass and the tip of the bisento plunged through it and lodged right between the eyes of the Oyabun behind. The glass fractured all over with a crackle like winter ice. The four hearts withered to autumn husks in their last beat. The slaves collapsed, dark blood oozing from the holes in their chests, and the Oyabun hung motionless, pinned like a fly in amber by four inches of folded steel embedded in his skull. The fight slowed to a halt around her, the din of battle ebbing as the Dervish Swords saw what had become of their leader. Putting her back under one of the carrying poles, she toppled the glass cage off its pedestal with a hoarse cry. The warehouse held its breath as it tipped, and the sound of the glass shattering into a thousand glittering shards echoed off the far walls. Bestride the corpse of the wretched Oyabun, she wrenched her bisento free and stepped back as the body went the way of the glass. Fractures spread outward from the neat wound, speeding over the white flesh, and the remains fell apart at her feet, noxious, yellow gas seeping loose as it was riven from head to foot. Springing atop the now vacant pedestal she held her weapon aloft. "The day is ours!" Her words had barely left her mouth when a spear of flame flashed out the shadows. Misaki leapt away just in time, seeing her own shadow painted black on the crates before her as a blinding blaze burned where she had stood. White-hot fire consumed the remains of the cage and the Oyabun with a dragon's roar, flames searching for the roof as the updraft tugged at Misaki's grey silks. Knives of glass caught up in the heat began to redden and sag. A winged figure stood atop a pyramid of huge, ceramic jars. Blue fire lingered at the ends of her outstretched arms, a cold light that glimmered in the brass of her wings and the curves of her face. She spoke English, her tone cool and measured. "I don't speak your language, Lady Misaki, but I wouldn't start counting heads just yet." Misaki motioned at her Brothers to hang back. This was bigger game than they could bring down, and she cursed herself for having ignored the woman. She had recognized the power the woman held in just that fleeting glimpse earlier in the battle, but had been too focused on confirming her father's suspicions about the Dervish Swords. She started circling left. So where had the western woman's friend disappeared to? Misaki spoke in English, too, watching the corners and keeping the woman in sight. "Bodyguard, I have left you no body to guard. Who are you?" "The name's Kaeris." It meant nothing to Misaki. Those brass wings spoke of money

and Arcanist connections, and Misaki had known enough Ronin to recognize a hired sword when she spoke to one. But she was out of the Dervish Sword's league, so who was paying for her? And now she had the edge on Misaki – not because of her weaponry, but because she had seen Misaki fight. Misaki knew nothing in return, and that was dangerous. Any crumb of information would be useful. "This fight is not your fight." "No, but a lady needs a hobby." Cocky. Arrogant, perhaps. But still holding back. She was careful, too. Precise. She was not the only one playing a waiting game, Misaki realised, as she moved from cover to cover. "And yours is being too late to stop me killing your employer?" "Him? He's nothing. He was an indentured slave until the Investors gave him to the Thirsty Glass. Poor sod. No, I'm here for you." "You missed."

"Did I? First rule of business. Leave nothing behind." The fire was spreading now; contortions of scorched metal in a puddle of smoking, molten glass was all that remained of the Oyabun and his conveyance. Burning scraps had scattered small fires all around the warehouse. Misaki reversed course for an instant, just to see what would happen. Kaeris raised an arm and then let it drop as Misaki resumed circling left, keeping in cover. So the woman wanted her going this way. That answered Misaki's question about her friend. The surviving Dervish Swords had fled, and she was approaching an open stretch of the warehouse near the canals. She was about to run out of cover. A glint of reflected firelight caught her eye, coming from deep shadow near some wine barrels. She looked for Shigeo, found him watching her, weapons and Brothers at the ready. She was within three paces of the open stretch when Kaeris opened up, just as Misaki had anticipated. And, just as anticipated, she aimed to Misaki's right, trying to drive her into the open area. Instead of dodging left, Misaki leapt towards the bolt of flame that would explode the instant it touched her. But a kestrel diving on prey does not snap at the wind, and Misaki swept her blade to match the speed of the bolt, catching it from behind and spinning, turning in mid-air with bolt and blade as one and then released it with a cry. If the look on Kaeris' face was priceless, what value the look on the face of her friend as the fireball slammed into the barrels where he hid? Should have shielded those optics better, Gunsmith. Wine geysered, most flashing to steam in the intense heat as burning wooden slats danced. Catherine Wheels through the air. "Take him!" Misaki shouted to her Brothers, already darting towards Kaeris. "Leave her to me!" But the Arcanist woman was firing again, a rapid stream of angry red comets hurtling through the air, forcing Misaki to jump two steps to the side for every one forward. Wherever they landed, the fireballs burst, spilling greedy flames over the dusty timber boards that sucked the fire outwards in ever-expanding pools. Heat washed over Misaki as she flew past an iron pillar, and still the onslaught of flame continued. Shots and cries sounded, but she had no time for her Brothers now. She paused behind a stack of ceramic tiles to chase away motes burning in her silks and noticed a neat hole through her scarf. A shot she had never seen had just missed her neck. That man must have taken it while she was in mid-leap, before she sent Kaeris' fire his way – his was a rare talent indeed. It was time to take the fight to the Arcanist witch. She scaled the stack of tiles like a cat going up a curtain. Kaeris glimpsed her as she reached the top, and the twin streams of fire started to converge. Misaki sprinted forward and leapt off the stack. She fell through heat-hazed air and slammed her blade down flat-bladed onto the timbers. Furious energy coursed through her, discharging with a thunder-clap as a wave of pure power flowed outwards, rippling the timbers in a massive, outrushing disturbance. Dust and dirt exploded upward from every joint



in the floor in a punishing grey cloud, lit blood-red by the fires. A cloud that hid her from Kaeris' sight. Fast as a breaking wave, she raced forward, not even slowing a fraction as she shot up and over the pyramid of urns Kaeris had been on. She jumped off the pyramid a second before a searing spear shot out of nowhere, aimed more by anticipation than sight. It scorched the air as it passed her by, and pain burned down her side. She landed clumsily, gasping and rolling clear as another dragon's breath flamed towards her out the dust and then a shadow loomed and Misaki brought the haft of her bisento squarely down on Kaeris' left hand. The woman cried out in pain of her own, clutching her hand and twisting away as the blue flames on the injured hand flickered away to nothing. Misaki's hand flicked out, flinging a round, red object at Kaeris' feet as the mercenary prepared to retaliate. Kaeris jumped back in alarm, then stopped, a look of bewilderment on her face. Misaki shrugged. "Just a cherry." But she'd bought herself an opening and only just had time to dive behind some sturdy winch gear as Kaeris brought her uninjured hand up and split the air with a beam of fire so white-hot it felt as though the sun had been rent asunder. The scream of anger that accompanied it was just as furious. Misaki kept moving, fast and low. The smoke from the dozens of fires was adding to the dust cloud, reducing visibility to only a few feet.

Straining to listen over the rush and crackle of fire, she heard a roaring BA-BOOM! and a scream from one of her Brothers. The Gunsmith was still alive, then. She tried to put him from her thoughts – Shigeo and the others would have to handle him alone. As if reading her mind, she heard Kaeris call out. "What are they to you, Lady Misaki? These so-called Brothers of yours? People like me and you are made to shape this world, but they're just murderers and thieves." "While you burn everything around you in the name of peace and tranquility?" The smoke and flames were confusing the air, making sounds come from all directions. Misaki kept low, circling outward. "You're telling me you have something in common with them?" "I wouldn't expect your kind to understand," Misaki replied. A laugh, but from where? "I may have my price, but I know about loyalty." Misaki answered with a laugh of her own. "As you know my name, and yet I am a complete stranger to you, so it is with your kind and that word." "The man who made these wings for me, and trained me in the ways of power, would prove you wrong!" There was fresh anger there – she'd struck a nerve. An avalanche of noise sounded from off to one side, a splintering, crashing torrent that had to be the remains of the Tea House collapsing. It gave Misaki her bearings for a moment, just as a red-wreathed silhouette loomed in the swirling smoke. Kaeris. She scythed her bisento as Kaeris sprang forward. Fire blossomed, meeting the magical blade, and then both women were grappling, their hands on the hardwood haft and their sweat-streaked faces inches apart. Flames poured like molten steel but were harnessed by the power of the bisento and instead of searing Misaki's flesh from her bones, they raced along the blade and lashed outwards harmlessly. Misaki shifted, trying to unbalance her foe, but the mercenary moved with her. More crashing sounds came from the ruins of the Tea House, along with heavy, clanking sounds. Was something coming through the wreckage? "Loyalty has to cut both ways," Kaeris panted, the effort of maintaining the flow of fire sending tracks of sweat through the ash on her face, "or it is just chains by another name. And I'm certain the Ten Thunders are getting a lot more out of you than you are of them." "And what of the company you keep?" Misaki spat back. "These so-called Investors? Did you gag at the foulness when taking orders from that thing in the cage, or did you not notice after a while?" "Today they are our friends, tomorrow who knows? That is freedom!" Kaeris' eyes were glowing with the energies pouring

out of her, her frustration at Misaki's ability to deflect them clear. "But what of the Ten Thunders? What does it feel like, to wield power like this and live among scum? Do you still feel them dragging you down, or do you not notice after a while? What can they offer you? Ancient traditions? Duties and responsibilities? Babysitting those fools?" "Discipline," Misaki said, as Kaeris' fires flew ever more violent and directionless, burning great avenues of flame in the air and setting the ceiling ablaze. "Mastery." Swift as a snake, she released her grip on her weapon and delivered a savage flurry of jabs to her opponent's midriff, just below the harness. As Kaeris recoiled in pain, Misaki snatched her bisento back and spun it around her shoulders before stabbing it forward. Kaeris only just rolled aside in time. "Control." The mechanical clanking sound increased as Kaeris sprang to her feet, but she did not strike out. Warily, they circled one another, the smoke making ghosts of them both. Kaeris was smiling. "And at last I have the measure of you, Lady Misaki. Control. I should have known. I tried to control the power, too, at first, but that's not the way it works here." Flames like snakes unravelled from her uninjured hand and entwined themselves languidly around her. "You think I am controlling this? Control is a myth unless we embrace the chaos. Control is impossible unless we revel in uncertainty and doubt. That is the paradox of power in this land." The snake's eyes glowed white-hot and furious. "You have revealed yourself to me, and that will unmake you."

The snakes struck, their heads splitting like hydras in mid-air. Misaki had been expecting the attack, but the nature of it surprised her. She fell back, scorched and warping timbers shifting underfoot. The flame-serpents were a flurry of motion, spending and renewing themselves from Kaeris' hand in brilliant bursts of light, but there seemed no sense or skill to their onslaught. Misaki moved with perfect timing, catching tongues of flame on her bisento and snuffing them to nothing, moving to intercept the next one in flawless harmony. But always falling back, because the next one was never where it should be, never where any skilled assailant would strike next. Most of the attacks were easy to repel, but a few came at her from improbable angles, their sheer randomness making them deadlier than anything Kaeris had flung at her before. In moments, her silks were smoking and charred in a half-dozen places, and she could smell her own singed hair. Off balance, and losing ground, her skill was working against her. With a titanic groan, an iron column collapsed and fell between the two women. Layers of roof and glass smashed down with it, and Misaki turned to see an enormous construct emerging from the smoke and flames where the Tea House had been. Metal beams and chunks of masonry bounced unnoticed off its armored shell. Brass cogs ground their teeth and steel talons glinted with malicious, mechanical intent as the Peacekeeper ripped up fistfuls of aged timber, its great head hunting for targets through the smoke. The Guild had finally arrived. "Time to be leaving," Kaeris said, coiling vines of flame around her body and across the floor, "but first things first." The looping tendrils of fire exploded outward, lunging for Misaki in an immolating embrace. But the interruption of the Guild machine had given her a second to think. Kaeris' assault embraced chaos and confusion to devastating effect, obliterating Misaki's superior skill. The very concept was anathema to her, but her only hope was to do the same. Abandon perfection. Let chaos reign. Fight fire with fire. She charged, screaming, before she knew what she was doing. That choice saved her life. She moved without thinking, abandoning her training to become as unpredictable as a force of nature. One moment as fluid as water, the other as highly sprung as steel, she changed in the blink of an eye to the whiplash motion of a

striking mantis. The fires of Kaeris could not find her, could not touch her. She reinvented her style with every heartbeat, drawing inspiration for the next lunge from a coil of smoke, the next block from the feel of the timbers under her feet, the next strike from the sound of her own breathing. Every stitch stood apart from the others, and yet knitted into one perfect whole. Chaos was pitted against chaos, and Misaki's was the most thorough and inventive. She was advancing now, her bi-sento describing blinding arcs in the air she had never seen before and – wonderfully – had no idea if she would ever see again. Kaeris screamed in rage and frustration and backed off, spawning a kraken of fire to encircle Misaki, but whatever gaps the flames left, there she was, impossibly leaping and spinning through them unhurt, every step bringing that sweeping blade closer to Kaeris. The paradox, Misaki realized as her steel bit the air inches from Kaeris' neck, was to achieve mastery through both harmony and anarchy. Exhilaration flowed through her as she understood the potential of what she had unlocked. She did not know what her next move was until she made it. When the Peacekeeper's chain spear exploded through a wall of burning barrels, it became simply another note in the symphony she was building, one whose final movement was now inevitable. Kaeris was spent. She had nothing left. Misaki poised and leapt, blade drawn back, and then the Peacekeeper crashed over them both like a wave of iron. Misaki danced anew in a forest of pistons and armour, thunderous clanking over the hateful hiss of steam, rising up over its great, red carapace among the soot and oil and beyond the grasping claws to launch herself once more at Kaeris. But Kaeris was rising. Borne aloft on brass wings and roasted air, she crashed into Misaki and kept on rising, one hand grasping Misaki's silk robes. Her feet left the Peacekeeper's back as it reared up, enraged at their escape, swiping its railroad spike-claws at them, but catching only smoke. Kaeris rose higher. Her brass wings heaved, steadily gaining height. Misaki struggled, but she was tangled, and could not bring herself about to strike. Patches of night sky sucked the smoke out of the burning warehouse, with more and more appearing as the building's death hastened.

Misaki saw her fate; a short fall and a quick end once Kaeris gained clear skies. Then a familiar cry and a pair of strong arms wrapped themselves around her waist. She looked down into the blood and ash-streaked face of Shigeo, hanging on for grim life, and behind him the burning stack of shipping crates he must have launched himself from. Immediately, the three of them began to drop back into the smoke. "No!" Kaeris screamed, her wings unable to bear Shigeo's extra weight. Misaki felt the grip holding her loosen, and looked up into Kaeris' eyes. They burned with bitter hatred. "You still feel them dragging you down, Lady Misaki?" Then Kaeris let go. Misaki and Shigeo fell. Before the smoke swallowed them up, her last sight of Kaeris was of the bronze wings rippling with blue fire as they powered the woman out a rent in the warehouse roof. Misaki hit the ground hard, rolling through burning wads of packing linen and sprang to her feet before the flames could take hold. She grabbed Shigeo's hand and hauled him upright, slapping at the fire that licked at his robes. Thunderous crashes sounded all around them, and the doomsday clank of the Peacekeeper was not far off. "Time to leave, Big Sister?" Shigeo shouted. Misaki nodded. "What about the Gunsmith?" Shigeo shook his head and winced, grabbing his arm at the shoulder. Misaki noticed the blood soaking the silk. "He got away. Left me one of his bullets. I left him a limp." "Who did we lose?" "Satoru. Hideki. And the big Guild engine put its spear through Hirofume." It could have been a lot worse, but her Brothers had fought fiercely and bravely and had made amends for their earlier disaster. Misaki was satisfied honor had been restored, and the Dervish Swords

had been wiped out in the most emphatic fashion. Come morning, everyone in Little Kingdom would be reminded why not even a brave man crossed the Ten Thunders. "There's no way out through that!" Misaki shouted, pointing towards the fury of the Peacekeeper and the raging fire. Wherever the Peacekeeper led, other Guild constructs and forces were not far behind. "Come with me." Misaki and Shigeo gathered the surviving Ten Thunders at the waterway at the rear of the warehouse. The rear wall was a blazing sheet of flame, burning timbers dropping into the oily, black water, but they could swim out, and the Guild would not have been reckoning on a pursuit to the river. They would take whatever boats they could find and be long gone by the time the lawmen caught up. Misaki was the last to leave, watching impassively as the great, dark shadow of the Peacekeeper raged amid the hungry flames. After a short underwater dash, she hauled herself up green-slick stones and onto a narrow tow-ledge. Ahead, her Brothers were still swimming, aiming for the Harken Docks. Out of sight behind her, the warehouse burned. Great blankets of smoke spread across the night sky, lit blood red from below. She looked up at the old stone and timber wall beside her, working out the best route to the top. A splash from below made her turn. Shigeo was stuck, unable to climb after her. She leaned down and gave him a hand up. "I owe you thanks," she said. "Less than we owe you." His shoulder was bleeding freely, but it did not look broken. He would mend. He glanced up at the wall she had been about to scale. "Are you leaving us?" The question was a loaded one. He knew, she realized. He'd always been the smart one. "I thought I had a difficult choice to make, Little Brother. Whatever path I chose, I would lose something very important to me. But in the fight with that woman, I found a way to fight and win I could never have imagined before. It was as if the north wind and the south wind blew as one. Two forces in opposition that came together. It should not have worked, but it did. I have much to think about."

"And have you made your choice?" He looked away, unwilling to meet her eyes. She shook her head. "No need. I am trying to tell you I have found another way." She put a hand on his uninjured shoulder. "Go. We will meet back at the Trading House. As much as I respect my father, our Oyabun, this is a new world with new rules. So I will lead the Ten Thunders, as he asks, but I will do it my way, and I will take you all with me. To the very top. This world will not know our next move until we make it. It should not work, but I have a feeling it will." Shigeo nodded. He gave a short bow and leapt into the canal, his battered katana between his teeth. She watched as he paddled away out of sight, and then began scaling the wall. The world was chaos and doubt. Misaki Katanaka smiled to herself, and climbed.