World in Chaos224 OutcastsThe world was chaos and doubt, and so she climbed.Misaki

Katanaka scaled crumbling brickwork, watched byalien constellations. A restless energy

powered her higher,fueled by lungfuls of cold city air and a gnawing anger shecouldn't

escape.She prowled the top of the bell tower among the gapinggargoyles 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 jadeeyes stood out in the

shadows.Exertion burned her blood, her breath steaming silver in themoonlight. She was

free up here, away from the demandsof the Trading House and the Ten Thunders. Free to

explorethe mystical energy that had coursed through her veins themoment she'd arrived in

this wonderful, terrifying place, anenergy that channelled through her to make her one of

themost fearsome fighters Malifaux had known. Up here, withthe world at her feet, she felt

like a god.Misaki stopped, a flare of light in the nightscape snaring herhunter's eye. Another

Guild train puncturing the Breachbetween the worlds. A lead downspout looked secure,

andshe swung across to a ledge thick with droppings. Alwaysmoving on.Far below, the city's

lights burned blue and yellow in thedark, a dark that held more than its fair share of

monstersand nightmares and terrible things.A cloud passed over the moon and she stole its

shadow toflit unseen, stepping silently up a crow-stepped gable. Everupwards. The stern

lights of the night boats glittered off theriver that split the city in two. Dark docks and unlit

piers hidmidnight commerce from prying Guild eyes and behindthem lay Little Kingdom. The

Gateless City-within-a-city, partof it but always apart. She knew what that felt like.And at the

heart of Little Kingdom lay the Katanaka TradingHouse, her headquarters and the base of

operations for theTen Thunders in Malifaux. And now it also held her Brothers,arrived just

this week from Earthside. She had not beenback there since they came.With the thought

returned the anger, and Misaki raceddown the gutter and leapt, suspended for a

momentbetween twinkling lights above and below, landing witha whisper on a bronzed eave.

Her bisento, a long-haftedweapon with a wicked blade, had been on her back whenshe

started the leap and in her hands when she toucheddown. The blade hummed the soft song

of steel as sheheld it outstretched, chest heaving, the razor-pointmotionless in the dark.

Control. In a cruel and randomworld, control was everything.But she could not control her

feelings the same way shecould her bisento, and the choice before her seemed

animpossible one. One way lay the path of family, duty, andloyalty. Obey her father, the

Oyabun. Pursue the interestsof the Ten Thunders, and do what she knew was right.The

other – the other was a path that struck out on itsown. It led up and kept on going, knew no

summits orheights, and its call had grown stronger with everypassing day. But it was a path

that would take her awayfrom her family, and there could be no going back.Once more the

city below tugged at her, calling out dutiesand responsibilities. The liquid fires of the

newly-installedGeissler tubes atop the Katanaka Trading House bathedthe rooftops around

them, the familiar kanji lettersburning in electric shades of red, green and blue.Modern, lurid

and expensive – her Brothers would haveslapped each other on the back when they first

sawthem. Her Brothers, who had swaggered unwanted andunannounced through the

Breach, made no effort to paytheir respects, and wrecked so much in a single night.Always,

no matter how high she climbed, they pulled herback down.She descended into the chaos of

the city, to greet them.RCtMThe night was cold, but so was the sake – the TradingHouse

was serving them the good stuff.

Aki Taoka of the Ten Thunders emptied the choko, thenreturned the small porcelain cup to

the bamboo mat. Hissilence told the serving girl she could continue, and soonAki and his

eleven Brothers were toasting one another andcalling loudly for more. The fight with the

Dervish Swordshad ended only a few hours before, but soon it was soembellished and

gilded in the telling and re-telling that fewof the Brothers could agree on anything except that

theyhad fought bravely against impossible odds.Satoru Moriya's shoulder had been cut near

the bone byone of the Dervish Swords' hired muscle, and he wasstruggling to raise his arm

to the toasts. Seeing this, theothers redoubled the number of toasts, the serving girlcame

round again in the blink of an eye, and the sakeflowed as Satoru groaned.“And where is Big

Sister?” Aki Taoka demanded, slamminghis choko down, his face red. “Huh?” he barked, as

headsup and down the long, low table nodded in sympathy. Allbut one. “She is supposed to

be in charge here. Does shepay her respects to her Brothers? Does she tend to

ourwounded?” Heads shook. All but one.All but Shigeo Inagawa, a young man whose

handsome,tattooed face looked haggard and worn. He wiped sakefrom his moustache and

gestured at the empty seat at thehead of the table. “Big Sister--”“--is probably working on her

back at the Qi and Gong!”roared Hideki Tsukasa from behind his dripping, blackbeard,

slamming the table with his fist as he choked withlaughter. Others doubled up and

hammered their cupsalso, while the serving girl skilfully refilled them withoutspilling a

drop.With a black, glowering frown Shigeo ignored the belly-laughs around him and carried

on. “Big Sister holds ourOyabun's seat at this table, and must have the samerespect--”The

table creaked as Aki leaned across to Shigeo, real angerin his watery, blue eyes now. “And

maybe she'll have it, theday she remembers her place and stops waving that horse-cleaver

around like she--”But a stunned silence had fallen, and Aki and Shigeo turnedtheir heads to

see why. The serving girl. She had filled theonly unused cup in the room and then sat down

before it,at the head of the table. Misaki Katanaka untied her whiteserving apron, handed it

to the slack-jawed HirofumiNomura on her left and downed the sake she had

justpoured.Beside her, in an iron stand, her trademark bisento stood,and not one man

present could remember how it had gotthere.She drew a cold look across them all, and then

nodded herhead a fraction, not taking her eyes off them. They weretrapped, and they knew

it. They had criticised a superiorto her face, while accepting her hospitality. As socialtaboos

went in the Ten Thunders, well – fingers had beencut off for far less. Misaki had

outmaneuvred them, butshe felt no great satisfaction in it – dealing with them wassimple

compared to the adversaries she faced daily inMalifaux.The real serving girl hurried in,

placing a bowl of cherriesin front of Misaki. She slowly savored a handful, giving AkiTaoka

her full attention as she spat the stones into a cup.Despite the sake, he retained enough

good sense not tolook 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 inits web. "You

are to be congratulated. From the sound ofit, the Dervish Swords are no more, and the

stragglers havebeen run out of Malifaux with your katanas jabbing theirfat behinds. Is this

true?"Aki paused, and then grunted, "No.""I see." Misaki downed another cup, the sake as

cool asher voice. "Then they have at least been put out ofbusiness, and I will never have to

concern myself with theirenforcers taking protection money that should be goingto my

Trading House?"Another pause. "No." Aki's eyes were trying to drill a holein 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 anysignificant unpleasantness?"A longer pause. "No." Aki's

mouth flapped open and shuta 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 thecareful plans I had laid for dealing with them. Your attackfailed

utterly, the Dervish Swords are not only still a threatbut are alert to our intentions toward

them, and you gotmy Ronin killed. I had intended to take over theiroperations, and their best

people, and you have justturned what was an opportunity for expansion into openwarfare.

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 adesire for

vengeance would redirect Misaki's anger.She smiled coldly. "You'll all think yourselves lucky

if youreach 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 likedShigeo. He had been one of the few who'd

sentcongratulations when her father had appointed her hisFirst Lieutenant in the new

dominion of Malifaux. "Whatyou don't know, since you're all new and stupid, is that

theDervish Swords have been busy making friends in lowplaces. Dangerous friends. Right

now, they are running tothose friends and demanding support against TenThunders'

aggression." Before her Brothers could blink, shesnapped up her bisento and brought it

scything down overher head. The enchanted blade stopped dead an inchabove the heavy

wooden table, which split in two downits length with a crack like thunder, the cups and

matsflying in the air. Misaki grinned a snake's smile. "They haveno idea. We're going to

show them just what TenThunders' aggression looks like, and this time we'll do itmy

way."RCtMRamos could barely make the woman out. In the red glowfrom the distant

furnaces she was little more than embersand shadow, smoldering beneath the enormous,

darkcrucible. Oblivious to his presence she moved, raising ahand to touch the cold skin of

the smelting vessel thathung above her like the belly of an iron giant. This forgehad been

closed down for repairs, and the unpoured zincin that vessel was cold and hard.Ramos

waited, willing her on. His companion heldpatiently beside him as the woman stood

unmoving, thethree as still as the machinery dwarfing them in thedisused forge. From the

other forge halls beyond thefirebreaks and baffles, distant sounds of heavy industryroared

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 lightglimmered into

being from the lip of the smelting vessel.A moment later, he had to turn his head as

white-hotmetal spilled from the gaping spigot and splashed in awaterfall of eye-searing stars

and sparks into the emptymold tracks below. Sweltering heat filled the forge.The woman

approached, seeming to emerge from theinfernal glow itself, and stopped in front of him and

hiscompanion. Her usually pale face was flushed with effort,glistening with sweat beneath

her short, blonde hair andher eyes filled with an exhilarating light. Ramos fanciedhe could

see embers dancing in their depths.“Impressive,” he said, “and timely. Certain friends in

thecity have asked for aid. I thought of you.” Ramos indicatedthe other man, his face hidden

behind a set of polishedgoggles. 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 fromthe

cascading metal was blotted out as brass wingssprang from her back and flexed

purposefully, eagerly.She leaned forward, the smell of smoke and blisteredsteel like

perfume. “So. 74 Victor. Are you in?”RCtMThere were two ways into the Dervish

Swords'warehouse complex; by well-guarded canals from the

river, or through the front operation – Madame Chin'sTeahouse. Either way, Misaki knew,

they would bewaiting.Reckless and hasty they might be, but her Brothers werealso proud

and fierce warriors who had served the TenThunders faithfully for years, and Misaki had no

desire tosee any of them cut to pieces in the dark, windingwaterways, 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 wouldsend more, and more, and

they would always need herto get them out of situations like this. She would neverbe free.It

was still dark, and from her vantage point atop StrickenMews clock tower, she watched by

gaslight as the twohand carts made their way along the cobbles towardsMadame Chin's. On

the open backs of each cart, nestledin thick straw, sat branded barrels of sake, fresh

fromEarthside. The runners moved cautiously: fine sakeneeded careful handling, and was

sensitive to bumps andjolts.Much like gunpowder, mused Misaki, as the runnersdeposited

the carts outside the teahouse, lit the hiddenfuses and sprinted away. Too late, shots were

fired atthem from the dark windows of the teahouse and thenthe ornate wooden building

vanished in a billowingcolumn of dark smoke. Thethumpof the blast arrived afraction of a

second later, and Misaki felt it in her chest.Glass shattered up and down the street, and the

bell inthe clock tower rang softly.As thick pieces of timber rained like rice at a wedding,

herBrothers broke from hiding and raced towards the freshruin, their battle cries thin on the

night breeze. Shigeo andAki were vying for the lead, Shigeo with his batteredkatana and

blunderbuss pistol, and Aki waving a long-handled cleaver in each hand. The other ten

Brothersfollowed close behind, screaming and brandishingnaginatas, clubs, chain-scythes

and pistols. They vanishedamidst the smoke and the cries of the wounded.Misaki leapt from

the clock tower. There was a third wayin, although only birds, the wind and Misaki herself

coulduse it. She landed running, flitting silently across a tiledridge 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 DervishSwords.She jumped across the gap between buildings, springingoff a crumbling

course of projecting brickwork on theopposite wall and climbed quickly up a series of

ornatecorbels carved with crows.There was a reason Baojun Katanaka, her father

andOyabun of the Ten Thunders, wanted to expand intoMalifaux. A reason beyond money.

A darkness hadinfected the Three Kingdoms, a darkness that no outsiderwas permitted to

know, and one that her father wantedno part of.A bird does not twitch at a falling leaf, and

Misaki ran rightpast a row of pigeons before they even noticed she wasthere. With a leap

she landed on the sloping, tiled roof ofthe Dervish Swords' warehouse, clinging on as her

feetthreatened to slip on the polished surface.She had to know if that darkness had come

here, too. Andthat was why she was up here while her Brothers were inthe thick of it. They

would draw out the poison, if it washere, and she would lance it.The night still shuddered to

the gunpowder blast, and thecracks and booms of the still-collapsing teahouse wouldlead

the Guild right to them. Time was tight. Just audible,coming through the skylight nearby,

were the sounds ofbattle from the warehouse floor below. Misaki prised thewooden lid open

and lowered herself inside for a properlook.The warehouse was sprawling and dark, lit

intermittentlyby gas lamps strung around iron pillars that held up thebroad roof. Piles of

bales and crates dotted the timberfloor. Off to her left, yellow gaslight glimmered on

waterwhere the narrow canals came right into the warehouse,and to her right, smoke

billowed from numerousdoorways and passages leading towards the strickenteahouse.

Her Brothers were almost directly below her, and shecould not help the stab of pride and

relief to see they wereall still standing, although bloodied. Back to back, thetwelve held their

ground in a tight knot, surrounded on allsides by the foot soldiers and hired hands of the

DervishSwords. Beyond them, Misaki could just make out awoman and a man, standing

together in the shadows, butbefore she could position herself for a better look, theOyabun 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 beenright. The poison had spread to the Dervish

Swords. TheThirsty Glass was here.The Oyabun was naked and shackled, his frail, white

bodycovered with self-inflicted wounds and weeping sores, butthat was the least of it. He

was held behind glass, four thickwalls to make a cage carried on the shoulders of foursturdy

slaves, the inside smeared with blood both freshand dried. There was something embedded

in the glassshe could not quite make out. The slaves placed the cageon a stone plinth and

moved to surround it, one standingon each side facing outwards. The Oyabun

ravedwordlessly within, as the Dervish Swords around fell silent.Misaki could not help

noticing that they kept their distancefrom their own Oyabun.Then she looked closer at the

slaves and recoiled indisgust. Each had a hole the size of a fist in their chestwhere their

hearts should be. Leading from the raggedblack wound, a gossamer-thin cable led behind

them andinto the glass of the Oyabun's cage. More gas lamps werelit, 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 keptbeating.

The slave linked to it spoke at once, his wordsjumbling and tangled.

--"--weavinganddancingbutnowthedanceisoverKILLbe-foremidnightchimesonceandthelastna

mesarecalled-ofthosewhoremain--"The Oyabun cried out and flailed against the walls, and

theslave fell silent. One of the Dervish Swords spoke up, aKorean giant with arcane tattoos

across his cruel face,addressing the surrounded Ten Thunders. Misakirecognised him as

Ssang Kal, the second in command."The Oyabun is generous. He will grant a swift

andhonorable death to those who put down their weaponsnow."The Oyabun placed a hand

on a different heart. Theslave's head snapped up.

"--talecarvedthriceistrueKILLevenfromaliars'tongue--"Ssang Kal spoke again when the

Oyabun stopped. "Selectone of your number to live. He will return to your masterwith a

message from the Dervish Swords." He drew awicked-looking knife and leered. "His tongue

will be cutout, and the message carved into his flesh, but he willlive."Shigeo stepped

forward, an insolent smirk on his face. Hehad lost his pistol, and his katana was a little

morebattered than before, but he rested the bloody blade onhis shoulder in an insultingly

casual manner as he lookedat the giant and tapped his chest.The giant Dervish Sword spat.

"A volunteer? So thesearethe mighty Ten Thunders we heard so much about? I hadnot

thought you could be such cowards."Shigeo's smirk vanished and he whipped the tip of

hissword round to point at Ssang Kal. "I volunteer to be theone to cut your head from your

shoulders, unless BigSister takes it

first.""--toagirlwhorunsandrunsbutKILLcrieswhenherhairiscut--"No sooner had the slave fallen

silent than Ssang Kal threwhis arms wide and crowed, "And where is the LadyMisaki, the

Oyabun asks? Where has she vanished to?"The Dervish Swords howled in derision,

brandishing theirweapons. "I think she has fled, rather than face

the-""--tigerspiderturningburningKILLonthewall--"One of the Oyabun's slaves was looking

right at her, andMisaki didn't need a tattooed giant to translate. She wasalready moving,

dropping fast, her sandals scrapingagainst one side of an iron pillar while her bisento

heldfast against the other. Ten feet above the floor she kickedoff, cartwheeling through the

air to land, crouched, at thefeet of a shocked Ssang Kal, her bisento held straight outbehind

her.

A hush fell over the assembled Dervish Swords. A hushthat seemed to grow as a single drop

of blood swelled atthe tip of Misaki's weapon, holding the attention ofeveryone in the

warehouse, until it finally dropped. Whenit hit the sawdust, chaos erupted as Ssang Kal's

bodytoppled to the floor, preceded only moments earlier by hissevered head.Several things

happened at once. Shigeo and the other TenThunders drew round, red objects from beneath

theirrobes and hurled them at the feet of the Dervish Swords.They exploded on the

warehouse floor in a flash of fireand smoke, blinding their enemies, as Misaki's

Brotherscharged.The man and woman standing back in the shadowsexchanged a glance

and split up without a word, a matter-of-fact look of determination on the face of the man,

anda barely contained look of excitement on the woman's.The man's cloak flicked open to

reveal an array of weaponsholstered on his wiry frame, complicated optics glinting inbrass

tubes.Misaki ignored them and pointed herself at the Oyabun,racing forward towards the

towering glass cage. A howlingDervish Sword got in her path, and she cut him fromshoulder

to groin. She smashed the iron-shod butt of theweapon into the bearded face of another on

the returnswing, and then used his collapsing body as a springboardto leap high above the

fray. She emerged from a columnof acrid smoke, dark coils trailing from her charcoal

silksand drove the point of her weapon into the glass of theOyabun's cage.It did not even

scratch the surface.Undaunted, she landed with another strike alreadyunderway, and

brought the long blade of the bisentoscything down overhead. Once again, it rebounded

fromthe glass, and she had to duck and roll to avoid a hookedblade on the end of a chain as

it sought her out. A lungingthrust pierced the lungs of the man on the other end ofthe chain,

and he died with blood frothing at his

lips."--holdwithinthefirethatburnsKILLtimeonlyendingwillsto-pit--"The slaves reached for her,

jabbering their nonsense, butthey were too slow and Misaki easily evaded their

clumsyswipes."--overlybrokenKILLmarksthelimitsof--"The glass was clearly enchanted, if it

was glass at all. Aglimpse of the gossamer threads joining the slaves to theirmaster gave her

an idea, and she cleaved the head of thenearest slave from crown to breastbone. He

collapsedimmediately, blood fountaining from his cloven face.Immediately, the glass around

the heart cracked.Misaki was fast, lightning fast, but the Oyabun wasprepared. His hand was

over the heart before the slavehad fallen and the crack sealed up a fraction of a

secondbefore the bisento struck it. Again the blade bounced off.At Misaki's feet, the slave's

sundered flesh and shatteredbone re-knitted, and he stood back up, babbling anew.Three

Dervish Swords rushed her at once, one swinging amachete, one a nail-studded club, and

the other withmatched sai daggers. She cut the club in half, along withboth arms wielding it,

while she kicked the one holding themachete in the throat. She had to leap backwards as

thetwin daggers stabbed at her face, and the slave behindwrapped his arms around

her."--whiletheironishotKILLnownownowME--"Misaki froze in her struggle, twisting round to

look at theslave. Had it really said that? Its empty face continued tobabble as the Oyabun

looked on, chewing the raggedtatters of his own

lips."--fabricunravellingKILLcrumblingtodustnoroominthe-bloodUS--"The two remaining

Dervish Swords renewed their assaultas Misaki spun her weapon to break the slave's grip

andducked away from the blows. She sent the bisento lancingbackwards, and it spitted both

men through their bellies.With a twist and a wrench, she loosed their innards andpulled the

blade and haft free.With the slave's words ringing in her ears she set off, racingaround 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 waterthrough reeds and her strikes

were like lightning, but asfast 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, theblade of her bisento humming a lethal song, but still thefrail madman

kept his defenses renewed, and a droolinggrin spread across his quaking features.And then,

instead of making the last strike, she hurled herweapon away like a bullet from a gun. It

struck one of theiron columns side on, perfectly balanced, the hardwoodhaft bending like a

bow, before streaking back through theair towards her. Towards the heart pumping in the

cageand the Oyabun's grinning, insane face.A fraction of a second before it reached its

target, shebrought a wooden-sandaled foot sweeping around andcrushed the skull of the

slave standing before her. As hedied a crack appeared in the glass and the tip of thebisento

plunged through it and lodged right between theeyes of the Oyabun behind.The glass

fractured all over with a crackle like winter ice.The four hearts withered to autumn husks in

their lastbeat. The slaves collapsed, dark blood oozing from theholes in their chests, and the

Oyabun hung motionless,pinned like a fly in amber by four inches of folded steelembedded

in his skull.The fight slowed to a halt around her, the din of battleebbing as the Dervish

Swords saw what had become oftheir leader. Putting her back under one of the

carryingpoles, she toppled the glass cage off its pedestal with ahoarse cry. The warehouse

held its breath as it tipped, andthe sound of the glass shattering into a thousand

glitteringshards echoed off the far walls. Bestride the corpse of thewretched Oyabun, she

wrenched her bisento free andstepped back as the body went the way of the glass.Fractures

spread outward from the neat wound, speedingover the white flesh, and the remains fell

apart at her feet,noxious, yellow gas seeping loose as it was riven from headto

foot.Springing atop the now vacant pedestal she held herweapon aloft. "The day is ours!"Her

words had barely left her mouth when a spear offlame flashed out the shadows. Misaki leapt

away just intime, seeing her own shadow painted black on the cratesbefore her as a blinding

blaze burned where she had stood.White-hot fire consumed the remains of the cage and

theOyabun with a dragon's roar, flames searching for the roofas the updraft tugged at

Misaki's grey silks. Knives of glasscaught up in the heat began to redden and sag.A winged

figure stood atop a pyramid of huge, ceramicjars. Blue fire lingered at the ends of her

outstretchedarms, a cold light that glimmered in the brass of her wingsand the curves of her

face. She spoke English, her tonecool and measured. "I don't speak your language,

LadyMisaki, but I wouldn't start counting heads just yet."Misaki motioned at her Brothers to

hang back. This wasbigger game than they could bring down, and she cursedherself for

having ignored the woman. She had recognizedthe power the woman held in just that

fleeting glimpseearlier in the battle, but had been too focused onconfirming her father's

suspicions about the DervishSwords. She started circling left. So where had thewestern

woman's friend disappeared to?Misaki spoke in English, too, watching the corners

andkeeping the woman in sight. "Bodyguard, I have left youno body to guard. Who are

you?""The name's Kaeris."It meant nothing to Misaki. Those brass wings spoke ofmoney

and Arcanist connections, and Misaki had knownenough Ronin to recognize a hired sword

when she spoketo one. But she was out of the Dervish Sword's league, sowho was paying

for her? And now she had the edge onMisaki – not because of her weaponry, but because

shehad seen Misaki fight. Misaki knew nothing in return, andthat was dangerous. Any crumb

of information would beuseful. "This fight is not your fight.""No, but a lady needs a

hobby."Cocky. Arrogant, perhaps. But still holding back. She wascareful, too. Precise. She

was not the only one playing awaiting game, Misaki realised, as she moved from coverto

cover. "And yours is being too late to stop me killingyour employer?""Him? He's nothing. He

was an indentured slave until theInvestors gave him to the Thirsty Glass. Poor sod. No,

I'mhere for you.""You missed."

"Did I? First rule of business. Leave nothing behind." Thefire was spreading now; contortions

of scorched metal ina puddle of smoking, molten glass was all that remainedof the Oyabun

and his conveyance. Burning scraps hadscattered small fires all around the

warehouse.Misaki reversed course for an instant, just to see whatwould happen. Kaeris

raised an arm and then let it dropas Misaki resumed circling left, keeping in cover. So

thewoman wanted her going this way. That answered Misaki'squestion about her friend.The

surviving Dervish Swords had fled, and she wasapproaching an open stretch of the

warehouse near thecanals. She was about to run out of cover. A glint ofreflected firelight

caught her eye, coming from deepshadow near some wine barrels. She looked for

Shigeo,found him watching her, weapons and Brothers at theready.She was within three

paces of the open stretch whenKaeris opened up, just as Misaki had anticipated. And, justas

anticipated, she aimed to Misaki's right, trying to driveher into the open area. Instead of

dodging left, Misaki leapttowards the bolt of flame that would explode the instantit touched

her. But a kestrel diving on prey does not snapat the wind, and Misaki swept her bisento

through the airto match the speed of the bolt, catching it from behindand spinning, turning in

mid-air with bolt and blade as oneand then released it with a cry.If the look on Kaeris' face

was priceless, what value thelook on the face of her friend as the fireball slammed intothe

barrels where he hid? Should have shielded thoseoptics better, Gunsmith. Wine geysered,

most flashing tosteam in the intense heat as burning wooden slats dancedCatherine Wheels

through the air."Take him!" Misaki shouted to her Brothers, alreadydarting towards Kaeris.

"Leave her to me!"But the Arcanist woman was firing again, a rapid streamof angry red

comets hurtling through the air, forcing Misakito jump two steps to the side for every one

forward.Wherever they landed, the fireballs burst, spilling greedyflames over the dusty

timber boards that sucked the fireoutwards in ever-expanding pools. Heat washed

overMisaki as she flew past an iron pillar, and still the onslaughtof flame continued.Shots

and cries sounded, but she had no time for herBrothers now. She paused behind a stack of

ceramic tilesto chase away motes burning in her silks and noticed aneat hole through her

scarf. A shot she had never seen hadjust missed her neck. That man must have taken it

whileshe 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. Shescaled the stack of tiles like a cat going

up a curtain. Kaerisglimpsed her as she reached the top, and the twin streamsof fire started

to converge. Misaki sprinted forward andleapt off the stack. She fell through heat-hazed air

andslammed her bisento down flat-bladed onto the timbers.Furious energy coursed through

her, discharging with athunder-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 floorin a punishing grey cloud, lit blood-red by the fires. A cloudthat hid her from

Kaeris' sight.Fast as a breaking wave, she raced forward, not evenslowing a fraction as she

shot up and over the pyramid ofurns Kaeris had been on. She jumped off the pyramid

asecond before a searing spear shot out of nowhere, aimedmore by anticipation than sight.

It scorched the air as itpassed her by, and pain burned down her side. She landedclumsily,

gasping and rolling clear as another dragon'sbreath flamed towards her out the dust and

then ashadow loomed and Misaki brought the haft of her bisentosquarely down on Kaeris'

left hand.The woman cried out in pain of her own, clutching herhand and twisting away as

the blue flames on the injuredhand flickered away to nothing.Misaki's hand flicked out,

flinging a round, red object atKaeris' feet as the mercenary prepared to retaliate.

Kaerisjumped back in alarm, then stopped, a look ofbewilderment on her face.Misaki

shrugged. “Just a cherry.” But she'd bought herselfan opening and only just had time to dive

behind somesturdy winch gear as Kaeris brought her uninjured handup and split the air with

a beam of fire so white-hot it feltas though the sun had been rent asunder. The scream

ofanger that accompanied it was just as furious.Misaki kept moving, fast and low. The smoke

from thedozens of fires was adding to the dust cloud, reducingvisibility to only a few feet.

Straining to listen over the rush and crackle of fire, sheheard a roaring BA-BOOM!and a

scream from one of herBrothers. The Gunsmith was still alive, then. She tried toput him from

her thoughts – Shigeo and the others wouldhave to handle him alone.As if reading her mind,

she heard Kaeris call out. "Whatare they to you, Lady Misaki? These so-called Brothers

ofyours? People like me and you are made to shape thisworld, but they're just murderers

and thieves.""While you burn everything around you in the name ofpeace and tranquility?"

The smoke and flames wereconfusing the air, making sounds come from all

directions.Misaki kept low, circling outward."You're telling me you have something in

common withthem?""I wouldn't expect your kind to understand," Misakireplied.A laugh, but

from where? "I may have my price, but I knowabout loyalty."Misaki answered with a laugh of

her own. "As you knowmy name, and yet I am a complete stranger to you, so it iswith your

kind and that word.""The man who made these wings for me, and trained mein the ways of

power, would prove you wrong!” There wasfresh anger there – she'd struck a nerve.An

avalanche of noise sounded from off to one side, asplintering, crashing torrent that had to be

the remains ofthe Tea House collapsing. It gave Misaki her bearings for amoment, just as a

red-wreathed silhouette loomed in theswirling smoke. Kaeris. She scythed her bisento as

Kaerissprung forward. Fire blossomed, meeting the magicalblade, and then both women

were grappling, their handson the hardwood haft and their sweat-streaked facesinches

apart. Flames poured like molten steel but wereharnessed by the power of the bisento and

instead ofsearing Misaki's flesh from her bones, they raced along theblade and lashed

outwards harmlessly.Misaki shifted, trying to unbalance her foe, but themercenary moved

with her. More crashing sounds camefrom the ruins of the Tea House, along with heavy,

clankingsounds. Was something coming through the wreckage?“Loyalty has to cut both

ways,” Kaeris panted, the effortof maintaining the flow of fire sending tracks of sweatthrough

the ash on her face, “or it is just chains byanother name. And I'm certain the Ten Thunders

aregetting 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 foulnesswhen taking orders

from that thing in the cage, or didyou not notice after a while?""Today they are our friends,

tomorrow who knows? Thatis freedom!” Kaeris' eyes were glowing with the energiespouring

out of her, her frustration at Misaki's ability todeflect them clear. “But what of the Ten

Thunders? Whatdoes it feel like, to wield power like this and live amongscum? Do you still

feel them dragging you down, or doyou 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 moreviolent and directionless, burning great avenues

of flamein the air and setting the ceiling ablaze. “Mastery.” Swiftas a snake, she released her

grip on her weapon anddelivered a savage flurry of jabs to her opponent's midriff,just below

the harness. As Kaeris recoiled in pain, Misakisnatched her bisento back and spun it around

hershoulders before stabbing it forward. Kaeris only justrolled aside in time. “Control.”The

mechanical clanking sound increased as Kaerissprang to her feet, but she did not strike out.

Warily, theycircled one another, the smoke making ghosts of themboth. 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.” Flameslike snakes

unravelled from her uninjured hand andentwined themselves languidly around her. “You

think Iam controlling this? Control is a myth unless we embracethe chaos. Control is

impossible unless we revel inuncertainty and doubt. That is the paradox of power inthis

land.” The snakes eyes glowed white-hot and furious.“You have revealed yourself to me,

and that will unmakeyou.”

The snakes struck, their heads splitting like hydras in mid-air. Misaki had been expecting the

attack, but the natureof it surprised her. She fell back, scorched and warpingtimbers shifting

underfoot. The flame-serpents were aflurry of motion, spending and renewing themselves

fromKaeris' hand in brilliant bursts of light, but there seemedno sense or skill to their

onslaught. Misaki moved withperfect timing, catching tongues of flame on her bisentoand

snuffing them to nothing, moving to intercept thenext one in flawless harmony. But always

falling back,because the next one was never where it should be, neverwhere any skilled

assailant would strike next. Most of theattacks were easy to repel, but a few came at her

fromimprobable angles, their sheer randomness making themdeadlier than anything Kaeris

had flung at her before. Inmoments, her silks were smoking and charred in a half-dozen

places, and she could smell her own singed hair. Offbalance, and losing ground, her skill

was working againsther.With a titanic groan, an iron column collapsed and fellbetween the

two women. Layers of roof and glasssmashed down with it, and Misaki turned to see

anenormous construct emerging from the smoke and flameswhere the Tea House had been.

Metal beams and chunksof masonry bounced unnoticed off its armored shell. Brasscogs

ground their teeth and steel talons glinted withmalicious, mechanical intent as the

Peacekeeper rippedup fistfuls of aged timber, its great head hunting for targetsthrough the

smoke. The Guild had finally arrived.“Time to be leaving,” Kaeris said, coiling vines of

flamearound her body and across the floor, “but first thingsfirst.”The looping tendrils of fire

exploded outward, lunging forMisaki in an immolating embrace. But the interruption ofthe

Guild machine had given her a second to think. Kaeris'assault embraced chaos and

confusion to devastatingeffect, obliterating Misaki's superior skill. The very conceptwas

anathema to her, but her only hope was to do thesame. Abandon perfection. Let chaos

reign. Fight fire withfire.She charged, screaming, before she knew what she wasdoing. That

choice saved her life. She moved withoutthinking, abandoning her training to become

asunpredictable as a force of nature. One moment as fluidas water, the other as highly

sprung as steel, she changedin the blink of an eye to the whiplash motion of a

strikingmantis. The fires of Kaeris could not find her, could nottouch 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. Everystitch stood apart from the others, and yet knitted into oneperfect whole.

Chaos was pitted against chaos, andMisaki's was the most thorough and inventive. She

wasadvancing now, her bisento describing blinding arcs in theair she had never seen before

and – wonderfully – had noidea if she would ever see again.Kaeris screamed in rage and

frustration and backed off,spawning a kraken of fire to encircle Misaki, but whatevergaps the

flames left, there she was, impossibly leaping andspinning through them unhurt, every step

bringing thatsweeping blade closer to Kaeris.The paradox, Misaki realized as her steel bit

the air inchesfrom Kaeris' neck, was to achieve mastery through bothharmony and anarchy.

Exhilaration flowed through her asshe understood the potential of what she had

unlocked.She did not know what her next move was until she madeit. When the

Peacekeeper's chain spear exploded througha wall of burning barrels, it became simply

another notein the symphony she was building, one whose finalmovement was now

inevitable.Kaeris was spent. She had nothing left. Misaki poised andleapt, blade drawn back,

and then the Peacekeepercrashed over them both like a wave of iron. Misaki dancedanew in

a forest of pistons and armour, thunderousclanking over the hateful hiss of steam, rising up

over itsgreat, red carapace among the soot and oil and beyondthe grasping claws to launch

herself once more at Kaeris.But Kaeris was rising. Borne aloft on brass wings androasted

air, she crashed into Misaki and kept on rising, onehand grasping Misaki's silk robes. Her

feet left thePeacekeeper's back as it reared up, enraged at theirescape, swiping its railroad

spike-claws at them, butcatching only smoke. Kaeris rose higher. Her brass wingsheaved,

steadily gaining height. Misaki struggled, but shewas tangled, and could not bring herself

about to strike.Patches of night sky sucked the smoke out of the burningwarehouse, with

more and more appearing as thebuilding's death hastened.

Misaki saw her fate; a short fall and a quick end once Kaerisgained clear skies. Then a

familiar cry and a pair of strongarms wrapped themselves around her waist. She lookeddown

into the blood and ash-streaked face of Shigeo,hanging on for grim life, and behind him the

burning stackof shipping crates he must have launched himself from.Immediately, the three

of them began to drop back intothe smoke.“No!” Kaeris screamed, her wings unable to bear

Shigeo'sextra weight.Misaki felt the grip holding her loosen, and looked up intoKaeris' 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 themup, her last sight of

Kaeris was of the bronze wings ripplingwith blue fire as they powered the woman out a rent

inthe warehouse roof. Misaki hit the ground hard, rollingthrough burning wads of packing

linen and sprang to herfeet before the flames could take hold. She grabbedShigeo's hand

and hauled him upright, slapping at the firesthat licked at his robes. Thunderous crashes

sounded allaround them, and the doomsday clank of the Peacekeeperwas 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 theshoulder. Misaki noticed the blood

soaking the silk. “Hegot 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 spearthrough Hirofume.”It could have

been a lot worse, but her Brothers had foughtfiercely and bravely and had made amends for

their earlierdisaster. Misaki was satisfied honor had been restored, andthe Dervish Swords

had been wiped out in the mostemphatic fashion. Come morning, everyone in LittleKingdom

would be reminded why not even a brave mancrossed the Ten Thunders. “There's no way

out through that!” Misaki shouted,pointing towards the fury of the Peacekeeper and

theraging fire. Wherever the Peacekeeper led, other Guildconstructs and forces were not far

behind. “Come withme.”Misaki and Shigeo gathered the surviving Ten Thundersat the

waterway at the rear of the warehouse. The rearwall was a blazing sheet of flame, burning

timbersdropping into the oily, black water, but they could swimout, and the Guild would not

have been reckoning on apursuit to the river. They would take whatever boats theycould find

and be long gone by the time the lawmencaught up.Misaki was the last to leave, watching

impassively as thegreat, dark shadow of the Peacekeeper raged amid thehungry flames.

After a short underwater dash, shehauled herself up green-slick stones and onto a

narrowtow-ledge. Ahead, her Brothers were still swimming,aiming for the Harken Docks. Out

of sight behind her, thewarehouse burned. Great blankets of smoke spreadacross the night

sky, lit blood red from below. She lookedup at the old stone and timber wall beside her,

workingout 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 hima 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 glancedup at the wall she had been about to scale. “Are

youleaving 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 veryimportant to me. But in the fight with that woman, Ifound

a way to fight and win I could never have imaginedbefore. It was as if the north wind and the

south windblew as one. Two forces in opposition that cametogether. It should not have

worked, but it did. I havemuch 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 havefound another way.” She put a hand on his

uninjuredshoulder. “Go. We will meet back at the Trading House. Asmuch as I respect my

father, our Oyabun, this is a newworld with new rules. So I will lead the Ten Thunders, ashe

asks, but I will do it my way, and I will take you all withme. To the very top. This world will not

know our nextmove until we make it. It should not work, but I have afeeling it will.”Shigeo

nodded. He gave a short bow and leapt into thecanal, his battered katana between his teeth.

She watchedas he paddled away out of sight, and then began scalingthe wall.The world was

chaos and doubt. Misaki Katanaka smiledto herself, and climbed.