

Clouds of Coal and Magic: Sample Chapter

Both Saki's elbows and butt slammed into concrete. It was hard to breathe. Saki tried to sit up, but there was something heavy across xyr chest. A piece of debris from the time machine?

Then there was a flailing of arms and legs, and the boy that was sprawled across xem pushed himself back off. "Pardon!" he said, looking behind instead of at xem. Saki recognized the look of one who was being chased.

"What's going on?" Saki asked.

Saki heard a muffled shout from another room, and the boy scuttled toward the edge of the room. That was when Saki realized they were inside, in a rather spacious yet empty room. The ground xe had fallen upon was bare, but the curtains and wallpaper were of rich maroon and gold colors, suggesting that perhaps a carpet of similar level of lushness had been recently removed. Or yet to be installed. The boy reached a closed door and grasped the large bronze knob, but it didn't turn. "Gart," he muttered, glancing back behind him.

The door opposite him was slightly ajar, and through it Saki heard more shouts. "Back here!"

"Locked?" Saki asked the boy.

"Check," the boy said, still jiggling the handle.

Saki pulled out xyr lockpick set and tossed it to him.

He caught it deftly, eyes widening when he saw what it was, then went to work on the lock.

Saki had just got to xyr feet and dusted xyrself off when the first man came through the open door. Saki immediately went on the defensive, legs spread wide and hands up next to xyr

face. This man looked like nothing more than a Malakan merchant; not a soldier and definitely not Eelian, but Saki never underestimated an opponent.

The merchant's bushy face showed alarm, and he raised his arms as if in defeat. Then he called behind him. "He's back here! Quickly! He's got an accomplice!"

The boy behind Saki grunted as he struggled to unlock the door. Almost immediately the merchant was joined by two others, and these men were wearing uniforms, with brass buttons and stiff felt caps. "Halt, you're under arrest, in the name of King Miraz," shouted one. As he spoke, the lock picks were pulled from the boy's hands and into the hands of the police officer. Saki grinned; good to know off the bat that xe was dealing with a Teller.

The other police officer focused on xem. "You're under arrest."

"For what?" xe asked, stalling in hopes he'd reveal his magic too.

"For aiding this threat," he replied, and he came for xem with his beefy bare arms, indicating that he was probably a Muscle.

"Squidly," xe said. Xe ducked his grasp and kicked him in the groin.

He went down with a groan even as Saki was already whipping xyr body around to kick the Teller before he could put his hands on the runaway boy. Xe swept the Teller's legs out from under him. In an easy moment both police officers were down.

Saki bared xyr teeth at the merchant, and he squeaked and ran from the room.

With that threat taken care of, Saki ran to the closed door and punched it open with the heel of xyr boot. "Well, what are you waiting for?" xe yelled at the boy.

He closed his mouth and darted through the broken door. Xe followed after him.

They were in a darkened corridor, and the police officers were rousing themselves to chase after them, but the boy seemed to know where he was going now. He pushed back a

tapestry that Saki hadn't noticed and revealed a rickety metal ladder. He started scrambling up it, and Saki followed him.

"What are you after?" he asked xem.

"After you, covering your ass," xe said.

"I had it sorted," he replied, short of breath.

"Check. You're welcome."

More shouts behind them indicated that the chase was back on. The boy climbed faster toward the ceiling. There was a small, round hatch above his head that he quickly pushed open and climbed through. Saki was after him in a moment, though xyr shoulders barely fit.

Xe gained balance on the roof and squinted xyr eyes shut in the bright sun of an afternoon shift. Had xe ever seen the sun so bright? The air breathed fresh and clear. Saki knew that clouds of radiation and pollution coating the atmosphere above Ground Zero, but xe had never realized just how much it had affected the air. Xe looked around xem, trying to adjust xyr eyes; the roof was made of some sturdy material xe'd never seen before, and between cracks in the roof, where plates didn't quite line up, little hills of dirt had accumulated, and in those hills scrawny weeds popped forth and reached toward the bright sun. The edges of the building had concrete gables and a stone gargoyle, and if xe looked beyond the gargoyle xe could see a brick clock tower rising next to xem. The rubble of the clock must have been where Jose had scavenged those large gears he had been so happy about last year.

Saki's head whipped around at the sound of shoes scuffing on concrete, and xe glimpsed out of the corner of xyr eye the boy jumping off the lip of the roof. "Wait!" xe called, hoping he was a Feather or a Jumper or something else that would keep him from dying.

Xe reached the edge and looked over, saw him land in a compost box. Behind xem, xe heard the Muscle copper struggling to fit through the hatch door. Xe had to think of something, fast, to end this chase. To give xem enough of an advantage to lose him. Xe looked at the weeds, looked at xyr hands. Maybe xe could encourage the small plants to become bindings...

Xe took a deep breath and channeled xyr magic into the weeds at xyr feet.

The vines swayed back and forth as if from a gentle breeze. Two or three gestured toward the policeman as if to say, "We'd love to help, sorry!"

Saki took a deep breath and mustered every last ounce of xyr magic.

Four of the vines sprouted an extra leaf each. One extended forward about half an inch.

Even with this brilliant sun and clean air, xyr magic was nothing. Almost Useless. And while xe had been futilely trying to grow stupid plants, the Muscle was forcing his way up through the hatch. Fortunately for xem, his magical strength couldn't even help fit his bulk through the small opening.

Saki knew how to take out this opponent the non-magical way. Xe stomped one of xyr boots down on the hand that was pressing down on the roof, trying to push himself up. Xyr other boot xe planted directly between his eyes.

With a howl the copper reached for his face with his free hand. Saki stepped back from the other hand, and as it raised up to join the other on his bleeding nose, Saki gave him another good hard kick in the head.

He sagged and then *shlooped* back down the ladder, unable to find a handhold. Saki slammed the hatch back closed above him. Xe knew xe didn't have much time before he recovered, so xe ran to the edge of the roof, held xyr breath, and jumped.

A hand reached out, casting a slight shadow over xyr face. Xe grasped it, and it helped xem out of the heap of decomposing vegetables and dung.

“Thanks,” xe said, giving xemself a token brush off on xyr butt, because xyr filthy hands weren’t actually helping anything.

“I told you I had it sorted,” the boy said, sounding pissed.

“I was giving you a head start; you should have taken it.”

“Just *go*,” the boy said, already taking off down the alleyway.

Xe kept up pace with him for two streets, but then he wriggled through a narrow crack where two stone walls barely didn’t meet, and xyr broad shoulders barely made it through.

They had entered a scrubby courtyard overshadowed by the large buildings surrounding it, with more weeds and trash than anything else. The boy looked over his shoulder at Saki.

“What are you doing? Why are you following me?”

“Those cops are following me now too,” Saki said. “Why did you wait for me?”

“I had to make sure you were safe against those guards. Active Fey are dangerous.”

“I can take care of myself against Fey *and* Non, thank you very much.”

“So can I,” the boy replied. “I didn’t need your help.”

Saki’s retort was cut off by a sudden shout on the other side of the wall behind xem.

The boy nearly jumped out of his skin. “*Schiesse*. They’ll have a Nose or Mapper tracking me. Run.” He darted across the courtyard toward a door that was rotting away.

“I need to get out of the city, and I don’t know how,” Saki called after him. “Can you...?”

The boy rolled his eyes as his slender fingers pried a plank away from the door’s setting.

“Try to keep up.”

Saki nodded. Xe squeezed through the doorway into a dark passage as xe heard the sound of scraping up the stone wall behind xem. It smelled like unicorn dung in here, but almost before xe had time to register the squashy feeling under xyr boots, they were back out in the sunlight, and xe was squinting in an alley. Then through a peach orchard, two more abandoned buildings, and a long corridor between a school and a jewelry shop before they came out onto a main street clogged with hundreds of city people. The colors and noises on this thoroughfare were so brilliant and discordant as to give Saki a physical reaction. Xe staggered back at the vivid, dried-blood-red pendants hanging from almost every stall. The meaty, passionate syllables of the Malakan language was similar to xyr parents' Nerjan, and xe was instantly transported back to the helplessness of xyr six-year-old self; and it was different enough that xe couldn't push past those doubts and insecurities. The square smelled of cumin and roasting hot peppers, of sweat and honey. It hadn't occurred to xem that the past would have smells. That it would be so...much.

Xe managed to recover xemself just as the boy paused a dozen paces ahead, noticing that xe was lagging.

“Did you want to get some shopping done before we get arrested? Come on!”

Saki wiped something out of xyr eyes and caught up with him without a word.

Finally the boy ducked into a tapestry shop that was wedged between a row of outhouses and the whitewashed brick of the city's outer wall. The shop was blissfully dark and quiet; the boy pushed aside a magenta rug woven with a pattern of inverted and righted evergreen trees to reveal a tunnel chipped through the outer wall—wider than the previous opening they had slipped through, but shorter than Saki was tall.

Without hesitation Saki hunched over and shuffled through the cool brick passageway to follow xyr guide. It was almost five meters long, but there was nothing obscuring the exit, so it was brightly lit, and xe could clearly see the sky and trees beyond.

With the noises of the city dimmed, xe could hear the sound of rushing water. The creek of poisonous sludge from xyr timeline must be a true river here. “I probably should have asked before--can you swim?” the boy asked.

“I don’t think so,” Saki said.

“That’s unfortunate,” he said, and xe heard him splash into the water.

The last step from the passageway gave way to sheer wall face and a meter drop to river. Saki took half a step back to assess the situation. It was at least ten meters across to the bank: no chance xe could jump it. The boy landed with a splash and was already kicking his way across, making a loud fuss. There was no way guard wouldn’t be able to hear him. But once they got to the other side, maybe they would be all right. The other side was gravelly and wildly uneven. There would be many alcoves for hiding, and the ground wouldn’t show tracks.

Xe looked down at the river again. Surely xe could figure out some semblance of swimming long enough to make it. It would be awfully embarrassing if xe failed in xyr mission after half an hour because xe drowned in a river. Xe took a deep breath and stepped out.

The breath was expelled forcefully as Saki hit the cold water, the weight of xyr boots and cargo pants dragging xem to the bottom. Xe pushed off the rocky bottom and flailed xyr arms in a rough approximation of what xe thought the boy had done. Xe felt xyr head break the surface and xe gasped before sinking again.

Xe couldn’t see, but xe felt creatures brushing xyr arms and xyr hair as xe repeated the jumping and flailing gesture. The third time xe managed to get some kicking in, though whether

it was propelling xem in the right direction was beyond xem. Jump, thrash, kick, breathe, sink. Jump, thrash, kick, breathe, sink. Xe couldn't remember what having lungs full of air felt like.

Then the fish against xyr arms were replaced with human hands, and the boy was helping xem up once again. Xe felt the grass against xyr arms as xe was heaved out, xyr cargo pants a thousand pounds and forcing xem to xyr knees on the ground. Xe coughed and wiped water out of xyr eyes.

“You're alive.” He sounded surprised. “If that huge ruckus didn't alert every guard in the city that we're out here, we might be safe. Safe-like. Akin to safe. On the far outskirts of safe.”

“Thanks. Again.” Finally able to breathe and see, xe took xyr first good look at xyr unexpected acquaintance. He was a few centimeters shorter than Saki, with the stick-thin build, pale complexion, and pointed features of a person who had never experienced a full meal. His dark-brown eyes were sunken wells of suspicion and hunger, and his lackluster hair was long and tangled. It was impossible to tell how old he was. Saki felt a punch in the gut that even in this time, outside of Ground Zero, there were kids who had grown up like xem, always needing more.

“What?” he asked, defiantly staring back at xem.

“Care to share how you got King Miraz's men after you?” xe asked finally.

He shrugged. “I stole some stuff. Burned down the mayor's stables. Burned some other buildings in the process.”

“Huh,” xe said. “You a Blazer?”

“No, I just burn stuff sometimes. To make a political statement.” His eyes darted behind xem, to the sides, over his shoulder.

Saki got the hint. “Akin to safe” wouldn't last long while they were out here. “We should go.”

“Okay, Great Dragon look upon you,” he said.

“And upon you,” xe said. Xe had a compass, and xe knew this river flowed west. If it was the offshoot of the Carlos River that flowed out of Rosario, and it clearly was, it flowed almost directly west beyond the border of Malaga and well into Pemberely. Exactly where xe was heading. It was part of the reason xe had been chosen for this mission. Xe was most familiar with the terrain that far west from Ground Zero in the present. Or the future? Time travel was confusing.

But xe asked anyway. “Um, I am a little disoriented. Which way is west?”

He pointed downstream.

“Ah, right. Sir Rifke guide you, then,” xe said. Xe continued to hesitate, reluctant to leave the boy. Xe knew xe couldn’t be much help to him, but xe felt bad leaving him. General Hiroshi provided a safe haven and a purpose to so many young people like him—like xem. Xe had directed many kids to General Hiroshi while on missions, returning the favor Raiden had done for xem so many years ago.

But General Hiroshi wasn’t here. This was the past, and anyway the boy had said he could take care of himself. He hadn’t even acknowledged xyr benediction and was far among the weeds.

Xe had xyr own work to do. Saki oriented xemself west and set to walking.