

Episode 3: A Train to Prosperity

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From set *Outlaws of Thunder Junction*

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Akul dug his claws into the gravel, watching as two Hellspurs appeared through the thick smoke. Their fists were tightened around the mine overseer's disheveled uniform, and when they shoved the man toward Akul, the overseer collapsed to his knees, face stained with blood and soot.

Flames danced in the dragon's eyes, reflecting what was left of the copper mine. "Tell me what you know."

The overseer sputtered into the sand, lip quivering. "Graywater hired me to look after the mine. Whatever you're searching for has nothing to do with me, I swear! Please—I won't tell anyone I saw you. I just want to go home."

Akul lowered his head and sneered. "If you have nothing to tell me, then I don't see why you're still breathing."

The man's eyes widened. "I *did* hear a rumor about someone stealing something from Graywater. Something important enough that Sterling Company headquarters sent out over two dozen guards to retrieve it!"

Akul leaned back, mildly appeased, and clicked a nail against the rocky floor beneath him. "Give me a name."

The man shook his head, fearful. "It was some shapeshifting fae from another plane. He had blue face paint and had help escaping—but that's all I know."

Akul's gaze snapped to the Hellspurs. "Find him. Now."

They nodded before vanishing back through the smoke, leaving the overseer at the dragon's feet.

For several excruciating seconds, the man waited in terror.

Akul turned to the engulfed mine, attention drifting toward an exit. The overseer's shoulders sagged with relief. He stood, knees quaking, and hooked a finger around his neckerchief to loosen some of the tension. With a wary glance in the opposite direction of the mine, he took one step closer to safety.

"Where do you think you're going?" Akul hissed like a growing flame.

The overseer froze. He held his hands up, ready to plead, but there wasn't time.

Akul whipped the barbed, venomous stinger on the end of his tail into the man's gut, and the light splintered behind the overseer's eyes.

By the time he hit the ground, he was already gone.

Oko watched the others from the mezzanine. Kaervek was huddled with Annie and Vraska, deep in conversation. Gisa and Geralf stood on opposite sides of the room, clearly at war with one another. Eriette, Malcolm, and Breeches were holding glasses at the bar. Umezawa sharpened a serrated knife, studying the others in calculated silence, while Tinybones sprawled across the top of the piano, holding a golden pocket watch up to the light for closer inspection.

The floorboards creaked behind Oko, and his mouth quirked with amusement. “I know you’re there,” he said easily. “I’ve been listening to you breathing for the past five minutes.”

There was a pause before Kellan appeared from the alcove. He pressed his hands over the railing, shifting nervously. “Sorry. I wasn’t trying to sneak up on you.”

“You’d be doing a terrible job if you were.”

Kellan’s cheeks reddened. “It’s just—well, this isn’t how I imagined our first meeting.”

Oko drummed his fingers on the wooden balustrade. “Reality rarely matches fantasy. But in my experience, the most fun happens when you aren’t following a plan.” He grinned. “Meeting you was an unexpected surprise, and one that I’m grateful for.”

Kellan brushed a dark curl from his brow, his expression softening. “Really?”

“Yes.” Oko motioned toward the crew in the lower room. “You’ll make a wonderful addition to the team.”

Kellan chewed on his thoughts a moment too long, but eventually released a sigh. He didn’t have the words for whatever was weighing on him.

“You came to my rescue when I needed it most.” Oko continued to stare down the balcony. “It’s something I won’t easily forget. Perhaps someday soon, I can return the favor.”

“I don’t need favors,” Kellan said slowly. “I just want to get to know you.”

“You will,” Oko promised. He knew how to sound genuine—and besides, he almost meant this one.

Kellan looked like he was about to say more when his breath hitched suddenly, and he leaned over the railing, eyes wide with alarm. Oko tensed, ready to summon his magic at the first sign of danger, but when he followed Kellan’s gaze to the corner of the room below, the crease in his brow vanished. Ashiok was drifting forward as if being carried by a storm of darkness. Black shadows curled around them, pulsing like a slow heartbeat.

Recognition flooded Kellan’s face, his concerned expression morphing into outrage. He gripped the wood tightly, knuckles emitting a golden aura.

“Easy, kid,” Oko said, sensing Kellan was ready to leap off the balcony and begin a brawl. “Whatever history the two of you share doesn’t have a place here. Is that understood?”

“You don’t know what they did—what they’re capable of!”

“I know what I need to. Everything else makes little difference to me.”

“Ashiok is dangerous,” Kellan insisted. “They attacked my home and manipulated people into doing their bidding. They made Rowan Kenirth turn—well, evil! You can’t trust them.”

Oko sniffed dismissively. “I don’t need you to trust Ashiok—I need you to trust me. Can you do that?”

Kellan stiffened slightly before nodding and letting go of the railing.

Oko made it a point to look pleased. “Good. Kellan, I’m sure your mother did an excellent job raising you, but there are things she hasn’t taught you. About your powers, about where you come from. Now that we’ve finally been reunited, I can teach you so much about your *true* heritage. I have business to discuss with the crew.” He moved for the stairs, pausing halfway down. “You coming?”

Kellan hesitated, grappling with the guilt clearly radiating from his shoulders. Still, he followed his father downstairs, stopping near one of the larger tables where the rest of the team had gathered.

Oko braced for a reaction from Ashiok, but it was Eriette who noticed Kellan first.

“Of all the people to run into on Thunder Junction,” she said haughtily. She turned her nose up, white hair spilling over her shoulders as she glared at Oko. “If I knew this brat was joining the team, I’d have negotiated a higher fee.”

Oko’s voice was all charm. “If the necromancers can attempt to set aside their differences for the sake of the mission, I’m sure the rest of us can learn to do the same.”

Kellan scowled. Eriette pursed her lips and shrugged.

“Wonderful. Now, getting back to the reason we’ve all gathered here ...” Oko nodded toward Kaervek. “What have you discovered?”

Kaervek removed the artifact from his coat, placed it in the center of the table, and folded his arms over his chest. “It’s not Thran or Phyrexian, but it’s as old, or older. I cannot tell you with precision what ancient place it hails from. It had no response to my magic, and so my knowledge remains limited.”

“Unsurprising,” Umezawa muttered, leaning against one of the pillars.

Kaervek’s nostrils flared, but he fixed his stare on Oko. “I believe the artifact is more than a key, and perhaps even more dangerous than we can understand. Whoever made it, and wherever it comes from ... You could be unleashing another Phyrexia on the Multiverse.”

“You sound afraid,” Vraska said testily.

“It is not fear that dwells inside me; it is caution,” Kaervek corrected. “I lost centuries because I seized a power I could not control. I am not keen to do it again without study.”

Ashiok’s shadows swirled behind them. “Bertram Graywater will be searching for us and doing everything in his power to find the key. We need to reach the vault before that happens.”

“We still don’t know where Tarnation *is*,” Malcolm pointed out, feathers straightening against his arms. “I know you’ve asked me to do recon, but there’s a lot of desert out there. I’d prefer directions—or at the very least, a map.”

Gisa’s grin was sinister. “How about we torture it out of someone? I bet there’s a Hellspur out there who could show us the way!”

Geralf scoffed. “You don’t have the patience for interrogation.”

“The only thing I don’t have patience for is *you*, brother,” she said. “Even your voice grates on me.”

Vraska waved a hand. “We need to know how to reach the vault—but directions won’t matter if we don’t know how to use this key.” Her eyes landed on Kaervek first, and then Annie. “Tell them what you told me.”

Annie raised her shoulders. “I know of an Outcaster from the territories who studies ancient magical artifacts. Nolan’s his name. He’ll do just about anything for a paycheck, and for a few extra coins, you can buy his silence, too.”

Oko looked around the room. “How soon can we get him here?”

“There’s a problem,” Vraska said, tendrils flicking behind her. “The man in question is currently on a train to Prosperity, escorted by Sterling mercenaries.”

The shadows at Ashiok’s feet shuddered. “Graywater must’ve gone looking for him for the exact same reason.”

“But Graywater doesn’t have the key anymore,” Malcolm pointed out. “He’s got no use for an artifact expert.”

“Wasting his time!” Breeches agreed.

Vraska narrowed her eyes. “For all we know, Graywater might put him under lock and key while he tries to get the artifact back.”

Oko nodded. “We need to get to the Outcaster before he reaches Prosperity.”

Breeches threw his arms in the air. “CAPTURE AND INTERROGATE!”

Gisa looked giddy. Geralf rolled his eyes.

Oko turned to Kellan. “You’re a former Sterling man. How familiar are you with the guard rotations on the train?”

Kellan froze, uncertain. “I—I don’t want to do anything illegal.”

A rumble of dark chuckles spread throughout the room.

“I’m only asking for your expertise,” Oko said, voice soft as velvet. Kellan cleared his throat, avoiding the stares from the rest of the crew. “I don’t want anyone to get hurt. I’ve already made a mess of things with Ral ...”

Oko pressed a hand to his heart. “I promise that no innocents will be harmed.”

Gisa’s face fell with disappointment, but everyone else was stoic.

“Okay,” Kellan said finally. “Tell me what you need to know.”

The train sped across the golden desert, sun blazing through the elongated glass windows. Kellan tapped his boot nervously, counting the passengers around him with dread. There had to be at least a hundred people in all the traveling cars combined—maybe more.

If anything went wrong ...



Art by: Leon Tukker

Oko placed a hand on Kellan's shoulder. "Try not to look so terrified," his father drawled, too low for anyone else to hear. "We're supposed to be blending in."

Kellan stilled, but his heart felt like it was about to beat out of his chest. To anyone watching, he looked like any other Sterling guard on their way to Prosperity. With Oko hiding beneath an illusion, he looked like one, too. He seemed to have a much better hold over his illusions now that he was aware of his son's presence.

Kellan's eyes flicked toward the door connecting their current railcar to the one behind it. "The guards will be on rotation soon. They'll be heading for the front of the train, which is our opening to head toward the back."

Oko's mouth barely moved. "You're certain the Outcaster will be there?"

Kellan nodded once. "The overnight coaches are the only place they can put people under armed guard without drawing attention. If Nolan is still on the train, that's where he'll be."

Umezawa sat inconspicuously on the other end of the aisle, hat pulled low, arms folded over his chest. Most of his tattoos were hidden beneath layers of fabric, but a few were visible just above his collar.

The moment Oko's voice pressed into Kellan's mind, he flinched. He'd never experienced group telepathy before—and he wasn't sure he liked it.

"*Can everyone hear me?*" Oko asked across the mental link.

Umezawa looked up in acknowledgment.

Annie's voice sounded next, vivid and clear despite her being over a mile up the ridgeline. "We're here, and we've got eyes on the train."

"Skies are looking clear, too," Malcolm announced. "Breeches is ready to blow up the bridge on your signal." "BOOM!" Breeches shrieked excitedly.

"Is that the signal?" Gisa cut in. Her giggling was bordering on euphoric. "I can hardly stand the wait!"

"Of course that's not the signal," Geralf tutted, exasperated. "You're to raise the corpses after Breeches blows up the bridge and forces the train to stop. We've gone over this a hundred times. Why is it so difficult for you to pay even half a mind to what anyone else says?"

"Corpses?" Kellan tried to ask, but no one seemed to hear him over the necromancers' bickering.

"Stop telling me what to do!" Gisa snarled back. "You're not in charge—and the only reason you were even invited on this job was because I allowed you to be."

"Having a stitcher is far more useful than a ghoulcaller. Besides, I'm here for the secrets this 'thunder' can offer my craft," Geralf countered. "Though at this stage, I'm not entirely sure it's worth having to endure the sound of your voice!"

"Ashiok didn't create a telepathic link for the two of you to argue like children," Vraska scolded. "Save it for after the mission. Right now, we need to stick to the plan."

The nearby door opened, and two guards stepped inside. They strolled down the aisle, giving an obligatory nod in recognition of Kellan's and Oko's uniforms, before disappearing through the next walkway.

The moment it was clear, Oko stood and moved toward the back of the train, with Kellan and Umezawa following behind him. When they reached the luggage carriage, they slipped past rows of suitcases and leather trunks and paused in front of a locked door.

Umezawa pushed the brim of his hat back. "I don't know how anyone can see with these things on," he grumbled before removing a small metal device from his belt.

A panel flashed, and several tiny origami shapes appeared along the edges. Umezawa held the piece of equipment up to the handle, and the shapes folded and refolded themselves like paper before burrowing inside the keyhole. He worked quickly, using the device to manipulate the lock as the metal pieces took on the shape of an intricate key.

Kellan had never seen anything like it before.

"Our window for blowing up this bridge and stopping the train is getting smaller," Malcolm noted through the mental link. "How are we doing in there?"

"Give me a minute," Umezawa replied coolly.

"READY AND WAITING!" Breeches squawked.

"Wait, was that the signal?" Gisa asked.

"He said to give him a minute!" Geralf barked.

"How dare you raise your voice to me," Gisa spat back. "Don't think our temporary truce will keep me from taking your tongue!"

"Threaten me all you like, but I can just as easily stich your mouth shut—"

"—you ruin everything, and I'm so tired of your constant nagging! If I could—"

"—the most unreliable, self-serving—"

“—irritating, obnoxious—”

“Would the two of you be quiet,” Malcolm roared. “How is Breeches supposed to hear the signal over all of this noise?”

“SIGNAL!” Breeches’s voice boomed.

“No, Gisa—what are you doing? Stop!” Geralf yelled.

The faraway screams carried all the way to the luggage car.

Kellan’s heart pinched as he watched Oko’s brow furrow. Even Umezawa paused at the lock, face paling.

“What’s going on?” Oko demanded.

“She raised the zombies too early,” Geralf groaned.

Gisa’s cackle exploded through the telepathic channel. “You see, dear brother? Doubt me all you want—I will always prove I’m more powerful than you.”



Art by: Chris Seaman

“Oko, you’ve got guards moving for the back of the train,” Malcolm said quickly. “You better find somewhere to hide if you want to keep the element of surprise.”

“I’m almost done,” Umezawa said, twisting at the partially formed key. “I only need to—”

The door behind them slammed against the wall, making Kellan jump. A pair of guards loomed in the doorway, trying to make sense of Kellan’s and Oko’s uniforms. But with Umezawa still perched in front of the locked door, they didn’t stand a chance at maintaining their cover.

The guards drew their weapons.

Oko and Kellan dove for opposite walls, just as a thunder blast burst toward the door frame. Umezawa gave a sharp cry, clutching his shoulder before stumbling for cover behind an oversized suitcase.

Kellan threw up a hand and shot a golden vine straight for the guard's weapon. With a sharp tug on his magic, Kellan yanked the rifle from his grip and sent it skittering across the metal floor. He charged the guard with his shoulder, knocking him off balance.

Oko moved swiftly, freeing a curved knife from his belt. He reached the second guard in less than a moment and pierced him between the ribs. The guard winced hard before crumpling to the floor.

Kellan struggled to pin down the other guard, head moving from side to side, trying to dodge the man's fist. From the corner of the room, Umezawa launched a small metal star through the air. It hit the Sterling guard in the neck, missing Kellan's hand by a mere inch.

Kellan released the man, surprised, and watched his eyes fall shut. He spun around just in time to find Umezawa sinking heavily to the floor.

Kellan rushed to his side. "He needs a medic. How fast can Geralf get here?"

"There's no time for that," Oko argued. "We need to find the Outcaster before the guards realize what's happening."

Kellan pulled his face back in confusion. "But—we can't just leave him here. He'll die."

"Personally, I'd rather take my chances here than with the necromancer," Umezawa coughed, eyes shuttering. "I don't want to wake up and find my limbs have been sewn on the wrong way."

"You see? He's fine," Oko insisted.

Umezawa teetered on the edge of consciousness.

Kellan frowned. "*Umezawa is hurt. We need someone to get him off this train,*" he said to the crew. Beside him, Oko folded his arms. The disapproval on his face was clear.

"*I'm on my way,*" Annie replied. "*What do you want to do about the bridge?*"

Oko's jaw tensed. "*Take it out.*"

"*BIG BOOM!*" Breeches wailed.

The explosion was instant, echoing through the train walls and making the floor shake. Beneath the carriage, the wheels rattled along the tracks before picking up speed.

"We aren't slowing down." Kellan frowned. "Why aren't we slowing down?"

Oko moved for the window, trying to make out the canyon in the distance, where smoke clouded the sky. "We need to get to the back of the train."

Kellan stood, balling his fists. "There are civilians on board. We need to warn them about the bridge—"

"We need to finish the mission," Oko interjected, eyes gleaming. "We can check on the passengers after we secure the Outcaster."

"But—"

Oko clasped a hand to Kellan's shoulder, shaking firmly. "I can't do this alone. I need your help."

Kellan's mouth parted, lips forming words that never came. "Alright," he said finally, too worried about disappointing his father to argue any further. "How are we going to get through the door without Umezawa?"

Oko motioned above them. "We'll go across the roof. Think you can knock these windows out with your magic?"

Kellan formed a hefty golden hammer, swinging it through the windows and shattering them completely. The two of them climbed up the frame and searched the outside of the train for anything to hold on to. They clawed their way up the embellished exterior until they reached the roof.

Kellan held his hands out, bracing against the wind. Beyond the overnight cars were the cargo ones. No doubt Gisa and Geralf were back there, staving off Sterling guards with an army of the undead.

And Nolan ...

Kellan pointed to a car. "There. That's the one."

Oko frowned. "How do you know?"

"Because it's the car they use to transport prisoners."

They leapt from one roof to the next, fighting the sway of the train as they made their way to the final overnight car. The smoke from the bridge carried through the air, making Kellan flinch. It wouldn't be long before they ran out of tracks.

They needed to hurry and find a way to stop the train before it went over the canyon and took innocent lives with it.

A blast of thunder exploded near Kellan's feet. He tripped, falling hard against the unforgiving metal. Pain radiated through his bones.

Half a dozen Sterling Company guards appeared, forming a line behind Kellan and Oko. One of them raised their blaster and shot a second burst of energy across the roof. Kellan leapt, taking to the skies for cover just as Oko rolled out of the way. The jump sent Kellan to the next train car but left Oko vulnerable on his own.

Panicked, Kellan tried to hurry back just as a series of blasts sent debris ricocheting toward him. He brought his arms up to cover his face.

"Father!" Kellan shouted through the chaos.

Oko winced—and Kellan did his best not to read into it. They were under fire; this wasn't the time to do anything other than survive.

Kellan scrambled forward and grabbed his father by the arms. He launched himself up and away from the next blast, holding tight to Oko before dodging a glowing arrow. They swerved hard before tumbling back to the roof.

Oko pulled out his dagger. Kellan moved a hand to summon his own weapons.

The guards closed in, surrounding them in a wide circle. The one in the center pointed her thunder rifle at Oko, and Kellan's magic stalled at his fingertips.

Concern buzzed through him—for his father, and the innocent people still on the train.

What would happen if he couldn't save them?

What would happen if he couldn't save his *dad*?

Kellan's shoulders shook, and he redirected his magic to protect Oko. If only one of them could make it out alive ...

Gray rotted arms closed around the guard's shoulders, and her weapon clattered to the ground. She twisted against the creature, screaming as it pulled her off balance. The rest of the guards began to turn one by one, yelping in alarm at whatever was behind them.

A wall of reanimated bodies appeared, scratching and pulling at the Sterling Company guards with a desperate hunger. Panic swept across the rooftops. Some of the guards retreated. Some leapt from the train. Others didn't escape at all.

Using the distraction to their advantage, Kellan and Oko forced their way down the nearest ladder, wedging themselves in the open space between the cargo and overnight cars.

Oko paused outside the door. "Allow me," he said, shapeshifting into one of the recently fallen guards. He pushed the door open and layered his voice with mock concern. "The ghouls—they're everywhere!" he gasped to the people in the room.

Nolan stood in the center, surrounded by four Sterling mercenaries.

The guards exchanged wary glances.

"They're making their way across the roof! We need everyone with a weapon to help stave them off," Oko added hurriedly.

Three of the guards acted quickly, rushing for the door with their thunder rifles. The moment they stepped onto the walkway between the carriages, Kellan's golden vines snared them and tossed them over the side of the train and onto the desert floor below.

The final guard hesitated. Oko let his illusion drop, revealing his pointed ears and blue painted face. His grin was wild with mischief.

"Don't worry. Odds are, you'll survive the fall. But please—give Graywater my regards." Oko shoved the man hard through the open door, where Kellan's vines did the rest.

Oko turned to the Outcaster, smiling brightly. "You must be Nolan."

Oko gripped Nolan's arm and nudged him forward. The trio marched back through the various overnight cars, watching as a mixture of ghouls and guards toppled occasionally from the roof.

When they reached a bolted door, Kellan lifted the latch and shoved it open. Umezawa was still slumped in the corner of the luggage car. Unconscious, but breathing.

With his grip fastened to the Outcaster's forearm, Oko leaned out of the shattered window. "Does anyone know why this train has yet to slow down?" he asked the rest of the crew.

"*The zombies reached the conductor,*" Annie explained, her breathing stilted. "*There's no one controlling the train.*"

"I'll fly to the front and take care of it," Kellan said, moving for the window.

"No," Oko ordered, forcing an arm in front of him. "We need to get the Outcaster and Umezawa to safety."

"Yes, but the people—" Kellan started.

"—will be dealt with later," Oko finished.

Kellan clenched his teeth, flustered. "We don't have time to argue about this."

“Exactly,” Oko said, and tilted his head toward the expanse of desert. “Get ready—our extraction team is here.”

Annie appeared with Fortune, galloping alongside the train. She tugged the reins, guiding Fortune as close to the tracks as possible.

When the gap was barely an arm’s length across, Oko stepped back and pushed the Outcaster toward the window.

“Y—you expect me to *jump*?” Nolan sputtered.

“If you want to live,” Oko replied, helping him onto the frame.

Annie grabbed Nolan’s outstretched arm and heaved him onto the back of the saddle. He clutched her waist for dear life, burrowing his face into her shoulder.

Kellan and Oko each looped an arm beneath Umezawa and lifted him onto the windowsill. Annie moved closer to the tracks once more, closing the gap between her and the window.

Kellan steadied himself as he carried the bulk of Umezawa’s weight through the opening. Annie looped an arm around Umezawa and pulled hard, forcing him onto the front of the saddle. With a sharp whistle, Annie steered Fortune toward safety and broke into a fearless gallop, kicking up sand behind them.

Smoke seeped through the broken window, and Kellan stared in horror at the canyon ahead. The bridge was obliterated. All that was left were the gnarled ends of the train tracks, one on each side of the canyon.

Oko stepped onto the ledge.

“Where are you going?” Kellan asked, wide-eyed. “There’s still people on board!”

“There’s no time to save them,” Oko said with a careless shrug. “We have to jump now, or we’re going over the edge with the train.”

“But you said—”

Oko didn’t wait for him to finish. He leapt, tumbling across the sand with unsteady grace.

The door burst open behind Kellan. One of the guards tumbled inside; a zombie was clutching his neck, teeth searching for flesh. There were more ghouls behind them, their moans growing louder by the second.

Kellan had no choice—he leapt and glided to the sand in a panic.

The moment he was firmly on his feet, he spun around, watching as the train approached the cliff. He ran on instinct, throwing his hands up in the air as giant gold bursts of energy erupted from his palms.

The vines whipped forward, snatching the train by the last carriage—but it wasn’t enough to stop it.

The momentum of the train fought back, and Kellan felt the tug on his magic burn through him, making his veins scorch. He strained against the weight, digging his heels into the sand as he hung on, desperate.

All those people ...

He couldn’t let them die.

He *wouldn’t*.

Kellan threw his head back, and every vein in his body pulsed. His knuckles blazed, and he held the vines like they were rooted inside of him, refusing to let them break.

The train screeched, slowing, but the first car was already hanging over the edge. Kellan's boots dragged across the sand, inch by inch.

Malcolm's distant shadow moved across the desert, and his voice sounded in Kellan's mind. "*The Sterling Company are a few miles out. We don't have the numbers to fight off an attack that big. You need to get as far away from that train as you can.*"

Oko appeared at Kellan's side, forehead creased with urgency. "We need to go!"

"You—promised—" Kellan strained. "I won't leave them to die."

"You can't save them," Oko argued.

"I have to try," Kellan replied, teeth grinding as he pulled hard at the vines.

The rumble of the approaching army sounded in the distance. A stampede of hooves and enormous mounts.

The Sterling Company was ready for battle.

Oko took one step back, then another. A look of pity flashed over his face before quickly shifting to resignation. With a final glance, he turned his back on Kellan and fled for the hills.

Kellan gripped his magic vines firm, sweat pooling across his face. Molten heat continued to tear through him, right alongside his hurt.

Oko had left him.

The train teetered at the edge of the cliff, inching farther into the open expanse below. Kellan couldn't fight it for much longer. It was too heavy. His magic was faltering, and the Sterling Company was barely a minute away.

Kellan blinked at the salt-sting filling the corners of his eyes just as Fortune appeared several yards away, rearing back as Annie drew her thunder rifle. She pointed it beyond Kellan and released a series of blasts toward the approaching guards.

"Umezawa—Nolan—" Kellan started.

"They're with the others," she answered. Fortune stamped his feet on the rocks, and Annie waved an arm toward the passengers staring out of the windows, most of them too frozen to move. "Get off the train, now!"

The people looked at one another in alarm before hurrying for the nearest exits. Their legs trembled with fear, each of them nervously jumping for the desert floor before fleeing as far from the train as possible.

Kellan took a ragged breath, feeling his energy start to slip. He blinked hard, forcing himself to direct every ounce of stubbornness he had left toward the magic radiating from his hands. Annie sent a few more blasts of energy behind him, trying to pick off the faster riders and stall for time before the bulk of the army arrived.

When the final civilian hit the sand, Annie turned to Kellan and thrust out an arm. "Come on, kid."

Kellan released his vines with a gasp, and the train shot over the edge of the cliff, exploding in the distance the moment it hit the ground. The *booms* sounded one after the other as each railcar landed in quick succession, followed by a barrage of rock and debris ricocheting off the canyon walls.

Kellan grabbed Annie's hand and heaved himself onto Fortune's back, and they bolted for the ridge, leaving the wreckage and Sterling Company behind.