

Episode 4: Finding Tarnation

Akemi Dawn Bowman

From set *Outlaws of Thunder Junction*
20. 03. 2024

It had been hours since Oko's crew evaded the Sterling Company, but Kellan couldn't stop fidgeting. He tucked his hands into his wool-lined pockets, knees bouncing with unease. A pot of stew simmered over the campfire in front of him, each flame casting shadows against the nearby rockface.

The Outcaster sat in the distance, guarded by Kaervek and Rakdos. His coat was made up of layers of fur, moss, and cactus armor, and his wiry mustache curled in every direction. A thick cloth covered his eyes, and his hands were bound with rope—not that he needed either. Eriette's charms had rendered him almost euphoric, and without outside help, there was nowhere for Nolan to run.

Outcasters were notorious hermits. If anyone was going to come looking for him, it was more likely to be a band of coyotes, a flock of vultures, or a particularly loyal cougar. But with Annie's sight and Malcolm's ability to patrol the sky, they'd see danger coming from miles away. There was no need to worry.

And yet ...

Kellan dug his fingernails into his palms. Oko had stolen from Bertram Graywater—*twice*—which made everyone in their crew a target. Not just to the Sterling Company, but to any outlaws hoping to profit from the bounty that would inevitably be placed on their heads. The thought of being a wanted criminal made Kellan's stomach roil.

A wooden spoon landed in the stew, making him jump. Breeches scooped a portion into a tin bowl, too distracted to notice that Tinybones was behind him, rummaging through his coat pockets for a flask. When he found it, he opened the lid and tipped the contents back. Amber liquid sloshed through his ribcage, pooling at Breeches's feet.

Breeches snarled in alarm, spilling his stew in the process. His nostrils flared, and the goblin's claws flexed with rage. He ran after Tinybones, whose bones gave a jovial shudder as he bounded over the rocks.

Umezawa's stifled howl echoed through the sheltered hillside. "What is taking you so long? My grandmother could stitch a *quilt* faster than this!"

Geralf tutted, eyes fixed in concentration. His fingers danced over Umezawa's wound as if threading an invisible needle. "Weaving flesh back together is an art form. Now, stay still."

Umezawa gritted his teeth. "You're enjoying this *far* too much."

"I don't know what you mean," Geralf replied, but the rapture in his eyes was undeniable.

Gisa feigned distress. "You're torturing the poor man. And not even in a fun way!" She leaned toward Umezawa, voice becoming song-like. "I can take all your pain away."

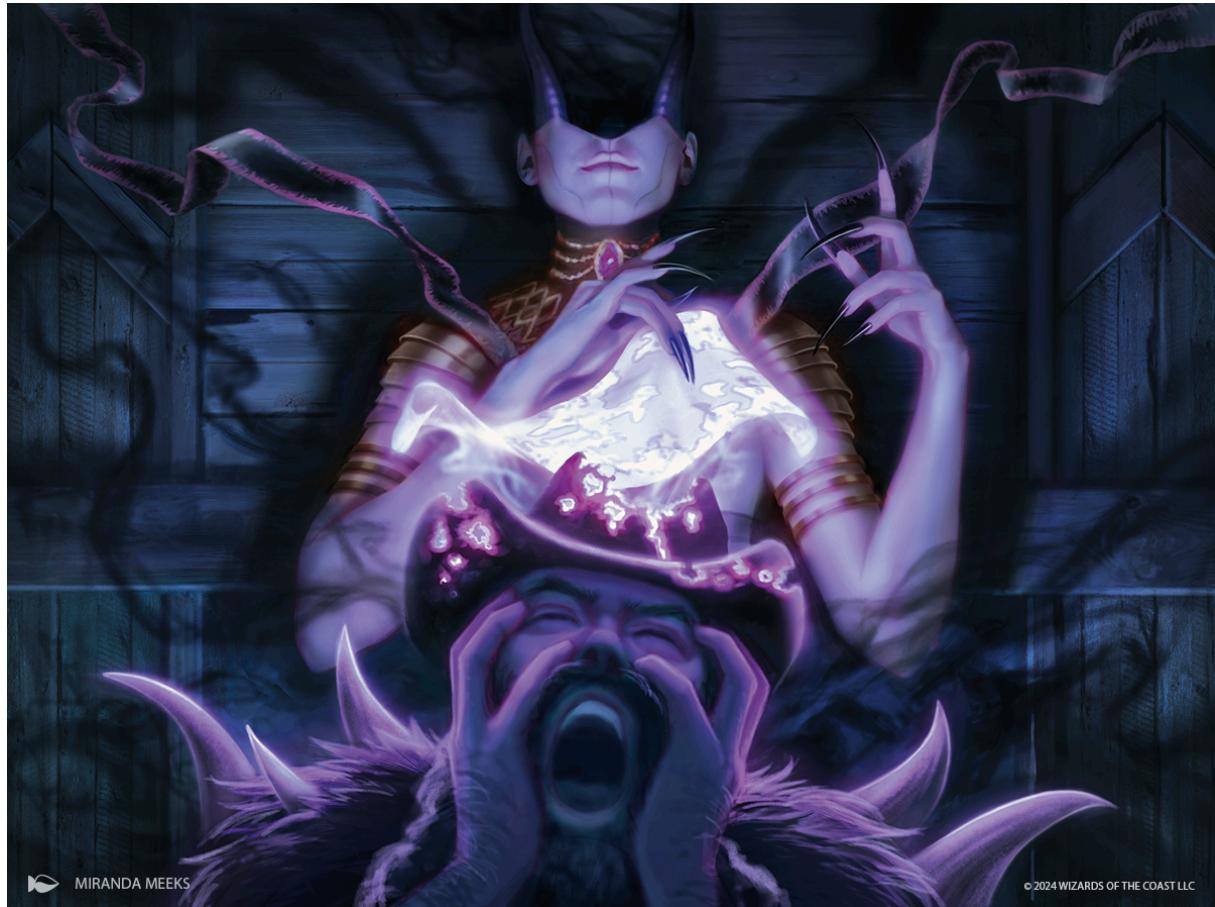
Geralf rolled his eyes, shooing her away with a hand. "The point is to heal him, not kill him."

Another stitch went through Umezawa's skin, and he shut his eyes tight. "If I pass out, don't let your sister anywhere near me."

Gisa pushed her bottom lip into a pout.

A breeze tumbled through the hills, making the fire shudder. Shadows pooled behind Kellan, and he turned to see Ashiok making their way toward the Outcaster.

Ashiok lifted their hands above the Outcaster's head, fishing for secrets with the lure of magic. Their fingers moved slow and deliberate. Memories were pulled out of Nolan's mind, leaving streaks of silver threads in the air.



Art by: Miranda Meeks

Kellan's skin prickled with concern.

"Don't worry," said Oko. He took a seat beside Kellan, leaning back until the firelight trickled over his sharp features. "Ashiok is perfectly capable of getting the answers we need without hurting him."

Kellan dug his heels into the ground. How long had his father been watching him?

"I didn't agree to this," he said. "You promised no innocents would get hurt. And just because he's been charmed doesn't mean he isn't scared. Ashiok isn't someone you—or anyone—should be trusting." He glanced back at Ashiok, shuddering at the memory of their confrontation on Eldraine. But for Ashiok's part, they barely seemed to notice Kellan was there at all.

"It's not my fault the plan went awry. And the Outcaster knew what he was getting into when he agreed to help Graywater. If he didn't want trouble, then he shouldn't have walked into it."

"He was surrounded by armed guards. For all we know, he was on that train under duress," Kellan argued. "I'm not sure he had a choice."

Oko's eyes flashed. "Is that how you feel? Like you had no choice?"

Blood rushed to Kellan's head, making his cheeks darken. "I—I never said that."

The challenge in Oko's stare vanished as if it were never there at all. He smiled and gripped Kellan's shoulder. "Everyone made it off that train. You may think I left those people behind, but I knew you could handle it—you're my son, and I trust you."

The tension didn't leave Kellan, even as Oko pulled his hand away. He wanted to believe his father. He wanted his approval. But he'd seen Oko's face on the train. Oko hadn't believed in him; he'd been ready to abandon him.

Maybe it was just a misunderstanding , Kellan's thoughts stirred, hopeful. He's your father. Even if he'd wanted to leave those people, he wouldn't have left you.

Smoke-like ribbons crept over the sand, and Kellan leapt to his feet abruptly. Ashiok waited with their hands folded together, shadows spilling away from their horns.

Oko stood, hungry for information. "What did you find?"

Ashiok tilted their head, lips pursed tight. "The artifact is a key, just as we thought. But it is one of six."

Oko brushed a finger over his brow. Kellan realized it was a tell, something he did to hide his frustration. "Where are the others?"

"Akul has the other five. He wears them in a medallion around his neck," Ashiok explained, and the nearby crew mumbled their displeasure. "But there's something else I found in the Outcaster's mind. A map to Tarnation exists—and it's buried in Thief's Folly."

From across the campfire, Gisa squealed with delight.

"You've heard of it?" Oko asked, bemused.

Geralf hummed from above Umezawa's vanishing wound, finishing the last seam. "It's a graveyard for prospectors."

Gisa flashed her teeth, eyes sparkling with venomous hunger. "So many bones. So many beautiful corpses to dig up."

Oko studied each member of the crew before landing on the necromancer siblings. "Are the two of you up for a little side mission?"

Gisa clapped her hands together eagerly, and Geralf gave a curt nod.

"Let's talk when we get back to the saloon." Oko turned to Tinybones, who was busy helping himself to a portion of stew; it dripped through the hollow of his ribcage. "Can you flag down Annie and Malcolm? The sooner we get out of here, the better."

The others started to pack up their gear, when Kellan's words erupted out of him, too important to hold back. "What about Nolan?"

"What about him?" Oko asked, barely meeting his gaze.

Kellan lifted his shoulders, sheepish. "Well—I mean—is someone going to take him home?"

Some of the others snickered.

Oko quirked an eyebrow, like Kellan was a strange kind of curiosity. “He’s an Outcaster. They thrive in the wilderness.”

“But we can’t just leave him here,” Kellan blurted out. “Hardbristle is days away. And he’s got no supplies, or water, or—”

Ashiok took a step closer, shadows rumbling along the desert floor like they were being tested. “You fear for his life.” It wasn’t a question.

Kellan opened his mouth, but the words were too tangled to sort through.

“Fear not,” Ashiok said, curling their long claws. “I do not wish the man dead.”

“How wonderful to see that we’re all on the same page,” Oko said with a hint of irritation.

Annie’s voice sounded from the darkness. “I can go with Kellan and escort the Outcaster to the nearest oasis. I’m sure he can make his way home from there.”

Kellan smiled weakly in appreciation.

Oko’s mouth twitched. “I’m sure you know how important it is to the mission that you don’t get caught—or followed.”

Annie nodded. “We’ll stay out of sight.”

Kellan followed her away from the campfire. When he was certain the rest of the crew was out of earshot, he said, “That’s twice you’ve helped me. Thank you.”

Annie didn’t respond. She continued down the path and clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, drawing Fortune’s attention. He stalked out of the evening breeze, body relaxed in a way that showed trust.

“What made you sign up with Oko?” Kellan asked.

“It was the lesser of two evils.”

He couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. “You don’t trust him?”

Annie winced. “Trust is for favors. This is a job—and I reckon I don’t trust anyone who hires outlaws to do their dirty work.”

Kellan stared at the ground. “I wasn’t sure you *were* an outlaw, to be honest. You don’t seem like the others. I thought—well, I don’t know.”

“That I was more like you?”

Kellan didn’t answer.

She shook her head like she was trying to rid herself of a memory. “A while back, I was with the Freestriders. We made the mistake of robbing Akul and the Hellspurs. He tracked us for weeks, relentlessly. We lost good people because of it. And when we tried to make a deal and return what we stole, my nephew was badly injured during the exchange. We barely escaped. After that, my nephew was never quite the same. He returned to join our people not too long ago.” Her eyes steeled. “It was never Akul’s plan to let us go. I’m not even sure he cared much about what we stole. He just wanted blood—and he used our trust to get it.”

“I’m not saying I’m any better than the crew around that fire. I know what I am, and what I’ve done. But Akul—he’s a different kind of outlaw. The *worst* kind. I don’t want to see anyone hurt the way my

nephew was. If there's really power in that vault, and Akul gets ahold of it?" Her expression hardens. "I can't let that happen."

Kellan looked back to the campfire in the distance, watching his father deep in conversation with Vraska and Ashiok.

The worst kind of outlaw ...

His eyes remained pinned to Oko, long enough for Annie to notice.

"Family is tough—blood or otherwise," she said quietly. "It's not always easy to know someone's heart. But in my experience?" She shrugged. "Time helps, but a gut feeling is always worth paying attention to."

Kellan blinked away his embarrassment.

Annie took hold of Fortune's reins. "I reckon that's enough storytelling for one day. How about we go fetch the Outcaster and get him on the trail home?"

They made their way to Nolan and helped him onto the saddle before taking the winding path down the hillside. Kellan flew alongside them, careful not to fall behind. Even though he wanted to take one last look at the campfire, he didn't.

He was too worried that he'd find his father watching him—and that all he'd see was doubt.

The saloon doors slammed open, and Gisa and Geralf half-stumbled into the room, eyes wide with delirium. They took a few steps inside, boots clunking heavily against the floorboards. The overhead light spilled over their faces, showing off a mess of fresh bruises and bloodied cuts.

Geralf tugged at the leather strap around his eye, making sure it was straight. Gisa swept a hand over her disheveled, knotted hair.

"Welcome back," Oko announced, leaning against the edge of the bar. "I see Thief's Folly has been kind to you both."

Geralf picked at the dried blood under his nails. "I'd rather not talk about it."

Gisa blew at the sand covering her leather bracers, and a small dust cloud appeared in front of her. She grimaced.

Her brother removed a piece of rolled-up parchment from his coat and held it up for Oko to take. "I believe this is what you were after."

Oko flattened the map against the bar, relishing the sight of every strange marking.

He finally had it—the path to Tarnation, and Maag Tarana.

"Is that what I think it is?" Vraska asked. She stepped away from Ashiok's curling shadows and leaned across the counter. "So—the vault floats above the city."

Oko's thoughts were already moving into hyper-focus. "The vault doesn't matter if we can't get ahold of the keys. And in order to get the medallion, we need to be in the same room as Akul." He looked up, searching the room for Annie, and found her sitting with Kellan at one of the far tables. They'd been almost inseparable since the train incident.

Oko's expression soured. He wasn't opposed to his crew becoming friendly—but it was easier to control people when he knew where they stood. Kellan's burgeoning friendship could be a problem. He didn't like it. Didn't *trust* it.

He faked a smile anyway. "Annie—you'd recognize the Hellspurs from Akul's inner circle, correct?"

She tapped a nail against her glass bottle. "I suppose so."

"If we were to track one of them down in Tarnation, do you also suppose they'd lead us to wherever Akul's headquarters are?"

"Maybe. But you can't just walk into Tarnation like it's a holiday destination," Annie said. "There's a reason only Hellspurs know how to find the city. They don't let outsiders in—and they *certainly* wouldn't let them leave."

"We're all capable of playing our roles," Oko countered. "If we dress like Hellspurs and keep a low profile, we can hide out in the open."

"I'm not sure our crew is exactly *low profile*," Annie said. "We have a giant demon and a skeleton, for starters. No amount of Hellspur attire is going to make them blend in."

"We'll split up the team and take a small group of four into the city," Oko said, as if the solution was simple. "Everyone else can wait outside Tarnation until we're ready to open the vault."

"Count me in," Vraska said.

"Perfect," Oko agreed. "Annie—you're with us, too."

She downed the rest of her bottle in acknowledgment.

Oko knew who had to be fourth. He'd known since before the necromancers brought the map back.

But he drew out the wait, gaze moving from one crew member to the next.

"Kellan," he said finally.

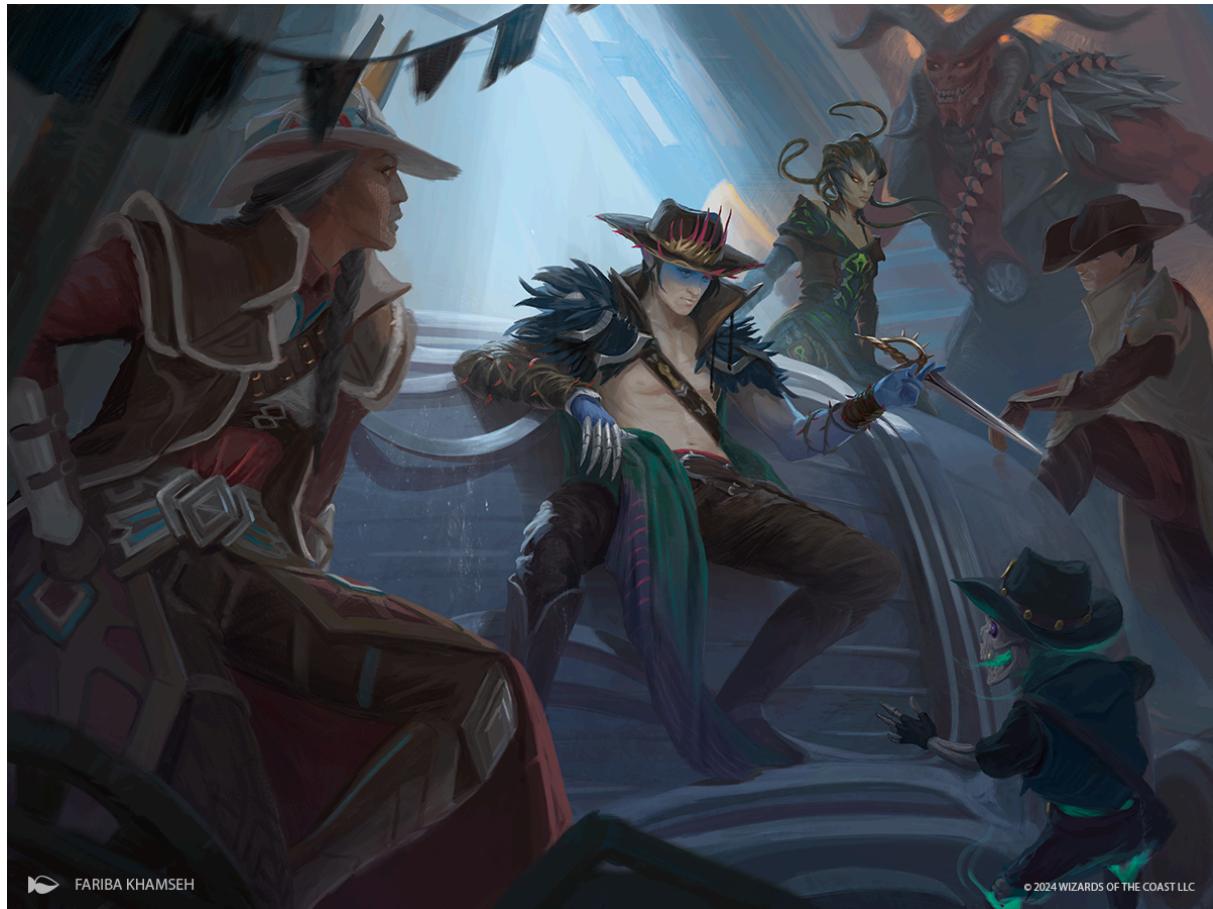
The shock on his son's face was clear. "You want *my* help?"

"I need you with me. You have skills that will be useful in Tarnation," Oko said. "Especially once we find Akul."

Kellan bit the edge of his lip, but whatever was weighing on his conscience didn't matter. Oko had posited Kellan as a necessary player; and Kellan wouldn't let his father down.

The boy nodded. "Alright. I'll do it."

Oko feigned gratitude, but he wasn't the least bit surprised. Kellan craved his attention. He wanted *acceptance*. Flattery, it seemed, was the key to keeping his son on his side.



Art by: Fariba Khamseh

He needed the boy's help, in more ways than he was prepared to explain. And Kellan was willing to oblige him, freely and without question, all because Oko was family. A stranger in almost every way except blood—but to Kellan, that was enough. That kind of allegiance? It was the one thing Oko *was* grateful for. He just needed to make sure it would last.

An enormous rock with sharp, jagged edges hovered in the sky. Clouds swirled around the tallest spire as if caught in its orbit while lava flowed from the edge, pooling into the twisted rivers that moved through Tarnation. It left an angry hue on every surface, glowing like the embers of a newborn fire.

Maag Taranaau. The vault.

A maze of warped rock foundations wound through the city below, surrounded by a circular canyon. Buildings made of solidified lava rock and sharpened bits of wood were everywhere, and animal bones framed many of the doors and windows, illuminated by the colorful lanterns hidden inside.

Kellan adjusted his hat, keeping far from the thin veins of molten lava running into the street. There was smoke everywhere—and more Hellspurs than he could count.

In the clearing to his left, a street duel was taking place. Two mountainous Hellspurs sliced at one another with a pair of axes. The edges blazed with remnants of thunder, casting sparks every time the blades collided. A small crowd jeered and roared, and when one of the axes landed in the other man's chest, the onlookers raised their arms in triumph. Kellan felt ill as they dragged the body toward an enormous fire pit and rolled the corpse onto the hot coals.

"A common practice here to settle disputes. More civilized than killing someone's whole family, I suppose," said Oko, noticing Kellan's gaze. He gave a carefree whistle and motioned ahead to a saloon door glowing with cindered edges. He'd shapeshifted into a rugged, human version of himself that blended in perfectly with the rest of Akul's crew, and his chest was covered in an elaborate display of bone armor.

They'd already visited three other saloons, but so far there'd been no sign of anyone from the inner circle of the Hellspurs. Nearby, Annie adjusted the black bandana covering the lower half of her face. Kellan wondered if she was afraid of being recognized, or of finally facing the people who'd hurt her nephew all that time ago.

When Annie, Oko, and Vraska stepped through the doors, Kellan took a silent breath, counted to five, and did the same.

The ceiling curved like the inside of a barrel. Everything smelled of metal and sour fruit, making Kellan recoil. He followed Annie's gaze to a woman sitting at the bar. She wore a spiked wrought iron pauldron, each point tinged with red-hot embers. The rest of her clothes were of burgundy material, frayed at every edge, with a small thunder pistol and hatchet tucked in her belt. Smoke radiated from her skin, as if she were ready to catch fire at any moment.

Annie went rigid, voice nearly inaudible. "That's Twist Fandango. One of Akul's crew."

Oko gave a brief nod as he strolled past Annie toward the bar, with Vraska taking the empty seat beside him. Annie retreated into the corner of the room, putting as much space between her and the Hellspur as possible.

Kellan brushed a hand over his cloak, avoiding the burnt edges. He felt like an impostor. A scarecrow among soldiers. But mostly he just hoped none of the Hellspurs would notice.

Kellan found a booth at the back and sat down, hands fidgeting beneath the table. Across the room, Oko was busy striking up a conversation with the bartender, as if pretending to be someone else was the easiest thing in the world.

"This ain't your table," a voice barked, gruff.

Kellan looked up to find three Hellspurs glaring down at him. The one who spoke had skin that burned like lava; the other two wore iron faceplates that covered everything except their flaming hair.

"I—I'm sorry," Kellan sputtered. He tried to stand, but the lava-skinned Hellspur shoved him back down.

"You're *sorry*?" he repeated, flashing his sharpened teeth. "You didn't learn them manners in Tarnation. I reckon you ain't supposed to be here at all." He pulled out a heavy-looking thunder pistol and pointed it at Kellan's chest.

"I'm just here to meet someone!" Kellan said quickly, stumbling over every word. "They have information I need about a job."

The trio cackled.

"No Hellspur would trust you with so much as an ember, boy," the man spit. "Either someone dragged you out here to skin your hide, or you're serving me a fabrication."

Kellan held up his hands. "I don't want any trouble!"

Their laughter continued, even more raucous this time, and Kellan took the opportunity to slip out of the booth. He made it three steps before one of the Hellspurs shoved him to the ground, knocking his face against the wooden planks with a *crack*. When he pressed his lips together, he could taste blood.

"Get up, coward," the Hellspur growled. "I'm only just getting started."

Oko's spurs rattled to a stop, blocking Kellan's line of sight. "Leave the kid alone."

Kellan pushed himself up shakily, relief knotting in his throat.

The Hellspur narrowed his eyes. "He's no Hellspur—and this ain't none of your business."

Oko didn't move. "He says he's here for a job, right? For all you know, Akul's the one who sent for him."

The man snorted. "Akul could snap this runt in half without even trying. He'd sooner hire a field mouse than this bag of twigs."

Oko's mouth hitched, taunting. "You willing to risk finding out which one of us is wrong?"

The three Hellspurs turned to one another, hesitant.

Oko shoved Kellan to the side, removing him from the Hellspur's path. "Let him deal with whoever invited him here, so the rest of us can drink in peace."

Fire raged in the man's eyes. He took a step forward. "What are you going to do about it?"

The two iron-masked Hellspurs drew their blades.

"Three against one?" Oko tutted. "Who's the coward now?"

The Hellspur laughed, low and deep, before swinging his massive fist toward Oko's head. Oko ducked, missing the blow by an inch, and cracked his elbow against the man's neck.

The saloon erupted into chaos, and the musicians in the corner stepped up the pace of their mad jig. Glass shattered, thunder exploded, and Kellan covered his face, too stunned to move. His ears rang, gaze processing his father and Vraska, each taking swings at every Hellspur around them.

Vraska was quick, slicing at every Hellspur with a long saber before they even had a chance to turn their weapons on her. When one of the iron-masked assailants charged, Vraska smashed the back of a thunder pistol against their face, knocking their mask to the ground. She shoved her boot against their neck, pinning them to the floor—and used her gaze to turn them to stone.

Some of the other Hellspurs stumbled back in alarm, but most only saw it as bigger fuel for a bigger fire. They roared, unloading their thunder blasters across the saloon, smashing the skull-shaped bar to pieces.

Oko shapeshifted from one Hellspur to the next, causing mayhem as he alternated between throwing punches and shifting into each neighboring Hellspur. None of them looked too closely before swinging for the nearest available jaw.

Kellan flexed his hands, ready to summon two swords of energy, when Annie grabbed his arm.

"Don't!" she argued. "We need to go after Twist. If she gets away, we might not get the chance to find Akul again." She motioned for the saloon windows, which were swung wide open.

"I can't leave him," Kellan said, firm.

Annie's eyes blazed. "Wouldn't he tell you the mission comes first?"

"I've been looking for him for so long. I won't leave him now!" Kellan said and flung a golden vine toward the Hellspur whose axe had been raised over Oko's unassuming frame, knocking her across the room.

Oko turned, eyes wide, when a thunder blast exploded through the saloon doors, sending wood splintering in every direction. Twist Fandango stood in the frame, hair curling with flames. Behind her were half a dozen armed strangers. Not just Hellspurs—but Akul’s inner circle.

One of them grabbed Kellan before he had a chance to react, clamping a pair of iron cuffs to his wrists. He took a staggered breath before realizing his magic was subdued. When he searched the room for Oko, Annie, and Vraska, they’d all been overtaken, too.

Kellan felt his stomach sink as the realization dawned on him: no one was coming for them. The rest of the crew would know better than to burst through Tarnation on a rescue mission. They were hired criminals, not friends. Twist stepped forward and sneered, holding her hatchet to Oko’s throat. He sputtered as something fizzled against his skin, forcing his illusion to fade.

“So, you’re the fae we’ve heard so much about,” Twist said, drawing out her words like a slow poison. “Someone I know has been *very* anxious to meet you.”

“I do love my fans,” Oko managed through strained breaths as the two Hellspurs holding him back tightened their grips.

Twist turned to the others. “Tie ‘em up—they’re coming with us. Akul wants to deal with these trespassers personally.”

Kellan’s toes grazed the floor as he struggled to keep his balance. His arms were raised above his head, chained to the rafters alongside the rest of the crew.

“Please tell me there’s a second part to your plan,” Vraska hissed through her teeth, swaying beneath the chains. “Or at the very least, a backup.”

Oko looked up at the only bit of sunlight peering through the high ceiling and squinted. The prison was an enormous dome, littered with crushed pieces of rock. “This looks like an old quarry.”

“It is,” Annie said dryly. “Which means we’re at the lowest level possible. Even if we manage to get out of these cuffs, we’d have to claw our way out of the entire city.”

Vraska shook her head. “I *told* you bringing the kid was a bad idea. A bunny would’ve made a more convincing Hellspur than he did.”

Kellan opened his mouth to apologize when the room shuddered, sending dust skittering down the walls. Footsteps boomed through the open doorway. Akul himself stalked through the dark mist, head low and talons scraping over the rocky floor. His crew filled in behind him, hungry for entertainment.

Akul studied each of the hanging prisoners, golden eyes scanning their faces, until recognition hit him.

“Annie Flash.” A low rumble sounded from deep in his chest. “I wondered when our paths would cross again. How is that nephew of yours?”

The rage on Annie’s face said everything she couldn’t.

A low rumble emerged from Akul’s throat. “I’ll give him this much—he’s a tough kid. I’ve seen bastards twice his size die after one of my stings.” The dragon turned his attention to Oko, hot steam erupting from his nostrils. “You have something that belongs to me.”

Oko motioned to the chains. “Cut me loose, and I’ll get it for you.”

Akul let out a throaty snarl. He held a claw against Oko's neck, stopping short of drawing blood, and dragged it slowly down to his heart. "I thought I'd have to rip the truth from you—but you've brought the key right to my doorstep." He reached into Oko's bone-clad vest and pulled out the artifact.

Oko clenched his jaw, watching as Akul reached for the chain around his neck. A medallion hung in the center, five spikes protruding from the sides at uneven heights. In the center was a strange carving with six glass domes, all lit with a different color except for one.

Akul slotted the sixth key into the medallion, and the edges morphed into another spike. The final glass dome became an iridescent violet. The medallion clicked and moved, turning in place until the spikes revealed a pattern.

Kellan's eyes widened. They weren't six keys—they were six pieces of *one* key.

And now they were united.

Akul roared, and a glow from deep inside him lit up every scale on his chest, like distant lightning in a dark storm cloud. Sparks crackled across his entire body, and he stretched his claws wide.

Oko hadn't taken his eyes off the dragon. "I take it you have no intention of letting us go?"

Akul's voice was lethal. "If I did that, I wouldn't have the pleasure of watching you suffer—and I intend to take my time."

Kellan's eyes shot around the room, frantic. Annie looked like she was going to be sick, his father, and Vraska ...

No. I can't let this be my fault. I can't let them suffer because of me.

He thought back to the battle he'd seen on the streets—the closest to honorable combat they got here. Kellan clenched his teeth, reaching for every ounce of courage hibernating in his veins. "I challenge you to a duel!" he blurted out.

Akul pulled his neck back in surprise before chuckling darkly. The contempt on his face was clear. The Hellspurs behind him broke into mocking fits of laughter.

"*What are you doing?*" Annie mouthed, fearful.

Kellan kept his eyes glued to Akul. "If I win, your crew has to let me and my friends go free."

Vraska's tendrils rose with interest.

Oko had no reaction at all. Just a calculating, pensive stare.

"I have no need to duel with prisoners," Akul drawled. "You're already at my mercy—of which I have none."

Kellan's heart thumped. "Even outlaws have a code, don't they?"

"You seem eager for a quick death, but I have other plans," Akul said. "Though, when it's time to finally throw your bodies into the bonfire, I'll make sure you're first. Consider it a gesture of goodwill." His eyes gleamed. "From one outlaw to another."

Kellan looked around, desperate for an idea, or a thought, or a—

"I never expected the infamous Akul to be so afraid of a child," Oko mused, unblinking.

Akul flinched, sucking the air between his sharp teeth. "*Afraid?*"

Oko lifted a brow. "Or maybe it's his magic you're afraid of. Maybe you prefer an easier target."

Kellan could feel the pressure seem to change in the room as the energy built and built. The scales across Akul's chest, each hard as steel, began to glow a sickly yellow. It was as if he were swelling with energy, with *thunder*.

Vraska strained against the chains. "All that talk of torture, and now you'd rather kill us than go head-to-head with the kid?" Her words were scathing. "No wonder you need whatever is inside the vault. Without your crew, you're nothing."

Annie blinked, studying the others. "You're a coward," she said slowly, eyes burning toward Akul. "You went after my nephew for the same reason you go after unarmed civilians and low-level outlaws. They're a sure thing. And as much as you like to cause trouble, well—I can't imagine you're happy when trouble comes to your own front door."

"That's why you hide this place, isn't it?" Oko pushed. "To avoid a fight you didn't choose?"

Akul burned from within, smoke shooting through the gaps of his teeth with every breath. The rest of the room fell silent.

To a criminal like Akul, reputation was everything.

And Oko's crew had just challenged his.

After a long pause, the dragon lowered his head toward Kellan, teeth appearing in two razor-sharp rows. "Throw them in a holding cell," he said to the Hellspurs. "The duel begins at midnight."