

Episode 2: The Jailbreak

Akemi Dawn Bowman

From set *Outlaws of Thunder Junction*

13. 03. 2024

Wind rustled through the open window, making the curtains billow in Annie's room. She watched the shadows curl around the floorboards, listened to the restless bray of a lone animal in the field, and rolled from one side of her bed to the other.

None of it was enough to keep Oko's voice out of her head.

He'd all but threatened her town, simply by *finding* her. And if Akul ever came looking ...

Annie sat up abruptly and scraped her fingers through her long, unbound hair. The townspeople were the closest thing to family she had left. If there was a target on her, there'd be a target on *them*.

Maybe Oko was bluffing. Maybe he got lucky, finding her out here in the wastes. Maybe history wasn't doomed to repeat itself.

But Annie just couldn't take the chance.

She grabbed her riding clothes and leather boots, braided her hair, and dressed as quickly as she could. Her coat was barely over her shoulders when she pushed open the back door and marched toward the field, stopping only to fetch a shovel from one of the weathered outdoor sheds.

She counted a hundred paces from the fence, straight through the yellow grass that appeared gray in the darkness. After she took her last step, she looked down at the small, unmarked gravestone in front of her. She clenched her jaw and started to dig.

For a while, she found nothing but dirt. But when her shovel hit the ground with a *thud*, she froze.

It was still there, right where she'd buried it all those months ago.

Annie dug up the surrounding earth until the top of a wooden box was visible. She knelt low, unbuckled the sides, and pulled the lid back to reveal her thunder rifle.

Nostalgia rippled through her, taking the air right out of her lungs.

Annie picked up the weapon, running her fingers over the familiar metal frame, and slung the strap over her shoulder. With two fingers, she whistled across the flat fields. The wind would carry the sound far—but it was magic that would make sure it reached her friend.



CAROLINE GARIBA

© 2024 WIZARDS OF THE COAST LLC

Art by: Caroline Gariba

Fortune slipped through the air, summoned by the bond between them. He let out a jovial whinny, dark eyes flashing when he spotted Annie's rifle.

"I know," she said, patting his neck. "But this town has given us more than we can ever repay. We owe them their safety."

Fortune lowered his head as Annie swung herself onto the saddle. She took the reins and clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, urging Fortune into the open desert.

They cantered for miles through the wastelands and beyond the canyon. When the sun splintered over the horizon, Annie took Oko's matchbook from her pocket and looked at the black lettering once more.

The Wildcard Saloon,

Rustwood

She'd never visited the town before, but she was familiar with the name. It was one of many failed ranching towns that collapsed the way most of the outskirt communities did—too few people, and too little money.

Rustwood appeared in the distance, and Fortune slowed to a cautious walk. The sun rose and the wind picked up, scattering dust and tumbleweeds across the faded path.

The town looked abandoned. For a moment, she wondered if this had all been some elaborate plan to lure her away from her home.

Panic set in. Annie was starting to pull on the reins when a clambering set of footsteps made her pause. Frowning, she grabbed her rifle, dismounted Fortune, climbed the saloon steps, and pushed open the doors.

A shriek came from behind the bar. Annie swung her rifle toward the sound, spotting a small skeleton creature, his bones wobbling in strange directions and his jaw twisted with wild glee. A few paces behind him was a fury blue goblin, chest puffed and eyes filled with rage.

“STOP!” the goblin screeched, but his warning only made the skeleton quiver with excitement.

The tiny creature bolted farther from the goblin’s reach, chattering in a language Annie didn’t understand. When the skeleton spotted Annie, he tilted his head and ran straight for the gap between her feet. Annie lost her footing and stumbled to the side, hitting the floor hard. Her finger remained close to the trigger, barrel pointed between the two strangers.

A winged being with long feathers sprouting from his arms appeared and grabbed hold of the goblin’s collar with a fist, yanking him back. Nearby, the skeleton rolled his head in place, taunting.

“That’s enough, Breeches,” the winged man urged, pressing his other hand to the goblin’s chest. “You know he’s only doing it to get a rise out of you.”

“LITTLE THIEF!” the goblin roared.

The skeleton held up a gold necklace and immediately stuffed it in the cavity of his chest. The goblin—Breeches—shouted a variety of single-word insults, and the skeleton skipped happily into the next room.

“Care for a drink?” Oko’s voice sounded from behind the bar. When Annie turned to look at him, his eyes were creased with mischief.

Annie lowered her thunder rifle and slung the weapon back over her shoulder. “You know fine well this isn’t a social call,” she said, dusting her hands against her coat. She bobbed her chin toward the strangers still squabbling in the middle of the saloon. “Friends of yours?”

Oko leaned over the counter like he was sharing a secret. “They’re part of the team I was telling you about. Breeches—the goblin—specializes in explosives, and Malcolm is a siren who does surveillance. The little one we call Tinybones.”

Annie’s expression hardened. “Did you threaten their homes the way you threatened mine, or are they just here for a good time?”

“What I said at the ranch was an observation, not a threat. Still—I knew you’d come around.”

“I reckon you think you know more than you actually do.”

“I know what Akul did to your nephew.” The spark in his eyes was impossible to miss. “Only a certain kind of person could ever forgive something like that.”

“I ain’t here for retribution,” she replied, terse.

Oko shrugged, clearly disinterested in prying further. “Come on—I’ll introduce you to the rest of the crew.”

Annie followed Oko through one of the back doors, where a second-floor mezzanine overlooked a large parlor room. Vacant card tables were scattered around the space, along with an old piano that was missing more than a few keys.

Tinybones teetered on the edge of the banister, fiddling with the gold chain that dangled through his ribcage. The moment Breeches appeared in the room below, he clambered up to the rafters and found a seat on the highest exposed beam.

“SNEAKING AND THIEVING AND HIDING!” Breeches shouted at the ceiling.

Tinybones swung his legs and rattled with delight.

A man and a woman sat at opposite sides of a table, their eyes an identical shade of pale gray, with the former wearing a leather and glass eyepatch across the left side of his face. Sitting on a piano bench was a woman with striking white hair and an elegance that was equal parts beautiful and terrifying. And perched on one of the mismatched bar stools was a gorgon covered in green scales, with a mess of long, snake-like tendrils for hair.

Oko motioned to the table first. “That’s Gisa and Geralf, the necromancer siblings. Geralf is our medic, and Gisa is … well, let’s just say it’s best to leave the healing to her brother. At the piano is Eriette, a witch who specializes in charms. And Vraska—an assassin from Ravnica—is my second-in-command.” He shifted his attention to the whole room. “Everyone else, this is Annie Flash. She can see through any illusion and is one of the best sharpshooters on Thunder Junction.”

A collection of murmurs and grunts sounded in waves. Annie didn’t bother with the usual niceties. Something told her this wasn’t the kind of group who’d appreciate it.

Oko squared his shoulders, voice suddenly serious. “I’m going to give you the same opportunity I gave everyone else here: the chance to walk away. Because once I explain the score, then you’re in until it’s done.”

“Sounds like you’re asking me to play a game without knowing the rules,” Annie pointed out.

Oko’s grin was unwavering. “It’s more of a token gesture. You and I both know you made up your mind to join the team before you ever stepped through those doors.”

Annie flattened her mouth into a hard line. He wasn’t wrong. She held up a hand. “I’m in—but *only* as far as stopping Akul. Anything beyond that’s got nothing to do with me *or* my town, you hear?”

Oko beamed. “I accept your conditions. Now would you like to hear what the job is?”

Annie grimaced, waiting.

“We’re going to rob Maag Taranaau,” he said at last.

Annie blinked. Oh, she’d heard of it alright—the only structure on Thunder Junction that supposedly predated the Omenpaths. “You dragged me all the way out here for a fairy tale?”

Vraska’s tendril hair rose in response. Eriette pursed her lips.

“Plenty of folks have come through Omenport searching for the vault, only to turn right back around empty-handed.” Annie shook her head. “It’s nothing more than a myth.”

“I assure you, Maag Taranaau is very real,” a voice echoed from above.

Annie looked up in alarm. Someone was watching them from the mezzanine. Someone who didn’t look entirely human.

Their head was framed with two horns that curved inward, but while the bottom half of their face was visible, everything above their mouth was made of smoke and shadow. They drifted down from the balcony like a phantom, billowing darkness behind them, and landed gently beside Oko.

“This is Ashiok,” Oko said. “They deal in nightmares and can extract information from a person’s mind. They hired us to break into the vault.”

Annie tried to fight the flutter in her chest, but the shadows around Ashiok made her want to squirm. “What’s any of this have to do with Akul?” she pressed.

Ashiok was stoic. “Akul and the Hellspurs built an entire town around the vault hoping to control it. They call it Tarnation.”

Annie frowned. “If Akul already knows where the vault is, then why hasn’t he taken whatever is inside?”

“Because he doesn’t have the key, despite his best efforts,” Oko said simply. “A man named Bertram Graywater is only recently in possession of it.”

“Graywater?” Annie repeated. “The founder of the Sterling Company?”

“One and the same,” Oko replied. “According to our intel, he had Akul halfway across the desert chasing a decoy courier just to make sure the key didn’t fall into a competitor’s hands. Fortunately for us, he has no idea we’re after it, too.”

The memory of the carriage accident snapped together in Annie’s head. *So that’s what Akul was after.*

“The vault ...” Annie’s voice trailed off, and she met Oko’s gaze. “What’s inside?”

“RAW POWER!” Breeches screamed, making some of the others jump.

“What’s inside Maag Taranaau doesn’t concern the team,” Ashiok countered. “They are acting on my behalf to break into the vault, and they will be paid well for it, as will you. The treasure is mine alone.”

Annie wasn’t sure if raw, magical power was something that any one person should have—if that was even true—but as long as Akul didn’t get ahold of it, she supposed it wasn’t any of her business to question the logistics.

Annie folded her arms across her chest. “Where do we start?”

“Our first stop is the Sterling Company headquarters,” Oko said. “A couple members of our team are being held in the prison after an unrelated incident—but it also happens to be where the key is.”

The ground shook, and the walls creaked and groaned, making dust fall from the ceiling beams. Annie grabbed the nearest pillar to steady herself, furrowing her brow at the lack of concern from the rest of the group.

The back door swung open, and the giant face of a demon with four horns and leathery red skin peered inside. He opened his mouth in a snarl, displaying two rows of razor-sharp teeth.

“Lord Rakdos!” Oko exclaimed. “I apologize for starting the meeting without you. But in our defense, it’s not as if you can fit through any of the doors.”

Rakdos growled, and a pair of bat-like wings rustled at his back.

A demon, necromancers, assassins, and thieves ... Annie had the distinct feeling that she was in over her head. But the moment she dug up her thunder rifle, she’d known what would happen. She was going to do whatever it took to stop Akul—even if it meant aligning herself with a crew like this.

Annie had made her choice, and there was no turning back.

The Sterling Company headquarters sat at the edge of the bustling metropolis of Prosperity. Tall gray boulders mimicked towering skyscrapers, and ornate trains moved through the heart of the city, connecting Prosperity to stations across Thunder Junction. Two long roads ran alongside the raised tracks, paved with clean white stones and patrolled by nearly a dozen guards.

Oko strolled down the path, nodding politely to the few guards that bothered to look at him at all. Most didn't—he'd shapeshifted into the most unassuming, forgettable face he could muster, much as it pained him.

He tugged the collar of his courier uniform, shifting the weight of the box tucked under his arm. The rattle of bones sounded from inside.

"Stop fiddling," Oko scolded in a low voice. "We're almost to the doors."

Oko eyed the ridgeline in the distance where Breeches, Malcolm, Vraska, and Rakdos were waiting for his signal. He hoped he wouldn't need it. If everything went smoothly, Oko would be in and out before Bertram Graywater even realized he'd been robbed.

A metal fence surrounded the headquarters, flickering with bright blue energy. Oko approached one of the small outbuildings where a guard was posted and held up the box.

"You got a courier pass?" the guard asked from the other side of a glass window.

Oko pulled a stolen identification card from his pocket, courtesy of Tinybones's nimble fingers and an evening in one of Prosperity's many saloons.

The guard studied it briefly before pressing a button. The gate slid open, and the blue energy tapered slightly. Oko made his way toward the wide concrete steps and drummed his fingers against the package.

The moment he stepped over the threshold, Oko surveyed the room. Huge white pillars held up the staggeringly high glass ceiling. The front desk was made of solid white marble and surrounded by large pots of manicured cacti. There were multiple stairwells leading to various levels of the building—something that would be helpful for hiding, but less helpful for a quick escape.

Oko approached the man at the desk. "I have a delivery for Bertram Graywater. I was told it was urgent."

"They always are," the man sighed, waving his hand for the box. "I'll take it to his office. You don't need to stick around."

Oko took a step back, watching the man shuffle for the stairs. When he was certain no one was watching, he looped around one of the large pillars and shapeshifted into one of the guards he'd passed on the road.

Admiring the gleaming silver buttons on his uniform, Oko straightened his cuffs and stalked after the man carrying the box, making sure to keep a safe distance behind him.

Annie and Eriette made their way to the back of the Sterling Company headquarters, where a row of air vents led to the lower levels of the building.

Wedged between the columns of an archway and hidden from view, Eriette removed a vial from her pouch and studied it with distaste. "Breeches assured me this wouldn't explode," she said, pouring the shimmering liquid across the grate. It sizzled in response, spitting and hissing as the metal dissolved. The slight wrinkle between her eyebrows vanished. "It appears the furry creature really *can* brew a potion."

"You sound surprised," Annie noted.

"I don't make a habit of trusting pirates," Eriette said thinly. "But for now, it appears we are all aligned."

They climbed down the narrow tunnel, following a dimly lit stairwell until they reached a corridor. Two prison sentries were pacing up and down the hall, boots clunking heavily off the damp stone floor.

Eriette stepped forward and whispered a spell under her breath, and a strange euphoria seemed to wash over the guards. They swayed in place, eyes glassy with their mouths curled into a pair of identical love-stricken smiles.

"I seem to have made a few wrong turns," Eriette declared innocently. "Perhaps you could help me?"

The guards began talking over one another, lulled by her charm, each attempting to be Eriette's one and only savior. Annie took the opportunity to hurry past them, making her way through the iron doorway and down another wide set of stairs.

The familiar desert heat was nowhere to be found so far below the surface. Annie shuddered at the cold, stale air, and cast her golden eye across each prison cell. The Sterling Company used illusions as a security measure, making the cells appear empty. It was one of the reasons Oko needed Annie's help.

It took her mere seconds to find them. Kaervek was on one side of the room; Satoru Umezawa was on the other.

From the corner of his cell, Umezawa looked up. A strand of black hair fell from his disheveled top knot, and he brushed it away. "You don't look like a guard, but you can still see us," he observed, suspicion bubbling in his tone. "Care to explain why that is?"

"Oko sent me," Annie explained. "He told me to remind you about the off-plane bargain you made and that you still have a job to do."

Kaervek puffed his leather-clad chest and pointed a finger across the room. "I have forsaken no promises. It is the fault of *this* cretin that we were subdued in such a humiliating manner!"

Umezawa grabbed the bars, knuckles blazing white. "We're here because of *your* incompetency!"

"You call yourself a leader of thieves, capable of picking any lock," Kaervek snarled. "If you are truly as clever as you claim to be, then why are we still confined to these iron cages?"

"I could ask you the same question. You talk a great deal about being a powerful conqueror, but it seems to me all you know how to do is get captured," Umezawa bit back. "With all the time you've spent in prisons, one would think you'd be an expert at escaping by now!"

Eriette appeared at the foot of the stairs with a silver key dangling from her finger. "Thought you might need this. The guards were *very* obliging." Her gaze roamed over the seemingly empty cells. "Did you find them?"

Annie pointed to their respective cages. "You didn't mention they were such great friends."

Eriette clutched the key to her chest and laughed. "Oh, they detest one another. It's a rather entertaining story, come to think of it." She sighed and moved for the lock on Kaervek's cell. "Another time, perhaps."

The key clicked into place, and Kaervek emerged from the illusion, hands bound in glowing restraints.

Eriette tutted. "Oh, you poor thing, having your magic subdued that way."

"Spare me your false pity, witch," said Kaervek.

Eriette's eyes gleamed wickedly. She uncuffed the restraints and tossed them to the floor, before freeing Umezawa from his cell, too.

"Thank you," Umezawa said with a curt nod.

"Such good manners, and such a handsome face," Eriette purred.

Annie couldn't be sure, but she thought Umezawa's cheeks turned an almost imperceptible shade of pink.

Kaervek rolled a bright orange flame in his palm, eyes beginning to glow. "I am ready to break free of this dungeon. What chaos shall we unleash on our captors as we turn their castle into a wasteland of ash and bone?"

"There's no time for any of that, I'm afraid," Eriette said. "We'll leave the way we came in, without drawing unnecessary attention. Except for Umezawa." The corners of her mouth twitched. "I believe Oko requires your assistance. He's somewhere in the building, though I'm not exactly sure *where*."

The tattoos near Umezawa's neck began to shift across his skin. "I'll find him," he said and moved for the shadows without another word.

Annie took one last look at the prison and followed Eriette and Kaervek back through the tunnel. It occurred to her that the only thing keeping Oko's crew from tearing each other apart was a common goal.

She hated to think what they'd do to each other as enemies—and with any luck, she'd never have to find out.



Art by: Cristi Balanescu

Oko waited near an alcove, watching as the man carrying the box moved farther down the hallway. He stopped at one of the doors, removed a key from his pocket, and let himself inside. A few moments later, he reemerged empty-handed.

When the sound of footsteps faded, Oko hurried for the office door and looked through the round glass window. The box was propped up on Graywater's desk, surrounded by an organized mess of paperwork and files.

With a knuckle, Oko tapped a slow pattern at the glass. There was rustling inside the box, and the cardboard shifted in place, tilting from one side to the other. Tinybones burst from the lid, partially disassembled. His bones clicked back into place one by one, and he fixed a well-worn hat over his skull. With a quick test shake of his arms, he leapt from the desk and unlocked the door.

Oko regarded him with mild fascination. "There are very few things in life that impress me—but you really are quite something."

Tinybones chattered his teeth in response.

Oko ran his fingers over various surfaces, searching for hidden spaces and locked cabinets while Tinybones rummaged through the desk. They hadn't heard anyone enter the room. Not until the person spoke.

"I recognize the skeleton. But do I know you?"

Oko turned quickly. Tinybones's head spun in place.

Umezawa stood in front of them both, silent as a wraith.

Oko's mouth curved into a grin, and he let his pointed ears appear through his illusion. "Does anybody really?"

Umezawa barely moved. "You clearly didn't have much trouble breaking into headquarters. You could have freed me and the warlock days ago, if you'd wanted to."

"The timing wasn't right," Oko replied easily and waved a hand around the room. "That's all bygones now anyway. We need to find the key. I doubt Graywater would leave it out in the open, but—"

"The portrait," Umezawa interrupted. He motioned to the wall behind the desk, clearly unimpressed by Graywater's lack of originality. "It's always the portrait."

Oko studied the frame thoughtfully before giving it a tug. It came away from the wall with ease, revealing a hidden safe. He made a space for Umezawa and retrieved a small device from his pocket. "I took the liberty of going through your things. Thought you might need this."

Umezawa's jaw tensed, and he snatched the object from Oko's hand. "Always two steps ahead," he muttered, words dripping with indignation.

In his open palm, the device contorted into the shape of a spider, legs stretched outward. It leapt, latching itself to the safe's dial, before a series of numbers flashed across the paneled screen. The device spun, and the metal legs clicked delicately in place each time the lock shifted from within. After several moments, there was a loud *clunk*, and the door swung open.

There was a small burlap bag propped against several thick books.

A smile stretched across Oko's face. He reached inside and pulled out a small artifact that looked otherworldly. While most of the metal seemed blackened with time, some parts of it gleamed in fluorescent hues.

The sixth key.

Oko tucked the artifact into his inner shirt pocket and picked up the empty box from the desk, lowering it toward the floor. Tinybones jumped inside, bones giving a jolt before disassembling into a pile.

"You coming with us?" Oko asked Umezawa. "I can disguise you as a guard, if you'd like."

"I wouldn't trust your trickster magic on me any more than I trust it on you," Umezawa replied easily. "I'll meet you both outside." He vanished into the hallway.

Lifting his shoulders in triumph, Oko made his way back out of the building, careful not to attract attention. He shifted back into a courier just before the last corner, and when he reached the gate, the guard opened it without question.

Halfway down the road, Oko crossed paths with a small group on their way to the Sterling Company headquarters. The man in the center had black hair with thick silver streaks along the sides. He was flanked by two bodyguards.

They'd never met before, but Oko recognized the man's face. He was well known on Thunder Junction. A Planeswalker—just like Oko.

Ral Zarek.

Except it wasn't Ral who made Oko stop in his tracks, nor was it the burly armed guard that seemed hungry for a fight.

It was the boy with messy black hair and pointed ears.

The fae magic that ran through their veins ... It was easy to sense. Judging by the look on the boy's face, he'd recognized Oko's magic, too.

Oko stiffened, and his illusion faded away without warning, unable to hold in the presence of a fae he hadn't expected. In an instant, he was Oko again, with no mask, and no disguise.

"Who—?" Ral started in alarm when his eyes fell to the box in Oko's arms.

Tinybones popped his head out. Ral's bodyguard lunged forward, but Oko was quick. He ducked, swift and sharp, and landed a blow right in the guard's throat, forcing him to his knees. Tinybones removed his femur and jumped from the box, cracking the bone hard against Ral's temple, who clutched his head, stunned.

The fae boy froze, and Oko didn't wait around to find out why. He shapeshifted into a large eagle, stretching his wings as Tinybones scrambled up Oko's back and gripped his feathers for dear life. Oko took off toward the hills just as the Sterling Company guards began to react.

"Follow him!" Ral's voice boomed up the hillside.

Thunder erupted in the sky, and Oko made several sharp turns to avoid being hit. Tinybones's hat fell to the ground, and he gave an irritated rattle as he clutched Oko's neck. The ridgeline was close, but there was little cover beyond the towering boulders, and every Sterling guard was armed. If Oko moved out into the open, he'd be at a disadvantage.

He dove low and immediately shapeshifted back into his true form inches from the ground. Tinybones leapt off his shoulder, shuddering at the unplanned flight. The pair hid behind one of the tall rocks and braced for a fight. All Oko had to do was hold them off until the rest of the team arrived.

The fae boy appeared in the sky, golden dust trailing at his feet. He landed several feet away, eyes wild with urgency. Oko charged, but the boy only raised his hands, pleading.

Despite his instincts, Oko hesitated.

"I—I don't want to fight you!" the boy sputtered.

"Strange disposition for a bodyguard."

The boy dropped his arms. "I've been searching for you. Not just on this plane, but on others, too."

"Oh?" Oko lifted a brow. "And why is that?"

"I'm pretty sure—well, you see—the thing is ..."

"I'm rather pressed for time," Oko snapped.

The boy's hands shook at his sides. "I think you're my father."

Oko stared, unsure whether he'd heard him correctly.

"My mother is Alyse," the boy said. "My name is Kellan."

Oko had heard as many lies as he'd told in his lifetime—enough to know that the boy was telling the truth. He remembered Alyse well. And Kellan ...

A stampede of footsteps grew closer. By the time Oko turned from the boy, it was too late. His hesitation had cost him; Oko was surrounded.

The Sterling Company raised their weapons, ready to fire.

Oko glanced at Tinybones, who was braced firmly on his shoulder. "I never thought to ask—but as a skeleton, how indestructible *are* you, precisely?"

Tinybones gave a careless shrug as Oko tightened his fists.

A mess of golden, vine-shaped tendrils appeared, throwing most of the guards back down the hill in a cluster of dust and magic. The rest were picked up one by one, ensnared by the golden vines, and tossed aside. Confusion swirled through Oko's mind until he realized the magic was coming from Kellan.

Ral stepped through the cloud of dust left behind, studying Kellan with a mixture of shock and disappointment. "Mind explaining what you're doing, kid?"

"I'm sorry," Kellan said, face crumpling. "I—I didn't plan any of this!"

Blue electricity spun around Ral's fingers, and the sky seemed to darken above him. Behind his eyes was a building storm. He lifted his hands, fingers sparking with magic, when the electricity suddenly fizzled.

Ral opened his mouth and blinked. "Vraska?"

Oko looked over his shoulder and found his crew standing in wait. Vraska stepped forward, narrow features pinched tight. The deep scars stretched across her skin appeared more prominent in the sunlight.

"I know," she said, slow and intentional, like the worst kinds of poison. "You thought I was dead."

Rakdos slammed into the earth beside Ral, wings spread wide and the desert sun blaring behind him. Recognition spread across Ral's face, but before he could say anything at all, Rakdos swung a boulder-size fist into the lightning mage and sent him skidding off into the dust.



Art by: Victor Maury

Tinybones took the opportunity to scramble for a guard's pocket watch, holding it up to the light in triumph. His satisfied giggle made all his bones rattle.

"THE JESTER-THIEF TAKES RECOMPENSE FOR HIS HAT!" Rakdos observed in a rumbling—but surprisingly musical—voice.

Tinybones stomped his feet in gratitude and settled in the crook of Rakdos's neck.

Malcolm folded his winged arms. "We should leave before they send reinforcements. It won't be long before Graywater realizes what you took."

"I agree," Oko said and observed Kellan for a moment. He looked so much like his mother, with his dark hair and hazel eyes. Alyse's were the same color, a mixture of moss and honey. They reminded Oko of his favorite forest, and the days they spent walking through the woodland and talking about their childhoods. It had surprised him back then—that he could listen to a person's secrets and not want to spin them into weapons. It surprised him even more that she had felt the same.

Oko pushed the thought away and plastered on a smile. "Looks like you're coming with us," he said to Kellan, who was beginning to look ill.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Vraska interjected, eyes brightening to a venomous shade of yellow. "We know nothing about him."

"Leaving him to answer to the Sterling Company would be a liability." Oko curled his mouth into another easy grin. "Besides, didn't you hear? He's my son."

The rest of the team exchanged uneasy glances but knew better than to argue.

“ONWARD!” Breeches squawked.

The team retreated over the ridge and out of sight. Oko felt Kellan behind him, clearly not wanting to let Oko out of sight but not wanting to get too close either.

Oko had never imagined himself as a father—but the boy had just helped him escape, and he’d turned on his own boss to do it. Kellan had shown loyalty without being coerced or tricked. He’d given it *freely*.

Midway through their journey back to the saloon, Oko decided that having a son could turn out to be very useful indeed.