

Episode 6: The Ballad of Thieves and Thunderslingers

Akemi Dawn Bowman

From set *Outlaws of Thunder Junction*

25. 03. 2024

The hot wind carried a flurry of embers that swirled around Oko like fireflies. He swept a hand through his hair, staring up at the entrance to the vault. A round door stretched into the dark fog. Lava seeped through the cracks, flowing over the edge and down onto Tarnation's surface below.

Oko turned to face his crew, reunited at his signal. "Whoever built this vault wanted to keep its treasure hidden, and I doubt a simple lock and key is the only thing separating us from the innermost chamber. We'll need to stay alert."

"BOOBY TRAPS!" Breeches yelled. He raised two fur-covered fists in the air, and a row of explosive devices appeared along his belt.

"Precisely." Oko focused on Annie. "I need you to be our eyes."

Annie's mouth was fixed in a tight line. She hadn't said a word since the saloon. When they took the elevator up to the floating vault, she made it a point to stand as far away from Oko as she possibly could, gaze pinned to the thunder shoot-outs spreading around the city.

It hadn't been Oko's intention to leave Kellan behind. There was no benefit to having his son locked up. But he'd been hired to do a job, and rescuing Kellan would've cost them the mission. He had no choice but to leave him to the Sterling guards.

It didn't matter if Annie couldn't understand Oko's logic; all he needed her to do was get the team through the vault without falling prey to any illusions.

"Let's just get this over with," Annie said, voice gruff. "The sooner we empty the vault, the sooner we can go back for the kid."

Oko didn't know how to play the role of a doting father, but he was perfectly capable of feigning gratitude. He bowed his head slightly and held a hand toward the door. "If you'd be so kind ..."

Annie's left iris glowed a vivid orange as she approached the outer entrance. The markings on the door began to shine, creating a display of elongated spirals that pulsed with life. The door parted down the middle, creating an opening in the rock.

Oko remained close to Annie as she led the crew down the dark corridor. Tinybones's nervous rattle echoed behind them, followed by the impatient thump of Rakdos's heavy steps. The demon's wings brushed against the walls, sending dust and debris tumbling to the ground.

When they reached a wide chamber, Oko stopped beside an enormous platform. Dozens of fiery lanterns lit up the curved ceiling, casting a distorted reflection on the uneven black floor. Two matching

pedestals stood on opposite sides of the room, each with its own lever. At the far end of the chamber was a staircase leading to a shimmering door.

Annie threw up a hand, stopping Oko from walking any farther. She pointed from one end of the room to the other. “There’s light stretched across here, like crisscrossed strings. I think it’s some kind of trap.”

“A security system,” Umezawa agreed. His gaze followed the crevasse down the center of the ceiling. “The lights are most likely designed as a trigger.”

Oko lifted a brow. “What kind of trigger?”

Breeches knelt at the edge of the platform and swept a blue finger along the partially reflective surface. “Volcanic rock and crystal,” he said with a sharp hiss, quieter than he had perhaps ever been before.

Geralf stared at the ceiling with disdain. “Are you suggesting lava might come pouring out of the ceiling at any moment? Because in case it wasn’t made clear, I can only stitch flesh back together if there’s still flesh to work with.”

Gisa giggled beside him, clapping her hands like she’d never been more excited. “Imagine the ghouls I could raise if you all burned to death!” She turned to the others. “Some of you would make such delightful and interesting corpses.”

“Perhaps our focus should be on turning the security system off,” Oko suggested.

Umezawa motioned to the pedestals. “I believe these levers are part of a dual-lock system. I’ve seen something similar on Kamigawa. In order to disarm the light grid, we’ll need two people to pull these levers simultaneously.”

“One of us needs to get across the platform without setting off the trap,” Oko concluded.

“I could try, but ...” Annie shook her head. “The gaps are small. I’m not sure it’s even possible for a full-grown adult to squeeze through them safely.”

Tinybones leapt up, chattering away in his language that sounded mostly like clicks and growls.

“THE BRAVE AND JOVIAL SKELETON VOLUNTEERS!” Rakdos translated.

“If I may,” Umezawa interjected, removing a round, metal device from his pocket. He held it up in his palm, and the top unfolded itself from the screen before refolding into the shape of an origami dragonfly. It fluttered in the air, and Umezawa passed the screen to Annie, quickly explaining the controls. “You can lead Tinybones across the grid with this. Wherever the device goes, he can follow.”

Annie did a few practice turns in the air before sending the dragonfly to the edge of the platform. The metal device dove up and then down, looping from side to side as if it were moving through a strange tunnel system. Tinybones followed close behind, mimicking every movement with ease. At the last turn, the dragonfly dipped low—then shot up in a high arc before resting at the foot of the stairs.

Tinybones’s head rolled off his neck, plopping firmly into his waiting hands. He scurried along the low path before throwing his skull over the last hurdle. With an anxious rattle, he took a massive leap over the invisible light. The moment he landed, his headless body rolled into the stone steps with a hollow *clunk*.

Tinybones picked up his skull, propped it on his shoulders, and spun his torso around so that he was facing the rest of the crew.

Umezawa took hold of the closest lever, waiting until Tinybones had reached the top of the opposite pedestal. “Ready?”

Tinybones chattered in acknowledgment.

Umezawa took a careful breath. “Three … two … one …”

They pulled the levers in unison. Metal shifted from deep inside the walls, creaking and turning like the gears of an ancient clock. The lanterns spun above them, rotating in place until they formed two straight lines, illuminating a path along the glassy floor.

“The grid has vanished,” Annie said. “I think it’s safe to cross.”

No one moved—not until Tinybones removed his humerus from his shoulder socket and chucked it across the platform. It clattered to a stop.

Oko smirked. He picked up the detached arm and returned it to Tinybones. “I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

The skeleton shoved his arm back into place.

When the rest of the team reached the bottom of the stairs, Annie looked up, studying the shimmering colors along the door’s surface. “This isn’t an illusion,” she said.

“No.” Kaervek’s voice was breathy. “It’s a ward.” He brushed past Umezawa, making a point to stare him down. “Your reliance on overly elaborate contraptions shows weakness. Allow me to show you what *true* magic can do.”

Kaervek made his way up the stairs, palms spread in front of him. Orange flames wove around his fingers, prodding and testing the protection spell. The colors rippled, flinching at the intrusion of Kaervek’s magic. A hissing sound erupted from the stone, an off-key whisper attempting to fight back, trying to protect whatever was hidden inside.

Oko took a step back to give him space, tilting his chin slightly so that his voice carried over his shoulder. “When we get through the door, I think some of you should stay behind with Rakdos. It’s only a matter of time before someone realizes we took the key, and we need to make sure our exit isn’t blocked.”

“It’s a little late for that,” a voice drawled.

Oko spun, knees bent as he prepared to retaliate. Akul stood at the other side of the platform. A red gash stretched from the corner of his eye to the lowest part of his nose. The Sterling Company had slowed him down, but they hadn’t managed to defeat him.

An unfortunate outcome, Oko thought dryly.

Hellspurs poured in behind the dragon, weapons ignited to create a wall of flames and thunder.

“Draw their fire away from Kaervek,” Oko said to his crew, voice low. “We need time to get the door open.”

“You’d best hurry.” Annie raised her thunder rifle. “I reckon the Sterling Company won’t be far behind.”

Akul stretched his jaws, building thunder in his core, but he didn’t get a chance to attack before Rakdos smashed into his side and clobbered him to the ground.

Akul scrambled to regain his composure while Rakdos raised his arms and bellowed with laughter as if he had all the time in the world.

“FINALLY!” his voice boomed. “*THIS IS THE FUN I WAS PROMISED!*”

Thunder erupted from both sides of the chamber, and the dragon and demon barreled toward each other, snarling in the center of the room as everyone else tried to stay clear of their fight. Oko's team shot in various directions, pulling their enemy's focus away from Kaervek, while Vraska and Oko flanked him.

Malcolm flew toward the lanterns with Breeches latched to his shoulders. As they circled the room, Breeches tossed several small explosives into the crowd of Hellspurs.

“BULLSEYE!” he squawked.

Tinybones leapt to avoid the blast, bones detaching to allow the shrapnel to pass through him before his body put itself back together. He climbed up the back of one of the Hellspurs, fishing for the spare thunder pistol wedged in its holster. With a bony finger around the trigger, he shot a blast straight into the Hellspur’s foot. The man howled, and Tinybones leapt to the ground with glee.

Gisa had managed to raise a single Hellspur ghoul, cackling in delight as her creation stumbled through the crowd in search of flesh. Geralf sliced at his opponents with a pair of razor-sharp knives. His cuts were surgical and strategic, maiming places on the body that weren’t easy to recover from. Across the platform, Eriette charmed several Hellspurs into an unshakable stupor while Umezawa attacked from the shadows, picking off unsuspecting Hellspurs with a retractable dagger.

Annie shot another blast from her rifle before using the back of the gun to crack a Hellspur across the jaw. “How’s that door looking?” she barked at Oko. “We could really use the cover!”

Kaervek’s hands sparked with magic. “Patience is necessary. No good ever comes from forcing a ward to submit before it is ready.”

Vraska drummed her long nails in the air, watching the battle unfold. “There are too many of them,” she said, too quiet for anyone but Oko to hear. “Getting the door open won’t matter if we lead their army inside.”

“What are you suggesting?” Oko pressed.

Her yellow eyes flashed. “You and I need to reach the vault’s treasure room. No matter the cost.”

A loud click sounded from the hollow of the stone door, and the enchantment vanished. The stairs gave a shudder, and the door began to rise.

Kaervek took a step back, just as a snarling foe slammed into him from the side, knocking him prone.

Oko looked back at the team. They were struggling to stave off the Hellspurs, and without backup, or a place to hide ...

They needed help—but Oko needed them to delay Akul for a little longer.

Annie caught his gaze, and her forehead wrinkled. When her attention snapped back to the surrounding Hellspurs, Oko didn’t wait to explain himself. He turned for the door without remorse, disappearing down the stairs with Vraska close behind.

Darkness filled the damp corridor, and the cold air made Oko’s skin prickle. At the lowest level of the room, a strange glow rippled from inside of a doorway. It reminded Oko of an Omenpath. Its light crackled with volatile magic, and an iron carving appeared to float in the center like it was caught in a web of energy. Golden beams trickled from its edges, forming rays of sunlight. It was shaped exactly like the medallion.

Oko removed the key, inches away from the ancient mechanism. The light shimmered in acknowledgement. “Time to find out what you’re hiding.”

A golden vine shot toward Oko's wrist, wrapping itself around his hand like a lasso. The force yanked him backward, sending the key skittering along the floor.

Kellan stood at the top of the stairs. A flicker of magic still thrummed at his fingertips.

Oko blinked, unable to hide his surprise, but Vraska was already moving in; the moment Kellan met her gaze, she'd turn him to stone.

"Wait—" Oko lifted a hand instinctively when lightning flashed through the room with a *crack*, making him recoil. He shook his head, fighting the bright haze, and realized Ral Zarek had appeared at Kellan's side.

Vraska stiffened, no longer concerned by Kellan's presence. "You shouldn't have come here," she said to Ral, voice clipped.

"Why are you doing this?" Ral demanded. "We are *friends*, Vraska."

"We were enemies once, too," she replied.

Electricity sparked in Ral's hands. "You can still return to Ravnica. I don't know what happened to you, or where you've been all this time—but it doesn't have to be like this."

Vraska snarled. "The only way to fix what I've done is by getting what's inside the vault."

Oko flinched at her words. *To fix what I've done*. They ricocheted through his mind like puzzle pieces that didn't quite fit. He knew Vraska took this job for the reward. He knew she'd been hired by Ashiok, same as he had. But what he didn't understand was the hunger in her voice, like she didn't just *want* the payday—she needed it.

Normally, desperation in others was something Oko reveled in. It made people easy to manipulate, and even easier to bargain with. But the people who kept their desperation a secret?

They weren't pliable. They were *dangerous*.

"Do I really mean so little to you that you can't even look at me?" Kellan demanded, interrupting his thoughts.

Oko pulled his attention from Vraska, feeling the heat of Kellan's anger. "I was going to come back for you. You were still going to get your cut of the treasure when the job was finished."

"I didn't search for you across the Multiverse for *treasure*."

"Perhaps not. But you knew what *I* was here for, and you were a willing participant up until the moment you got caught," Oko pointed out. "I treated you the same as any member of my crew."

"I'm not your crew; I'm your son. I wish you could've seen the difference."

Oko lowered his chin. Vraska and Ral were still arguing—soon their fight would move beyond words. He didn't have time to waste.

"You can either help me," Oko said coolly, "or you can get out of my way."

Kellan clamped his mouth shut, and the muscles in his jaw tightened.

Oko watched him for a moment, calculating the odds of Kellan truly making an enemy of his father, when he remembered the key had fallen from his hand. Oko's eyes shifted, searching the floor.

Kellan noticed.

They moved at the same time, racing for the medallion. Kellan burst ahead, body lifting in the air as gold dust trickled behind him. He flew too fast for Oko to catch, sliding under him and grabbing the key.

Oko skidded to a halt just as Kellan shot out of his reach. The boy stilled midair, fist wrapped around the medallion. Oko ran his tongue over his teeth, eyes darkening. Flexing his fingers, Oko summoned his magic and threw several brightly colored vines across the room. They lanced through the air, serrated with sharp thorns, and snapped around Kellan's torso. Oko barely flicked a finger, and the vines slammed Kellan against the ground with brute force. Kellan let out a sharp cry, and the key slipped from his hand.

Oko picked up the medallion. "There's so much you could have learned. So much I could have taught you," he said, voice becoming a lethal purr. "Our bloodline is more powerful than you know."

Kellan pushed himself to his feet and balled his fists. "The only thing you've taught me is to never trust you again." His shoulders shook with defiance. "I won't let you open that vault."

Sparks flew nearby. The conversation between Vraska and Ral had escalated.

Oko gripped the medallion tightly. "There's something you should know about me," he said carefully, facing his son. There was no illusion of kindness. No half-truths to disguise himself. He was showing Kellan a part of him that existed deep in his very core. "*I don't like people telling me what to do.*"



Art by: Andreas Zafiratos

Oko was pulling a hand back to throw another set of vines toward Kellan when thunder grazed his shoulder. He stumbled back, clutching his arm as he sucked air through his teeth.

Through the sights of her thunder rifle, Annie stared down at Oko from the top of the stairs. She was the best sharpshooter on Thunder Junction, and she missed on purpose. Oko didn't bother asking why.

"Are you really going to give up the biggest payday of your life for a kid you barely know?" Oko said, voice laced with irritation.

"The Multiverse is full of people who do bad things for selfish reasons," Annie replied easily. "But the people who do good and expect nothing in return? I reckon they're worth protecting."

Oko summoned his magic, letting power build through his arms as he prepared to lash out at Annie with his vines, when Kellan darted into his line of sight, eyes glowing a strange green. Oko felt it immediately—the relaxing calm that swept over him, curling around his mind like a blanket. He swayed in place; Kellan reached for the medallion.

The moment his fingers brushed against the key, Kellan recoiled in fear, clutching his temples as he released a blood-curdling scream. The sound was slurred in Oko's mind, as if he were watching everything in slow motion. Shadows moved across the floor, wrapping around not only Kellan but Annie and Ral, too. They cried out in agony, overwhelmed by the nightmares seeping into their heads.

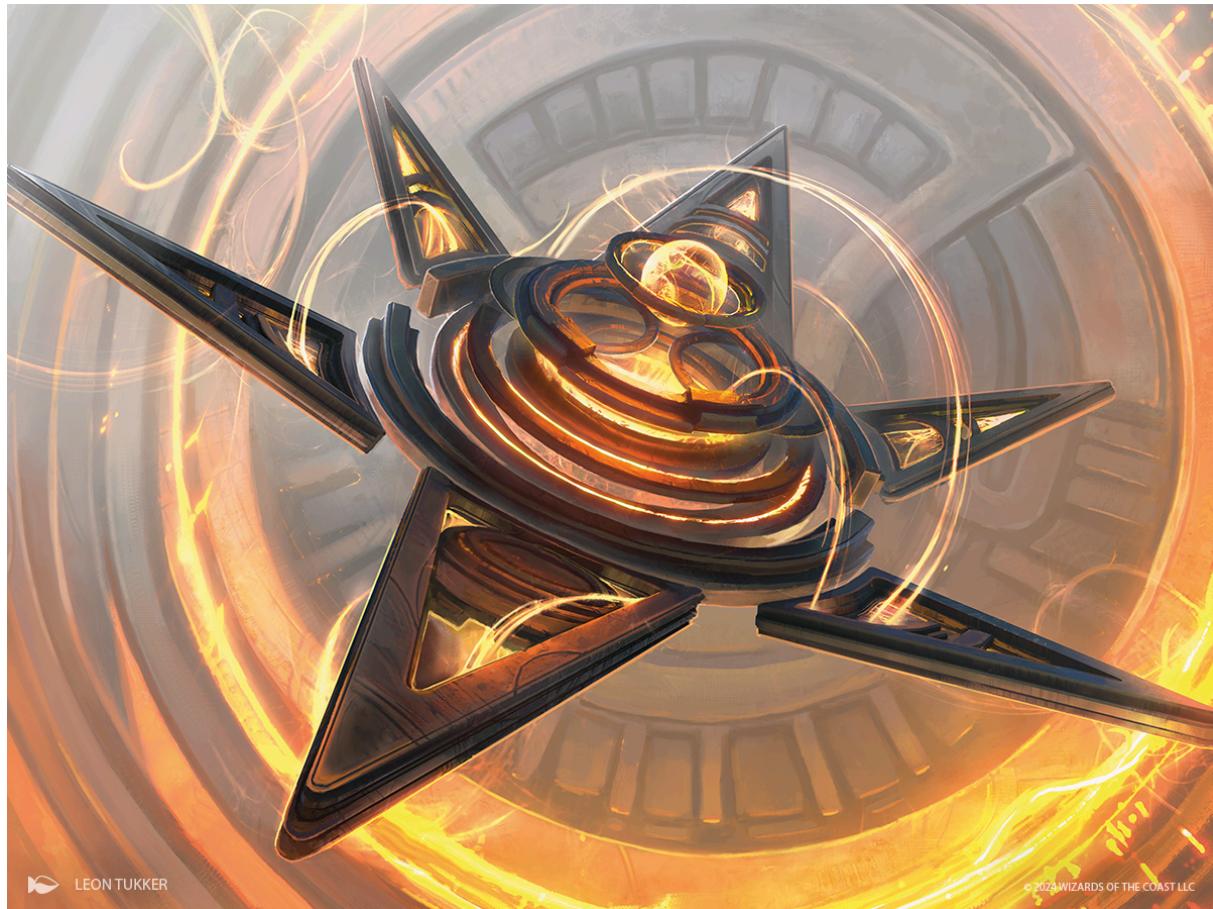
Kellan's magic faltered, and Oko blinked hard, breaking free of the illusory calm. He followed the shadows that swept through the room, knowing who they belonged to.

Ashiok stood with Vraska beside the locked door, dark smoke billowing at their feet.

"Your timing is impeccable," Oko said.

Vraska tilted her head toward the door with an impatient huff. "Let's just get the door open before we have any more unexpected company."

Oko held the key to the center lock. The metal gave a shudder before snapping into place. The spikes stretched out into the glowing door, clicking and turning as the center spun in an erratic pattern.



Art by: Leon Tukker

Each piece of the key broke apart, moving in opposite directions. The light pulled back like a curtain; there was nothing left to block the way.

With the back of his hand, Oko wiped the blood from his chin, and stepped into the treasure vault.

A golden mist burst into view, stretching in every direction. There were no walls or ceiling to be seen—just a seemingly infinite expanse filled with curved metal pathways leading to the center of the room. Stairs hovered one on top of the other, overlapping in a way that made them appear as if they were constantly shifting in place. At the top of the innermost platform was a pod-like structure encased in glass. Metal stretched around the glowing sphere, marked with an ancient script and surrounded by threads of amber magic. Behind it was a mural of an enormous horned creature, towering over the platform like a guardian.

Oko made his way toward the treasure pod, eyes never leaving the shifting metal cage. He stopped several yards away and squinted through the pulsing light. A shape moved behind the glass, too obscured by a cloudy haze to make out properly.

Oko frowned. This was something *alive*.

Ashiok floated past him, feet barely touching the ground. “At last,” they mused, moving for the pod. They pressed their sharp nails to the glass, more tender than Oko had ever seen. “I have found you.”

The creature brushed against the barrier as if it were reaching for Ashiok’s outstretched fingers. In that moment, an illusion drifted away. One that Ashiok had been wearing for some time.

The darkness evaporated, and beneath Ashiok’s hooded cloak was Jace Beleren.

Oko's nostrils flared. The trickster didn't appreciate being tricked in turn. "How long have you been hiding behind your magic?"

"He's *still* hiding." Annie stumbled through the doorway, focused solely on Jace. Her eye glowed a vibrant orange as she saw past the illusion he was still tucked carefully beneath. "Your scars ... Those plugs ... What happened to you?"

Jace's piercing blue eyes filled with resentment. "You are searching for secrets that are not yours to find." He lifted a hand and gestured at Annie. By the time she hit the floor, she was already asleep.

Jace turned back to the cloudy tank and pressed both hands to the glass. The pod shattered, and dust particles shimmered in place before fading away entirely. A small creature rested on what was left of the altar. Its body was covered in orange fur, and a single tuft of cream hair sat at the top of its head, wedged between two dark horns. A long tail curled around its legs, hollow at the tip. Inside, a blue orb flickered to life. Its nose twitched, sensing the open air, and a pair of large green eyes fluttered open as if the creature had been asleep for a very long time.

Jace scooped up the child in his arms, cradling it to his chest. The child barely had time to process what was happening when Jace pressed a finger against its forehead, sending it back into slumber.

"Rest now," Jace said. "There will be time for us to get acquainted."

"What's going on?" Oko demanded. "You said there was power in the vault. But this—this is a child. An *infant*."

"He is so much more than that," Jace replied, eyes flashing as he nodded to someone behind Oko.

Oko turned, but Vraska was already waiting.

"Your services are no longer required," she said. Her eyes flashed with golden magic, and Oko felt the stiffness spread through his feet immediately. When he glanced down, his legs had already turned to stone. Oko fought the sting of betrayal as the petrification spell rose through him. If he didn't act now, his will would be overcome by Vraska's magic, and it would be too late. For a moment, he wondered if Kellan would meet the same fate.

When the stone reached Oko's neck, he shoved the thought away, and planeswalked out of Thunder Junction.

Kellan stirred, fingers scraping across the stone floor. Ral was asleep nearby, but Kellan couldn't see Annie anywhere.

She must've gone after Oko alone, Kellan realized.

He pushed himself to his feet and stumbled into the final chamber. A faint glow radiated from a broken altar, and he found Vraska standing beside a man Kellan didn't recognize. In his arms was a sleeping child.

Annie was lying on the ground, unmoving.

Kellan shot toward her, shimmering faerie dust behind him. By the time he reached her side, Vraska, the man, and the child had vanished without a trace.

The ground shuddered, and cracks appeared across the vault door. Rock fragments fell from the archway, toppling to the floor like hailstones.

Kellan frantically checked Annie's breathing. She was alive, but there was a wound at her temple where she'd fallen and blood trickled down her cheek. He looped an arm around her and pulled her weight toward him. She rustled slightly, groaning as Kellan helped her upright.

"We have to go," he urged.

Annie strained against Kellan, reaching for her thunder rifle that was still lying on the floor. He scooped it up with his free hand, and they shuffled for the doorway, nearly colliding into Ral.

"The ceiling is caving in," Kellan said quickly.

Ral stared at the half-broken altar in confusion. "But—the treasure—"

"It doesn't matter anymore. Whatever was inside this vault is gone."

Ral clenched his jaw, solemn.

They hurried back through the vault, zigzagging around the mess of falling rocks. By the time they reached the first chamber, most of the Hellspurs had already fled. Akul was sprawled out on the floor, eyes shut in defeat. Pinning his limp body to the ground was a victorious Rakdos.

"Everyone needs to get off this rock!" Kellan shouted in warning. "Something in the vault was activated, and this place is falling apart!"

Rakdos looked up, blinking at the molten lava beginning to pour through the cracks in the ceiling. The rest of the team exchanged wary glances, unsure of whether Ral's presence was a concern.

Eriette emerged from the crowded battle site, wiping blood from her brow. "Where's Oko? And Vraska?"

"They already left," Kellan said quickly. "There's no time to explain—we need to *move*."

The team fled back through the corridor as the sound of the vault being ripped apart roared behind them. The moment they reached the open air, Malcolm and Breeches took off into the night, soaring toward the wide desert horizon. The rest of Oko's crew piled onto Rakdos's back, where Tinybones settled comfortably in the center of his horns.

Rakdos huffed. "I HAVE SWORN ONCE NEVER TO BE RIDDEN AGAIN. LET IT BE KNOWN THIS IS THE LAST AND FINAL TIME!" With one last snarl, he took off over the edge of the floating rock.

"You go ahead," Kellan said to Ral. "I can fly Annie down myself."

"Get as far away from Tarnation as you can. I'll come and find you when it's safe." A crack of lightning shot down, skittering into the canyon, and Ral was gone.

Annie made a face. "When it comes to traveling, I prefer four legs on the ground."

"You don't like flying?"

"I rode a bird once that nearly broke my neck. So, no."

Kellan flinched at the lava sputtering up from the ground. "Trust me—flying is a lot better than falling."

She gave a curt nod, but before she reached Kellan, Akul burst from the vault entrance, talons splayed wide. He snatched Annie's waist and yanked her toward him, thunder sparking across his scales. She cried out in alarm, kicking at Akul's claws, but it only made him grip tighter. Kellan heard a *crack* and worried it was bone.

Panic set in, and Kellan struggled to focus. He raised his hands, ready to summon a pair of energy swords, when he remembered what his father had said—about their bloodline, and the power that

flowed through them. Kellan knew he would never be his father. He didn't want to be. But the abilities that came from his fae side weren't something to fear—they were a part of him. Kellan had faltered the last time he fought Akul because he hadn't been ready to accept his magic, and his heritage. Not completely.

He wouldn't make that mistake again.

Kellan dropped his hands and took a breath, steadyng his magic as it pulsed through him. *You can do this.*

Kellan sent a wisp of golden energy toward Akul like a lure, slow and strategic. The moment their gazes locked, Kellan leapt into Akul's mind without warning. He burrowed deep into the dragon's core, past the anger and the bloodlust that rippled around him. When Kellan's magic latched onto Akul's soul, he held tight and dampened every ounce of fight until the dragon was nothing more than a puppet. It wasn't just hypnosis—it was *control*.

"Release her," Kellan ordered.

Akul's claws relaxed, and Annie tumbled back to the ground. Behind the dragon, the rocky mountain broke apart, piece by piece. Jagged stones toppled to the ground, and lava erupted from every crevasse, pouring like an open wound into the city of Tarnation below.

Kellan's eyes didn't leave Akul. He couldn't let him go free; if he did, the Hellspurs would never stop coming for Kellan, and Annie, and the town she wanted so desperately to protect. It had to end now.

Kellan sent another surge of magic into Akul's mind. "Go back inside the vault—and don't come out."

Despite the subtle glint in his eyes that suggested some part of him understood what was happening, Akul obeyed. He marched back into the entrance of the collapsing vault, tail dragging slowly behind him. Kellan watched the dragon's silhouette vanish as the tumbling rocks sealed the opening shut.

When the ground split apart and the floating mountain began to shed the last of its rubble, Kellan grabbed hold of Annie and fled across the sky. The last he saw of the vault was a giant, golden orb all that rock had concealed.

One moment it was there—and then threads of magic wove around the sphere, pulsing at every seam, and the vault shot toward the clouds and vanished from sight.

Oko appeared out of the Blind Eternities and inside Wildcard Saloon. There was no sign of Vraska's magic; he'd rid himself of every last bit of stone thanks to his ability to shapeshift.

He'd been lucky—but he would've preferred being smart.

Vraska and Ashiok had tricked him. Or Vraska and *Jace*, it seemed. They'd used him and his crew for their talents and fled without paying them their dues. And the child ...

Oko pursed his lips and smoothed the wrinkles above his brow. There was no point in worrying about any of that now. He preferred to lick his wounds and search for better opportunities. Revenge could wait.

Running a hand through his dark hair, Oko admired his reflection in the mirror behind the bar before moving for the back room.

Rakdos paced outside the window. Tinybones was doing his best to lure Geralf and Gisa into a game of chase, but neither necromancer seemed interested in taking the bait, too busy drowning their dis-

appointment with a half-emptied bottle. Eriette sat at the piano, thumping an occasional key out of boredom, while Umezawa and Kaervek were perched at opposite ends of the balcony, glaring at one another from the shadows.

Oko flashed a bright smile. “Worry not, my friends—I am alive and well!”

Eriette’s voice was clipped with impatience. “I take it none of us are getting paid?”

Gisa sank her head into her hands. “The Hellspurs were no fun at all. Most of them ran away before I could finish any of my ghouls!”

“The entire mission was a disaster,” put in Umezawa. “We were set up to fail from the very beginning.”

“Do not include me in your collective humiliation,” Kaervek spat. “I did my part and severed the magical wards. Our so-called leader’s inability to manage this group of miscreants is the *true* failure.”

Oko flicked his nail dismissively. “Vraska and Ashiok were always planning to double-cross us. They betrayed me, just as they betrayed all of you.” He looked around, counting the crew that was still left. “Where are Breeches and Malcolm?”

“Their loyalty was always to the gorgon,” Eriette pointed out. “When she didn’t come back, they left.”

Oko tried not to show his disappointment. Breeches’s shouting sometimes grated him, but Malcolm was an ideal scout. Oko thought he could be a useful addition to a more permanent team.

Geralf tapped a finger against his empty glass. “Umezawa’s right—this was a disaster from start to finish.”

“WHAT AN AMUSING TIME!” Rakdos bellowed through the open window nearby. “I HAVE NOT HAD THIS MUCH FUN IN DECADES!”

Tinybones raised his arms, bones rattling as he cheered.

Umezawa folded his arms across his chest. “There’s nothing funny about being cheated out of a payday.” He pinned his gaze to Oko. “I’d like to know what you’re planning on doing about it.”

Gisa raised her eyebrows, grinning with anticipation.

“Nothing,” Oko admitted simply. He was immediately met with a collection of scowls. “At least not for the time being. We have no leads on where Ashiok and Vraska went—and I don’t make it a habit of wasting time and resources when there are plenty of other treasures to be found in the Multiverse.”

Kaervek scoffed. “You mean to let them go?”

“They’ll show themselves eventually.” Oko’s eyes darkened. “When that day comes, they’ll be sorry they ever crossed us. But until then ...” He shrugged. “We can either take our frustrations out on each other, or we can agree to reunite when a better opportunity presents itself. For revenge *or* a bigger score.”

Rakdos roared with enthusiasm. The others exchanged glances.

Oko tucked his hands at his back. “Shall we agree to keep in touch?”

“You know where to find me,” Umezawa noted. “But I’m tripling my fee next time.” He bowed his head slightly before disappearing back into the shadows.

Kaervek waved a hand through the air and turned for the door. “You owe me for this miserable failure, Oko. I will give you time to search for the traitors. Just know that one day, I intend to collect what was promised to me.”

Gisa sighed from across the table, twisting a strand of hair around her finger. “I guess you can count me and my brother in. Unless I’ve killed him before then, of course.” Her smile stretched across her face. “But don’t worry—I can always bring his corpse along to the team meetings!”

Geralf rolled his eyes. “If given the choice between a trained medic and a half-wit corpse wrangler, they will choose me every time.”

Gisa stuck out her tongue. The two of them left the room, bickering under their breath.

Tinybones rattled and scurried up Rakdos’s face.

“THE SKELETON WILL ALSO RETURN FOR FURTHER AMUSEMENT!” Rakdos roared through the window before turning for the desert. His wings spread wide, blocking the sunlight from the window, and he took off with Tinybones clutching gleefully to his horns. “ONE LAST TIME, SKELETON! ONE LAST AND FINAL TIME!” And he was gone.

Only Eriette remained, still tapping away at a lone key on the piano. The silence stretched between her and Oko until finally she asked, “Would you like to know what happened to your son after you disappeared?”

Oko leaned against the nearby pillar, hands stuffed in his pockets. “If he’s anything like me, then I assume he got away.”

Eriette nodded. “So did Annie.” She tilted her head. “Do you mean to include them in this circus act a second time?”

“No. From now on, their business is their own,” Oko said, and he meant it.

Meeting Kellan hadn’t been part of the plan. Neither was betraying him. But both things happened, and Oko had no intention of feeling sorry about it. Kellan was safe—he’d get over what happened between them, eventually. Perhaps their paths might even cross again someday.

Oko had never had much of a father. He’d have liked to have been a better one to a child of his own. If the circumstances had been different ...

He straightened his shoulders and blinked the thought away. Right now, there were bigger things in the Multiverse to focus on.

Oko reached for the half-filled bottle Geralf had left behind and poured two glasses nearly to the brim. He passed one to Eriette and held up his own.

“Until next time,” he said.

Eriette raised her glass. “I look forward to the reunion.”

It had been over two weeks since Maag Taranaau had fallen from the sky, wreaking havoc on Tarnation’s surface. A single bruise was the only visible wound Kellan had left from the failed heist, but the ache he carried in his heart was much harder to get rid of.

Kellan tried not to think of Oko, but he found himself searching for his father in every stranger’s face. Maybe it was silly to think his father might be watching him from an illusion, but it was comforting, too. Kellan preferred the imagined version of his father, and he wasn’t ready to let go of him quite yet.

There were plenty of chores on Annie’s ranch to keep Kellan busy. It reminded him of his days in the sheep-filled town of Orrinshire, when time moved a little slower. He liked the work, and the routine, and the fact that he wasn’t in a hurry to rush to another plane. He’d never really felt like he belonged

anywhere; if he couldn't fix that by knowing his father, then maybe he could fix it by helping his friends.

Kellan heaved the last bale of hay onto the stack and pulled the barn doors shut, turning to watch the animals grazing in the nearby field. A crack of lightning sounded, making some of the horses rear back in alarm.

Ral Zarek appeared at the gate. When he spotted Kellan, he raised a hand in greeting.

Kellan slid his work gloves off and tucked them into his back pocket before making his way toward Ral. "Don't tell me you tracked down Vraska already?"

"No," Ral admitted, somber. "There's been no sign of her—or Jace—since they left." He sighed, expression softening. "But there's lots of work to be done on Ravnica. I could really use someone I trust."

"Are you offering me another job?"

Ral laughed. "What can I say? I'm a glutton for punishment."

Kellan looked back toward the ranch. The hole where Annie had dug up her thunder rifle was still visible. She wasn't ready to bury it again. Not until she knew for sure that the town was safe.

Kellan had stuck around for the same reason. He figured it was the least he could do to repay her. But with Akul gone and Tarnation in shambles, Kellan was starting to think they might actually be okay.

Still—he wasn't ready to leave Thunder Junction quite yet.

"I think I've done enough wandering for a while," Kellan admitted. "Besides, I'm expecting someone."

Ral smirked. "Sounds like there's a story in there. And the way you're blushing, I think it's a good one."

Kellan fought a nervous laugh. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Ral peered over Kellan's shoulder toward the house. "Is that sweet potato pie I smell?" He took a deep breath through his nose. "What are the odds Annie will offer me some if I go and say hello?"

"You can try," Kellan said. "But don't be surprised if she has you chopping fence posts in exchange."

Ral rolled up his sleeves. "For pie? I'd make her a fence-building machine."

Kellan watched him disappear into the house. He thought about joining them when he saw a lone rider on a horse coming down the path. He squinted in the sunlight, holding his hand over his eyes to get a better view.

It was a woman carrying a parasol. With pointed ears and long black hair that hung in a braid at her shoulder, she was dressed in thick layers despite the scorching afternoon sun. Hanging from her shoulder was a heavy satchel—several rolled pieces of parchment poked out the back, and inkwells swung from leather thongs along the sides.

Kellan met her halfway down the path, grinning. "Finally found your way out of that Gruul ruin, did you?"

"I got your invitation on the relay tower," Amalia said, holding out a hand so Kellan could help her to the ground. She flashed a smile, pale face tilted up toward him. "You know, it's *very* expensive to send messages like that. Did you miss me that much?"

Kellan's cheeks darkened, and he ran a hand over the back of his neck. "I—I'm glad you're here."

"I came all the way from Ravnica, and you aren't even planning to give me a hug?" she teased, twirling her parasol so that the shadows danced around her.

Kellan opened his mouth, sheepish, when Amalia threw an arm around his neck and squeezed.
“I missed you, Kellan,” she said against his cheek. “And I can’t *wait* to start mapping this place together.”