
Episode 5: High Moon

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Twelve chimes erupted from the molten clock tower. Its sharp edges glowed a sinister red, and its shadow stretched across the enormous courtyard below. Fenceposts made of bone and black iron were wedged into the ground, circling the perimeter to create an enclosure.

Tarnation's dueling grounds.

Kellan stood at the edge of the arena, flanked by a pair of Hellspurs. A gate creaked open behind him, making stones tumble from the surrounding rockface. Footsteps echoed through the dark tunnel. Oko, Vraska, and Annie appeared, still bound in chains. Their captors ushered them toward the spectator stands, where dozens more of Akul's crew whooped and jeered.

Vraska gave no more than a slight nod in Kellan's direction. An acknowledgment, or a goodbye, Kellan wasn't sure.

Oko cast a look of disdain at the man prodding him forward. When Oko reached the top of the stairs, he adjusted the Hellspur armor he'd worn as a disguise. Kellan was surprised the bones and cindered cloth hadn't been an illusion, but despite the anti-magic restraints on his wrists, it hung from his father's lithe frame crooked and unkept from the hours spent in a holding cell.

Annie met Kellan's gaze and lunged forward, straining against the guards. "The second you get the chance, fly outta here," she managed to say before they yanked her away. "You need to save yourself while you still can!"

Kellan tried to respond, but the Hellspur on his left shoved him into the arena. He tripped over his own feet, skidding against the rocks. Pushing himself to a standing position again, he tightened his fists and faced the center of the ring.

Streaks of lava flowed between the cracks in the earth, sending steam curling through the air. The ground trembled, grumbling like the belly of a volcano, and a figure stalked out of the dark tunnel. Moonlight washed over Akul, making his scales shimmer. He stepped into the arena, golden eyes flashing with thunder, and moved in slow, predatory circles around Kellan.

Kellan swallowed the knot in his throat. "What are the rules? The winner is whoever draws first blood, right?" he asked hopefully.

A chorus of snickers erupted from the crowd. Kellan tried not to look sick.

Akul snarled through his teeth. "This is Tarnation, boy, and we like to be entertained." He turned his head toward the stands and roared, "This is a fight to the death!"

The Hellspurs met his rage with wild enthusiasm, and Kellan recoiled at the sound, feeling his stomach drop like a heavy stone. He searched for Oko in the stands once more and found him brushing lint from his sleeve. One of the bones detached from the armored chest plate, and Oko looked down at the floor, distracted.

The pang of disappointment running through Kellan was visceral.

Fire erupted around the courtyard, blocking every exit. Akul whipped his tail from side to side, thunder crackling across his chest where the medallion gleamed.

The rising temperatures made Kellan's cheeks flush. He didn't care about the key, or the money, or the power. He only cared about his father. And yet ...

Kellan's thoughts made him dizzy. *This might be the last time we ever see each other, and he won't even look at me.*

One of the Hellspurs stood on a wooden platform and shouted for the crowd to simmer down. "On my signal!" she bellowed into the arena.

Akul paced. Kellan tried to clear his head, letting the thrum of magic build in his fingertips. Oko's attention wasn't going to save him, no matter how badly he wanted it. If Kellan was going to get out of this alive, he needed to do it on his own.

With a slow breath, he steeled his heart and prepared to fight.

The Hellspur aimed a thunder pistol toward the sky and pulled the trigger. Blue energy burst into the air, scattering sparks above the crowd. The cheers came like a tsunami.

Kellan reeled back, and Akul charged. Jaws snapped toward him, and Kellan flew out of the way, avoiding the dragon's fangs. He landed on the ground and braced for another attack, barely missing the glistening barb on the end of the dragon's tail as it swung straight past him. It hit the earth, gouging a deep line in the black rock.

Kellan sucked the air through his teeth, trying to ignore the menacing laughter pounding through his ears. He dodged another of the dragon's blows, and then another, leaping in partial flight to avoid a burst of thunder.

Kellan knew he couldn't overpower the dragon. He was unevenly matched in strength and size. But maybe if he could wear him down, and make him tired ...

It was a small chance. Minuscule, even. But what other options did he have?

Despite what Annie had urged him to do, flying away wasn't an option. Even *if* he managed to get out of the canyon without being shot down by Hellspurs, it would mean abandoning the others. Oko, Vraska, Annie ... They'd be made to suffer, and when Akul and his crew were done toying with them, they'd be thrown into the coals. Nobody would come for them, just like nobody was coming for Kellan now. The only way to make it out alive was by winning.

Reaching for his magic, Kellan steadied his shoulders and summoned a golden lasso. He whipped it toward Akul, but the dragon threw his tail out, slashing the magic apart. Kellan flexed his hands and tried to muster every bit of his strength. A rush of heat moved through him, from his core all the way to the very tips of his fingers. The energy grew from his fist, morphing into a golden spear. He heaved it toward Akul with a vengeance. It sailed straight for the dragon's heart, leaving streaks of golden dust in the air. The moment the spear made impact, it bounced off and clattered to the ground. Akul's scales were too thick to pierce.

Akul sneered, baring two rows of sharpened fangs. He stretched his jaws to reveal a crackling orb of thunder building inside of him. Kellan gawped with horror. Thunder was pure chaos, magic that destroyed anything it touched—and Akul had *swallowed* it.

Kellan looked from side to side, searching for somewhere safe to take cover. Lava flowed around him, seeping through the devastated breaks in the ground where Akul's tail had caused the most damage. Pockets of steam burst from the earth, making the sweat pool above Kellan's brow.

There was nowhere to run.

This isn't how it ends, he thought frantically, his mind racing. *You didn't track your father across the Multiverse just to die before getting to know him!*

Kellan's heart thumped, and the desperation he'd carried for months boiled to the surface. He still wanted to believe that there was more to his father than being a trickster. That with enough time, Kellan would be able to meet the man his mother once loved, not the one she left. But if Kellan died at the hands of Akul, he'd never get the chance. He'd never truly *know*.

And there was so much more he wanted to know. About his faerie heritage, and what it meant to be half-fae, half-human. He wanted to embrace the part of himself that he'd never been taught to understand. He wanted to be Oko's real son. Kellan needed more time with his father, and he wasn't about to let Akul take that away from him.

Something burst to life inside Kellan's chest, and his eyes flashed with untamed magic. Energy moved through him, spilling through his veins. It was foreign and familiar all at once, a magic that tasted of thistle and pine, of the deep places in the woods—an untapped power that had been dormant inside of him since birth, waiting to be set free. Waiting to be accepted.

Kellan locked eyes with Akul, holding his stare like he was dampening his fury into something pliable. Something he could bend to his own will.

The dragon lost focus, thunder spinning from his teeth in a harmless sigh. He hesitated, blinking in confusion, lulled by an illusory calm.

It took Kellan a moment to realize what had happened, but when he did, his face pulled back in surprise. He turned his hands over, studied his palms, and blinked.

How did I do that?

The angry bellows from the stands commanded his attention, forcing him to snap back to reality. Akul was still swaying in front of him, lost in a trance. *Vulnerable*.

Kellan threw a golden vine into a wide arc, looping it around Akul's neck. He pulled as hard as he could, digging his heels into the earth. This was his chance to take the dragon down, and he wasn't about to waste it.

Akul didn't react—not even as the air was choked out of him. The milky haze in the dragon's eyes swirled, and he began to weaken, knees falling limp.

Just a few more seconds, Kellan's mind pleaded, fighting the guilt bubbling through him at the thought of taking another life.

It had to be done. There was no other way.

But when Kellan's intentions wavered, so did his magic. Akul snapped out of his trance. Steam burst from his nostrils when he realized what Kellan was trying to do, and he slashed violently at the magic vine around his throat. The severed tension made Kellan fall backward, back cracking against the hard stone. He yelped as Akul launched himself toward Kellan with his full might, slamming his claws into the buckling earth.

Kellan was wedged beneath him, unable to move.

“Enough!” Akul snarled, spit flying through his teeth. He raised his fist, talons arced and ready for the kill. “This ends now.”

A blast of thunder hit Akul in the neck, making him rear back in alarm. Kellan flew out of the way, golden dust erupting from his feet, and found a corner on the opposite side of the arena. He crouched low, heart beating out of his chest, and searched the ridge for the source of the attack.

Cresting over the hill was row upon row of mercenaries. Their silver armor reflected the thunder crackling along their weapons, and in the center was Ral Zarek, eyes flashing as lightning built in his palms. The Sterling Company had found Tarnation—and they had brought an army.

Kellan’s forehead creased as his eyes darted around the space trying to understand what was happening. Akul didn’t wait for an explanation; he unleashed a charge toward the first row of mercenaries, splintering a nearby building. The Sterling Company opened fire, and Hellspurs poured from the hills with their rifles and steel. Thunder and fire ripped the world apart around them.



Art by: Xabi Gaztelua

Kellan searched the chaos for his father. He expected to find him still bound with iron restraints and held back by Hellspurs—instead, Oko appeared strangely calm, watching as the last bone on his vest fell to the ground. Oko cracked his head against the Hellspur behind him just as Tinybones appeared, reassembled out of the fallen bones of Oko’s armor. The little creature reached into his ribcage and pulled out a key, freeing the rest of the crew.

Only a few Hellspurs had remained behind. Vraska faced them, tendrils swaying in the air, and locked eyes with one after another until all of them were stone. Tinybones shook with incoherent laughter before clambering up Oko’s shoulder. Oko rubbed the bruises on his wrists where the cuffs had been

and met Kellan's visible shock with a wink. He approached the flames without missing a beat. "You did good, kid. Now—throw me the medallion."

Kellan looked between Oko and Tinybones. He didn't understand. If he was here the whole time ... If Oko had planned an escape ...

The deception turned his thoughts into a vortex. Kellan forgot to breathe.

Oko held out a hand, expression hardening. "The key. *Hurry!*"

Kellan frowned. "I don't have it. It's around Akul's—" He looked back at the dragon, who was too busy thrashing his way through the crowd of Sterling guards to notice much else.

Lying on the rocky floor was the medallion, flickering with light from the nearby embers. Somehow in the mayhem, it had been ripped from Akul's neck.

Thunder blasts echoed all around, making Kellan's heart pinch with worry. He had a million questions—but they'd have to wait. He leapt forward, snatched the key from the ground, and tossed it back through the flames toward Oko's waiting hand.

Oko caught it midair, fingers clutching tightly to the metal. A brief look of hunger spread over his face. Kellan finally saw it then: Oko's need to *win*. The world was full of games, and Oko knew how to rig them all.

He shoved the medallion in his pocket and turned to the others. "Annie, can you guide us through town? We need to reach the entrance to the vault. Malcolm is waiting."

"Malcolm? I thought you said—" Kellan started, but an explosion shuttered his words. He ducked, covering his head as embers rained over the courtyard.

Annie's eye brightened with an orange glow as she looked down into the canyon. "This way," she said quickly, and turned up the nearest street with Vraska close behind.

"That's our cue, kid," Oko urged, motioning for Kellan to follow.

Kellan leapt into the air, golden dust spinning behind him as he made his way over the fire—but the next blast was even closer than the last. Rock burst from the ground, and the impact sent him careening back into the arena. He rolled clumsily over streaks of lava, howling in pain as it seared the skin on his arms. With one hand cradled against his chest, he struggled to stand. He only made it two steps before a Sterling guard smashed a club against the back of his head. Kellan slumped to the ground, body quaking. The world darkened. His vision was tunneling. From across the fire, he saw his father watching him with a strange resignation in his eyes.

Kellan expected him to do something—to *help* him—but instead, Oko turned for the road and left his son behind.

A second blow landed on the back of Kellan's head, and all the light went with him.

Annie slouched behind a metal crate in the back of the saloon, reeling at the sight of Tinybones scavenging the floor for lost coins. Oko had lied to her. He'd had a plan the entire time and kept it from the crew. Now Kellan was paying the price.

Vraska checked the nearest window to make sure they hadn't been followed. Oko moved quickly from one room to the next, searching for weapons. He returned with several knives and split them between the team.

Annie scowled at the blade.

"It's just until we reach the vault," Oko assured her. "Breeches has been looking after your thunder rifle."

Annie tucked the knife in her belt. "We need to go back for Kellan."

"Not possible," Vraska said, pacing near the doorframe. "We wouldn't last two seconds trying to get back into the courtyard. Most of the roads are already barricaded."

"Then send the skeleton if you have to," Annie barked. "He seemed to have no trouble sneaking in the first time."

Tinybones gnawed on one of the coins, testing the gold. When it didn't bend, he rattled with irritation and flung it over his shoulder.

"The Sterling Company is raiding most of Tarnation, and the Hellspurs are distracted trying to protect their territory," Oko said, dismissive. "This is our chance to get to the vault without being noticed."

Annie's cheeks darkened, and she grabbed Oko's arm and pulled him close. "Why do I get the feeling you *knew* there was going to be an ambush?"

Oko peeled her fingers away, brushing his shirt sleeve. "Of course I knew. I wasn't about to have us face a dragon without an exit strategy. I made sure Bertram Graywater received the coordinates for Tarnation and left us enough time to get close to Akul before the Sterling Company arrived. The distraction gave us the perfect opportunity to steal the medallion."

Annie tried her best to keep her voice even, but the heat was rising through her faster than she could control. "Are you telling me getting captured was part of your plan all along?"

"We pulled it off beautifully," Oko grinned, triumphant. "They never suspected a thing."

"Neither did the rest of us," Vraska pointed out icily. She glared at Oko, yellow eyes flashing in warning. "I don't appreciate being kept in the dark."

"I couldn't risk any of you looking too confident about an escape," Oko said with a shrug. "We needed Akul to let his guard down, and he did." He lifted the medallion from his vest, tilting the metal until it caught the overhead firelight. "Now we've got everything we need."

"What about Kellan?" Annie challenged. "Was getting him to fight the leader of the Hellspurs part of your plan, too?"

"No," Oko admitted. "I brought Kellan with us because I knew he'd get us caught. The rest was all him."

A storm raged behind Annie's eyes. "You're brash, and reckless, and you put us all in danger—and now the Sterling Company will likely execute Kellan for his part in helping you." When Oko didn't say anything, she crossed her arms. "You could at least have the decency to look sorry about abandoning your son."

Oko flinched, before running a hand through his hair. "Malcolm is waiting near the vault entrance. We don't have time for distractions. Either we leave now, or we lose our chance."

Annie didn't back down. "I'm not leaving the kid to die."

Vraska brushed a long nail above her brow where two deep scars crisscrossed over one another and watched the shoot-out from the window. "He'll be fine for another day or two. You saw him stand up to Akul; he's tougher than he looks."

“And what if Akul wins this fight? What then?” Annie rolled her tongue against her teeth and chose her words carefully. “I’ve seen what he’s capable of. He’ll make Kellan suffer, worse than you can possibly imagine.”

Oko’s voice softened. “If you go after Kellan, you’re letting Akul win.”

Her nostrils flared. She was done letting him manipulate every situation to his favor. “This ain’t sitting right with me.” She stared straight at Oko. “If it had been the other way ‘round, he never would’ve left you.”

Oko rubbed the edge of his brow and sighed. “Look, the moment we finish the job, I will go back for Kellan myself.”

Annie hesitated, unconvinced. “The job will be done. You won’t have a crew.”

Oko waved a hand in the air like the details were unimportant. “You’ve more or less volunteered to join me. And Tinybones will come if I pay him extra. Isn’t that right?”

Tinybones was perched on top of a barrel. He was busy pouring loose sand from his hat, voice clicking in his own language. When it became obvious Annie didn’t understand him, he made an enthusiastic hand gesture before rattling with glee.

Annie wasn’t sure if she believed either of them, but she also knew Oko was right about Akul. If they didn’t get to the vault now, the Hellspurs would win. They’d find a way to escape the Sterling Company, and then they’d come for the medallion, and the power inside the vault.

For her town, and for Thunder Junction, Annie had no choice. There was no time for a rescue mission tonight.

Wherever Kellan was, she hoped he’d understand.

Kellan awoke in the back of a carriage, hands bound in iron. He wiped the blood from his lip, wincing at the bruise on his cheek, and looked out the barred windows. There were other prison carts lined up beside his, and a small patrol of Sterling guards that seemed more preoccupied with the road than Kellan—but there were no other prisoners. Every one of them was still in Tarnation, putting up a fight.

It was just Kellan, battered and alone.

The truth stung more than any wound: Oko had left him behind.

Kellan sulked against the carriage wall and looked at the stripes of moonlight that slipped through the metal bars. He was in a cage, a prisoner of Bertram Graywater. He was going to answer for the crimes he helped his father commit.

He shut his eyes, fighting the hurt that tasted like bile in his throat. He’d been naive. Oko wasn’t a father; he was a *stranger*. Their connection was nothing more than a childhood fantasy Kellan had been holding onto for too long. People had warned him about Oko’s true nature. They told him he couldn’t be trusted. He’d even seen it for himself.

He pressed his hands to his face, wishing he could find his voice just so he could scream.

The sky flashed and reverberated overhead with an onslaught of storm clouds. The surrounding horses reared, making the carriage shudder. Kellan stumbled forward, bracing against the floor, when another crack of lightning erupted outside the window. Several thuds landed heavily in the sand, followed by a jangle of metal and spurred boots. A key clicked into place, and the carriage door swung open.

Ral Zarek stood in the frame wearing a long poncho that billowed behind him.

Kellan rose to his feet and looked out the window. The patrol of Sterling mercenaries was sprawled out on the ground, unconscious.

With a knotted brow, Kellan touched the bruise on the back of his head. *The guards must've hit me harder than I thought.* The man he had betrayed days ago couldn't possibly be breaking him out of jail. The only other explanation was a concussion.

Ral watched him carefully. "I think you and I are on the same side—and I'm going to give you a chance to prove me right. Besides, Kaya will never forgive me if I let anything happen to you." He leaned forward and unlocked the cuffs from Kellan's wrists, letting them clatter to the wooden floor.

"Wait—you're letting me go?"

"I need a favor."

Kellan's mouth tightened. He knew what Ral wanted. It's what *everyone* wanted. "Let me guess. You're after the vault, too?"

Ral lifted a brow. "That obvious, huh?"

Kellan hopped out of the carriage, checking the fallen guards once more for movement. It wouldn't be the first time he'd been too gullible to see the truth. But as far as he could tell, this wasn't another ambush. Kellan looked away, eyes burning with regret. "I owe you an apology for what I did at the headquarters. I'd been looking for my father for so long, and when I finally found him ..." His words slipped away like water running through his fingers.

"I get it. Families are complicated. And fathers are, well ..." Ral's smirk was edged with sadness. "They either make you or break you, I suppose." He held Kellan's stare. "You still have a choice to be better than the hand they tried to deal you."

"By robbing the vault?" Kellan challenged, defiant.

"Okó has a history of lying, manipulation, and murder. You really want someone like that having access to the vault's power?"

"*No one* should have that kind of power," Kellan countered. "But he's a better choice than Akul, or Bertram Graywater."

"I agree with you," Ral said simply. "Which is why I want to make sure whatever is inside that vault stays locked up for good."

Kellan's mouth parted in surprise. Had he heard Ral correctly?

"I came here to discover new ways to communicate across planes. Not to unleash a bunch of unchecked magic from an ancient vault that nobody here understands." Ral shrugged. "I think you and I can help put a stop to those who'd cause this plane harm."

Kellan didn't answer, still processing what Ral was saying.

"I know you don't want to fight your father," Ral said. "Maybe you don't even want to face him again. But I've seen what power wielded in the wrong hands can do. And with the Omenpaths, it's just too great a risk. Because it's not just one plane that could be destroyed—it could be dozens."

Too many people knew how to string lies together and make them sound like the truth, and Kellan rarely knew how to tell the difference. But if there was a way to seal off the vault's power for good ... He met Ral's eyes. "What's your plan?"

“We get the key back, find the treasure inside the vault, and lock it away on another plane where no one will be able to find it,” Ral explained. He paused, watching Kellan’s expression shift, and held out a hand. “What do you say? Are you with me?”

If Kellan joined forces with Ral, he’d be going against Oko. He’d be going against the entire crew.

But Kellan didn’t owe them anything. Not anymore.

Kellan clasped his hand over Ral’s. “I’m with you,” he said, unflinching.



Art by: Wylie Beckert