

Episode 4

Valerie Valdes

From set *Lost Caverns of Ixalan*

Quint

The Sun Empire explorers waited for Great Shaper Pashona in a room large enough to accommodate them and the dinosaurs who had survived their journey. Huatli fed Pantlaza strips of dried meat, which the big raptor greedily swallowed, while Inti supervised the cleaning of armor and weapons. Caparocti and Wayta engaged in a training dance with complicated footwork, grunting and striking each other with sticks.

Quint examined the poncho that held Abuelo's spirit as he contemplated what he and Wayta had discussed earlier. He'd never worked at an archaeological site so far outside his own experience, and he felt underprepared despite his training. How many history texts at Strixhaven were written by members of the culture they described? Hadn't he himself been annoyed at some loxodon depictions? When he'd found the lost city of Zantafar, a few archaeologists argued he shouldn't be permitted to work at the site because he wasn't sufficiently neutral. Thankfully they'd been overruled, but it was a tense time.

Now, faced with one astonishing discovery after another, he wondered if Wayta was right: none of this was his story to tell. Though perhaps if he found more evidence of the Coin Empire—

Nicanzil returned to the room and all activity ceased.

"The convocation begins," Nicanzil said. "Follow me."

Packs were shouldered, weapons sheathed, and soon the Sun Empire contingent climbed endless stairs to the top of the building. They emerged in front of the huge golden door that had been visible from the shore when they first arrived. Quint wanted to examine it, but a sudden tension among his allies stopped him.

"Vampires," Wayta spat. The other warriors mirrored her disgust, some reaching for weapons.

Vampires? This must be the Legion of Dusk, from Torrezon. Saheeli had mentioned them.

A wizened merfolk entered from the opposite side of the room, her green skin mottled with brownish-pink spots, pink fins flaring out behind her like a cape. She wore jade armor like many of the River Heralds but carried no visible weapons—a magic-user, perhaps.

"Great Shaper Pashona," Huatli said, bowing deeply. "You honor us."

"Warrior-Poet," Shaper Pashona replied, inclining her head. To Quint's surprise, she then stared at him. "Who are you, stranger?"

"Quintorius Kand," Quint replied, tapping his forehead politely with his trunk. "Loxodon archaeologist. I'm visiting from Arcavios—that is, a place far from Ixalan."

"Why are you here?" the shaper asked.

"To help the Sun Empire with some research," Quint replied, "but I'm also on my own quest for knowledge."

"What do you intend to do with this knowledge?"

Quint wondered if the shaper could read minds. He glanced at Wayta, then said, “I’m not sure yet. Nothing bad.”

Shaper Pashona turned her attention to Huatli. “And you, Warrior-Poet, and your people? What are your intentions?”

Huatli gestured at the huge door. “We came seeking this portal. We believe it leads to”—she cast a suspicious look at the vampires—“a place of historical importance to the Sun Empire.”

Shaper Pashona followed Huatli’s gaze. “Who leads you?” she asked the Legion members.

One of the armored vampires carrying a lance stepped forward. “Our business is none of your concern. You will release us at once.”

Inti, already tall, straightened and threw his shoulders back, looking twice as big. “These invaders should be imprisoned,” he said.

“Or killed,” Caparocci added.

Huatli, to Quint’s surprise, nodded agreement. He’d never seen her look so bloodthirsty.

“You are all invaders,” Shaper Pashona said. “We helped you so that we could learn your purpose, but we can throw you back into the sea and let the spirits decide your fates.”

“You cannot stop our holy mission,” the vampire leader insisted.

“If you kill us,” Inti said, “you declare war on the entire Sun Empire.”

Another vampire stepped forward, elegantly dressed, with a whip hanging from his belt. “Torrezon as well. Queen Miralda would be most displeased.”

Nicanzil’s fins rippled. “You assume your people would ever find us.”

Hands reached for weapons, and the sharp scent of magic filled the air. Quint fixed the image of a defensive sigil in his mind.

“Enough!” Huatli exclaimed. “Shaper, your people and mine seek to open this door. I propose we work together.”

Shaper Pashona tilted her head. “What help do you offer?”

Huatli smiled. “We can translate the script on the door. If it’s like what we found in Orazca, we’ll have it open quickly.”

“Thank you for the reminder of your people’s betrayal in taking the golden city,” Nicanzil murmured.

“If we’re reminding each other of things,” Inti said, “remember it was a River Herald who first claimed the Immortal Sun.”

“The one who dies having made no mistakes never lived,” Huatli said diplomatically. “We all fought against the Phyrexians to defend our homes. We can fight each other now that our collective enemy has been vanquished, or we can use this chance to build a more lasting peace between our people.”

To Quint’s surprise, the second vampire spoke again. “Queen Miralda might be open to such negotiations, depending on what we find.”

“Shut your mouth, Bartolomé,” the other vampire snapped. “I warned you—”

“Very well,” Shaper Pashona said, and the vampire fell silent. “Warrior-Poet, you may proceed.”

Huatli gestured for Quint to accompany her, and together they examined the door. It didn't contain any removable tablets, and the glyphs looked slightly different. Next to the door, a tiered box with compartments in various sizes was embedded in the wall, for what purpose he couldn't fathom.

"This dialect isn't the same as the other door," Huatli said, brow furrowed. "This may take longer than I expected." She perused the glyphs, her lips moving slightly, while the members of the various factions shifted uneasily. Pantlaza gave a soft trill and sat down to preen her feathers.

Quint was about to search through his scrolls for a spell that might help, when he realized he had something potentially better. Or rather, someone.

"I'm going to summon a ghost," Quint said. "Nobody panic, please."

Wayta snorted, and Quint grinned at her.

He pulled the poncho from his pack and once again cast the spell to summon Abuelo. He briefly feared the spirit had been lost in the fight against the huge walking mushroom, but to his relief the familiar pinkish glow of magic in the fabric resolved into the same teal form as before.

Huatli took a step backward. "Who is this?"

"Abuelo," Quint replied. "I'm hoping he knows how to open this door."

Abuelo peered at the crowd, then up at the portal. "Oh, you made it to Matzalantli!" he exclaimed. "How wonderful. We must get inside and warn the Oltec about the Mycotyrant."

"How do we do that?" Quint asked.

"It's quite simple," Abuelo said. Then his face scrunched in confusion. "But I can't remember."

Huatli gestured at the box next to the door. "Does it involve this?"

"Yes, it does!" Abuelo exclaimed, beaming. "How good, you figured it out."

Huatli and Quint exchanged a bemused glance.

"What do we do with it?" Huatli asked gently.

Abuelo frowned. "There's a key. I always forget. Abuela kept it in her khipu, and I always stayed with her ..."

"Is this the khipu?" Quint asked, producing the object he had found with Abuelo's poncho, a belt-like cord festooned with lengths of knotted string and beads.

"Yes, yes, give it to me," Abuelo said. He shifted through the strings with surprisingly corporeal hands, muttering to himself until he found the one he wanted. "Here! The golden door."

Quint leaned closer, holding his breath as the Echo's fingers slipped down the knots and beads.

"Open the drawer in the side," Abuelo said, gesturing at the box. Huatli did so, finding a collection of polished gemstones in different colors.

"Where do they go?" Huatli asked, cupping them in her hand.

"Green in the upper right and lower left corners," Abuelo replied. "Yellow in the other corners, and also the three spaces above or below, and over one."

Huatli did as she was ordered, Abuelo nodding and smiling.

"Last, the cosmium," he said.

"The pink ones?" Quint asked.

"Yes." Abuelo flickered like a candle's smoke, then moved away. "Pardon me. Sometimes cosmium can affect Echoes like me in strange ways."

Quint filed that away for future knowledge. "So where do those go?"

Abuelo flickered again, his mouth moving, but no words came out.

Inti groaned. "We were so close," he said. "Now what?"

Huatli examined the box, tilting her head. "I think I know this pattern."

"Do you?" Quint asked. "What is it?"

Huatli laughed softly. "It's a key." She placed the rest of the cosmium beads in the center boxes, which formed a shape like a stylized serpent.

As soon as the last bead was laid, the box glowed faintly, and the pinkish gleam spread to the door and its glyphs. Light burst through a crack at the seam of the now unsealed portal, which swung open with a rush of surprisingly cold, fresh air.

Much as Quint wanted to rush in and savor the thrill of discovery, he let Huatli lead the way, the other warriors flanking her. They stepped into a broad tunnel, bored wide enough to fit a dozen people. The passage sloped sharply downward, and yet as Quint walked, he had the dizzying sense that everything around him was shifting, as it had when he planeswalked. He continued moving down, the way steep but never steep enough to be impassable—until he reached a wide circle of stones like a well, easily the same diameter as the tunnel itself. Huatli stopped at the rim of the well and gasped. Others quickly crowded around her to see.

"This is impossible," Huatli said.

"Incredible," Inti added.

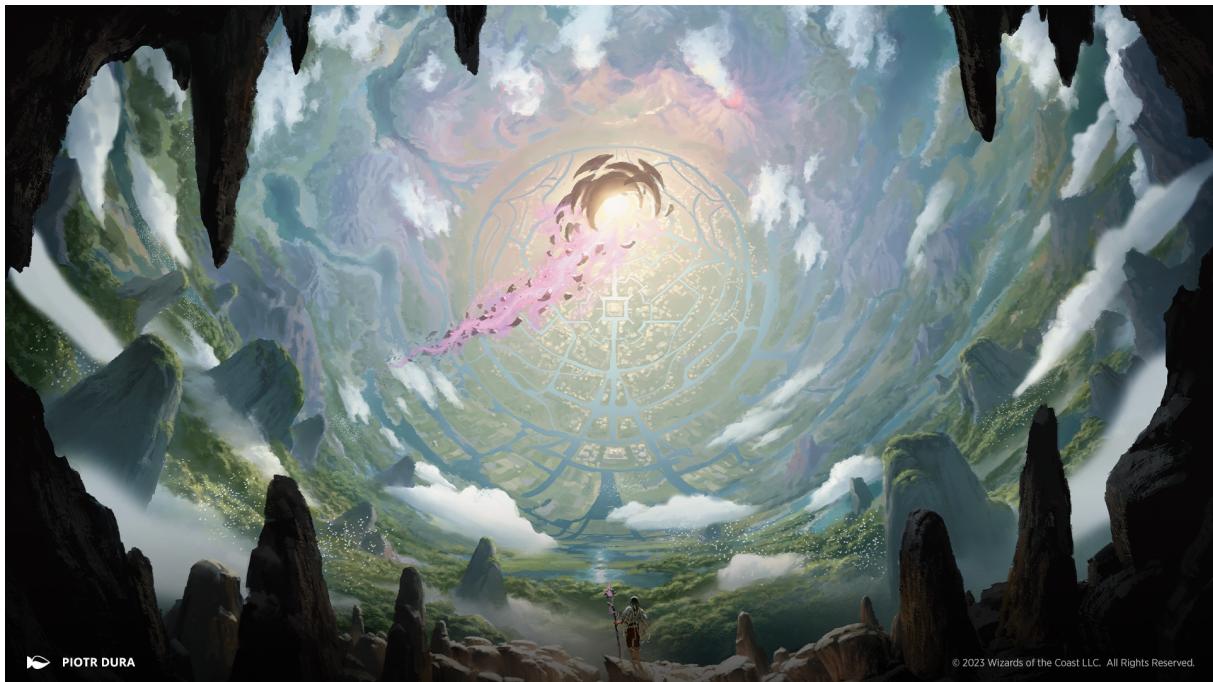
"Unbelievable," Caparocci murmured.

Wayta simply blinked her one visible eye.

They stood before a circle of sky dotted with clouds. Did the door lead back up to the surface? But no, they were deep under the earth, and the tunnel sloped downward.

Shadows appeared at the edge of the opening. People, craning their necks over the lip of the well, looking *down* at Huatli and the others.

"Find Anim Pakal," one of them said, their tone more concerned than shocked. "Someone has opened the seal."



Art by: Piotr Dura

Malcolm

With the elevator ropes cut, Malcolm had to fly down in stages from one level to the next. He sometimes carried Breeches, while other times the goblin climbed down the rough walls, and they stopped to rest whenever they tired. The sickly green glow of fungus lit their way along with their shoulder lamps, and they both continued to wear their crude masks for fear of breathing whatever spores had harmed their companions.

They eventually found the elevator, damaged but mostly intact, perched atop a shelf of mushrooms stretched halfway across the cenote like a macabre stage. They didn't find any corpses, nor any sign of the fallen beyond the black bile the infected had retched onto the wooden platform.

And still, the bottom of the shaft remained out of sight.

Malcolm lost track of time, minutes seeping into hours. Somewhere far above, the sun rose and set; down in the dark, only weariness and hunger and thirst marked the absence of usual daily routines.

A dim light below them gradually brightened, until finally they reached the end of their seemingly endless descent. A tunnel to the left lit up while the glow around them faded, as if they were being guided. Or herded.

Breeches grumbled, "BAD SHROOMS."

"You said it, mate," Malcolm agreed.

They followed the glow through rough-hewn tunnels, too regular and purposeful to be natural. The farther they walked, the more Malcolm's dread mounted. If this were a trap, how would they escape? The sky was so far above them, the sea so far away ...

The tunnel opened into a cavern large enough to contain an entire town, the ceiling so high that Malcolm could fly comfortably without hitting it. A fungal forest spread out before them, hauntingly beautiful, littered with crumbling ruins. Bioluminescent spores floated like tiny fireflies between mush-

rooms as tall as trees, their caps and stems every shade of green, from the palest seafoam to nearly black. Gills fluttered as Malcolm and Breeches passed, as if they were being sniffed.

Soft noises suggested they weren't alone. The scuffing of footsteps, bodies brushing against the terrain, occasional murmurs. Perhaps survivors from Downtown? But what if they were all infected? Malcolm's guts clenched in horror.

They reached a clearing, the ground covered in connected concentric circles like the markings on his allies' skin. Malcolm stopped, wary of stepping on the lines, which resembled strands of a spider's web. He had no desire to be caught like a fly.

A motley collection of people emerged from the forest. He didn't recognize them at first, covered as they were in fungus like the corpse that had started this investigation. Some were flanked by walking mushrooms with arms and legs, like nightmarish children's dolls.

One of the humans stepped forward, his movements stilted, eyes replaced by glowing button mushrooms. Xavier Sal, the mayor of Downtown. Malcolm's hope of finding survivors vanished as soon as the man opened his mouth.

"We welcome you to this place," Xavier said tonelessly.

"Who is 'we'?" Malcolm asked.

"We are the Mycotyrant." Xavier gestured behind him, and a giant figure was suddenly illuminated by dozens of glowing fungi.

The Mycotyrant hung in a circular web of rootlike strands stretching from the floor to the ceiling. Its toadlike body was broad and green with purplish spots, gills like a collar around its neck. Large mushrooms sprouted from its back, smaller ones from its head, and while it had no legs, two thick arms ended in vicious claws. Above a lipless, gaping maw filled with thornlike teeth, beady eyes glowed green, staring down at Malcolm and Breeches with malevolent interest.



Art by: Chase Stone

"You are known to us, Malcolm Lee," Xavier said. "As is your quest, thanks to your former companions."

"Are they here?" Malcolm asked, dreading the answer.

"Yes," Xavier replied. "They have been incorporated into our colony, as have the ones who once resided in the place you call Downtown."

Malcolm cringed. "Incorporated, as in ...?"

"We are one," all the humans said in eerie unison.

Malcolm had seen trees felled by fungus, trunks rotted from the inside. Given what had happened to his people, the dinosaurs they had fought, and what he now faced, he could only assume they were suffering a similar fate.

He looked past Xavier at the Mycotyrant, wreathed in fungal light. "What is it you want?" Malcolm asked. "Gems? Money? Food?"

The Mycotyrant emitted a cloud of spores like a silent laugh. Xavier's mouth stretched in a rictus that mirrored his puppet-master's motion.

"Everything."

Amalia

The golden door whose image had taunted Amalia for weeks lay open before her. She couldn't help feeling thrilled, yet deeply unsettled by her foresight proving true again. With Kellan in tow, she followed the mass of people through a tunnel, emerging into the astonishing place she had also seen in visions.



Art by: Piotr Dura

A sprawling panorama spread before, above, and around her as she stepped through the portal. Vibrant grasslands stretched into the distance, strange long-necked furry creatures roamed, and birds soared through the air, alone or in flocks. But instead of the land disappearing at the horizon, it curved upward. Amalia had the disconcerting sensation of being inside an enormous inverse globe.

At the center of it all, a strange sun hovered, so close Amalia imagined she could reach it if she possessed the power of flight. It illuminated half the land, while other parts fell into shadow caused by the

metal pieces rotating around it. A tail of more metal shards extended away from it, glittering a faint pink. This, too, she had foreseen, and she shivered at the thought of what future places she might be shown next.



Art by: Adam Paquette

"This is truly incredible," Kellan said. "Is this what you were trying to find?"

Amalia shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. I've never been here before."

To their left, a pyramid rose several stories, with a large, spiked disk at the top similar to ones in the Sun Empire. Shorter buildings were scattered around it, and people poured out of them. They wore ponchos and khipu like the spirit the archaeologist had called Abuelo, and wielded pink-bladed weapons and staves with magic that sent rippling pulses through the air. Among their number, smaller creatures waddled about, their jointed bodies formed from various kinds of metal. Each had a single glowing eye in colors ranging from red to green to purple and beyond. Floating spirits joined them, some humanoid with recognizable features, others more like animals or half-formed wisps of teal fog.

Amalia squinted at the strange sun, black dots floating around it like birds. Some of these shifted into an arrow-shaped formation and approached. More warriors, riding on the backs of great bats that also wore armor like the Sun Empire's flying dinosaurs.

Something about the bats made her shudder, and as if in response, the voice from her visions returned.

Come to me ...

It seemed louder now, stronger. Amalia glanced at Vito. His lips stretched into a fanatical smile as he turned his gaze to the sky.

Bartolomé touched her arm, and Amalia flinched. "Are you well?" he asked.

"Just overwhelmed," she said. She had never lied so much in her life as she had on this journey.

Kellan whistled as he noticed the approaching fliers. "I don't suppose you have any idea what's happening here?"

Amalia grinned sheepishly. "I'm afraid not," she said. "I do hope we'll find out soon."

"As long as they don't fling us into more quicksand," Kellan said, "I suppose we should consider this an improvement."

One of the bat riders landed, and Bartolomé shifted closer to the crowd gathering around her. Amalia followed, Kellan beside her, wanting to know what was happening.

The woman's dark hair was held in place by a crownlike band, her khipu and belt adorned with the same pink stones used in the weapons. One of the strange mechanical creatures followed her like a child.

"I am called Anim Pakal," she said. "I command the Thousand Moons. Who are you all, and how have you opened the seal at Matzalantli?"



Art by: Chris Rahn

The spirit Abuelo drifted forward. "I helped them," he said. "I was granted the key to entry when the door was sealed, in the hopes that we could return when the Mycotyrant was defeated."

Anim inclined her head to him. "Honored Echo, we welcome you. Does this mean Topizielo is safe now?"

Abuelo shook his head. "It is not, but neither is Oteclan and the rest of the Core. The Mycotyrant has grown in power rather than fading. The plan to isolate and defeat it has failed."

"Then why did you open the door?" Anim asked. "You have brought ruin to us."

"Ruin would have found you asleep in your beds," Abuelo replied with a curt gesture. "Now you can prepare yourselves."

"The Thousand Moons do not sleep," Anim said. "This garrison has guarded the door at Matzalantli since it was closed in the time of my ancestors. It would have remained closed, and we would have been safe, if you had not opened it."

The warrior-poet stepped forward now, bowing her head respectfully. "We would have found a way in eventually—if not through this door, then through other means. Our people have been digging mines deeper into the earth, as have others."

"She is correct," Bartolomé said, ignoring a glare from Vito. "The Brazen Coalition alone has an entire city below the surface devoted to delving."

Shaper Pashona added, "We believed we would find the Source behind the door. We, too, would have done all in our power to unseal it. Ignorance can provide a measure of safety, but it can also make for poor choices."

How well Amalia knew that now. If she had realized what this journey would mean for her, she might have stayed at home. But no, that was an unworthy thought. She had learned so much, and her maps would be of great value to her people, if she ever managed to return to Torrezon.

Anim eyed the assembly with her chin raised imperiously, then settled on the warrior-poet. "Are you of the Komon?" she asked.

"We are of the Sun Empire," the woman said, indicating the rest of her companions and their dinosaurs. "I am called Huatli. Who are the Komon?"

"A didact could tell you more than I," Anim said. "The Komon are our ancestors who left the Core to explore Topizielo. Until the doors were sealed, we traded regularly, but we have not seen them since."

The loxodon—Quintorius—cleared his throat politely. "Perhaps the Komon made it to the surface? It would explain the similarity in glyphs used by the Sun Empire and, well, you, if you're the ones who made the door."

That interruption led to a more thorough round of introductions that included him and all the Sun Empire members, then the River Heralds. Amalia struggled to pay attention as she considered the implications of their discussion. If the Sun Empire was descended from these people, what did that make this place inside the plane? Perhaps her own people had once walked these fields and hills, once soared through the skies on bats. It would explain why the search for their god had led them here.

Anim looked up at more incoming bat riders. "We sent word of your arrival to Oteclan. Soon, Akal Pakal will arrive to welcome our long-departed cousins, if indeed that is what you are."

The one called Inti bowed and said, "We offer you the strength of our people in exchange for your hospitality. We are eager to trade and improve the bonds between us."

Some darkness crossed Huatli's expression, but before she could speak, Anim approached Vito where he stood stiffly next to Clavileño.

"We have not been introduced," Anim said. "My apologies for the oversight."

Vito inclined his head coldly but said nothing.

Bartolomé once again interceded. "We are humble explorers from the Queen's Bay Company," he said with a courteous bow.

"They're vampires," a Sun Empire soldier shouted.

The change in Anim Pakal was immediate. Magic arced between her fingers and danced up her arms as she formed a glowing shield between her and Vito. The Oltec surrounded the Legion members, weapons drawn and more magic rippling in the air.

"Worshippers of the Great Betrayer are not welcome here," Anim said coldly. "Imprison them."

"Again?" Kellan groaned. Amalia echoed the sentiment, but if fighting the Malamet had been foolhardy, attacking the Oltec would be suicidal.

Vito seemed about to protest, then his eyes glazed over, and he grabbed Clavileño's arm. "All proceeds according to his will," he said.

Amalia flinched, expecting the harsh whispers of Aclazotz to echo in her mind once again, but she heard nothing. Perhaps that was a blessing.

The shadows of the bat riders fell on the vampires as they were led away, into the depths of the garrison, away from the light of the strange, shell-covered sun.

Wayta

The Sun Empire contingent sat in a dining hall within the garrison, partaking of the delightful local food. After days of trail rations, Wayta indulged herself. One never knew when the next meal would come; restraint was for fools.

One of the Oltec approached Huatli. “The steward has arrived. The Thousandth Moon sent me to guide you.”

“We thank you,” Huatli replied, tossing the last of her food to Pantlaza and heading for the door.

Inti and Caparocti flanked her, while the other warriors followed behind. Wayta waited for Quint to finish stuffing fruit into one of his many pockets before escorting him out.

Akal Pakal, Oltec steward, awaited them in a vibrantly painted building adorned with a sun emblem on the roof. She wore layers of ceremonial robes, blues and greens and golds with intricate geometric patterns. Large gold disks hung from her neck, and a tall headpiece engraved with glyphs adorned her head. Wayta couldn’t imagine carrying that much weight around, but perhaps it was no more onerous than her own helmet and armor had been.



Art by: Ryan Pancoast

“Be welcome,” Steward Akal said, her voice warm and husky with age. “I have heard some of your story from my sister Anim, and I am eager to hear more. First, however, we should discuss the presence of blood-drinkers in your midst.”

“They are not our allies,” Huatli said. “We have warred with them, but when Ixalan was invaded by the Phyrexians—people from another plane—that fight took precedence. After so much violence, I hope for a peaceful way forward, and would welcome any aid you can provide as we try to rebuild.”

"Or," Inti interjected, "you could help us get rid of the vampires now."

"Inti, we discussed this," Huatli said, her tone affectionate but exasperated.

"And the emperor discussed it with us," Caparocti added. "Torrezon has been weakened by the invasion and by infighting. The living oppose their vampiric overlords more than ever, the Brazen Coalition harries them when it's lucrative, and the orcs off the western coast have never been friendly. Now is the perfect time to strike."

"Better that we work together to care for our lands and rebuild what was lost," Huatli said, "rather than dying on foreign shores."

"Better that we press our advantage before death comes to us," Inti countered.

Wayta had heard enough of the same talk when she fought in Tocatl during the war. Stay in one place and set up blockades, or stay mobile and be harder to target? Retreat and retrench, or push ahead to drive the enemy out? Keep supply lines open and risk quick death, or let them collapse and risk starvation? Some commanders were more careful than others, some more thirsty for glory and power. The latter, she had found, were eager to spend the coin of other warriors' lives from the safety of their well-stocked bunkers.

Common soldiers suffered in the aftermath of the war, too, despite their sacrifices. Those who gained power through violence didn't give it up easily, using it to exploit the powerless and increase their own influence. Her frustration had led her to the Brazen Coalition, and now back to the Sun Empire, but she wondered whether there was anywhere in all of Ixalan where the same problems wouldn't find her.

Wayta wandered over to Quint, who stood apart with Abuelo, deep in discussion. Abuelo's hands moved as he spoke, while Quint nodded and took notes.

"You must be bound to the poncho," Quint said. "It's what I used to summon you."

Abuelo looked down at his clothes. "Not the most convenient thing, but I'm happy to appear so clearly. Some Echoes are wisps, others are monsters changed by their binding."

Maybe those people were showing their true forms in death, Wayta thought.

"Is an Echo bound to this?" Quint asked, producing the khipu that had helped them open the golden door.

Abuelo ran the strands through his ghostly fingers. "I hope so," he said. "This was Abuela's."

"Your wife?" Wayta asked.

"Yes." Abuelo smiled wistfully. "She could make anything grow. Flowers, fruits ... Thorns when she had to. She was fierce."

The mention of flowers reminded Wayta of a poem she'd composed, after another battle like so many others:

We could not save the blooms Trampled to mud by our boots So we planted blood-fed seeds In the open mouths of our wounds Hoping golden flowers of death Would grow from our shallow graves

Nothing like what the warrior-poet created, Wayta thought. But Huatli had told her once that poems should be honest.

Quint used his hands and trunk to spread the khipu out as he examined it. "Perhaps we can bring her back, as I helped you come back."

"Assuming she is an Echo," Abuelo said. "She may have simply passed on."

Quint flared his ears slightly. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

Wayta drifted away again like a petal on the wind, staring at the peaceful landscape with grief filling her chest. She carried her own ghosts with her, different kinds of echoes. A glance told her the steward and her people were still deep in discussion. Would they forge an alliance? Would it lead to the war the emperor wanted? If it did, what seeds would Wayta plant?

Malcolm

The fungus-infested residents of Downtown surrounded Malcolm, not moving, not even breathing. Those who still had eyes stared at him, and those who didn’t pointed empty sockets or pale button mushrooms in his direction.

All dead. He had hoped to save them, to bring survivors out of the deep dark, but all he could do now was collect information and try to make it back to the Brazen Coalition alive to deliver it.

“You did this to our people?” Malcolm asked the massive form of the Mycotyrant above him.

What was left of the mayor replied. “You dug through stone and ore and veins of shining crystal until one of your kind found us. We wanted to know more of you.”

“And you couldn’t simply ask?”

“To join is to ask, and to know.”

Malcolm’s feathers ruffled. “To kill, you mean.”

Xavier’s head tilted in an almost human gesture. “We do not kill. We change. We spread. Where there is one of us, there are all of us.”

An image of the body near Sunray Bay flashed through Malcolm’s mind. Either this creature had no concept of death, or it didn’t understand that it was killing its hosts when it ... what was it doing, precisely? Controlling their minds? Consuming them? Assimilating them into itself?

“Where did you come from?” Malcolm asked.

“Here,” Xavier replied. “We have always been. We have watched and grown. We have seen the Oltec and their gods walk the Core before it was denied to us. We were here when the Komon Winaq built cities and when their bones enriched the soil. We have traded with the Malamet and the Deep goblins, and gathered lore from all the flesh that finds us.”

Malcolm had no idea what any of that meant, but it sounded impressive. And alarming. The mention of trade, however, was the first promising thing he’d heard so far.

“Maybe we can strike a deal,” Malcolm said. “Is there something specific my people might be able to offer you?”

“GOLD?” Breeches asked. “GEMS?”

The glowing green eyes of the suspended creature brightened.

“We want ... the sun,” Xavier said.

“The sun,” repeated the infected people.

“We have been denied the light of Chimir for ages,” Xavier continued. “You have another sun above, and we will have it.”

You can't just have a sun, Malcolm thought, but he kept that to himself as the full potential of what the Mycotyrant said dawned on him. If this creature made it to the surface, depending on how fast it spread, it could soon consume all of Sunray Bay. Maybe even all of Ixalan.

Lost gold and gems, as Breeches kept lamenting, were the absolute least of their worries. Malcolm peered around him at the fungal forest, the high ceiling of the cavern and the stalagmites and stalactites with their luminescent mold. He thought back to the tunnels through which he and Breeches had passed to get here, the distance from the bottom of Downtown's cenote mine up to the surface.

How could he and Breeches possibly escape this place alive?

Amalia

The Oltec didn't have prisons like the ones in Torrezon, which Amalia had heard were vile, dank places filled with death and disease. They had temporary detention rooms, according to the guard who grudgingly answered Bartolomé's questions. People weren't jailed as punishment—the concept seemed to appall the man.

Even so, the Legion vampires and their few remaining servants were locked up in empty rooms, weapons confiscated, and left to await their fates. Bartolomé arranged for him, Amalia, and Kellan to be together; he paced, Amalia sat on the floor, and Kellan stared out the small window, occasionally glancing back with a troubled expression. Amalia's map hadn't been taken, so she used her blood magic to explore the immediate area by filling it in on the page.

From the room next to them, Vito's voice rose. "The time of our salvation is at hand. The words of Venerable Tarrian have guided me to this, our destination, and soon we will be redeemed."

Muffled sounds of approval followed. Bartolomé shook his head in dismay and continued to walk, back and forth, hands clenched behind him.

"So," Kellan said quietly. "You're vampires?"

Bartolomé paused. "What do you know of vampires?" he asked.

Kel shrugged. "They murder innocent people and drink their blood, not necessarily in that order."

"That is not what our church preaches," Amalia said, righteous indignation swelling inside her. "We only feed from criminals, evil people, and we use the power of blood to help others."

"Who decides who's a criminal?" Kellan asked, gesturing at the room. "Right now, we're criminals."

"Justice will be served," Amalia said, but her conviction wavered. She had never considered that the people consigned to prison in Torrezon might be innocent. The church would never allow it.

Would they?

Vito roared, "Ours is the promise of eternity, baptized in blood and sanctified by Aclazotz, who waits for us here, beyond these doors."

Bartolomé sighed. "Some of us are not entirely committed to the morals espoused by the church."

Amalia knew he wasn't only referring to Vito. She'd heard the whispers of Vona de Iedo and other heretics. But perhaps they were not who Bartolomé meant?

"You said you came here through a magical doorway," Amalia said, eager for a new subject. "Why would you leave your home?"

Kellan looked back out the window. "I'm searching for my father," he said.

"What happened to him?" Bartolomé asked.

"I don't know," Kellan said.

"What will you do when you find him?" Amalia asked.

"That depends," Kellan mused. "I've never met him, truth be told."

"Why do you want to find him, then?" Bartolomé asked, curious.

A gold spark flashed in Kellan's brown eyes. "I need to know more about myself. About who I am."

Amalia understood that sentiment all too well.

"I suspect," Bartolomé said, laying a hand on Kellan's shoulder, "that whether you find your father or not, you'll know yourself quite well by the end of your quest."

"You may be right." Kel chuckled. "I already know I'm tired of being rescued and imprisoned."

Bartolomé pointed his chin at Amalia. "Her magic could get us out any time, but where would we go? We're surrounded by enemies, and the surface is well above us."

He was right. She could use her magic to rewrite the map, as she had before. But then what?

"Behold," Vito said. "The power of Aclazotz!"

The light slanting through the window softened and faded, replaced by a tendril of mist. Amalia stood and peered outside. A magical fog covered the building, so thick her hand would disappear if she thrust it through the opening. Her people could do this, did so frequently in battle, but why now?

In another room, a stifled scream died with a gurgle. Furtive begging met with a sickening thud. When the scent of blood reached her, Amalia feared the worst. The Legion soldiers had not fed enough since the descent began, and their human servants had dwindled between the desert and the Malamet. The usual rules and traditions might not bind those who were already prepared to commit atrocities in the name of god.

Vito's voice again filled the silence. "Follow me, children of shadow. Now we reclaim our power."

The sound of splintering wood punctuated his words. Where were the guards? Swallowed by the mist? Amalia positioned herself in front of Kel, who protested and moved to her side. Bartolomé stood between both of them and the door.

"Amalia," Bartolomé said, "if something happens to me, you must return to Queen Miralda. Tell her everything." He glanced at her over his shoulder. "Promise me."

"I swear it," Amalia said, her voice raw.

The door was torn from its place and thrown aside. Clavileño glared at Bartolomé, then stepped aside to allow Vito entry. A crimson handprint was smeared down the front of his armor, eyes blazing—with religious fervor or thirst, Amalia didn't know.

"Aclazotz demands a sacrifice," Vito said, his mild tone at odds with his expression and the blood staining his mouth.

"He has had enough sacrifices," Bartolomé retorted.

"The blood of the outsider will suffice," Vito continued, looking past Bartolomé to Kellan. "We will take him to Aclazotz, who will reward us with untold power and bring darkness to this sheltered place once more."

Bartolomé's gaze flicked to Kellan, then settled on Amalia. His expression changed, a widening of eyes, a firming of the jaw.

Escape, he mouthed at her.

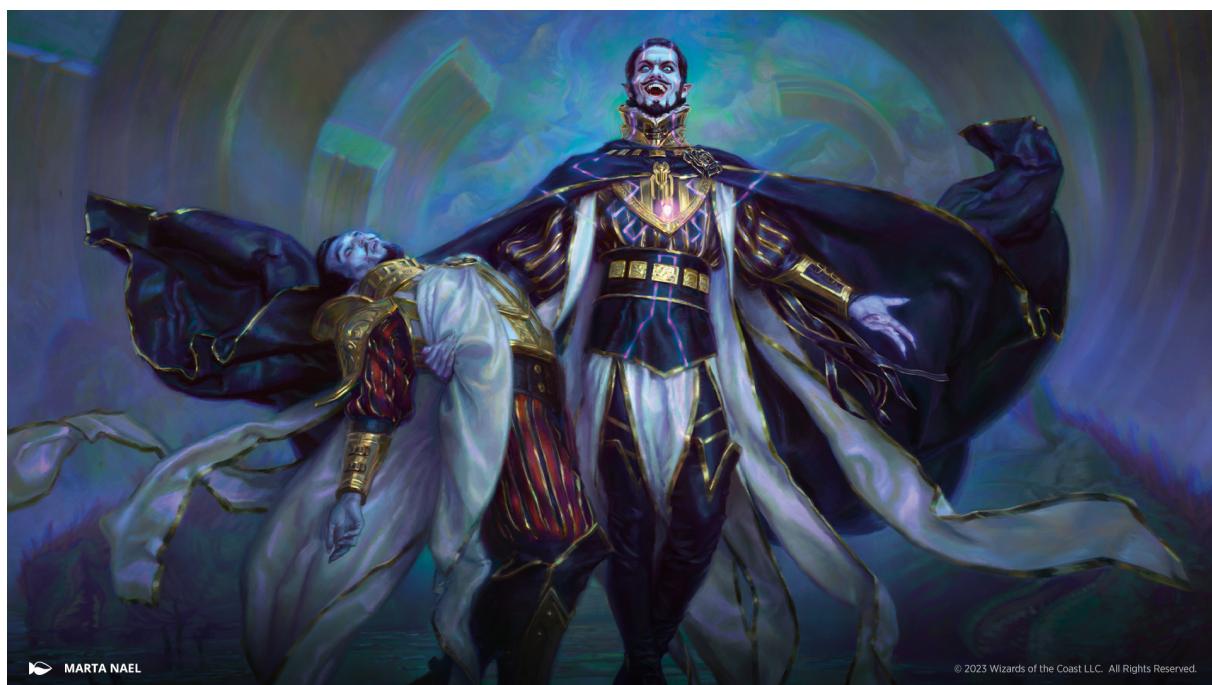
They were impossibly far from Torrezon, surrounded by Oltec warriors. But perhaps, after this, she and the strangers shared a common enemy.

Amalia hovered her quill over the map. With a stroke, she could set them free.

Bartolomé leaped at Vito, hands curled into claws, fangs bared. They grappled, blocking the doorway so Clavileño and the other soldiers couldn't intervene.

Next to Amalia, Kellan pulled his wooden hilts from his belt. Gold light burst from them and formed into a pair of shimmering swords.

Vito locked an arm around Bartolomé's head and twisted, the terrible snap echoing in the small room. He let the body fall and stared down at it with undisguised contempt.



Art by: Marta Nael

Amalia stifled a sob as she steadied her shaking hand. She lowered the quill and swiped it delicately at the edge of the building on the map, erasing the line.

The wall behind her vanished. Mist rolled in, swallowing everyone in the room. Kellan was only visible thanks to his swords.

"Run," Amalia said, grabbing Kellan's arm. The light of his weapons vanished as they fled, disappearing into the gloom, fear dogging their heels like a paladin's mastiff.