

Episode 2

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From set *Lost Caverns of Ixalan*

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Wayta

Room after room, tunnel after tunnel, Wayta followed the warrior-poet and her loxodon assistant deeper into the earth. She and nineteen of her fellow warriors reported to Inti and Caparocti, Imperial officers sent by the emperor to aid Huatli in her mission. All were armed and ready to face any foes they might find, but so far their most dangerous enemy was dust.

Wayta scratched the scarred skin under her eyepatch, the injury a tangible reminder of all she'd lost in the war against the Phyrexians. When she'd lied about her age to join the ranks of Ixalan's defenders, her chosen path had seemed so clear and simple. She'd gone where she was told, eaten and slept when she was told. Fought when she was told. After the invasion, she turned away from the once-comforting jungles of her home, now filled with the ghosts of her fallen comrades. But no matter how far she sailed with the Brazen Coalition, no matter how often she treaded the boards at High and Dry or scraped barnacles off the sides of ships, the Threefold Sun followed her. Watched over her. Warmed her when she shivered with old fears. Gradually the worst of the shadows in her heart were chased away by light. She'd left the pirates and returned to the Sun Empire a year older, heard about this expedition in Pachatupa and knew it was precisely the challenge—and distraction—she'd been looking for.

Now, here she was, back in her old armor, down in the dark, searching for other people's ghosts. At least hers remained on the surface.

Quint and Huatli examined yet another painting in yet another room, illuminated by a globe affixed to Huatli's chest plate, carrying the light of the Threefold Sun. Their pack dinosaurs stamped restlessly, and even the usually well-behaved Pantlaza trilled and growled his displeasure. Wayta sympathized.

"More signs of struggle," Huatli murmured, running her hand along a gouge marring the picture, which depicted a battle.

"And more of that pinkish-purple pigment," Quint said. "You're sure you've never encountered it before?"

"I'm sure," Huatli replied.

One of the half-dozen pack dinosaurs reared. Wayta sent it a soothing thought as its embarrassed handler tugged its harness, the lights dangling from the leather swaying and casting strange shadows.

"Careful," Inti said. "Don't want to break any more pottery."

"Pottery?" Quint asked, ears perking up. He followed Inti's gesture and knelt to rummage through a pile of broken ceramics and other objects. He picked something up with his trunk and touched it to his tongue. Wayta cringed.

"Bone," Quint said solemnly.

"Disgusting," Caparocti said. "Huatli, may we continue?"

Reluctantly, Huatli left the mural behind.

On they went, climbing down tunnels and hiking through dark, cold caverns. At nearly every place where their path narrowed, they found barricades and bodies, some prepared for their rest like the ones in the first room, others lying where they fell, weapons clutched in bony fingers.

Wayta tried not to lose herself in memories of her own battles; slipping on blood, comrades screaming, the scent of magic and sweat and death. She wondered whether conflict was inevitable, whether peace was transient and fragile like so much bone and clay.

"Hello, what's this?" Quint said. He and Huatli stopped again, and soon Wayta saw what had halted them.

This chamber contained a chasm full of glowing green fog, the ceiling carved with giant glyphs whose meaning eluded her. Huge blocks of stone, each bearing its own glyph, stretched across the chasm like a bridge. Gaps between the stones would make crossing difficult.

Caparocti dropped a pebble into the fog. No sound signaled its landing.

"That's bad," Inti noted dryly. Wayta agreed.

"The poem speaks of this," Huatli said, brow furrowing, and recited the lines.

Pass across the mists of time Stone by stone, foot and hand, Eyes sharp, heart strong, breath calm. Begin again to reach the end.

Huatli ran her finger along a panel set into the wall, also bearing the same glyphs. "I wonder what this is meant to be." Several symbols were missing or broken, pieces of the stone littering the ground below.

Wayta rolled the riddle's words across her tongue like spiced meat. She hadn't studied the old tongues the way Huatli had; the war had stolen that possibility from her. But if this were like the door ...

"Do the glyphs on the bridge match the words in the poem?" Wayta asked.

Huatli nodded. "As before, not directly. There is sandal, and there is palm." She pointed at each stone as she spoke, a path forming in Wayta's mind.

"And 'begin again' suggests the pattern repeats," Quint added. "Well done."

Wayta stepped forward. "Let me try, Warrior-Poet."

Huatli nodded, her expression softening. "Good luck."

Handing her pack to another warrior, Wayta stepped back from the edge of the chasm and said a quick prayer to Tilonalli, the burning sun, for strength. She ran and leaped onto the first stone.

It remained firm beneath her boots. She exhaled in relief, then jumped to the next one.

On she went, one after another, growing bolder as the opposite side of the chasm drew closer. Her boldness made her sloppy, and after an awkward landing, she stumbled onto an adjacent stone.

Without warning, it fell into the fog.

Wayta leaped and gripped the correct stone before the fog swallowed her. As she pulled herself up, the platforms began to rearrange themselves with a grinding sound, and she nearly lost her grip. She glanced to her left, seeing her death in a stone racing toward her to knock her away or crush her.

Strong hands grabbed her arms and hauled her up. Caparocti released her once she was safe, and she struggled to calm the racing of her heart.

"Thank you," Wayta said.

"It's nothing," Caparocti replied. "Let's finish this."

Wayta nodded and collected herself, proceeding more carefully. Together they reached the end, finding a panel of glyphs on the wall that matched the ones floating behind them, and the broken ones on the other side.

"What will that do?" Caparocti asked.

"I think ..." Wayta touched the glyphs in the order mentioned in the poem, and they glowed briefly. The platforms slid together, forming a solid bridge, much easier to cross. Caparocti whistled and gestured for the rest of their group to cross as Wayta schooled herself into stillness.

"Where did you serve?" Caparocti asked, gaze sharp as a blade.

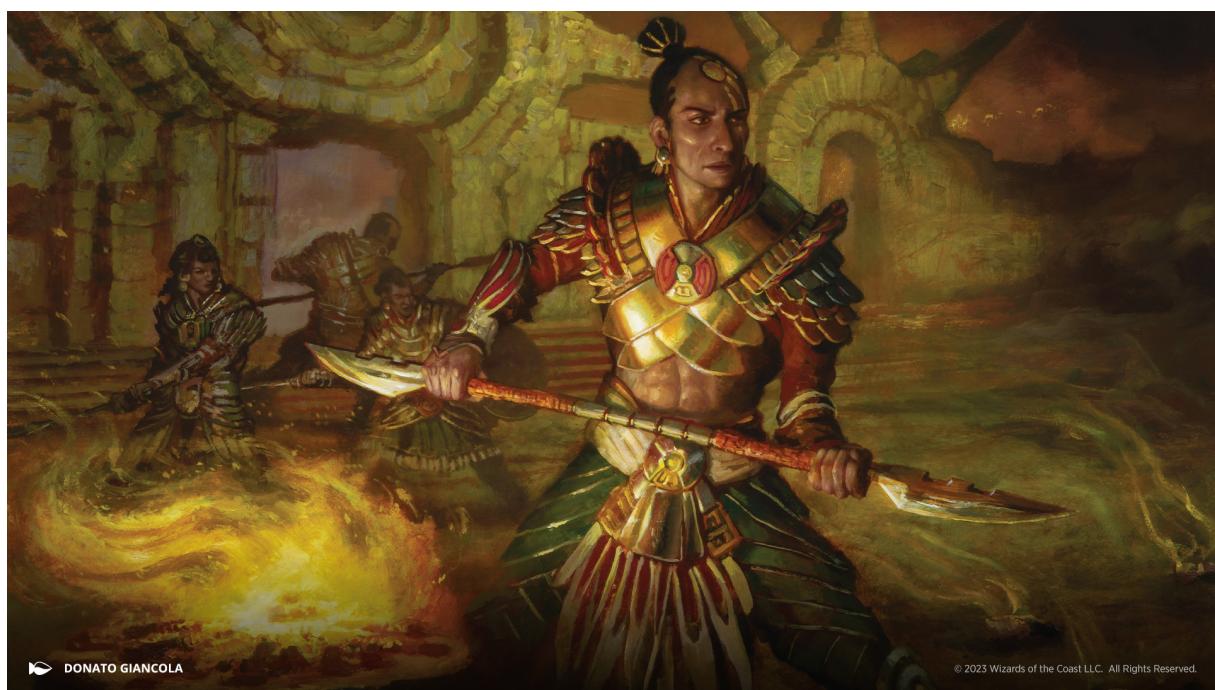
"Tocatl," Wayta replied.

"Anyone who survived there would be a valuable asset in the coming war with the Dusk Legion," he said.

Wayta looked respectfully past his shoulder. "Are you sure war is coming?"

"As sure as day follows night," he replied. "The colonizers must be eliminated, or they will never stop trying to rule us. Might protects our empire."

Wayta thought again of the bodies they had passed in the caves, and the ones that filled her dreams, wondering what the price of that strength might be.



Art by: Donato Giancola

Malcolm

Elevators, Malcolm decided, were a special form of punishment created just for sirens. So were caves.

He and his crew were on their tenth—eleventh?—elevator, their headlamps and shoulder lights barely cutting through the darkness of the cenote. While he could easily use his dowsing skills to find ore, finding missing people was beyond the scope of his magic. Each time they reached the end of an elevator, they searched for a sign of Downtown's residents, finding a muddle of tracks in the ore dust that

suggested many people moving in one direction. Every level had its own cutouts and branching caves dug into the walls, and each showed signs of its workers joining the mass exodus, ever downward.

Their descent halted with a jolt and a thump. Malcolm stepped off and stretched his wings, looking around.

“NO GOLD, NO GEMS,” Breeches screeched.

“Hush up,” Malcolm said. “We don’t need our enemy to know we’re coming.”

Breeches flicked his tail and ambled over to the entrance of a tunnel.

The next elevator awaited them on the other side of the cenote. Malcolm was about to start the lengthy process of setting up counterweights and checking the lines when Breeches screeched again.

“I said hush,” Malcolm hissed. Still, he raced over to see what Breeches was excited about.

A haphazard trail of tools seemed to lead into one of the tunnels rather than out, though it was hard to tell the difference. The way the handles fell, the scuffmarks on the ground. More telling were the smeared markings on the walls and floors, like blood, but greenish black. The air smelled faintly of mold and rot, turning Malcolm’s stomach.

“Come on,” Malcolm said, gesturing for two of his people to follow. “The rest of you get that elevator ready.” He adjusted the light on his shoulder and drew his sword.

The deeper into the tunnel he went, the stronger the fetid smell grew. The fungus sprouting from the walls became thicker and more prevalent, its faint greenish glow too bright to ignore. It was beautiful, in a way, yet it made his flesh prickle and his feathers stand on end.

At the end of the tunnel, a cavern opened, its ceiling uncomfortably low and spiked with stalactites. Their counterpart stalagmites rose from the ground to meet them. Fungus covered the ceiling like a thick carpet, its glow casting eerie shadows around the room.

“A sign!” Breeches whispered. He nudged something with his blade. A pile of bones stripped clean of flesh and half-covered in black mold.

“That can’t be our people,” Malcolm murmured. “There hasn’t been enough time for—” He stopped, thinking of the corpse of poor Lank, mushrooms erupting from his eyes and mouth, decomposing faster than he should.

“Boss,” one of the pirates said urgently, pointing.

In the shadows at the opposite end of the cavern, something moved. Multiple somethings.

The other pirate turned his headlamp on that area. With a hiss like a cockroach, something lurched sideways, out of the light. Mottled flank, scales, fungal growths bursting from raw flesh, a flash of eye in a head more skull than skin.

“We need to go,” Malcolm muttered. “Now.”

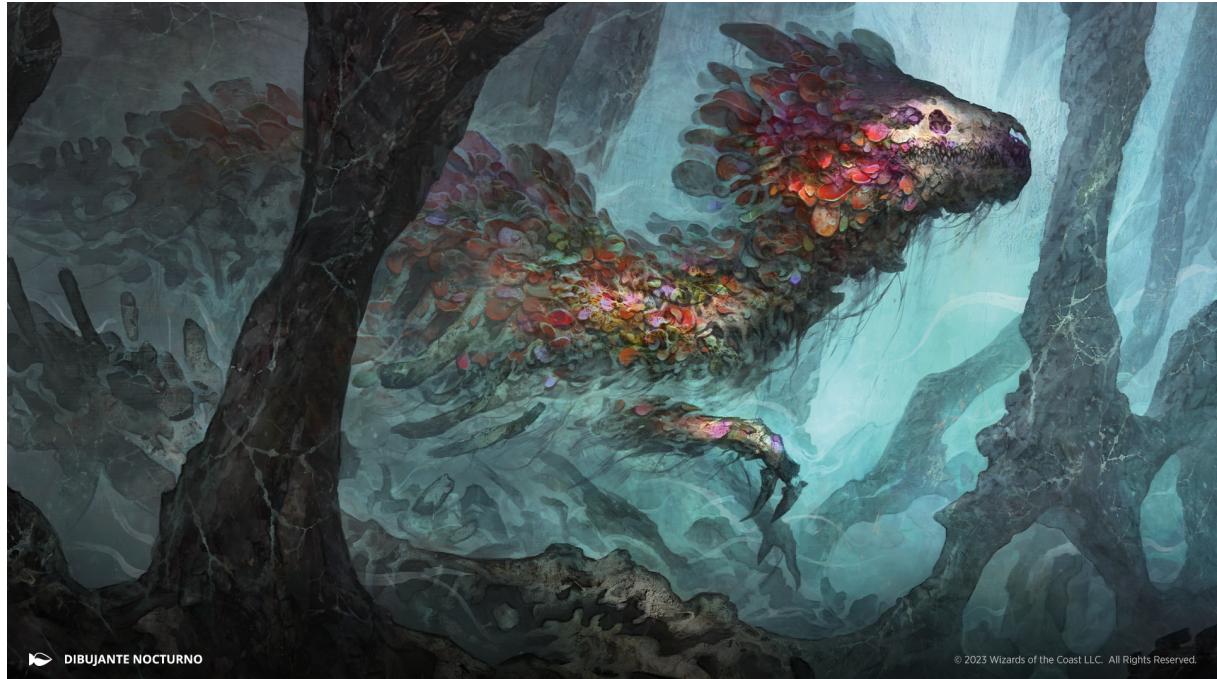
A scream from Malcolm’s left receded into a side tunnel, abruptly ending in a wet crunch.

“Storm and sea, what was that?” the first pirate asked.

A roar answered, like a dinosaur’s but wrong, wet, the way a sailor breathed when they’d just been fished out of the drink. As one, the pirates pointed their lamps toward the sound, their staccato heartbeats loud to Malcolm’s siren senses.

A horror emerged from the passage beside them. The living corpse of a raptor, half its snout rotted away, the rest bristling with teeth and fungal tentacles that rippled like anemones. More revolting than

Lank had been, because at least he was dead; nothing so decayed should be skulking around. It moved stiffly, awkwardly, broken claws alternately tapping and scraping the stone ground. Mushroom-like gills fluttered in its neck, hissing soft, pale clouds of dust.



Art by: Dibujante Nocturno

Not dust. Spores.

“Cover your mouths!” Malcolm cried, fumbling for the bandanna around his neck. “Back to the elevator!”

The raptor leaped at the nearest pirate, who fended it off with her cutlass. Her wildly swinging lamp illuminated more of the beasts slinking out of the tunnel, fungal strands attached to their limbs seeming to shift as if pulled by some invisible puppeteer. Their heads swiveled in eerie unison to face Malcolm.

Any courage he might have pretended to feel shriveled under their dead gazes. Malcolm grabbed Breeches by the collar of his vest and ran.

Vito

A chipped mosaic adorned the wall, depicting a bat-winged form hovering above prostrate servants. Aclazotz. Yet another sign that Vito’s pilgrimage proceeded according to divine will.

Bartolomé studied the image at a discreet distance, illuminated by the enchanted candelabra tethered to his belt. Vito harbored no illusions about the Queen’s Bay Company director or his loyalties. Bartolomé no doubt hoped to find riches in their travels to send back to Queen Miralda and her sycophants. They were too devoted to Saint Elenda and the old scriptures—and their own greed—to embrace the suppressed truths of Aclazotz.

Then there was the cartomancer, Amalia Benavides Aguirre. She appeared to be studiously mapping their progress with her magic, but sometimes he caught her lapsing into silences, staring at nothing, her lips moving as if she were speaking. Was she, too, hearing Aclazotz calling to her?

No. Vito had been chosen for this task, and he alone served as the instrument of the divine. He would prove himself worthy by bringing Aclazotz to Alta Torrezon, ending the tiresome theological debates

that plagued his people. They would embrace their vampiric strength and reject the sanctimonious humility and restraint preached by Saint Elenda. Never again would Torrezon be chained, physically or spiritually.

He caressed the cover of the journal of Venerable Tarrian. Here, at least, was a kindred spirit. If what the journal said was true, it was no wonder the church wanted no one to know of it.

"Hierophant," Clavileño said, interrupting his reverie. "We've found another door."

Like the first one, this door was also preceded by an altar and similar grooves in the floor. Once again, Aclazotz asked for a sacrifice. Vito was all too honored to give it.

This time, he did not call upon Amalia to aid him. She was soft, as so many were among the nobility. The war had penetrated some of their layers of swaddling, but not all.

Clavileño and another soldier held the servant down as Vito cut his throat, blood pouring down the obsidian altar and toward the door. The shining dark magic unsealed the portal, which ponderously ground open, scraping grooves into the floor. Vito cleaned his knife as he peered inside, stiffening in surprise.

Where before he had found narrow tunnels leading deeper into the earth, now instead Vito faced a massive underground desert, unearthly light filtering in from tunnels in the ceiling. Rough stone pillars and sinkholes like whirlpools disrupted the smooth surface of the ocean of sand. A collapsed monument to something other than Aclazotz had been toppled and partly swallowed by the distant edge of the cavern, as if even the earth scorned its blasphemy. Huge passageways on the other side of the sandy sea, smoothly bored like mine shafts, led upward and to the right.



Art by: Josu Solano

"Send a scout," Vito told Clavileño. "Find the tunnel with signs of Aclazotz." The journal hadn't mentioned a place such as this, but Tarrian had been gone for so long. Change was inevitable.

Clavileño passed the orders to a scout, who approached the edge of the sand, spear in hand. He took a half-dozen steps, using his weapon for balance. Without warning, too fast to make a sound, he vanished. A dimple in the surface marked where he had stood, but no other sign remained.

"Is this quicksand?" one of the soldiers asked. "I've heard of this."

"It's not supposed to be *that* quick," Bartolomé answered. "How can we cross so much of it?"

Vito would not be deterred. "Clavileño," he said. "Check from above. Find stable places to ford this treacherous sea." He didn't consider what might happen if none were found. They would be found. He had faith.

Clavileño's legs dissolved into smoke as he rose into the air. He flew back and forth across the desert, darting down to test different areas with his spear, marking solid ground by drawing a large X on each spot. By the time he returned to Vito's side, soldiers were bringing planks of wood down from the rooms they had passed, doors and remnants of furniture and anything else long and wide enough to stand on. They formed a makeshift bridge to the first place marked by Clavileño, who deemed it sturdy enough to support multiple people.

Vito led the way, carrying the lance of Venerable Tarrian like a standard. Behind him, careful footsteps and the uneasy whickering of horses followed. They had enough wood to reach the first solid ground, but the soldiers at the end of the column had to bring the wood with them, moving it up the line to be laid at the front. Progress was tedious, and sand sucked at the edges of their unstable path, clinging to boots and tinging the air with the taste and scent of salt.

Something moved nearby. Vito glared, unsure what he was seeing.

Five pale forms skittered across the sand in an odd, sliding motion. Long, spindly legs, insectile bodies narrow and segmented, folded arms tucked against their chests. Like a cross between a mantis and a spider.

"Should we—" Clavileño began.

Faster than thought, two of the mantis-spiders glided up to the column of pilgrims. Their arms snapped out, snagging a porter and a prisoner, dragging them away as they screamed and flailed. With brisk, efficient motions, the creatures used razor-sharp forearms to dismember their prey, mandibles shoving the pieces into jagged maws.

Chaos erupted. The horses reared and tried to bolt. Humans cowered together as vampires moved to protect themselves and their servants.

"Purge these abominations!" Vito shouted. "For blood and glory!"

Clavileño repeated the battle cry as he brandished his spear, launching into the air, trailing black mist where his legs had been. Several of his soldiers followed suit, and attacked the nearest enemy as a unit, two soldiers flanking while one flew above to strike from behind. Vito admired their brutal efficiency as he surveyed the rest of the combatants.

Amalia murmured a spell Vito didn't recognize, raising her sword defensively against the creatures. One of them froze, seemingly held by her magic. Bartolomé unfurled a whip and lashed out, wrapping it around the monster's neck. The whip's enchantment turned the end into a vicious curved blade, which neatly decapitated the mantis-spider with a flick of the wrist.

Vito gripped the lance of Tarrian like a standard as his gaze shifted back to the flying vampires, who tore gaping wounds in the mantis-spiders with blade and spear. Soon all four were defeated, sinking into the sand, and no others seemed to be approaching. Victory was theirs.

"How many did we lose?" Vito asked Bartolomé.

"Hard to count here," Bartolomé replied. "Perhaps it's best done when we reach the other side."

Vito nodded agreement. “Keep moving,” he said. His people obeyed, and even some of the humans rushed to help those who shook with fear or passed into an inner realm that left them empty-eyed.

Eventually they made it to the far end of the cavern, where a pathway subtly marked with carved bat wings lured them onward. Bartolomé organized the porters and prisoners, while Clavileño formed his soldiers into ranks. They reported that beyond the two taken by the monsters, a porter, a soldier, two prisoners, and a horse had fallen into the sand.

“We honor their sacrifice,” Vito said solemnly, surveying his people. “Bloodshed is inevitable to assure the glory of Aclazotz is restored. Do not waver in your convictions, and your reward will be immeasurable.”

He passed Bartolomé as he entered the new tunnel, and for a moment, the director’s expression shifted from careful neutrality to something less sanguine. No matter. If Bartolomé tried to hinder the mission, he would be eliminated.

Aclazotz would rise, and the enemies of Torrezon would fall.

Quint

Exploring new places would never get old, Quint was sure.

Before him stretched a cavern many miles across, from edge to edge filled with stone buildings and narrow streets. A city, Quint marveled, built into this deep cavity. He grinned, recalling a different city below the earth. At least he hadn’t risked falling to his death finding this one.

“O pilgrim,” Quint whispered. “What wanderer built you?”

The city was constructed from stone blocks covered in a luminescent fungus, their surfaces pock-marked like a coral reef. The blue and green glow of the strange growths was eerily regular, almost mathematical, like some of the complex ritual magic circles Quint had studied at Lorehold. More interesting were the purple-pink lines etched into the city’s central pyramid, apparently from the same pigment they’d encountered repeatedly since that first room, already so long ago.

“What do you think?” Wayta asked him, gesturing at the city with her chin.

“It’s incredible,” Quint replied. “It reminds me of Zantafar.” He wished Asterion could see this place. His old mentor would have been thrilled.

“Don’t test the bones with your tongue here,” Wayta advised. “I don’t like the look of that mold.”

Quint was inclined to agree.

They continued into the depths of the city, Inti and Caparocti sending warriors to look for any interesting weapons or armor, while Huatli and Quint continued to examine any glyphs and paintings they encountered.

There were more bodies here, too, but unlike in other rooms, none seemed to have been given funeral rites. Instead, petrified skeletons lay where they’d fallen, some with arms outstretched, others curled with knees to chest, all of them stripped to the bone. Worse were the ones swallowed by the fungal growths, mushrooms sprouting from their orifices like macabre bouquets.

A faint pinkish glow in the distance attracted Quint’s attention. He blinked and it disappeared, and for a moment he thought he’d imagined it. Then it happened again. He tracked it patiently through the streets, dimly aware that he’d left everyone but Wayta behind.

In the center of a plaza, in front of a dry fountain, Quint finally found a pile of cloth and beads, surprisingly well preserved. He examined the fabric, worried it would crumble under his touch. Instead, magic emanated from the gems and threads made from that ubiquitous purple-pink mineral, a magic both familiar and distinct.

He spread the cloth carefully on the ground, smoothing it with his trunk and laying the beads next to it. Multiple strings of connected beads and knotwork, in fact. The cloth was woven in shades of purple, green, blue, and a deep blood-red.

“Is that a poncho?” Wayta asked.

“You would know better than I,” Quint replied. “I’m going to try a spell that may answer all our questions.”

He raised his hands and began to trace the sigils of “The Rousing,” its archaeomantic magics familiar from training and repeated use. The spell reached its peak, and the poncho glowed with a heatless flame as mild nausea turned his stomach. Then, suddenly, the flame’s color changed, flaring the purple-pink of the gems and dyed threads.

The poncho rose, hovering in the air. A turquoise glow from within coalesced into the form of an old man wearing the garment, his hair tied atop his head. He squinted at Quint and Wayta.

“Who are you?” the ghostly figure asked.

“Quintorius Kand,” Quint replied. “And you are?”

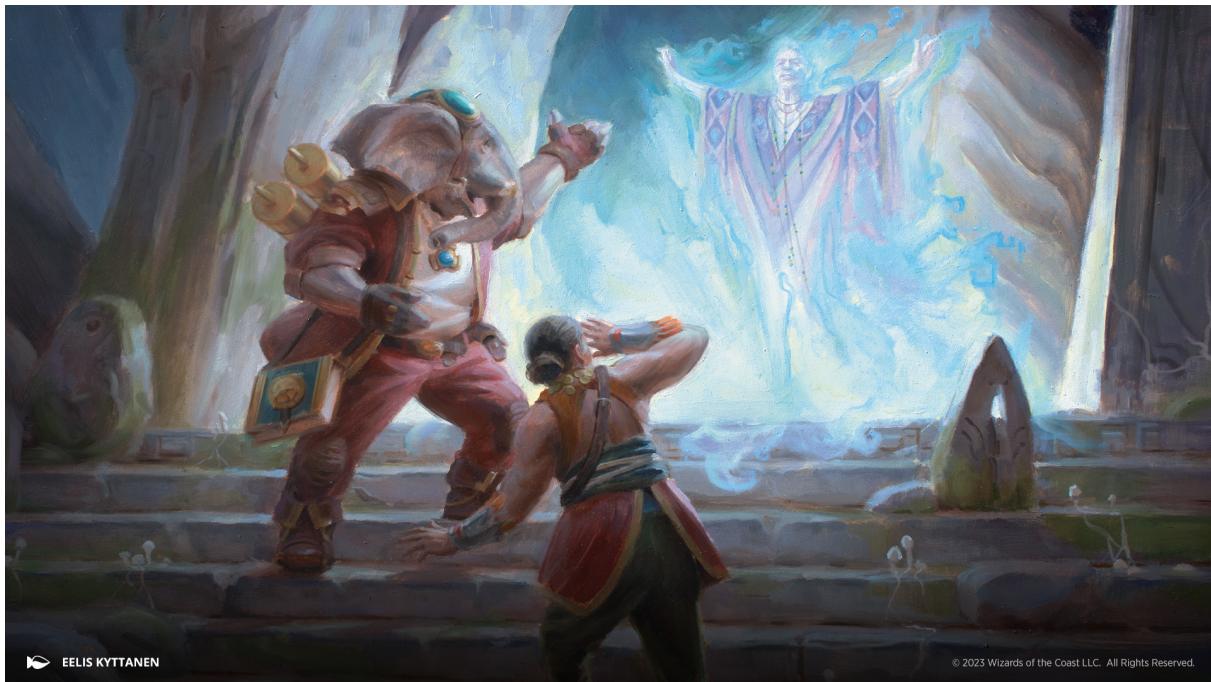
“I am called ...” The ghost paused, confused. “I don’t know.”

“He looks like my abuelo,” Wayta muttered.

The ghost’s face lit up with a smile. “Abuelo! Yes! I know that name. Someone called me that.” His smile vanished. “But where is ...?” He looked around, as if seeing his surroundings for the first time. His mouth opened and closed, then his gaze snapped to Quint’s. “I must warn Oteclan of the mycoid infestation. It’s too late. The door must be closed!”

Without another word, the ghost raced off into the fungus-infested city.

Oteclan? Mycoid? Door? Quint recognized one of those words, and it was an important one given their destination. He didn’t hesitate; despite his unsettled stomach, he launched himself into a run to see where the ghost would lead.



◀ EELIS KYTTANEN

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Art by: Eelis Kyttanen

Malcolm

Malcolm had fought dinosaurs before. These were different.

His sword hacked through a mushroom-covered chest, steel sliding through skin with unusual ease. The creature didn't react, didn't recoil, didn't screech in pain. It simply attempted to bite him again. He spun away, running up the side of a rocky spire, leaping between several others before launching himself toward a clear space on the ground.

The other coalition members weren't faring any better. They dodged among the stalagmites, avoiding talons and teeth. If the battle lasted much longer, they would tire and get sloppy, and then—

"BIG BOOM?" Breeches asked, standing so he and Malcolm were back to back. He had abandoned his blasters for a knife in each hand and one gripped by his tail.

"Not here," Malcolm said, looking up at the spiky points of the stalactites. He didn't want to risk being impaled. There was something else he could do, though he wasn't sure it would work.

Malcolm began to sing.

His magic-infused voice echoed eerily in the cavern, like a long-forgotten lullaby or a half-remembered melody from a pleasant dream. Everyone who heard it, pirate and dinosaur, stopped to listen. Even Breeches let his knives fall limply to his sides.

Malcolm methodically cut his way through the enemy as he sang, hoping they wouldn't be able to attack if they were in pieces. Soon, the dinosaurs had been reduced to quivering piles of parts. He stopped singing, stalked to a corner of the cavern, and threw up his last two meals.

"Sink me, that was vile," he muttered. But at least they were alive.

The other pirates emerged from their reveries, still dazed as if drunk. Breeches was the first to fully recover, taking off his hat to scratch his head, then replacing it and ambling over to Malcolm's side.

"No gems, no gold," Breeches said mournfully.

“And no people,” Malcolm said. He scanned his allies for injuries, wincing at the claw and bite wounds visible on bare arms or through torn clothes. Breeches seemed fine, and he had also been fortunate.

“Let’s get back to the others,” Malcolm said. “Safety in numbers. Then we’ll get cleaned up and bandaged before we move on.”

He led the way back through the fungus-lit tunnel, to the cenote and the pirates finishing the preparations to continue descending. Nothing was amiss there, to his relief.

“Now, then,” he began, turning back to his injured companions. He swallowed what he’d been about to say, frowning.

Their bloody wounds were … not gone, but changed. Black marks like scabs had replaced slices and gouges, though none of them had cast any healing magic or used potions or poultices. More alarming, the blackness seemed to be spreading in lacy patterns, like circles connected by luminescent black veins.

“Are you well?” Malcolm asked.

“I feel fine,” they each said, not quite in unison.

Malcolm’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t like this at all. He could leave them here, or send them back up, but he still had to solve the mystery of where the Downtown residents had gone. He could use the extra hands if they came across more of those dinosaurs, and perhaps they really were fine, as they said.

Perhaps being so far underground was starting to get to him. When this was over, he’d take a nice, long rest on a sunny beach somewhere. Vance would owe him that much, assuming he succeeded.

Malcolm walked to the next elevator, his steps uncomfortably heavy for a creature of the air. The depths of the cenote beckoned, cold and comfortless.

Amalia

This was the third stone marker they’d encountered since leaving the desert behind. Taller than Amalia, covered in glyphs, and topped with a carving like the snarling maw of some giant cat. Was this a monument? A proclamation?

Or was it a warning?

An ominous sound waxed and waned around them, echoing off walls and then diminishing to a whisper. It reminded Amalia of holy oil being poured into a baptismal font, but on an unfathomably large scale. Her fresh blood filled in more of her map of these underground spaces. It was difficult to chart the topography properly given how many different levels there were, none uniform. She squinted at some of the new lines and colors; what was that up ahead? Fire?

Amalia remembered her visions and shivered.

“You’re not cold, are you?” Bartolomé asked. She shook her head.

If I were, Amalia thought, I wouldn’t be soon.

At precisely the place her map indicated, they found the source of the mystery noise. In a huge cavern crisscrossed with arching natural bridges, a thunderous fall of lava cascaded down the side of a wall, bright enough to light the entire space. On some of the rocky outcroppings, stone buildings rose, while others had been carved directly into large stalactites. How anyone could reach those without the power of flight, she couldn’t imagine. Like all the areas they’d found, these seemed deserted, though in better repair.

Perhaps not so deserted. Someone emerged from a nearby building, chased by a half-dozen smaller figures. He raced across one of the bridges toward the vampires, wielding strange glowing swords that trailed motes of light. His clothes were unusual, a red and white tunic with a half-cape, and what looked like branches covering the upper part of his chest.

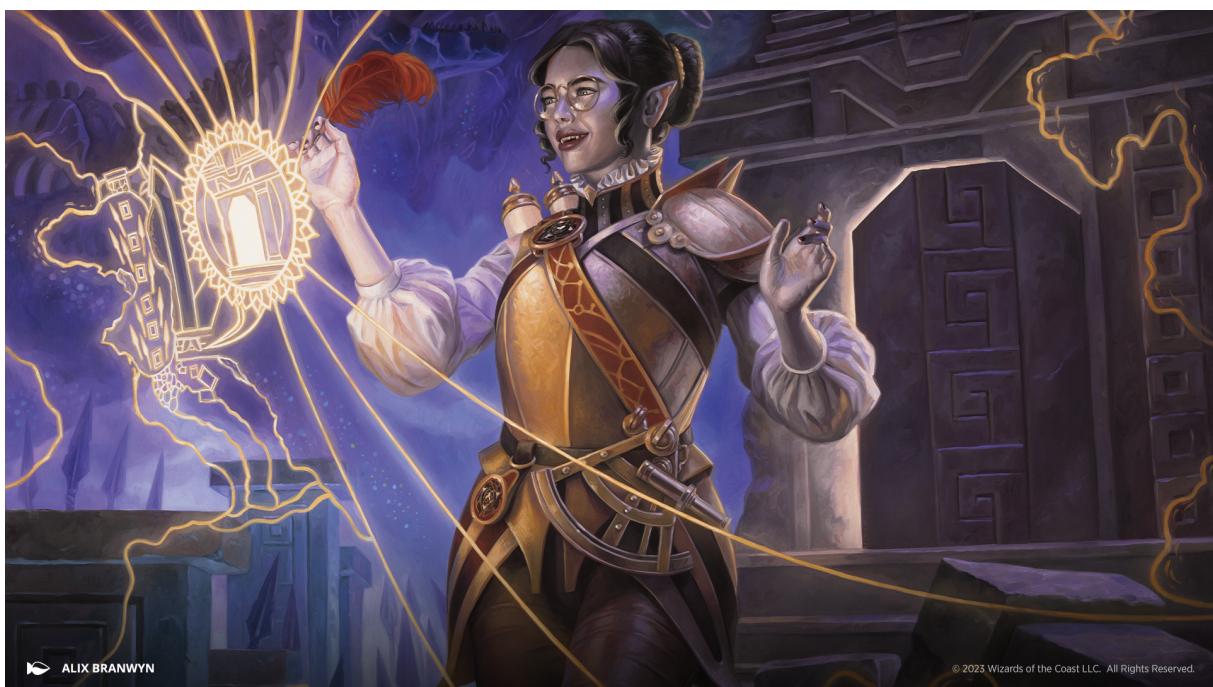
"Hey there, excuse me!" he yelled at the Legion, his accent unfamiliar. "Help would be very appreciated!" His pursuers came into view: creatures like goblins, but hairless and pale. One of them threw a spear at the man, who spun gracefully and cut the length of sharpened bone into three pieces.

Amalia stepped forward, hand falling to her own weapon. Bartolomé gripped her shoulder, holding her back. Vito dismissed them both with an imperious glare, continuing down their original path.

Surely he didn't intend to leave this person to his fate?

Even if he did, she wouldn't. Amalia retrieved her enchanted quill and unfurled the map of the caverns, focusing on their present location. Her nib traced the line of the bridge the man crossed. If she wasn't careful, this spell might kill him. She murmured the incantation and channeled her will into her instrument, the tip glowing like a starlit night.

With a delicate scratch of her quill, Amalia changed the map, and changed the world.



Art by: Alix Branwyn

The bridge of stone partially vanished. Two of the pale goblins fell screaming through the sudden gap beneath their feet. A third tried and failed to stop running and followed them over the edge.

Amalia had misjudged just enough that the man almost fell as well. He landed with his upper body mostly on the newly created outcropping, and with effort, he pulled himself the rest of the way up.

"Well done," Bartolomé murmured, startling Amalia. She smiled at him, relieved to have helped.

Until she saw Vito's annoyed expression.

As she tried to figure out how to apologize, the strange man jogged over, breathing heavily. Now that he was closer, she noticed his skin was tanned like people from the Sun Empire. Unlike them, however, his ears ended in delicate points.

"I'm in your debt," he said, bowing politely.

"And you are?" Vito asked coldly.

"I'm Kellan," the man said. "Not sure what I did to provoke those ... whatever they were, but I'm awfully glad you came along." His blades disappeared, leaving him holding hilts that looked like elaborately woven twigs. He hooked these onto his belt.

"Where did you come from?" Bartolomé asked.

"Eldraine," Kellan replied. "I was—"

"It doesn't matter," Vito interrupted, glaring at Bartolomé. "He is none of our concern."

"He will die if we leave him here," Bartolomé protested.

"We are on a holy quest and cannot afford distractions."

Amalia cleared her throat. "I'll take responsibility for him. We've lost too many—perhaps he can help."

Vito and Bartolomé stared at her in silence, until finally Vito bared his teeth.

"Report anything suspicious to me immediately," Vito snapped. He returned to his place at the front of the expedition, his lance raised like a beacon.

Bartolomé leaned close to Amalia's ear. "Do not openly defy him again," he whispered.

Amalia nodded, not daring to imagine the consequences of being perceived as Vito's enemy.

"Thanks," Kellan told Amalia. "I think."

Amalia smiled wanly and rooted through her pack for bandages. She could smell his blood—strange and potent, like spiced wine. "Can you bind your own wounds," she asked, "or do you need assistance?"

"I can do it," he replied. "Would it be rude to ask who you all are?"

"I'll explain while we move," Amalia said. And yet, that promise tasted like stale blood in her mouth, because she wasn't sure what she could tell this stranger. Not without endangering both of them in the process.

They entered another tunnel, the lava's light and roar fading behind them, the darkness its own terrible promise.