

Episode 6

Valerie Valdes

From set *Lost Caverns of Ixalan*

Huatli

Inti is dead.

The battle raged in the sky, Sun Empire and Oltec warriors chasing the twisted Dusk Legion soldiers through the roiling detritus of the cosmium reef. On the ground, Huatli cradled the broken body of her cousin, kneeling in the blood-spattered soil of a land far from home.

She had failed to protect him. Death was a warrior's constant companion, but no one eagerly fell into her embrace. What would she tell her family? Every word of comfort she had ever offered to the loved ones of a lost comrade turned to sand in her mouth.

A gust of wind and the flapping of wings signaled the arrival of her enemy. Vito carried the same lance he had wielded when she met him in the River Herald's underground city, but his form was corrupted, a vile combination of man and bat.

"Aclazotz will be pleased when I deliver you to him," Vito said, his voice rougher, fangs longer. "His victory is at hand."

Huatli stood, readying her sword and razor-edged shield. *Tilonalli, smite my enemies*, she prayed silently.

Vito circled her, his lance aimed at Huatli's heart. "When we return to Torrezon, I will be made a saint. I will bring my people the pure gospel of blood, unsullied by our weak queen and the false Saint Elenda. The faithful shall reform to accept the true rites of Aclazotz or be purged."

That knowledge would please Caparocti, if he still lived; it would be easier to invade Torrezon if the vampires were already killing each other. In this moment, however, Huatli hardly cared.

Vito thrust. Huatli knocked the point of his lance downward as she sidestepped. He struck again and again, while she danced out of his reach.

"Together, Vona and I will rule at our master's side," he continued. "We will dwell in his house for eternity, while the faithful who served him in his confinement will rule here. An alliance of blood and power."

Would he never cease talking? Huatli watched for an opening. She needed to turn this fight to her favor.

"I should let you live," Vito said, baring his teeth. "Who better to make my words canon than the poet of my fallen enemy? Who better to carry the tale of my victory to the empire that will soon be nothing but a memory?"

Huatli extended her senses, reaching out with her magic to the land around her, searching. Calling. Hearing her call answered.

"Where are your fine speeches, Warrior-Poet?" Vito taunted. "Has the return of Aclazotz stopped your tongue? Or was it the death of your precious seneschal?"

Huatli fell to one knee, stretching her magic until she felt like a paper-thin layer of rubber. The sounds around her faded. She called to the mountains and forests, the fields and valleys. More voices replied, until her head swam with the effort of containing them all.

“You wish to throw yourself at my mercy?” Vito asked. He struck again, the point of his lance sliding off the armor of her upper arm. The pain galvanized her will.

Huatli stood, swaying under the onslaught of the multitudes she summoned. Vito aimed to trip her, but she danced backward, years of training making her nimble despite the magic splitting her focus.

Vito leaped into the air, using the height and distance to his advantage. Huatli couldn’t reach him, couldn’t hit him, could only continue to push his blows aside with her shield. Already her muscles ached from exertion. Soon, she would tire. Soon, she would fall.

Not yet. Not until Inti was avenged. The ground trembled beneath her boots.

“Abandon your foolish hopes,” Vito said, hovering above her like a grim shadow. “Aclazotz is risen, and his eternal reign is inevitable.”

He stabbed his lance down at Huatli. She caught it in the gap of her shield, twisting the weapon out of his hand.

“Only death is inevitable,” Huatli said. “Even for you.”

A cry rent the air. Vito turned to find its source. A flying dinosaur barreled into him, sending him tumbling to the ground. From another direction, Pantlaza raced into the light shed by Huatli’s armor, attacking Vito with the huge, sharp claws on his feet. They carved a pair of long slices into his gray skin, which bled ichor as black as his foul heart.

“You dare?” Vito shrieked.

More dinosaurs appeared from land and sky, swarming over the vampire with tooth and claw. Each time he took to the air, he was driven back down. On the ground, he was flanked and harried from all sides.

Huatli picked up the lance, a superb weapon wielded by a wicked hand. It deserved a fitting end.

Vito threw a dinosaur off, leaving a gap in the wall surrounding him. With a roar, Huatli charged, the full might of her rage and sorrow filling her arm with strength. The lance slid through the vampire’s plate armor, piercing his vile heart and pinning him to the ground.



Art by: Marta Nael

Vito froze in shock and, Huatli hoped, pain. He collapsed to his knees, monstrous hands futilely attempting to pull out the lance. His own blood made the haft too slippery to grasp.

“Aclazotz,” he whispered, “why have you forsaken me?”

Huatli stood over him in silence as he fell sideways, blood pooling beneath him on the dark earth. The red light died in his monstrous eyes.

The empire was rid of a dangerous enemy. And yet, Huatli felt hollow. The vampire’s death would not return her cousin to life.

The dinosaurs clustered around her as they had surrounded Vito. Instead of attacking, they nuzzled her with their snouts, brushed her skin with their feathers, comforted her. Pantlaza trilled at Huatli, crooning like a father to a hurt child.

“Thank you,” Huatli murmured, touching the light of the Threefold Sun where it gleamed on her armor. But the battle was not over. More vampires remained, and Aclazotz still darkened this land.

With a mental command, Huatli sent the flying dinosaurs toward the cosmium reef, and the others toward the steward and her other allies. She mounted her own bat and flew away from the bodies of family and foe, promising Inti that she would return when every vampire in the Core was eradicated.

Malcolm

The army of the Mycotyrant spread across the pristine land like ... well, like a virulent fungal infection, which was basically what it was. Malcolm felt guilty for bringing this problem to a place that seemed idyllic, aside from the vampires and the darkness and the return of an ancient evil.

Right, no, everything was bad.

As he listened to Quint confer with a spirit named Abuelo—an Echo, he called himself—Malcolm thought of Vraska and all she’d told him of other planes and cities and seas. He missed her. She’d died in the invasion, or so he’d heard. He didn’t want to believe it of his former captain, who had always

seemed so powerful, nearly invincible, but war had a nasty habit of stripping away people's lovely illusions and replacing them with ugly truths. Wayta was a walking example of that, a child forced to grow up faster than a Herald-magicked weed. She stood nearby, while Breeches voraciously ate his way through some local fruit. Malcolm should do the same, but his stomach clenched with worry.

"We won't know unless we try," Quint said, holding up a khipu. Abuelo nodded, his expression determined.

"What are they doing?" Malcolm asked Wayta.

She shrugged. "Magic."

Quint laid the khipu on the ground and traced shimmering blue sigils above it. The magic spread to the khipu, blue shifting to pink as the crystals knotted into the strings of the garment lit up. Abuelo stilled as if holding his breath.



Art by: Zoltan Boros

A teal bubble of light formed above the garment, which rose to hover at Malcolm's shoulder height. The light stretched and roiled like a miniature storm, then from one blink to the next, it became the figure of a woman. The khipu hung from her neck, over her poncho. Wrinkled lips stretched in a smile as she peered up at Abuelo.

"There you are!" she exclaimed. "I thought that titan got you."

Abuelo chuckled. "It did."

"Oh, I suppose it did." She looked around. "What happened to the other Komon?"

"I don't know," Abuelo said. "But let me introduce you to our new friends. Everyone, this is Abuela."

Abuela sniffed the air. "The Mycotyrant nears. We must gather the other Echoes."

Breeches swallowed whatever he'd been chewing. "MORE GHOSTS?" he asked, dismayed.

"Better than mushroom-encrusted dinosaurs," Malcolm muttered.

Lights crested a nearby hill. Malcolm took to the air to scout, sighting people whose ponchos and khipu suggested they were Oltec. They carried staves tipped with pink crystals, and some were accompanied

by furry long-necked creatures he'd never seen before. Their faces were lined with tattoos, some glowing faintly in the dark of the hidden sun.

Malcolm returned to his allies to find Abuela clapping her ghostly hands in excitement.

"The gardeners have arrived!" she exclaimed.

Abuelo nodded. "We are fortunate they came so quickly."

"What can they do?" Malcolm asked.

The steward answered, her voice rich with purpose. "Since the beginning of the Quiet Age, they've been developing practices to fight this enemy. We had hoped never to need them, but we wished to be prepared."

One of the gardeners approached the steward, saluting and bowing her head politely. "Tan Jolom sends his regards, and some of his fellow Echoes."

Various gardeners produced different objects—a necklace, a headdress, a small crystal mask, a serrated blade, and more. Spirits burst into existence, anchored to the items. Some were less solid, some less human, but all bowed to the steward and awaited further orders.

Steward Akal surveyed the group. "Our ancient enemies have returned. While our Thousand Moons fight to save Chimir, you must preserve the land for their return."

"Ojer Kaslem will aid us," the gardener replied. "As will Ojer Axonil, with his fire and storms, and the other gods."

The lone vampire standing nearby—Amalia, that was her name—stepped forward, gripping her pant leg nervously. "I may be able to help," she said. "I can change the land with my map."

Steward Akal pointed. "Coordinate with the gardeners. We must all work together." Kellan, whom Malcolm had only seen by her side, squeezed Amalia's shoulder in support and offered her a dimpled grin.

"May the gods guide us all," Steward Akal said. "Save Chimir and save the Core!" A roar of approval replied, and the members of the newly formed army set out.

Malcolm flew toward the mass of fungus, which had finally stopped swarming through the golden door. Their eerie green glow made them an easy target in the darkness, distinct from shafts of white or pink or blood-red emanating from other sources. At the center of the group, two huge mushroom-headed creatures held the Mycotyrant aloft in its fibrous web.

Malcolm shivered and surveyed the land, then turned back to meet the others.

"The Mycotyrant isn't far. He's heading ..." What cardinal directions made sense here? The sun didn't move. "This way," he said finally, pointing.

The gardener turned to Amalia, who pulled a map and quill out of a container slung across her back. She bit her finger open, daubed it in her ash tin, and carefully smeared the blood mixture on the paper. Malcolm peered at the map. Parts of it were filled in, but others were blank. As the solution spread, the empty portions of the map disappeared, replaced by a detailed depiction of the terrain. It even showed the mass of the mushroom army as a dark stain.

"We could use that kind of magic in the coalition," he told Amalia. "If you ever want to jump ship, so to speak."

Amalia gave him a faint, almost embarrassed smile.

"Wait until you see the rest," Kellan said, nudging her with his hip.

Amalia asked the gardener, “Where do you want the fissure?”

The gardener ran her finger around a particular section of the map. “There. Make it as deep as you can. We will do the rest.”

Amalia nodded and lowered her quill to the paper. She waited, took a deep breath, then swiped the nib across the map.

The ground rumbled and shook. Malcolm stumbled. When he looked at the map again, a deep crevice lay in the path of the army, encircling them so retreat would be difficult.

Kellan gripped Amalia’s elbow as she wavered. “You’re amazing at this,” he said.

Amalia’s cheeks darkened—was she blushing? Vampires didn’t blush. What a precious little fledgling.

Malcolm flew back toward the Mycotyrant and his troops. The first small mushroom scouts found the trench, too deep and steep for them to climb, too wide to leap. More of the creatures arrived, dozens, hundreds, and to his horror they began to throw themselves off the cliff.

No, they held each other, grafted together, forming a thick fungal chain. One of the flying creatures dove into the space and grabbed the last mushroom, carrying it to the opposite side. More of them piled on, and soon a thick bridge spanned the crevice.

So much for that plan, Malcolm thought.

Before he could get any closer to the Mycotyrant, Malcolm felt more than saw something above him. A fungus-encrusted bat swooped down, narrowly missing him. More such creatures filled the skies, their movements awkward and stilted compared to his, but they could overwhelm him with sheer numbers.

“Not today, stinkhorn,” he said, and retreated.

Below him, the Echoes formed a ghostly vanguard that reached the mushrooms before everyone else. Malcolm landed next to Breeches and Quint and gestured at them.

“What are they doing?” Malcolm asked.

Quint lowered his goggles. “Watch.”

An Echo with a face like a bare skull floated up to one of the smaller walking mushrooms, which paused as if in confusion. Silently, the Echo slid into the creature and vanished.

At first, nothing happened. Then the mushroom shuddered and jerked, veins of bright teal splitting its skin. It dissolved into blue smoke as if consumed by invisible fire.

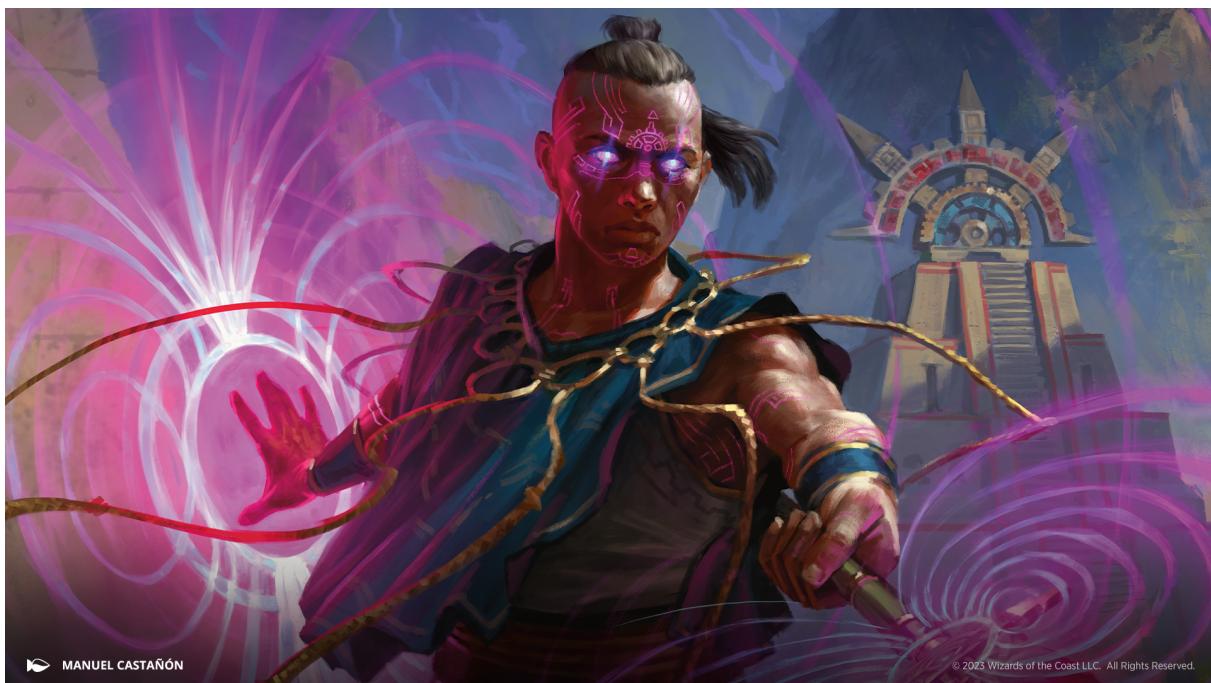
The Echo reformed and drifted to the next enemy. Other Echoes followed suit, and one by one, soldiers in the fungal army dissipated.

“They turn themselves into a sickness,” Quint explained. “It only affects the mycoids—that’s what they call the mushrooms.”

“Impressive,” Malcolm said. “There are so many of them, though.”

“The counter-infection is only one of our tools,” a gardener said. “Here is another.”

The gardeners divided into groups of three and stood shoulder to shoulder, raising their staves. Thin rings of pink light emanated from crystals embedded in the wood, rippling outward in waves. With a shout, the gardeners lowered their weapons, and the magic sliced through the air, toward the mycoids.



Art by: Manuel Castañón

Every fungus the light touched burst into flames. Dozens of the creatures fell writhing to the ground, then lay still, disintegrating into ash.

Still, more came. The fight devolved into a melee, with some mycoids wielding spears or blades, and others casting spells that choked the Oltec with fetid spores. Kellan stayed near Amalia, gracefully fending off enemies with a pair of magical blades. An unfurled scroll hovered in front of Quint like a shield—and it worked as well as one, the magically rigid paper shattering and deflecting incoming arrows and spears. Quint wielded another scroll like a whip, sigils sending ribbons of golden energy lashing out to loop around enemies and cut through them like razors. The mycoids advanced despite their injuries, leaving piles of decomposing fungus in their wake.

The titans remained on the far side of the crevice, too heavy to cross the mushroom bridge. The Mycotyrant hung between them, baleful green eyes glaring at its enemies.

Malcolm caught Breeches staring at the fungal overlord with the same shrewd expression he wore when he was calculating how deep a mark's pockets were. He finally bared his teeth in a wild grin and pointed.

“BIG BOOM!” Breeches exclaimed.

“You think it can kill the Mycotyrant?” Malcolm asked incredulously.

Breeches nodded and grinned. From his pack, he retrieved the weapon he’d acquired in High and Dry as payment for a debt. The metal tube was about the length of a forearm, with an elaborate vine pattern etched in the surface, a jutting leaf for a trigger, and flower petals molded to the end. Malcolm had been surprised when the previous owner agreed to turn the thing over. Once he’d seen it in action, however, he’d concluded he would rather stick with cannons, thanks very much. It was more destructive and unreliable than it was worth.

Those qualities would likely serve them well now.

Malcolm picked Breeches up and leaped into the air, circling around from the direction he’d decided to call south. “We’ll probably get one chance,” Malcolm said. “Don’t miss.”

Breeches glared at him indignantly.

Malcolm didn't argue. It would definitely hit something. He just didn't want it to be him.

One of the titans holding the Mycotyrant swiveled its wrinkled morel head to watch Malcolm and Breeches fly closer. With a roar, it grabbed a nearby mycoid and threw it, the smaller creature flailing its limbs and trying to hit Malcolm or Breeches in passing with its spear.

Malcolm dropped and it sailed over him. Another mycoid followed, then another, and he wished he were back at High and Dry telling the story of this unbelievable day to friends over a drink.

"Mushrooms," he would say. "Smart mushrooms, turned into projectiles. Trying to stab me. No, seriously. Swear it on my song."

Assuming he survived, which he fervently hoped to.

"Any time now, Breeches," Malcolm said, his tone strained.

Breeches pointed the tube at the Mycotyrant.

A fungus-covered dinosaur swooped. Malcolm dodged, and Breeches fumbled the artifact, which flipped and twirled between his hands. He whipped his tail forward and caught it before it could plummet to the ground. The flowery end, unfortunately, now stared Malcolm in the face.

"Careful where you aim that thing!" Malcolm shouted. "Hit the blasted Mycotyrant already!"

"FLY BETTER!" Breeches retorted. He passed the tube to his feet, then to his hands, holding the artifact so both sides were at arm's length.

Malcolm said, "Warn me before you—"

FOOOOOM!

Smoke and sparks billowed from the back of the tube. From the front, an enormous ball of molten fire sprayed, thick as pitch and just as sticky. The force of the weapon's magic sent Malcolm and Breeches flying backward, and Malcolm nearly dropped his goblin passenger before righting himself.

Everything in the fireball's path was leveled. The Mycotyrant had only a moment to see its death looming before the projectile tore through the nearest titan, hitting it squarely in the body. It fell from its web to the ground, pinned beneath the fiery projectile, which splashed flames in all directions.

Every fungal creature around it shrieked in unison, some collapsing like puppets whose strings had been cut. Others struck by the sticky fire flailed their arms, running around or rolling on the ground. A few launched themselves into the fissure, turning the shadowy space into a pit of flickering flames.

They were soon joined by the bridge as gardeners broke the front ranks, their own magical fires cleansing the area. Echoes continued to transform mushrooms, the harmless smoke combining with its acrid counterpart. The once fertile earth lay bare, scorched, littered with lumps of ash and the bodies of the fallen.

But they were winning, and hopefully this meant Downtown would be safe as well.

Malcolm nearly smacked himself for daring to hope again. How had the impulse not been beaten out of him?

As if in response, a storm of dark energy erupted from the distant mountains. Bolts of red lightning flashed, illuminating rocks sheared away in a landslide that sent up clouds of dirt. The ground shook, sending people stumbling or knocking them off their feet entirely. Shouts of concern crossed the battleground, and far above in the cosmium reef, bats shrieked like nails dragged across metal. Malcolm's feathers shivered involuntarily.

As the dust cleared, the casing around the sun shifted apart slowly, almost imperceptibly. Most of the land remained shrouded in shadow, but shafts of light shone through as the strange dawn broke.

The Oltec cheered, and even Quint and Amalia and Kellan joined in the celebration. Malcolm landed nearby, finally dropping Breeches and rubbing the muscle aches out of his arms. One person, he noticed, wasn't celebrating.

Wayta stared at the mountains, squinting her single visible eye. "What is that?" she asked.

Pillars of a great temple rose from the sheared mountain face. A blood-red glow emanated from inside, and Amalia stumbled, grabbing her head and wincing.

"Aclazotz," Amalia said. "That's his temple. We need to go there, to stop him!"

What could he do that was worse than covering the sun? Malcolm wondered.

Anim Pakal whistled, then turned to the assembled warriors. "Gardeners, please continue to eliminate the Mycotyrant's forces. Leave not even a single spore alive. My Moons, come. We will root out the disease of cosmium eaters and end them as well."

Amalia trailed after her, followed by Kel with his magic swords. Abuelo and Abuela flitted around with the other Echoes, gleefully turning mushrooms into mist. Quint swiped a handkerchief across his goggles with his trunk, then tucked it into a pouch on his belt.

"This is going to be an incredible paper," Quint said.

Wayta made a choked sound, then began to laugh so hard tears leaked from her eye. Malcolm had never seen her stoic demeanor so completely altered; she looked younger, happier. Poor Quint seemed confused, but he cracked a smile, too.

Breeches tilted his hat back with his tail and sighed happily. "BIG BOOM."

It was more like a big *foom*, Malcolm thought, but he didn't want to spoil the moment. He had a feeling it would be spoiled by something else soon enough.

Amalia

The trail to the temple of Aclazotz was littered with cosmium eaters, alive and dead. The Thousand Moons mercilessly fought any they encountered, with assistance from Amalia and Kellan. Acrid smoke from the fungal fires mingled with the clouds of dirt from the landslide, forcing Amalia to squint and blink away grit. Dinosaurs roamed the terrain, their feathers and claws and teeth caked with blood, as if patrolling—or hunting.

"Behind you!" Amalia yelled.

Kellan spun as he ducked, dragging one of his glowing blades through a vampire's knee. The other he angled up, slicing his enemy open from crotch to collarbone. Her other leg buckled, and bringing his sword together like scissors, Kellan took off her head.

Amalia blanched and looked away. "You're surprisingly good at that, Kel," she muttered.

"These guys aren't so tough," Kellan said. "You ever tangle with a giant goose?"

"What's a goose?" Amalia asked.

"It's like a dinosaur with a grudge."

They continued, climbing inexorably toward the temple. The warriors carried torches and glowing crystals, while Amalia's floating candles remained tethered to her belt, flickering madly. Darkness

churned above, a shadow darker than night like a stain on the air, but the red flashes had stopped. Amalia dreaded what they would find.

A vampire-bat swooped toward Kellan, who barely dodged the creature's spear thrust. It still wore the armor of the Dusk Legion, to Amalia's horror. What had Vito done to her people? What would she tell Queen Miralda if she ever escaped this place?



Art by: Antonio José Manzanedo

She had to keep going. To bear witness. To carry the stories back home.

A whistle rose and fell from further ahead, answered by a pair of matching notes.

"We have found the entrance, Thousandth Moon," one of the scouts said.

Anim Pakal inclined her head, then gestured for Amalia to approach. "Come," she said. "Perhaps you can tell us something of your god."

Amalia flinched at the reminder of her connection to Aclazotz and sent a beseeching look Kellan's way. He gave her a dimpled grin.

"I'm with you," he said.

A stone door loomed, cracked in half by the earthquake, leaving a jagged hole to the temple beyond. Amalia climbed into an antechamber whose roof had collapsed, then ducked under partially crumbled pillars that looked as if the god himself had thrust them aside in his rage.

Inside, rows of seats led down to a stage with a pit at one end and a barred cave at the other. Lengths of gem-encrusted chains lay scattered as if blown apart by a massive force. Everything was broken, covered in debris and dust that lingered in the air. The scent of blood suffused Amalia's senses until she wanted to scream. So much death. For what? To turn Vito and Clavileño and the others into monsters?

"Aclazotz is gone," Anim said. "So are the rest of the cosmium eaters, and the Dusk Legion, assuming any of them survived the battle."

A warrior cleared his throat. "One of the eaters has been apprehended for questioning."

Three more of the Thousand Moons dragged in their prisoner. His poncho and khipu were streaked with blood down the front, as was his chin, and he spat defiantly at Anim. She wiped the red-tinged fluid away and crossed her arms.

“Where is Aclazotz?” Anim asked.

“He is free,” the cosmium eater said. “He gathers his children, and soon he will end the Fifth Age and begin a new age of blood. All who join him will feast on the weak for eternity, and all who oppose him will be consumed.”

“No,” Amalia whispered in horror.

The eater’s gaze shifted to her. “You,” he said venomously. “Traitor. We saw you run when you were called. And now you align yourself with the enemies of your god? You and all your kind will be cleansed in fire and blood, and your names will be forgotten.”

Amalia could only stare at him mutely, the once strong bonds of her faith breaking like the chains that littered the ground.

“Where is Aclazotz?” Anim repeated, grabbing the man’s chin. He snapped at her, and she recoiled.

“He is beyond your reach,” the eater replied. “But you will not be beyond his for long.”

Amalia stumbled out of the temple, back into the open air, the eater’s laughter pursuing her like an attack dog. She stopped beyond the door, wrapping her arms around herself and shivering.

She shouldn’t have left home. Shouldn’t have gone on this forsaken journey. Bartolomé died to protect her and Kellan, but his sacrifice was in vain. The schism would never heal. Worse, it seemed Vito had been right all along. What would Aclazotz do to Queen Miralda? To Saint Elenda? To her family? Did he want to transform all vampires into his own image?

A hand touched her arm, startling her. Amalia looked up at Kellan, his dark eyes gentle.

“I’m sorry,” Amalia murmured. “I was raised to believe my god was distant, but benevolent. That he charged us with a sacred mission to serve and pass along his gift. Now I find he’s ... he’s ...”

“Not what you expected?” Kellan asked.

Amalia nodded. “I feel as if I’ve been living a lie.”

“I might understand that more than anyone else here.” Kellan offered her a sad smile. “You still have a choice, though. You’re not locked into a destiny someone else planned for you.”

“What can I do? Go back to Torrezon and warn Queen Miralda of all this? How can I choose a mere woman over my own god?” Amalia stared at the temple, the door, broken like her faith.

Kellan seemed to consider that one. “If you don’t like what your god is doing, maybe you should find another one?”

“Another god?” Amalia laughed bitterly. “You make it sound easy.”

“It’s probably tricky,” Kellan said. “Maybe Quint can help. He’s smart, and all those professors at the university he talks about are probably even smarter. You could talk to them.”

Other planes. Other gods. Other vampires? It was almost more than Amalia could imagine. But then, she’d never expected to find a whole world beneath her own, inside it, like a seed in an avocado, a pearl in an oyster. She’d found something inside herself, too—not a pearl, perhaps, not yet, but a grain of something that might become harder and stronger.

“Will you tell me about your gods?” she asked Kellan.

"We don't have those where I'm from," Kellan said. "But I can tell you about the fae. Next best thing, I think." Together they returned to the path, walking away from the ruins and back toward the growing dawn.

Wayta

The second Sun Empire delegation reached Oteclan a week after the battle, to find Chimir restored to her previous glory even as pyres of the dead burned. The River Heralds retreated to their underground ocean, the Brazen Coalition returned to the surface with the remaining vampire and her companion, and the Oltec began to clean up the mess everyone had made of their home.

Wayta idly scratched her eye beneath the patch as Steward Akal greeted the new arrivals, Anim Pakal just behind her. A few of the so-called diplomats were recognizable even to her—many of them warriors, some higher ranked than others. All loyal to the emperor.

Huatli struggled to hide a scowl.

Speeches followed, pretty words for now; there would be time for negotiations later. Long tables covered in food beckoned them to feast, gathering the people she had come to know and respect. She stayed near Quint and some of the soldiers who had survived the vampire and mycoid attacks, quietly celebrating. Remembering the fallen.

Caparocti sat at Steward Akal's left hand, having been appointed the emperor's voice in the proceedings. Wayta was too far away to hear their discussion, but the steward looked serious, concerned, while her sister at her other elbow gestured widely before jabbing a slice of fruit toward the sky. Huatli, next to Anim, sat up stiffly and nudged her plate forward, her food untouched. Behind her chair, Pantlaza attentively waited for scraps.

Quint gently elbowed Wayta, who nearly spilled her juice. "You know," he said, "I have an eavesdropping spell." When she didn't respond, he added, "If you don't use it, I will."

Wayta hesitated, then nodded. It wasn't as if the conversation could be private in such a public place.

Pulling a scroll from his pack, Quint cleared his throat. He unfurled the scroll and began to quietly read it, the words individually sharp and clear, yet somehow fading and blurring together so Wayta couldn't understand them.

"Did it work?" she asked.

Huatli's voice suddenly sounded as if it were right next to her ear. "Surely we have lost enough. Can we not rebuild and mourn instead of seeking out new battles?"

"Aclazotz threatens the entire surface," Caparocti retorted. "You saw what he did to the vampires here. Do you want to face an army of those in Ixalan?"

"We can fight Aclazotz without declaring war against the entire Legion of Dusk," Huatli said. "If we move quickly, with a smaller force, we should be able to stop him before he gathers more allies to—"

"You're going to fight a god with a small force?" Caparocti asked incredulously. "What will you do, bore him with poetry?"

Wayta frowned. That was uncalled for.

"You forget that I am a warrior as well as a poet," Huatli said coldly.

"And yet your title was stolen for you by your cousin Inti rather than granted by the late emperor."

Huatli stood, laying her hands flat on the table. “Keep Inti’s name out of your mouth. He was a better man than you could ever dream of becoming, not even if you lived as long as the sun-cursed vampires themselves. You certainly share their thirst for blood.” She began to move away, Pantlaza trailing after her, then paused to glare at Caparocti, dark eyes blazing with menace. “Do not look for me again, Champion, because you will find me.”

Silence followed her departure, though Caparocti looked more pleased than embarrassed or cowed. Wayta had an urge to command a dinosaur to relieve itself on his head.

Anim leaned closer to her sister. “Whatever we decide, we cannot remain here and ignore what is happening on the surface. Not anymore.”

Steward Akal pressed her lips together. “Especially not if Aclazotz is amassing forces there. And if any remnants of the Mycotyrant have spread, we must continue our work to purge them, as the gardeners tend to crops.”

“Will you supply us with warriors?” Caparocti asked. “Echoes? Cosmum?”

“We will coordinate an appropriate response,” Steward Akal replied.

“The Thousand Moons stand ready to assist,” Anim said.

“You stand ready to see the surface for yourself,” Steward Akal said dryly. “We will do what must be done.”

And what would that be? Wayta wondered. So many people had different definitions of “must” and were eager to apply them. We must defeat this enemy. We must hold this tunnel. We must break this line. Every must was a promise made, so many of them paid in blood.

Wayta clapped Quint on the shoulder. “Thank you for letting me hear that.”

“What do you intend to do?” Quint asked.

“What I must.” Wayta squared her shoulders and followed Huatli, who stood at the edge of a lake, a cool breeze teasing strands of hair from her braid. The seneschal’s sword hung low on her hip, a cosmum crystal affixed to the pommel.

Huatli glanced at Wayta, then back at the water. They stood in silence for a few minutes, waves lapping at the shore, Pantlaza chasing insects that fluttered from flower to flower.

“I wanted to be a warrior-poet once,” Wayta said. “When I was much younger. Before Orazca was found and claimed.”

“How simple that time seems now,” Huatli murmured. “The stone does not feel each drop of rain, but still it is worn away.” She smiled weakly at Wayta. “Perhaps an even more important destiny awaits you.”

Wayta shrugged. “Not everyone has to be a legendary hero. A candle isn’t as bright as the Threefold Sun, but it still lights a room.”

“True.” Huatli’s hand gripped the hilt of her cousin’s sword. “Being the warrior-poet means I’m meant to lead. I would happily hunt down Aclazotz myself, but an invasion of Alta Torrezon? It’s too much. How can I find the words that will spark flame in the hearts of our people when I cannot commit myself to this cause?”

Wayta nudged a pebble with her boot, kicking it into the water. “A wise woman once told me: it is more important for poetry to be honest than good. Perhaps you need to find a quest you believe in, that also serves the empire?”

"Perhaps I do." Huatli fell into thought. Then, she untied the sword from her belt and offered it to Wayta.

"The seneschal's blade?" Wayta asked, bewildered. "You want me to have it? Why?"

"I think Inti would like it," Huatli replied. "You can ask him if you want. He's an Echo now. His spirit is here, in the gem." She tapped the cosmium crystal in the pommel.

Wayta hesitated, then reached for the hilt. "I am honored more than I can say. I will keep him safe."

"I hope he keeps you safe, too," Huatli said, a flicker of amusement lighting her face. "You're not dead yet. Stay strong, little sister." She took a step away from Wayta, then another, walking along the edge of the lake toward the still-frolicking Pantlaza.

"What will you do now?" Wayta called to her.

Huatli smiled. "I've received an invitation to Otepec from the emperor's sister. It was carefully worded, but I think I'm not the only one who isn't eager to kindle a new war while the embers of the last one are still hot."

Wayta had no notion of what Caztaca Huicintli would do. If anyone could persuade her brother not to invade Torrezon, it would be her. And if he couldn't be persuaded? She shuddered to think what might happen.

Perhaps the Legion of Dusk wouldn't be the only ones facing a civil war soon.



Art by: Tyler Jacobson

Malcolm

Climbing back out of the caverns had almost been worse than going in. On the way down, Malcolm had hoped to find survivors of whatever fate had befallen Downtown. On the way up, he knew better. The mystery was solved, but the underground city remained empty, and he had no idea when, if ever, new residents would move in to continue the work of the old.

He and Breeches arrived at Sunray Bay exhausted and grimy from travel, having said their goodbyes to Amalia and Kellan. Dreams of baths and soft beds taunted him; he'd make his report to Vance, the families of the lost would have to be notified, and then he would disappear into the bottom of a tankard of ale until he'd washed the taste of failure out of his mouth.

When will you learn, Malcolm told himself bitterly, stopping in the middle of a street to stare up into the storm-heavy sky.

Sunray Bay was as deserted as Downtown, with the same signs of the Mycotyrant's handiwork: Burnt-out buildings and magic-scorched walls, discarded items, spoiled food. Mushrooms sprouted from random cracks, clustered in dark corners, shook their spores into the air and glowed with the awful green color Malcolm knew he'd see in his nightmares forever.

At the docks, not a single ship waited. He hoped that meant their crews had escaped to safety before they were infected, but he feared the worst. All it would take was one pirate, one stowaway, and the problem would continue to spread.

"We need to get to High and Dry," Malcolm told Breeches. "We have to warn them or find out whether it's too late."

"Big boat? Little boat?" Breeches asked.

"Any boat that floats," Malcolm replied. "Come on, maybe we'll find something in the cove farther up the coast."

If not, he would—what? Keep going, he supposed. Beg a boat from the next port he reached. Fly to a Sun Empire village. Wander back to Orazca and pretend the plane wasn't falling apart again. But he wouldn't stop, not now, maybe not ever. If he did, the fungus would catch up.

The sky opened, pouring sheets of warm rain on the ruined town. Malcolm tipped his face up, letting the water wash through his feathers, wondering if he would ever truly feel clean again.

Amalia

Even by the standards of Ixalan, the island Amalia and Kellan found themselves on was lush, the jungle like a thick wall nearly to the shoreline. Soft sand shifted under Amalia's boots as she stepped out of the tender that brought them from the merchant vessel to land.

"Are you certain this is the right place?" Amalia asked.

"Mostly a feeling," Kellan said. "My luck hasn't failed me yet. Not when it really counted, anyway."

"We'll know soon," she said. "Either way, your search will continue."

"It will," Kel agreed. "Who would I be if I gave up now?"

Who indeed? Amalia wondered. Her own urge to explore had led her to this place, but she still harbored worries, doubts. She thought she'd expunged them at sea, but she had only succeeded in ignoring them for a time.

And now, her time was almost up.

They found a dirt path that wound through the jungle. Sun dappled the ground as branches and flower-studded vines formed a shadowy roof.

They used a massive fallen tree to cross a gulch, a waterfall beside it misting the air into rainbows. On the other side, at the center of a field covered in tall grass, they found what they were looking for.

A strange circle coruscated and swirled with lights. It was taller than a human and just as wide, and it floated above the ground without shifting or moving, as if it were a painting affixed to a wall.

Kel whispered, “That’s it. An Omenpath.”

“You’re sure?” Amalia asked. “Where does it go?”

“I have no idea,” Kel said. “The last one brought me here, but this one might not be so forgiving.”

“You think this could lead to somewhere worse than a cavern full of angry goblins and jaguarfolk?”

Kel shrugged. “I wish it wouldn’t, but if wishes grew in fields, we’d all farm.”

They stared at the swirling portal in silence as the sun baked their heads.

Amalia looked to Kel, only to find him staring at her. “What?” she asked.

“Are you sure you want to come with me?” he asked quietly. “This is your world. Your family is here, your friends, everything you’ve ever known. Are you truly ready to leave it all behind?”

The question Amalia had been ignoring now loomed, immense and unavoidable. She had promised to look after Kel, yes, but surely her duty had long since been acquitted. He was a grown man and didn’t require a guardian. His quest was his own, and she had no need to take it upon herself to accompany him.

But she had left home to explore, to find new places, to learn new things. She wanted to help her people, yes, and so she had sent word to her family and Queen Miralda through the remaining Queen’s Bay Company members of the oncoming storm Aclazotz might bring. However, she found herself keen to avoid the discord between her god—former god?—and his wayward disciples. His gospel of blood and subjugation repelled her, and she would sooner leave than see it come to pass.

“I am ready,” Amalia said firmly, pleased to find it was true. “Whenever you are.”

Kellan took her hand, his skin pleasantly warm. She could feel his pulse through his thumb as it sped up slightly.

“Just so you know,” he said, “this could lead anywhere. The next place may not be any better than this one.”

“What could be worse?”

Kel shrugged and treated her to a dimpled smile. “Giant goose?”

Amalia laughed, her heart lighter than it had been for weeks. Without another word, they leaped through the Omenpath, and everything changed.

Quint

The place the Oltec called Colony’s End jutted from the side of a mountain, a huge half-circular ruin seemingly cast from a single piece of metal, despite its layers and ridges. Quint shouldn’t have been surprised at how large it was, given the size of the remains he’d seen at the Night War memorial in Oteclan. They matched the corpse found during the first tentative foray into the caverns beneath Orazca; he hoped someone had preserved that one for future study as this one had been.



Art by: Adam Paquette

“Colonizers,” the didacts told him. Their stories described giants whose great, dark vessels appeared in the sky, blotting out the light of Chimil and then caging her within a metal prison. Sometimes legends grew in the telling, but given that Quint had seen the prison himself, he was inclined to believe the Oltec weren’t exaggerating.

They’d also warned him to stay away from Colony’s End, because it was dangerous and hadn’t been fully explored. He knew how to be careful, though. He’d survived his delve into Zantafar when Asterion hadn’t because he’d taken better precautions. That he was essentially doing precisely what Asterion had done by coming here alone was a fact he was prepared to overlook in the interests of historical scholarship.

Tucking the loose end of his scarf back into his collar, Quint continued to climb. Soon, he reached the side of the ruin, the wall looming a dozen times his height or more. Before he could lose himself in contemplation of scale, he found the very thing that had brought him to Ixalan: bas-reliefs depicting the same coin motifs he’d discovered elsewhere. His excitement grew as he traced the pattern to an open doorway, sunlight slanting in to illuminate a room composed of the same metallic material as the exterior.

Quint retrieved a light globe from his pack and began to map the ruins. Unlike others he’d explored, these felt eerily lifeless, colder than the mountain weather should have made them. The further he delved, the less dirt and dust coated the floor beneath his echoing footsteps. No water intruded to cause rust, no mold sprouted in corners. The place was sealed up tighter than any tomb.

It was also empty of any signs of habitation. Tall oblong objects towered over Quint—furniture, perhaps, scaled to their makers. He considered climbing them, but decided to finish his map first.

On he went from room to room, pacing off the dimensions of the space and recording them on a scroll. Ramps led up and down to other levels; despite his curiosity, he finished his exploration of the current floor before proceeding to the next. Up or down? He pulled out the coin he’d been carrying with him and flipped it.

Down.

The lower level was much like the first, tall ceilings and more potential furniture, but otherwise nothing. How did these people live? Did they eat? Sleep? Had they taken all their personal effects when they left? It was as if he'd found the bones of some giant creature, long since picked clean, and was trying to determine the color of its eyes.

He turned a corner and stopped, blinking in astonishment. Unlike every other room, this one held a long row of massive tanks, their glass fronts shattered, shards littering the floor. Whatever fluid or gas they might have contained had long since drained away or evaporated, and any objects inside were missing—perhaps intentionally destroyed, perhaps taken by survivors.

Quint sighed. He'd found more questions than answers. As usual.

A glint of a reflection from his light caught his eye. At the end of the row, one of the tanks was intact. How had this one survived? Perhaps he should ask the didacts when he returned to Oteclan.

He ambled over, peering through the glass. The interior was cloudy, opaque; was there anything inside? With his handkerchief, he swiped at the surface, then cupped his hands to the sides of his eyes and pressed his face to the container to get a better look.

With a deep clang, the tank lit up.

Quint scooted backward nervously. What had he done? What was happening?

Inside the container, smoky air swirled, then slowly dissipated, revealing the body of an enormous creature. It was so tall, Quint couldn't see its head from where he stood, only thick, gray-skinned legs and hands that ended in claws.

What a discovery! This specimen was far more intact than the one in Oteclan. But how could he possibly transport it? He'd have to return to the others and bring a team back to—

The creature's fingers twitched. It flexed them, stretched its hand, and then curled it into a tight fist.

Or, Quint thought, perhaps I should go. Now. Right now.

Mycotyrant

One mind was all, and all minds were one.

Some bodies required direct attention to function, while others acquired sufficient autonomy to act on their own, nonetheless acquiescing to the will of their progenitor. Some were more stubborn and refused to obey. So be it. More bodies could always be formed or assimilated.

Temple ruins in a jungle on the surface swarmed with vampires, clearing vegetation and building a camp. One of them struck a swollen fungal sac with its blade, releasing a cloud of spores that settled on its skin like flies. Soon, it would join the body that watched from behind the trees. As would the others.

The pirates from Downtown who had escaped now wandered Sunray Bay, their faces covered. They passed from one body to the next, each giving a different point of view, a different influx of knowledge and sensory input. Their refusal to assimilate was puzzling, and frustrating, but so it went. They did not understand the efficiency to be gained.

The battle against the Oltec had taught them a valuable lesson: sometimes stealth succeeded where force failed. A new body stood on the deck of a ship—such useful things, ships—and watched as it approached High and Dry. This one retained its original form in most ways, except for its eyes, covered by dark lenses. Better to hide, and plan, and spread.

With enough time and care, everyone would succumb. Everything would be joined. Controlled. Already the light of the new sun warmed the molds and caps spreading across the surface.

For every stalk burned away, more would grow. Progress was inevitable. It only required time and patience. And more bodies.

Aclazotz

The ship's hold reeked of despair. Wide-eyed sacrifices awaited their doom in the dark, their spirits broken, hope lost. Soon, the faithful would descend to feast on their life-sustaining nectar, and more importantly, to offer the choicest morsels to their risen god.

Freedom after such long imprisonment was perhaps an even more delectable pleasure, despite the need for confinement in the salt-crusted, stagnant cargo hold.

Aclazotz longed to stretch his wings. To soar. To hunt.

Soon the ship would reach Torrezon, a land of sheep awaiting their promised shepherd to lead them to eternal life. Those who had survived the battle against the Oltec and their misbegotten surface brood would serve as the generals of his army. He would canonize the strongest among his children, forming them into more perfect images of himself.

One vampire he craved above all others: Vona de Iedo, the Antifex. She had rejected the false teachings of his lesser creations and found the path to truth. Vito had fallen and would be forgotten, but Vona? He would set her at his right wing to see that his will be done.

And once he secured Torrezon, they would return to Chimir and obliterate her at last.

The ship creaked and rocked as Aclazotz opened his single, baleful eye, shrouding the hold in red light. The sacrifices shrieked and moaned in terror, blood pounding in their bodies like a syncopation of drums. Such sweet music they made for him. He would almost miss it when they were silenced.