

Episode 5

Valerie Valdes

From set *Lost Caverns of Ixalan*

Quint

What would it be like to touch the sun?

Quint stood on a hill overlooking the valley that housed the Thousand Moons garrison and the nearby town, gently fanning his face with his ears. The land curved upward in the distance rather than remaining flat, while below, aqueducts wound their way between clusters of pyramids and smaller buildings, the water they carried pooling in stone reservoirs. He watched the Sun Empire warriors don special harnesses, supervised by members of the Thousand Moons. Huatli cooed to her bat, while Wayta and her mount already made lazy circles in the air.

Steward Akal seemed to sense Quint's envy. "This is a coming-of-age ceremony for our people," she said. "Our new cousins are already of age, and have their own traditions, but we are glad to share this with them."

"I'm honored to observe," Quint said. "Besides, someone has to stay with Pantlaza."

Hearing his name, the raptor peered over to Quint. Once he realized Quint had no food, he went back to his nap.

The bat riders launched into the air, gradually shrinking to black dots as they approached the glowing pink tail stretching from the broken shell around the sun. The cosmium reef, they called it, a dangerous place filled with metal shards and fragments of the crystals used in their armor, weapons, and other devices. Huatli and the others would try to claim a piece of that cosmium for themselves.

Steward Akal interrupted Quint's reverie. "You are from another plane? Not the surface?"

"I am," Quint replied. "Arcavios. I attended a university there, Strixhaven."

"A place of learning?" Steward Akal asked.

"Yes," Quint said. "I studied archaeology and archaeomancy, among other things. I want to find lost stories and share them. Preserve them for future generations."

Steward Akal gave a quiet hum of acknowledgment. "You are like our didacts. They explore and learn and teach. Stories are the memory of the plane, and to forget is to succumb to darkness. Even during the Night War, our stories were a guiding light."

Quint pondered how to ask about the Night War, or the metal around the sun, or any of a million other questions. There was so much to learn here, he hardly knew where to begin.

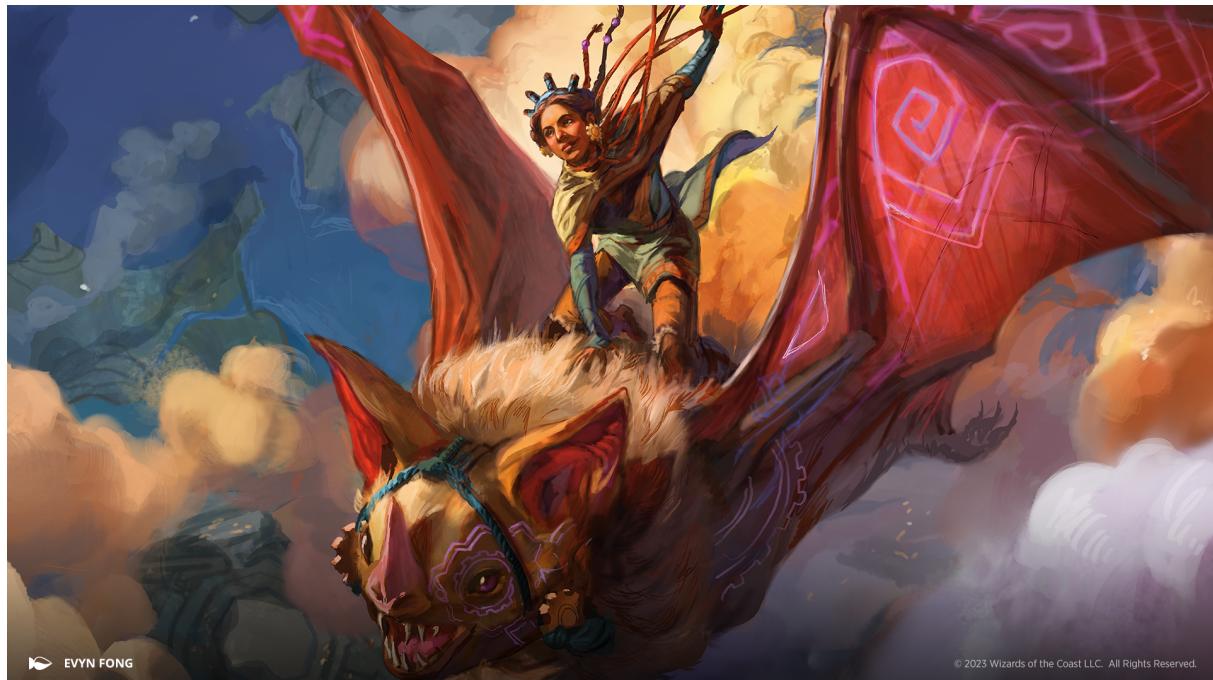
He returned his attention to the bats. "Is this meant to be secret, or could I share this with my colleagues?"

"Not secret," Steward Akal said. "But it would be best to leave explanations to those of us who understand the nuances. I would be happy to summon one of our didacts to assist you, perhaps in exchange for stories and knowledge from your own home?"

“An exchange would be excellent.” A didact might also be able to help with his Coin Empire research. Depending on how things progressed, he could bring Saheeli here soon, or some of his colleagues from Arcavios ...

A breeze cooled Quint’s skin and set the grassy fields rippling. Quint pulled his goggles down over his eyes to get a better view. Dinosaurs and other animals roamed wild, rodents the size of dogs and long-necked ruminants with soft-looking fur. So peaceful.

The distant figures darting among the reef began to return. Huatli was in front, Inti behind her, while Caparocti and Wayta trailed after them with the other soldiers.



Art by: Evyn Fong

Huatli landed first, dismounting and handing her bat to an attendant. She all but bounced toward Steward Akal, waving a chunk of pink crystal.

“I found a fragment!” Huatli exclaimed. “Is it large enough for a necklace, do you think?”

Steward Akal nodded. “You might also be able to adorn a weapon with it. A sword, perhaps?”

A shadow crossed Huatli’s face. “Perhaps,” she said, her enthusiasm dampened. She scratched Pantlaza’s feathered head, earning a happy trill in response.

Inti and Caparocti glided to a halt, but Wayta flew past. A piercing whistle sent the Oltec riders chasing her, including Chara, and Quint wondered if she might be having trouble with her mount. Within a span of breaths, however, she turned back and landed, but didn’t climb down. The brow over her visible eye was furrowed, her mouth set in a grim line that mirrored the tension in her shoulders.

“There,” Wayta said with deliberate calm, pointing toward the far end of the garrison across the valley. “The vampires have summoned a cloud of their cursed fog, bigger than usual.”

Quint didn’t know what that meant, but the rest of the Sun Empire faction tensed.

“You’re sure?” Caparocti asked.

Wayta nodded. Inti cursed under his breath. Another sharp whistle with a different cadence announced Chara’s return. She, like Wayta, stayed mounted.

"The Thousandth Moon approaches," Chara said. "She has two prisoners with her."

Steward Akal leaned on her staff. "We must question them."

The warriors muttered among themselves as Wayta dismounted and stood at Quint's side. The grim form of Anim Pakal stalked toward them, weapon ready, gnome automaton at her side. In front of her, a vampire and a man trudged along wearily. The vampire stumbled and the man caught her, helping her regain her footing.

"We found these two running from the garrison," Anim told her sister.

"We weren't escaping," the man said defensively. "We were trying to find help." Quint peered at him and realized his ears were pointed. An elf, he guessed, the first he'd seen on Ixalan.

"I'm Amalia, and this is Kellan," the vampire said. "The other vampires, they ... They killed our human servants and the queen's emissary, then escaped. They're looking for Aclazotz."

"The Betrayer?" Anim asked, recoiling with shock. "He's been imprisoned for ages."

"Do you know where he is?" Amalia asked.

Steward Akal paled and clutched her staff more tightly. "No, but some among the Oltec still worship him, and they may have passed this knowledge down." She looked toward the sun, closing her eyes. "If the vampires find these allies, they may at last be powerful enough to release the bat god from his prison. No one in the Core will be safe from his unending blood thirst."

Just what we need, Quint thought. A violent god trying to kill everyone for fun.

Malcolm

A host of fungal creatures closed in as the Mycotyrant peered down at Malcolm and Breeches from its webbed perch in the cavern, the green glow in its eyes inscrutable.

"Enough slow talk," it said, still using Xavier as a puppet. "We will assimilate you, and we will ascend to the surface and its sun."

Malcolm mentally plotted how quickly he could fly away with Breeches, and whether it would matter when the only exit was guarded.

There must be another way out. He stretched his senses to feel the air currents and found a tunnel behind the Mycotyrant. A faint breeze from that direction carried the scent and sensation of a large body of water. Here? Underground?

"*BIG BOOM?*" Breeches asked, his whisper awkwardly loud.

Malcolm glanced upward, then around, his gaze falling on a mushroom-encrusted dinosaur. He remembered the fight in the cavern and smiled.

"Let me try something first," Malcolm said. "Plug your ears."

Breeches obeyed. Taking a deep breath, Malcolm began to sing.

The Mycotyrant's eyes closed and everyone around Malcolm froze, stunned. He continued to sing, grabbing Breeches and tugging him toward the exit that led to water. They passed more unmoving figures, and even the toadstool trees seemed quiescent. He wondered if his proximity to the Mycotyrant made his magic affect the entire colony, as the creature called its horde of puppets.

He found the tunnel, glad for his shoulder light since the glowing fungus had darkened. Breeches kept his hands over his ears as he followed. Malcolm wasn't sure how long his magic would work, but he

sang until they were deep into the rock, hoping it would carry and keep the monsters in his sway until he and Breeches were safe.

A hideous, many-mouthed scream echoed behind them. He really needed to stop hoping.

“Run,” Malcolm said, then took off in a dead sprint.

Breeches ran, his ambling gait keeping pace with Malcolm’s. Green light erupted around them, fungal growths twisting and reaching for them as they passed. He didn’t dare look back for fear it would slow him down enough to be caught.

The feel and scent of water strengthened. A light loomed ahead, more blue than green, with faint tinges of magic interspersed. River Herald, but also something else. Something older and more powerful.

Without warning, the tunnel ended in a short cliff. Below him, an ocean stretched so far he couldn’t sense the end of it, while closer to his position, a gilded city crowded the banks and descended into the depths. Merfolk swam with purpose or lingered on the shore, some guards pointing up at him and Breeches while others continued their business unaware of the impending incursion.

“Incoming!” Malcolm shouted, imbuing magic in his voice to make it carry. He grabbed Breeches and dove out over the water, angling toward the city.

The Mycotyrant’s forces erupted from the tunnel. Malcolm finally risked a glance backward. It seemed every infected resident of Downtown dogged his heels, tumbling onto the beach or splashing awkwardly into the water. Their numbers were dwarfed by half-decayed dinosaurs and cat-people, and those creepy walking mushrooms, some wielding weapons while others gathered magic to themselves. Worse, holes in the roof of the cavern spouted flying creatures, dinosaurs and giant bats so encrusted with fungus they struggled to stay aloft.

The chaos of battle destroyed any serenity the place had enjoyed. Merfolk drew weapons, activated the enchantments in their armor, pulled out jade totems and summoned huge elemental creatures to repel the fungal invasion. Walking bonfires flung gouts of flame, while hulking waterspouts knocked foes from the air, sending them tumbling end over end to their dooms.

At the top of a pyramid like those in the Sun Empire, a door opened into a space that promised impossible skies, if Malcolm and Breeches could only reach it ...



Art by: Piotr Dura

A merfolk warrior loomed in front of Malcolm, brandishing a jade-tipped staff. He skidded to a stop. “Who are you?” she asked.

“Malcolm Lee, at your service,” Malcolm said, giving a polite bow. “This is Breeches, my associate.” Breeches tipped his hat.

“Pirates,” the merfolk said, mouth twisting with distaste. “I am Nicanzil. What evil have you brought to our shores?”

“Calls itself the Mycotyrant,” Malcolm said. “Turns people into mushrooms.”

Nicanzil pondered this, her fins shifting behind her. “This must be the danger the Sun Empire mentioned. Our people beyond the golden door must be warned that it is closer than they knew.”

If warning them meant escaping through that door, Malcolm was ready to oblige. “Come on,” he told Breeches. “Let’s go sound the alarm.”

Breeches bared his teeth in assent as he drew his three swords—one for each hand and one with his tail—and together they traversed the battlefield, dodging combatants as Malcolm aimed unerringly for the promise of open skies.

Vito

Come to me ...

The voice of Aclazotz called to Vito more clearly than ever. He led the remaining vampires of his expedition through the broad paths of the garrison, shrouded in impenetrable fog. Despite Bartolomé thwarting his intended sacrifice, he’d finally had his revenge on that thorn of the Black Rose. His body thrummed with the holy sacrament he’d consumed, and anticipation of more to come.

Voices called out in the mist, laced with confusion and bravado and, more than anything, fear. Clavileño and the other soldiers found and silenced some, gorging themselves in an ecstasy of blood. The words of Venerable Tarrian thrummed in Vito’s mind like the heartbeats of the people he stalked.

Blessed are the weak, for they shall feed the strong.

Blessed are the peaceful, for they shall yield without struggle.

Blessed are the merciless, for they shall require no mercy.

A red glow appeared in the fog, walking toward Vito. He lowered his lance to attack.

“Vito Quijano de Pasamonte,” the mysterious figure whispered. “I have been sent to guide you to Aclazotz.”

Could this be a trick? Surely no one would dare.

“I am ready,” Vito said, raising the lance like a standard.

They left the garrison and trampled across carefully tended fields, past isolated homesteads whose denizens huddled together in fear, finally descending into the depths of a fetid swamp. The vampires’ skin was as pale as the moss hanging like the beards of old men from the gnarled branches around them. Boots squelched in ankle-high mud that stank of rotten eggs and decay, and any animal sounds and songs that might once have given life to the land fell silent as if under a spell. More people joined them, carrying or wearing crystals that glowed a dim red, until a veritable army traveled unseen within the fog that wound its way between trees and turned the sun into a feeble ghost. Some of them dragged glassy-eyed prisoners through the muck, presumably imminent sacrifices for Aclazotz.

“Who are you?” Vito asked.

“We are the servants of Aclazotz,” the figure replied. “We have worshipped our master since he was imprisoned, waiting for the day of his salvation.”

Vito faltered at the mention of imprisonment. He had assumed Aclazotz merely bided his time, part of a greater plan—not that he had been trapped here, in this nightless place. The father of vampires, caged.

Then, a rush of pride overcame that flicker of doubt. He was the instrument of his god, a savior. He would realize the vision of Venerable Tarrian, exceeding the disappointment that was Saint Elenda. A new, pure era would begin in Torrezon, with him leading the faithful.

Vito didn’t know how long he trudged through the swamp. Once, he might have been surprised his enemies hadn’t found him, riding their bats through the skies. Surely the fog would be visible from a distance. But Aclazotz worked in mysterious ways, and Vito trusted his god to ensure the success of his chosen saint.

Before he could ask how much longer until they reached their destination, the fog cleared, revealing the mouth of a cave. Nothing about it marked the location as special; no signs or symbols were carved into the exposed stone, no temple steps invited entry, no gold or silver adorned the entrance or the tunnel beyond. It might have been any cave in any place in all the plane, and Vito knew its anonymity was part of its power.

Vito had lost the magical candles that lit his way through the caverns of the underground. The red lights of the servants of Aclazotz guided him, first through a narrow corridor that might have been naturally formed, then into a side tunnel that had clearly been clawed open according to some intelligent design. The stench of rot pervaded the space, as if this were a midden or charnel house rather than the shrine of a deity.

He would see Aclazotz properly worshipped in temples befitting His Majesty, and his foes would suffer for their impertinence.

The tunnel ended in a strange door, ringed in symbols and engravings he didn't recognize, a gaping hole at its center. The figure who led him retrieved something from their robes, a chunk of pink crystal that glowed with an inner light.

"This is the key," they said, handing it to Vito. "Place it inside and be marked as worthy ... or be destroyed."

Vito did not doubt his worth. He took the crystal and placed it in the cavity.

A ring of stones clamped down on his arm, rendering him unable to move. The pink glow of the crystal brightened, and with it came a searing pain, as if his fist had been plunged into the sun. Vito clenched his teeth until his fangs pierced his lip, blood trickling down his chin. The sensation shifted from fire to ice as the flush of vitality from his recent feedings drained from him, pouring into the cavity until he trembled, more enervated than he'd felt since his last Blood Fast. His knees threatened to buckle, but he forced them to straighten and bear his weight. He would not fail Aclazotz, now or ever.

The pain and pressure vanished, and Vito pulled his arm free. Crimson light spread to the glyphs around the door, and it rolled sideways with a deep rumbling sound.

"You may enter the sanctum," said his guide.

A proper temple facade awaited, its columns rising to four times Vito's height. A stream of bats erupted from the entrance, as if to mark the occasion of his arrival. He waited for them to pass, then continued his procession, Clavileño and the others behind him like an honor guard.



Art by: Cristi Balanescu

A small antechamber opened into a vast amphitheater with tiered rows of seating. Carved glyphs in the walls bathed the assembled crowds in blood-red light, and a thousand pale faces turned to watch Vito enter. He lifted the lance of Tarrian higher, descending to meet his fate, to reach the figure at the center of the room.

"Come to me," said the voice, as familiar to Vito now as his own name.

Aclazotz.

The bat god crouched on the floor, shrouded by his wings and wrapped in loops of thick golden chains inlaid with hundreds of pink crystals. His body was the brown of old, dried blood, wings gilded and tattered where they brushed the stone beneath him. A collar of skulls hung from his neck, and a black and gold crown adorned his head, proclaiming his godhood to any who gazed upon him.

A single red eye pierced Vito with the strength of its regard, and he fell to his knees in worship.

“My master,” Vito murmured, voice thick with emotion. “I have come.”

Aclazotz drew a deep, rustling breath. “My slumber was disturbed by the invaders on the surface,” he said. “And so, I have called to you all, my children of the night. The time of my ascension is at hand.”

“We shall rise,” the assembled cosmum eaters intoned.

“The end of the Fifth Age is upon us,” Aclazotz continued. “Chimil’s light will be extinguished, and my darkness will be absolute. You, my chosen, will serve at my side, glorying in the salvation of life everlasting. Bring forth the sacrifices.”

A wail emerged from a cave to Vito’s left. The people who’d been dragged through the swamp were penned inside, huddled together like lambs at market. Vito rose and approached them, gesturing for his soldiers to attend him.

“Do not fear death,” Vito said soothingly. “Your blood will give rise to the power, glory, and eternal kingdom of Aclazotz, now and forever.”

One by one, the prisoners were delivered unto the bat god, who feasted on their essences as Vito respectfully averted his gaze. The bodies were dragged away and thrown into a pit, faint streaks of gore marking their passing. With every death, the baleful eye of the god brightened, a beacon in the dim room.

And then it was done. Aclazotz huddled in on himself, then with a piercing scream, he rose and strained against his bonds. The pink crystals in the chains flickered madly, then dulled to the same red as the god’s eye. A concussive burst of magic struck everyone in the room as the gold links snapped in a dozen places. With a mighty shrug, Aclazotz sent the chains scattering across the floor. He lifted himself to his full height and stretched his wings, and Vito fell to his knees again in awe.

“Come to me,” Aclazotz intoned. “Receive my blessing.”

Vito reached the god first, prostrating himself. “I am worthy,” he said.

“Then my eternal covenant shall be yours.”

Aclazotz bent down until his breath misted Vito’s face, smelling of blood and some sickly-sweet flower in the throes of decay. The fangs of the god lengthened and sharpened. In a flash, he sank them deep into Vito’s neck and torso. Vito screamed. Pain spread across his chest, then into his limbs, a fire beyond anything blood had ever ignited in his veins. Muscles spasmed and bones cracked and reformed, black spots dancing across his vision as unconsciousness threatened to claim him. The fangs of Aclazotz released him, and he dimly sensed that the others around him were being blessed as well, one after another.



Art by: Antonio José Manzanedo

The magic receded, and Vito winced at the profusion of sounds and scents that suddenly demanded his attention. The dim red lights of the crystals blazed like torches even as all other colors were leached out of the room. His once pristine robes now hung in tatters from his larger frame, torn by his transformation and the ministrations of Aclazotz. He swiveled new ears toward Clavileño, who had finished his own transformation and turned beady eyes to Vito.

Where once vampires had knelt, new creatures stood, their forms echoing their master's. They retained their armor and weapons, but their hands now ended in vicious claws. Vito flexed his wings, longer fangs protruding from his enlarged mouth.

"Come," Aclazotz said. He launched himself into the air, exiting the room through a broad hole in the ceiling.

Vito followed without hesitation, his comrades beneath him. They passed through a dark tunnel made bright by the echoes of their collective shrieks, until a pinprick of distant light grew to reveal the world beyond. They emerged from the caves, a legion prepared to do battle for the god who had gifted them with his power. The first flash of the sun's brilliant glow stung his eyes, but they soon adjusted, and the land spread out before him in shades of stark black, bone white, and misty gray. Air currents swirled around them, carrying myriad scents both familiar and unknown—the rich decay of the swamp, the musk of animals, moisture-laden clouds, and, just ahead, bats and humans mingling together. Up they flew, higher and further, until they reached the long trail of pink-tainted metal that arced away from the sun.

Aclazotz hovered, his eye once again flaring as he turned his gaze to the light. "Chimil," he whispered, addressing the Core's shining sun. "As I was consigned to my prison, so shall you be. I will consume your precious Oltec as I did their ancestors, as I consumed your feeble god-spawn to close the veil between death and life. I will end the Fifth Age at last, and my children will bring the Sixth Age to the plane."

His largest wings stretched wide, then began to close, slowly, straining as if he were moving an impossibly heavy weight.

The metal around the sun shifted, pieces rotating and locking together like a broken container being reassembled. Which was precisely what it was: Aclazotz wielded his power to reform a shattered sphere that would soon imprison Chimir.



Art by: Campbell White

The shadow of that prison fell across the land, enshrouding it in a darkness deeper than any night in Torrezon. Vito's altered eyes thrilled at the change, the richness of the landscape's textures both heard and seen.

With a harsh gasp, Aclazotz closed his wings and fell to the ground, impacting with a sound like thunder. Vito landed beside him as the god struggled to stand, glaring at the remaining shafts of light escaping the sun's metal walls.

"More," Aclazotz said. "I require more sacrifices. You will bring them to me."

"Thy will be done," Vito said. He shrieked his command to the assembled Legion, and their response echoed through the mountains until it shook the foundations of the plane.

Wayta

The sun darkened, and Wayta fought the urge to panic, cold sweat pooling in the small of her back.

She rode her bat toward the clouds of fog that covered the Thousand Moon garrison and the swamps and mountains beyond. They'd lost time searching the villages and outlying areas for the escaped vampires, finding Oltec huddled in their homes and signs of violence in the streets. Their destination had been uncertain until a swarm of creatures shot out of a cave, led by a bat as large as three or four people standing end to end: Aclazotz.

At first, Wayta assumed the monsters with him were other bats, but her spyglass told another story: they were vampires, corrupted somehow, turned into abominations that resembled their foul god, yet still wearing their armor and carrying their weapons. The Legion made straight for the cosmium reef, halting at its edge. Before the first among the Oltec could reach them, the light had begun to disappear as if a shade were being drawn over a lantern.

The war against the Phyrexians had been like this. Day suddenly turning to night as the enemy blotted out the sun. The screams of her allies, her friends, turned to sobs, pleas, prayers—then cut off. The wave of memories crested, and she rode it like a ship in a storm, trying not to capsize.

Huatli glided up to her, riding her own bat, her shard of the Threefold Sun illuminating her face as it had in the darkest caverns.

“Breathe, little warrior,” Huatli shouted. “Victory will be ours this day.”

Was it day anymore? It didn’t matter. The sentiment held, even if she’d heard it uttered by so many who wouldn’t live to see another hour.

“Chimil’s prison is being remade,” The flight leader shouted from her mount. “We must stop the betrayer Aclazotz, or Chimil will be sealed inside again.”

Wayta didn’t want another war. Not with a so-called god, not with the sun-forsaken vampires, not with anyone. But she would fight this battle, the one before her, the one forced on her. And she would win.



Art by: Raoul Vitale

The crystals on the flight leader’s headpiece gleamed like a pink constellation, as did similar gems on the other bat riders. Below, across the land, in garrisons and villages, cities and huts, people called light to themselves. Single flames and bonfires, flickering glows and steady beacons. Wayta didn’t know these Oltec well yet, but she felt a kinship with them, with this refusal to bow to the weight of shadow.

“Still think we should leave Torrezon alone?” Caparocti shouted at Huatli.

“This isn’t Torrezon,” she replied, dark eyes cold. “Even so, these monsters will never see their homeland again once we reach them.”

“There’s the warrior-poet we all know and love,” Inti joked. “Give us a poem before we ride into battle.”

Caparocti rolled his eyes, but Wayta listened as best she could, not wanting the words to be lost to the wind that whistled past.

Huatli’s gaze grew distant, then shifted to meet Wayta’s. When she spoke, it was loud, defiant.

We do not fear the little mist

We have weathered hurricanes

We do not fear the falling night

We rise with the Threefold Sun

“For the Threefold Sun!” Caparocti shouted. The Sun Empire troops echoed his words, and the Oltec bat riders trilled a ferocious whistle that sent shivers up Wayta’s neck.

A terrible shriek echoed from the Legion. Some of the bats careened wildly or bucked, nearly dropping their riders. Wayta’s mount shrilled back and dove, her stomach leaping into her throat as she struggled to regain control.

The vampire abominations flew toward the Oltec force.

Huge bat wings kept these strange creatures aloft. Beady eyes stared from gaunt, pale faces with flattened noses and huge ears. Some still wore their helms, some their plate armor, while others must have once been Oltec given their torn ponchos and khipu. They shrieked again as the vanguard of riders reached them, spears and bright pink magic colliding with swords and sickly waves of red.

One of the Dusk Legion charged Wayta, brandishing his sword. She drew her own, thumbing the magic stone that extended it into a spear. She waited, biding her time, focus narrowing to take in speed and distance. The vampire-bat was nearly in striking distance when she urged her mount into a shallow dive, striking upward. Her blade tore a deep gash in her enemy’s wing, and with a scream, he spun toward the earth.

Nearby, Huatli chased a pair of cosmium eater bats, while one of the Thousand Moons fought a creature with a tall, familiar-looking lance. Wayta moved to flank, but another vampire bore down on her. She banked her bat to avoid his sword, then barely missed another attack from her blind side. With an annoyed grunt, she pulled her mount upward to survey the battle from above. The swirls of the cosmium reef floated around her, drifts of crystals small as drops of rain. It would have been beautiful, if the blood of her allies and enemies wasn’t joining the cloud.

So it would always be, she thought darkly. Blood in the sky, blood on stone, blood in the rivers and in the foam on the sea.

A golden gleam caught her eye, glinting in the slivered light of the sun. The door at the base of the mountain, the one through which they’d passed to enter this new land. Someone flew out of it—another vampire-bat? No, a siren? One she was almost sure she recognized.

A rush of greenish blackness poured through the portal behind him. Fungal creatures, like the ones she and the other Sun Empire warriors had fought in the deserted city by the underground river. Hundreds of them, perhaps thousands.

All of them preparing to swarm the garrison.

“It always rains when it’s wet,” Wayta muttered.

Malcolm

The open air was not the balm Malcolm had hoped for, despite its relative sweetness after so long slogging through stagnant caves. His enemies dogged his heels, tossing spore bombs and casting ropes of fungus to tie people to the ground. Worse, as intriguing as this new land might be, sloping upward to encircle the sky, there appeared to be another battle already in progress.

Malcolm put more distance between himself and the teeming mass of sentient mushrooms, trying to keep an eye on Breeches. The goblin's three blades spun and cut like a reaper mowing a field, but he would be overcome if reinforcements didn't manifest soon.

The closer Malcolm flew to the strange, shadowed sun at the center of this place, the more the air currents shifted—no, slowed, as if some magic force made them drowsy. His feathers fluffed slightly, the weight of his limbs easing barely enough to notice, and yet he did. It was incredible. It drew him like a moth to flame, or a fish to a hook.

In the floating reef of pink-infused metal, people riding bats warred with—people-bats? Wearing Dusk Legion armor? He blinked at that in confusion. Some of the riders were Sun Empire, if their armor and the lights they carried were any indication, but how had they found this place? And why?

One of them caught his eye: a familiar face from High and Dry, or rather, a recognizable weapon and eyepatch. She had moved away from the center of the fight and now stared in his direction. Malcolm raced toward her, and she did the same, each fighting the occasional bat-winged vampire until the two of them met in the middle.

"Wayta," Malcolm said, relieved. "What is going on here?"

"Let me explain," Wayta said, then paused. "No, there is too much. Let me sum up. The vampires have transformed into bat monsters and their god imprisoned the sun. You?"

"A giant mushroom is infecting people and turning them into its puppets so it can take over the plane."

Wayta snorted. "It'll have to get in line. Do you think it could infect a god?"

"Let's not find out," Malcolm said, his feathers rippling with unease.

"Follow me," Wayta said. "We must warn the steward, if she doesn't already know."

She led him up—no, down—to a cluster of humans dressed in unfamiliar garb, as well as a vampire and two strangers. Off-worlders, like Vraska and Jace had been, if he had to guess. And those cursed Phyrexians.

One of those off-worlders jogged over immediately, a loxodon with goggles on his head. "Wayta!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "Everything alright up there? What's happening? Who's your friend?"

Wayta grinned. "Quint, this is Malcolm Lee. Everything's a mess, and there's a horde of those walking mushrooms pouring through the golden door."

Quint seemed to think this through. "How many is a horde?"

"How many mushrooms make a forest?" Malcolm replied.

"Mushrooms?" the pointy-eared young man asked. "Are they poisonous?"

Malcolm laughed grimly. "Much worse. They're ambitious."

The vampire woman sighed. "Saints protect us from ambition."

Someone else approached, a woman wearing an elaborate headdress and leaning on a staff. "This is quite a time of strife," she said. "I am Steward Akal, and you seem to have brought us more trouble."

"Not on purpose," Malcolm said. "I came to solve the mystery of what happened to my people, and unfortunately, I found the answer. It said you call it the Mycotyrant."

Steward Akal pursed her wrinkled lips. "My sister was mobilizing the Thousand Moons to mount a defense, but between this and Aclazotz, our forces will be spread thin." She gestured at a soldier standing

nearby, who ran over and saluted. “Send another urgent summons through the towers to any available gardeners.”

Malcolm sighed in relief. This wasn’t over, but he and Breeches weren’t alone in their fight anymore.

Breeches. Oh no.

“Wayta,” Malcolm said. “Can you help me give someone a ride?”

Vito

This battle would be immortalized in the new scriptures of Aclazotz for the rest of time.

Vito dodged a wave of magic from an Oltec bat rider, then speared her through the midsection with his lance. Only her harness kept her from falling to her death as she slumped over the saddle. The scent of her blood sweetened the air, and Vito shrieked in triumph.

Around him, streams of glittering pink dust darkened as the sacrifices converted the power of the reef, bending it to the will of Aclazotz. Soon, the god would finish what he had begun, and the treacherous light of this inner world would be extinguished.

His soldiers pursued their foes relentlessly, looping through the sky, striking human and bat alike. Clavileño had initially formed ranks, but soon the fight transformed into a frenzied melee. Sword fought spear, teeth and claws tore through spells, and the transformed creatures alternately feasted and carried humans back to Aclazotz. The one Vito had struck succumbed to that very fate as a hulking vampire in a torn poncho shredded her harness and pulled her from her mount. Her scream faded into the darkness, and Vito moved on to his next opponent.

Clavileño soared past, trading sword strikes with a burly Sun Empire warrior wielding a staff with a blade on each end. The weapon knocked Clavileño’s helmet off, and the vampire barely ducked a second slash that would have opened his throat. Instead, it sliced his ear in half. Either Clavileño felt no pain, or it didn’t bother him, because he renewed his attack with greater ferocity.

Before Vito could intervene, another warrior descended on him, armed with a shield and a broad, long sword. This one he remembered from the introductions among the River Heralds: Inti, seneschal of the sun. How appropriate for him to meet his end here, as Aclazotz snuffed out this sun’s light.

“For the power and glory of Aclazotz!” Vito growled, launching himself at the interloper.

Inti’s shield knocked Vito’s lance away, his sword slashing down toward Vito’s neck. Vito glided back, the blow whistling harmlessly through empty air. He stabbed again with his lance, and again his attack was deflected. They circled each other in the air, sun and shadow, fire and smoke. The seneschal moved his shield to expose the light on his belt, temporarily blinding Vito, who retreated with a hiss.

“Don’t like the power of the Threefold Sun, bloodsucker?” Inti taunted, pushing his temporary advantage by unleashing a flurry of cuts. He didn’t notice Clavileño gliding silently toward him.

Vito bared his newly elongated fangs. “My god granted me something greater than yours, weakling.”

“What is that?” Inti asked.

“The power of flight.” Vito drove his lance down in a single, powerful thrust—straight into the skull of Inti’s mount. The bat shuddered and went limp, then began to fall, with Inti still harnessed to its saddle.

The warrior fought to unhook the latches that tethered him to the mount, and in doing so left himself vulnerable. Clavileño circled behind him and gripped Inti’s head in one massive claw.

“Glory to Aclazotz,” Vito said. Clavileño snapped Inti’s neck and both human and bat bodies fell into darkness.

“Inti!” A scream from nearby. The warrior-poet on her own mount, diving toward her fallen comrade. Vito followed her. She, too, would make an excellent sacrifice.