

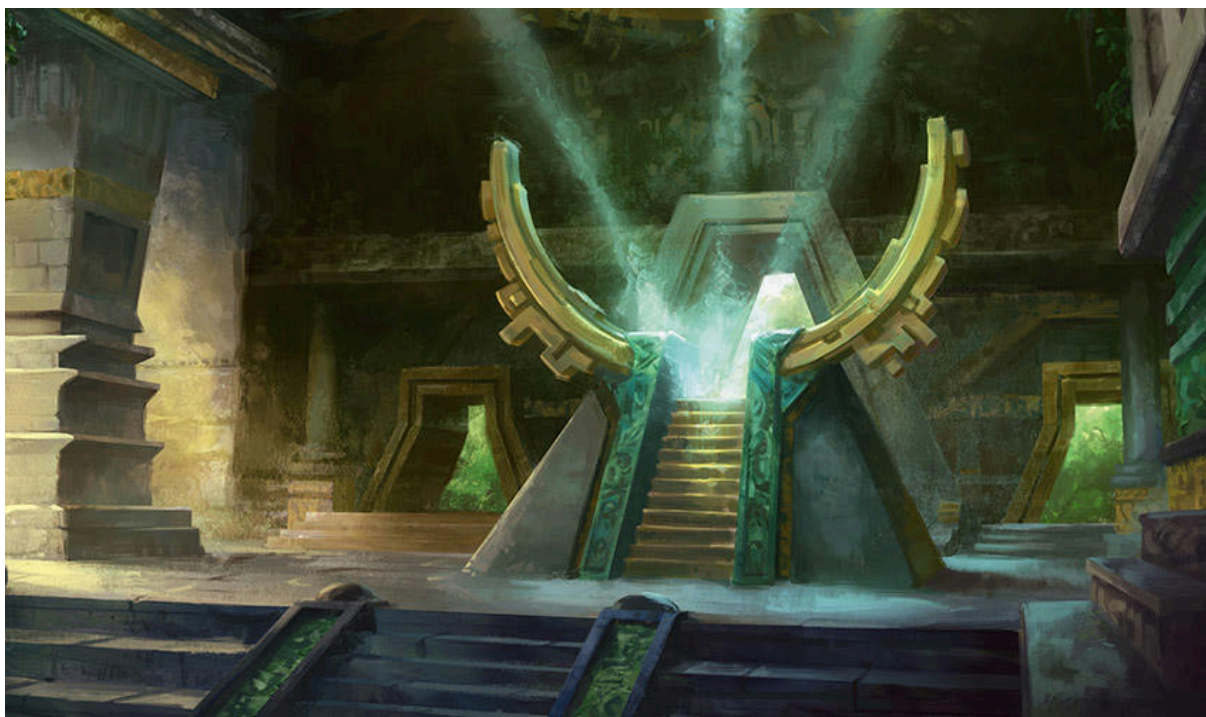
Who Tells the Stories

Alison Luhrs & Gregg Luben

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HUATLI



Art by Yeong-Hao Han

The Immortal Sun vanished beneath their feet, and Huatli, Tishana, Vona, and Angrath all tumbled through the floor into the empty room below.

The lot of them landed in a breathless heap on the ground.

Huatli groaned and sat up. She felt bruised and sprained but . . . lighter somehow. She looked at Angrath, who blinked in dumbfounded amazement. The two of them looked upward. Where the Immortal Sun had been was now just a hole in the ceiling.

Angrath laughed heartily. He stood and glared at every person in the room.

“I HATE THIS PLANE, I HATE THIS CITY, AND I WISH YOU ALL A VISCERALLY PAINFUL DEATH!” His body glowed a warm and vivid orange, and he called out, “SEE YOU NEVER, PATHETIC FOOLS!” as he planeswalked away.

Tishana was staring at the place where he had been a moment before. She looked at Huatli, confused and alarmed. “He is gone,” she said, stunned.

Huatli nodded limply. “And so is the Sun,” she said plainly. Both the Immortal Sun and the barrier. Perhaps they were one and the same after all.

“NO!” Vona yelled at the hole in the ceiling. She was hissing in anger, stomping her feet on the ground. “Where did it go?! Which one of you took it?!”

“What happened?” the hierophant yelled faintly from the room above them. “I can’t see anything.”

“IT’S GONE, MAVREN!” Vona yelled upward, her voice agonized. “The Immortal Sun is gone!”

A faraway gasp. A very distant “Nooooo.” Huatli was too exhausted to laugh at how childish it sounded. Breeches and the siren Malcolm were peering downward through the hole.

“WHERE IS SUN?!” Breeches yelled.

“It is gone, goblin!” Tishana shouted.

“What do we do now?” Malcolm quietly asked Breeches.

“Run away?” he suggested.

Malcolm nodded. “That seems best.”

“RUNNING AWAY!” the goblin screeched, clambering up on Malcolm’s head. The siren paused for a moment, and his head tilted for a moment as if he were listening for something.

“RUNNING AWAY?” repeated Breeches.

Malcolm shook off whatever had overcome him, extended his wings, and departed. Huatli got to her feet and walked over to help Tishana up. The two of them stood and looked around the room. A rumpled nest of dried leaves and grass was heaped into one corner of the room—a bed for some giant creature. The place had the same musty smell that permeated the rest of Orazca. A massive door was open to the outside, and light spilled in to illuminate a room that had been dark for centuries.

Tishana waved her hand, and Huatli heard a *thud* followed by a pained groan from the room above. Moments later, Mavren Fein clambered through the hole in the ceiling and moved to Vona’s side.

A shadow appeared at the door, silhouetted by the sinking sun.



Elenda, the Dusk Rose | Art by Chris Rahn

"Is it gone, children of night?" said the shadow.

Huatli knew immediately who it was, and sensed the others did as well, for Tishana tightened her fists at the same time that Vona and Mavren Fein fell to their knees.

Saint Elenda approached silently. Her golden eyes were forlorn, staring at the hole in the ceiling where the Immortal Sun once stood. She looked down at Vona, who was trembling with an emotion Huatli couldn't quite read. Awe? Guilt? Or some amalgam of the two?

"Did the beast take it again?" Elenda asked.

Vona looked up, her expression that of a confused child. "Saint Elenda, I don't know what you are talking about," she sputtered.

"The azure beast," Elenda clipped. "Did he take the Immortal Sun?"

"It vanished from underneath us," Huatli said aloud, suddenly aware of the gaze of all four of the others. "But I saw something large fly away not long ago."

Saint Elenda stood in quiet contemplation for a moment. "So, it is gone for good." She looked up, and nodded. "I understand."

She turned and began walking back toward the door. Mavren Fein scrambled to his feet. "Saint Elenda, wait! You must go after it! We have to retrieve the Immortal Sun!"

Elenda smiled gently and shook her head. "No, my child. We are free. It is gone forever. Do you not feel the change in the city?"

"The power that was bound here is free," Tishana said. "Orazca's magic was subsumed so long as the Immortal Sun was here. Now it flows as freely as my namesake."

Vona rose from her kneeling position as though the floor had suddenly caught fire. In the blink of an eye, she closed the distance between herself and Elenda and began to shriek. "How long? How long have you been here? How long? HOW LONG?"

Elenda did not so much as blink. "My journey ended centuries ago, when I found this place."

Shaking with rage, Vona gathered herself before asking, "Why? Why have you betrayed our people? Why have you denied us the true immortality?"

"Finding true immortality was never our purpose, my child. You have forgotten what we were. What we are. Why I returned to Torrezon to give the gift so long ago. Our order was meant to *guard* the Immortal Sun, not to use it. This dark power that we took into ourselves, the horrors that we wrought—all of it was meant to give us the strength to find the Immortal Sun and *protect* it from the likes of Pedron the Wicked and those who would use its power for their own selfish ends. Our humility and deference to forces greater than ourselves light the path of our salvation, not the Immortal Sun. When I finally found this place, I knew beyond doubt that I should not disturb it. The Immortal Sun was far safer here than it had ever been in Torrezon. I finally knew the purpose of my sacrifice: to use my power to stand sentinel here. And so I sealed myself away, waiting for others of our order to find this place so that I might show them the way . . . so that I might finally be free."



Temple of Aclazotz | Art by Daarken

“That’s not true,” Vona said. “It can’t be true.”

Mavren Fein hung his head in shame and confusion.

Elenda spoke again. “I searched the depths of my devotion and found enlightenment in my sacrifice. What have you found? What has become of my people?”

“We conquered Torrezon,” Vona spat. “We created an empire in your honor!”

“Empires are temporary. As an immortal, you should know that, child,” Elenda said, staring down her nose at Vona.

“Saint Elenda,” Huatli said. “Please, return to Torrezon and leave Ixalan in peace. Your people did not understand what you meant for them to learn, and they mutilated your memory in your absence. *You* must be the one to tell your story. Not them.”

Elenda approached Huatli. Huatli couldn’t help but feel small in this ancient one’s presence. “You are wise, Huatli, Warrior-Poet, and your future will be one of service to worlds far beyond our own. Blessed is your path.”

Mavren Fein was openly weeping as he finally rose to his feet. “Take me to Queen Miralda,” Elenda said tersely.

“Take yourself!” Vona hissed. “You are no saint—”

Vona’s objection was interrupted by a quick slice of her cheek from Mavren Fein. She hissed in pain and glared at him. Mavren readied his weapon. “Do not speak ill of a living saint!” he warned.

Vona rounded on him. “I’ll speak ill of whoever I please!”

She glared back at Elenda, who seemed to have finally lost her patience. Elenda snapped her fingers angrily and Vona’s knees buckled, her face hitting the ground seemingly of its own volition. She growled as her face was pushed hard against the gold tile of the floor.

“You will take me to Queen Miralda,” Saint Elenda commanded in a frightening tone.

Vona slowly got to her feet, her body her own once more, and she wiped at the wound on her cheek. She and Mavren Fein stood and walked toward the door, dumb with embarrassment, and the three vampires exited into the night.

Huatli let out a long, shaking breath.

The chamber was still, and Tishana's eyes were closed. The merfolk opened them, a smile manifesting on her lips.

"Orazca is found," she said, "and Ixalan is at peace."

Huatli looked up at the ceiling. "What does that mean now that the Immortal Sun is gone?"

"It means the city is unbound. There is old magic in its walls, magic that the Sun Empire built into every stone and tile. It is still a place of power."

Huatli nodded, mind racing. She remembered the stories of the old emperors, of conquest and battle, of how cruel the River Heralds had always been made out to be. She knew Tishana now. She knew, had they been the ones to tell their story, they would not be remembered in such a way.

"Orazca belongs to no one," Huatli said. "The Sun Empire's claim is old, but does not reflect the realities of ownership. It should be shared."

Tishana was looking intently at Huatli. "Do you truly think so?"

". . . Yes. I will return to Pachatupa and advise the emperor. He'll listen if I tell him the River Heralds are open to negotiation." Huatli looked at Tishana knowingly. "Are you?"

Tishana's face was unreadable. After a long breath, she nodded. "Yes. The River Heralds are."

Huatli bowed her head. "Thank you, Elder Tishana. I know we'll see each other again."

"We will, Warrior-Poet. Help others tell their stories."

"I will. Goodbye, friend."

They touched hands as a farewell, and Huatli turned to leave the tower. As she walked, a thought came to her mind. Huatli walked to one of the walls and placed her hand on its surface, curious, uncertain, *will this work?*

She reached through the lines of power in the city and called out.

The threefold roar of an elder dinosaur filled her ears, and Huatli smiled.

Pachatupa looked incredibly small from Huatli's vantage point.

The journey home had taken a delightfully short time thanks to the length of her new mount's stride, and though she was worried about dismounting from such a great height, Huatli was happy to arrive with proof of Orazca's awakening in the form of the elder dinosaur.



Zacama, Primal Calamity | Art by Jaime Jones

Huatli slowed Zacama to a halt, and politely asked the dinosaur to lower her to the ground. Zacama was not intelligent per se, but she was somehow aware that she had a name, and was able to inform Huatli of what it was through their magical connection. Commanding Zacama was different than any mount Huatli had ever directed before. It was more like guiding an entire river than steering a boat, but Huatli got the hang of it after some trial and error.

She was now looking down on her home city, charmed by its relative scale. The entire city looked like a child's toy village rather than the metropolis it was. A crowd had started to gather in the plaza in front of the Temple of the Burning Sun, all staring up in astonishment at the sight of Huatli being lowered to the ground by Zacama's rightmost head.

Huatli's descent was less than graceful, but by the time she got down, Emperor Apatzec was waiting. He bristled as Huatli allowed Zacama to depart, and the earth shook with every step the elder dinosaur took.

"I take it you found Orazca?" he asked tentatively.

Huatli smiled. "I did. I'll meet you in the temple in one moment, Emperor," she said, finding Inti's face in the crowd.

Emperor Apatzec nodded and began walking back up the stairs of the temple, his nervous eyes still watching Zacama's departure over the tops of the trees in the distance.

Inti was standing with his mother and father, and all of them were looking at Huatli with more elation than she had ever seen on a person's face.



Forerunner of the Empire | Art by Dan Scott

They all tackled Huatli in an embrace, and Huatli laughed as more and more cousins jostled their way through the crowd to pepper her with congratulatory slaps on the back and earnest hugs.

They were bombarding her with questions and excited compliments, and Huatli couldn't help but blush at the attention. Despite a lifetime of preparing for dealing with the public, her homecoming was still overwhelming. Eventually she found Inti again.

"I need to speak with the emperor," she said.

Her cousin gave her a deadly serious look. "You came back on a three-headed elder dinosaur. He *better* give you that title! Don't leave until that helm is on your head, Warrior-Poet!"

Huatli's gut dropped. She had forgotten about her title.

Inti turned her shoulders around and pushed her up the steps, fist pumping in the air. "You've got this, cousin! Go tell that emperor what a hero you are!"

Huatli smiled and began to make her way up the Temple of the Burning Sun.

When she reached the top of the steps, a small group of guards was waiting to escort her to the emperor's residence. The formality was unnerving, and Huatli followed closely. She was suddenly uncertain how the emperor would react. What if he did not like what she had to say? Huatli stamped the feeling out. Whether he liked it or not was unimportant. He needed to know the *truth*.

The guards parted on either side of her, and Huatli walked forward into the emperor's meeting hall. The walls were lined with carvings of all the Sun Empire's heroes. Great men and women, warriors and shamans and warrior-poets all, each of them illustrious champions whose stories Huatli knew by heart.

Truth is decided by who tells the stories, Huatli thought to herself with a chill.

Emperor Apatzec was standing on the far side of the room. Huatli walked toward him and kneeled in greeting. He motioned for her to rise and sit. Huatli realized the helm of the warrior-poet was resting on a table in front of her.

“You accomplished what I asked,” Apatzec said with more than a little pride in his voice. “There will be a ceremony tomorrow to give it to you officially.”

Huatli stared at the helm, and an odd sensation crept over her.

The helm was silvery steel and warm golden amber. It was beautiful. And it was hers, at last. All those years of study, all those hoops jumped through, all that pomp and circumstance and preparation. But Huatli had known all the stories when she was a teenager, had defeated dozens of foes by the time she was eighteen. And now, Huatli could walk to another world if she wanted to. What more did she really gain when she earned something as small as a *title*?

Apatzec sat across from her and placed a cup of xocolātl on the table before her. He gently sipped his own. “Warrior-Poet,” he said, “tell me how you discovered Orazca.”

Huatli took a deep breath, and began.

She did not try to tell him what he would want to hear. She told him what was *true*.

Huatli told him of Tishana’s courage and wisdom, of how they had ventured into the jungle and tracked the vampire for days. She emphasized that the River Heralds did not desire to reclaim their old territory, but instead were seeking to eliminate the outside forces that were infringing on both their lands and those of the Sun Empire. She told Apatzec about Angrath, and the existence of other worlds, and even told him about Saint Elenda and how she found peace through service and sacrifice. She told him that the Immortal Sun was gone, but the power of the city remained. Most of all, she told the emperor that Orazca was not *theirs* any longer.

“I urge you to make an accord with the River Heralds,” Huatli implored. “Let us work together to find a way to make peace.”

Emperor Apatzec sat in silence. He was staring at his empty cup, mahogany eyes quickly scanning back and forth as he thought through his answer.

Eventually, he spoke. Slowly. Deliberately. “That is not the story I want you to tell tomorrow.”

Huatli swallowed. Nodded. She’d had a feeling that would be his response.

The emperor was shaking his head. “We are weeks away from invading Fort Adanto in the south. I need the message of tomorrow to be one of inspiration and *conquest*. Orazca is *ours*, and if our people see the dinosaur you arrived on and hear a story about working *alongside* the River Heralds, I won’t have the support I need for our military campaign.”



Ashes of the Abhorrent | Art by Daarken

A little fire of fury lit in Huatli's heart.

"After what I just told you, you *still* think that is the most important thing?"

"You said yourself that Mavren Fein and the Butcher of Magan were monsters."

"Monsters who were severely reprimanded by *their own deity*. Fort Adanto will be empty when we arrive. The Church will want Elenda returned immediately!" Huatli gestured broadly.

Apatzec remained steadfast. "Then it will be easier for us to reclaim."

"Even though that land was controlled by the River Heralds before the Legion of Dusk arrived?"

"Yes," asserted the emperor. "Our empire cannot grow if we do not expand."

"Our empire has the opportunity to live in peace!"

Huatli realized her hand was on the helm of the warrior-poet. She looked down in surprise and caught the glare of Apatzec. He stood, and looked down at her impatiently.

"The ceremony will happen as planned, but there will be no oration alongside it. I will relay to the people what happened at Orazca," he said.

Huatli was furious. She did not bother to hide the disgust on her face. "It is the right of the warrior-poet to address the public. I will not be silenced for the sake of your agenda."

"It is for the sake of the Sun Empire's agenda, Huatli." Apatzec turned and made his way toward his personal chambers. "The ceremony will take place at noon tomorrow. Go tell your family the good news." He walked away without another word.

Huatli looked at the helm of the warrior-poet and fumed. She turned and exited down the stairs.



Ixalli's Diviner | Art by Lucas Graciano

Huatli went to her aunt and uncle's house before returning to the barracks.

Her family offered praise, congratulations, and a table piled high with rabbit and frillhorn tamales and four kinds of sauces. They feasted and asked her ten thousand questions, which Huatli answered with gusto. Her aunt, uncle, and dozens of cousins gathered around to listen to her story. They gasped and cheered and occasionally helped the younger cousins to ask a question if they had one, but most of all, they happily listened. Huatli was expecting most of their questions to be about Orazca, but it was the nature of planeswalking that captivated them the most.

At first, they did not believe her, but when she demonstrated by vanishing and reappearing a moment later with a rock from another world in her hand, they were ecstatic.

Huatli explained what she had seen on the other side (a rugged stream in brambled woods) and was answered by her uncle cheering. "You can't just *stay here* and be the emperor's pet! You have to go there, Huatli!"

The rest of the family yelled their approval, and her uncle mussed her hair affectionately. The youngest cousin laughed and cooed at all the excitement. Huatli's smile fell.

"But I'm the warrior-poet. I'm meant to stay here."

"You're meant to collect stories and histories!" Inti said, his mouth full of squash. "Why would you want to only tell stories from *here* when you can go someplace else?"

The family erupted in agreement. Huatli smiled, feeling bashful and a little nervous.

Inti continued, "And if what the emperor says is true, then there is nothing you can do. Your destiny does not lie here."

Huatli trusted her cousin more than anyone. His judgment was sound. She took a deep breath and nodded. "I'll go for a week."

Her aunt leapt to her feet. "I'll pack for you!"

Inti started stuffing tamales into a bag. “You’ll need rations!”

Her uncle and a particularly bold cousin clenched their fists in determination. “You’re not leaving until we get you the helm of the warrior-poet!”

Huatli sputtered, “But I’m coming right back!” but her addendum was lost in the excited frenzy of her family.

The next few hours were a blur.

Huatli kissed and hugged and was told to stay put while her family snuck into the Temple of the Burning Sun to retrieve the helm of the warrior-poet. They arrived back safe and sound after a tense several hours, with Inti wearing the helm on his head and a foolhardy smile on his face.

At dawn the next morning, Huatli said her farewells. She promised she would only be gone a week, and swore she would deal with the emperor when she returned. Her aunt did not cry, but her uncle did, and she told each of her cousins a different farewell with the same tight hug.

The last to say goodbye was Inti. He adjusted the helm on Huatli’s head and smiled. “You are the warrior-poet. It is your duty to gather stories. No one ever said they had to be only ours.” Inti stepped back with a smile on his face.

Huatli squeezed the straps of her travelling pack and smiled. “Goodbye, everyone! I’ll be back soon!”

Her family waved, and Huatli reached for the spark inside her.

Her vision brightened with the light of the midday sun, and Huatli stepped forward into another world.