

Ixalan: Three Hundred Steps under the Sun

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From set *March of the Machine*

Now

The jungles around Orazca burned, a ring of fire so hot that the golden borders of the city bubbled and melted, sinking into their foundations, flowing into the scorched earth. Darkness lit ruby by the titanic, sinuous mechanical vines that plunged down from somewhere above the acrid clouds. Crimson lightning scratched across the sky, chased seconds later by booming thunder. The canopy swayed and shook, trembling in the hot wind. Trees, rotted from the inside out, exploded when the flames reached them.

Huatli, alone, stood atop the Winged Temple of Orazca, her hands pressed to her chest, heaving for breath, waiting. An awful, agonizing waiting, bile and choke rising in her throat. Waiting.

Inti—was he alive? Did her company and the auxiliaries hold the steps? She could not look down, she could only keep her eyes on the horizon, waiting. It was impossible to hear anything but her own heartbeat, her own breath, and the roar of the fire.

All around her, at every point of the compass, darkness hung heavy over the plane. The only light was the fire. The jungles around Orazca burned.

Ixalan burned.

Hours Before

The doors were sturdy, built millennia ago to defend this most sacred inner sanctum. Barricaded, they would not break.

Coughing. Muttering soldiers. Prayer. The rank smell of sweat, waste, burnt wood, burnt flesh, burnt metal. The air hurt to breathe. Someone found and struck a torch while others fumbled with their lights, whispering the necessary prayers for Kinjalli to spark them to life.

Light flooded the dark hall, revealing a long, columnar chamber carved in murals. Gold embellished every surface, burnished and shining. Nearly a hundred soldiers—the majority Sun Empire along with a handful of auxiliaries from the Corsair Coast, Torrezon, and archipelagos between—crowded the space. Exhausted, they attended to pressing duties—replacing battle-worn weapons, stripping off useless armor, wiping themselves clean of soot, blood, and oil. A priest anointed a rank of silent, greying soldiers, bidding them to return to Ixalli's embrace. Grim-faced warriors followed the priest, macahuitls ready in case any of the dying turned.

Drying blood stained Huatli's hands and she couldn't stop them from trembling. She needed water. She needed to be clean. She had a canteen. She reached for it, found it empty.

A commotion. Shouting from the barricaded door. A roar outside, loud as a volcanic eruption, and then a boom that shook the hall. Dust and plaster chips fell from the ceiling, pinging off Huatli's armor like hailstones. All around her soldiers laughed, cursed, and muttered.

"We should go," Inti said. He crouched at Huatli's side, streaked in soot, head bandaged and bloody. "I'm not confident the barricade or this hall will hold. And you dropped this." He pressed Huatli's helm into her hands. The helm of the warrior-poet. The only one in all Ixalan.

"Where's yours?" Huatli asked, indicating her cousin's bandage-wrapped head.

"In the gullet of some dead invader," Inti shrugged. "It did its job." He offered Huatli a hand. "Come on."

Huatli reached up, took Inti's hand, and stood.

"We'll surely get through this," Inti said. "You'll speak this story to the empire when the sun rises."

Huatli looked at her cousin. His grin was broad and warm, genuine despite the weight of fatigue around his eyes, across his shoulders. He trusted her, and so everything was going to be fine. She reached out and touched his bandage.

"Find a helmet," she said. "I think you got hit in the head too hard."

Inti laughed, and Huatli joined him.

Behind them the hall shook, the door jumping on its great hinges as something huge slammed into it.

"How long until dawn?" Inti asked, looking back at the door.

"Hours," Huatli said. "If it comes today."

"Let us hope."

"Fine," Huatli nodded. "But also fight."

"Warrior-poet," an elegant voice, roughened by smoke. Mavren Fein, the thin, patrician leader of the auxiliaries, stepped out of the darkness, flanked by a handful of his Legion paladins. He squinted against the harsh light of the Sun Empire soldiers' Kinjalli stones. Huatli could see his skin steaming where the light hit him; the stones cast a scouring kind of light, harder than day. She held up a hand to block hers.

"Thank you," Mavren said, brushing burnt, paper dry skin from his sharp cheekbones.

"Well?"

"What now?"

Huatli shrugged.

"My favorite type of poet," Mavren said. "One who lets silence speak."

Huatli reached toward him with her short spear. "Careful, colonizer," she said. "I can think of more profound silences yet."

"Fine," Mavren said. "Let me try again, begging your apology." He reached out, slowly. Huatli did not waver. The vampire raised an eyebrow, looked to the point, then to his hand, then pushed the spear-point aside. He cleared his throat. "What do we do now?"

"Now—nothing," Huatli said.

"Nothing?"

Huatli nodded. "The Phyrexians know we are here. More will come to encircle us. We will let them."

“Trapping us here was part of your plan?”

“When hunting a great beast,” Huatli said. “Bait is necessary.” She lowered her spear.

“Bait,” Mavren sniffed. “Ensure the trap does not close on us as well, warrior-poet.”

Huatli let him leave with the last word. The last of her soldiers filed past, keeping a wary eye on the backs of Mavren and his vampires. The light went with them, fading until Huatli uncovered her bauble. Kinjalli’s warm light swelled but never bloomed beyond a small pool. She was alone with her breath.

The door boomed, rocked. The ancient hinges creaked. A barrel tumbled from the barricade, cracking open when it hit the ground. Spoiled maize spilled out, wriggling with dark shapes.

“Hold,” Huatli whispered, a prayer in a single word.

She turned and hustled from the door, hurrying to catch the rest of her force, a little ember of light in a great and total darkness.

Days Before

The invasion came to Ixalan presaged by subtle warnings ignored by the great powers contesting the old continent. War already raged; subtlety was among the first casualties. The Sun Empire had pushed the Legion of Dusk out of the golden city of Orazca. Emboldened, imperial forces chased the routed Legion expeditionary forces back to the Sun Coast. There, at Queen’s Bay, the empire encountered a constellation of squat, imposing fortresses. Two crouched on the mainland and a third loomed on a barrier island at the mouth of the bay. This was Miraldanor: the Legion had carved up the Sun Empire’s land and named it after their queen. This could not stand. The emperor ordered these fortresses razed.

Thousands of brave soldiers assaulted the dark stone walls of Fortress Leor, the middle of the three fortresses. The defenders held months—the Sun Empire had little experience in siege warfare—but fell before the end of the year. The empire moved in, taking Leor and splitting the Legion forces of Queen’s Bay in half. A triumphant victory for the empire, but the real prize was anchored in Leor’s harbor: ships, blue-water frigates that the defenders could not burn completely. The Sun Empire, firmly entrenched and with the Legion’s remaining forts surrounded, reverse-engineered the vessels. The emperor, to the adulation of his subjects in Pachatupa, declared a new objective: they would build their own great ships, cross the ocean, and return to the Legion the fear that those austere knights had brought to Ixalan.

A great work began. Mighty forests fell as new shipwrights hurried to fulfill the emperor’s demands. The Sun Empire youth took to the rivers, lakes, and coasts of Ixalan to learn the ways of the tides, the winds, and the stars. Hardened veterans of the empire’s consolidation campaigns and the expeditions to Orazca returned to their cities to recruit more to their ranks. Quetzacama handlers and breakers set into the jungles, breeding territories, and reserves to find suitable cavalry mounts. The empire hummed with energy and excitement—conquest, war for glory, was coming.

Even then, the invasion was already underway.

Somewhere in lands unknown, or in the great gyres that twist over vast tracts of empty ocean, the invasion signs manifested. Odd symbols glimpsed in momentary alignments by sailors and lonely peasants too frightened to understand what they saw: a boiling lake, an acre of dead fish arranged in a perfect circle and bisected by a straight line, a tree weeping black oil, a red cloud, lingering in defiance of the wind.

Ixalan churned, and Torrezon rumbled, and the archipelagos around High and Dry fell silent, and no one looked up to see the sky split open one humid morning off the Sun Coast, revealing a hideous, colossal metal branch of Realmbreaker, the Invasion Tree, plunging down from a hurricane eye red as a wound.

The Phyrexians came to Ixalan and ended the emperor's war in its cradle. In its place was a greater terror: the Threefold Sun set and did not rise again, obscured by clouds as dark as ink, and hope's darkest hour fell, throttled on the sands of Ixalan's once golden shore.

Huatli stood at attention in the imperial throne room high atop Tocatl, the imperial citadel at the heart of Pachatupa, the capital city of the Sun Empire. The throne room had been converted to the imperial war room. A scale map of Ixalan, Torrezon, and the sea separating the two continents dominated the chamber, awe-inspiring in size and detail. Aides and officers orbited the table, nudging small model soldiers and quetzacama, moving and removing the finely crafted models as sweat-slick runners arrived to relay news of the war.

A ring of white stones surrounded Pachatupa, unmoving save for the occasional adjustment forward. The Phyrexians.

Huatli rolled her shoulders. She had been on the front for days; her body felt deployment's cost. She needed rest, not to stand at attention in dress uniform while the emperor gathered formal reports from his generals. Even now the imperial vanity demanded satisfaction.

Huatli looked around the room of generals, priests, and command staff. Most were old men and women, stuffed into armor tailored to fit their younger selves; the imperial vanity suffered, she thought. A handful of the assembly were her contemporaries—soldiers promoted for heroic deeds accomplished during the Orazca campaign, or officers who proved themselves against the Legion during the jungle warfare that followed—enough to make the assembly not feel totally hopeless. Together, they awaited the emperor's return from the observation platform, where he paced, trailed by attachés and scribes.

Hope was precious now, and cruel. Its absence was not a void but a dagger. Sun above, Huatli wanted to sleep. She missed Saheeli like she missed the daylight. Huatli closed her eyes, trusting her legs to keep her standing.

Outside, the sky was dark. By the priests' reckoning it was midday, but the light was hidden behind ink-black clouds. The sun had disappeared in the early days of the invasion, first choked to a feeble red orb by wildfires burning at every point of the compass, now all but quenched to a dim blush. Not only fire smoke, but some other foul emission belched from the invaders. Ash fell. A regiment's worth of palace attendants scurried across Tocatl, brooms in hand to sweep away the grey drifts, but their efforts were not enough. The imperial citadel took on the appearance a mountain in winter; the sun's light gone, the air took on a deep, uncanny chill.

"Where is my navy," Emperor Apatzec Intli III bellowed as he strode back into the war room. "There are nearly ten thousand soldiers and sailors aboard those ships, find them!" He waved a hand, dispatching a squadron of scribes and junior officers to the task. Good for them, Huatli thought—they would never find the fleet, and now had an excuse to flee to the far corners of the plane.

"Ten thousand soldiers, hundreds of ships," the emperor muttered, striding to the table. "Torrezon was right there," he said, slapping the facsimile continent's shores to emphasize his utterance. A collection of miniature ships, carved by expert toymakers in Pachatupa below, sat at the midway point between the two continents—the last known location of the invasion fleet. To Huatli the invasion of Torrezon

had always been a bad idea; under the pressing threat of the Phyrexians ringing the walls of Pachatupa, mourning the interruption of one invasion in the face of another did not inspire confidence.

“Your grace,” one of the commanders—Caparocti Sun—something, Huatli could not remember his last name—spoke up, clearing his throat. “My aerosaur fliers stand ready to scour the oceans, but the weather over the straight—”

“Kinjalli *scour* the weather,” the emperor shouted. “Why do your fliers *stand*, Caparocti Sunborn, when they should be *flying*?”

“There are severe hurricanes, your grace, just off the coast,” Caparocti said, keeping his voice calm. The first siege of Leor, that’s where Huatli remembered Caparocti from. An emperor shouting at him would not rattle Caparocti after the bitter fighting they endured under those grey walls. “These storms are wild and unnatural. My fliers tell me that the skies flash with red lightning, and the wind sparkles with razors. It is not a question of will—they want to soar, your grace. It is a question of prudence.”

“You doubt?”

“I do not doubt,” Caparocti said. “I wish to defend the empire against losing more soldiers before meeting the enemy.”

The emperor stared at Caparocti, then through him, his jaw flexing as he ground his molars. Huatli knew Caparocti to be correct. She waited to see if the emperor agreed.

“Ten thousand,” the emperor whispered. Fury had left him. He walked around the table, his commanders and high priests parting, until he could reach the finely carved miniature ships. His Dawn Fleet, meant to bring the light of the Threefold Sun to Torrezon’s dark corners and gothic castles. The emperor’s frown deepened.

“The rest of you, report.”

One by one the commanders and priests rattled off their reports, relaying grim butchers’ bills likely already out of date even though they were a day old at most. A dozen towns along the northern barrier reported empty but for writhing masses of fused flesh and metal. A column of deathspitters and their handlers massacred, with only a single squad of survivors left to make it to Pachatupa. A western redoubt reduced to ash and lakes of oil, an iron rose pulsing at its center. Swarms of machine insects buzzing through the jungles. A dozen dead, a hundred dead, a thousand dead, imperial soldiers and civilians alike melded to metal armatures and lashing cables, marching before pale horrors like puppets on strings.



Art by: Viktor Titov

This was not a war: it was a collapse, seeking its end point. The Phyrexian forces, a mix of alien invaders bolstered by a seething mass of forcibly converted fodder, formed a ring of fire and metal surrounding Pachatupa, closing tighter by the hour. Even with aerosaur flights and swift raptors ranging ahead of the advancing enemy, the delay between event and report was so great that the empire could not respond in force. Individual soldiers in the field were leading this war, while the emperor begged his commanders and generals for guidance they could not give. The great strength of the Sun Empire was its size, its logistics: it was a brontodon that ground its enemies down with well-organized, steady, overwhelming numbers. But a brontodon could not fight a swarm of hungry, furious anhafish. On the back foot, with no line to hold and their logistics in disarray, retreat was the only rational choice.

“And your report, Huatli?” The emperor asked. He plucked model ships one by one from the table, letting them fall and shatter on the polished stone floor. He did not respond to the harsh crack of stone on stone.

“My lancers remain at company strength,” Huatli said. “We stand ready to break these invaders, as Tilonalli does the advance of night.”

“My poet,” the emperor said, a wan smile bringing out the wrinkles around his eyes. He dropped another ship on the ground. “Do you have words for the dead, warrior-poet?”

“There are many, your grace,” Huatli said. “Too many to speak.”

“And your powers,” the emperor said. “Your planeswalking, your magic. Can you beseech the Threefold Sun to intervene in our hour of need?”

“No,” Huatli said. “But there are others who could help.”

The emperor plucked another ship from the map, the final model not yet broken. He held it in both hands. “Explain,” he commanded.

Huatli stepped from the rank of commanders and walked to the edge of the emperor’s table. She bowed to him, then gestured to the map.

The emperor nodded.

Huatli picked up a statuette, carved in the shape of a warrior, one of the many clustered atop Pachatupa. She walked a counterclockwise arc around the table, stepping around the fragments of the model ships the emperor had shattered on the floor.

“Pachatupa is surrounded,” Huatli said, gesturing to the ring of white stones around the model city. “We have water. Weapons. Soldiers. The capital is a curled fist, but it is alone. Without steady supply from the empire, Pachatupa will starve. We need to break this siege or draw enough of the Phyrexians away so we can reopen those supply lines.”

“Otepec and Atzocan are cinders,” Inti said, his voice a low rumble. “Little Pocatli as well.”

“Yes,” Huatli said. “But here—Itlimoc state, Quetzatl state. No cities, just land. Small towns.”

“That’s true,” Caparocti said. He shrugged. “We have had no reports of Phyrexians there.”

“Farms,” the emperor muttered. “Maize, squash, and beans. Few people live there, and most came here seeking safety behind my walls. There’s nothing there but food.”

“Astute, your grace,” Huatli nodded. “The people there fled and the Phyrexians followed them here. The invaders don’t want life—they want power.” Huatli plucked a figurine of a dinosaur from a shelf under the table, where models of the dead were stored. She placed it on Orazca.

“By Kinjalli,” Inti smiled, a broad grin breaking out across his face as he understood.

“I will call the elder dinosaurs to Orazca,” Huatli declared. “This will draw the main body of the Phyrexians away from Pachatupa. We know they seek great power, so I’ll show them great power. They’ll flock to it like flies to droppings, which should lessen their numbers here, allowing you to break Pachatupa’s encirclement.”

A murmur of surprise and approval from the assembled generals ringed the chamber.

“This is a gambit, warrior-poet,” Caparocti said. “What if the Phyrexians await us at Orazca? What if the elders do not come when you summon them?” Caparocti swept a hand to the other generals and commanders. “We cannot spare our soldiers and risk Pachatupa falling.”

The generals murmured again, their approval twisting to concern.

“I would need only a small force,” Huatli said. “My company of lancers. Volunteers—those who know the jungles west of the capital, those who know Orazca.”

“We cannot—”

“Quiet, Caparocti,” the emperor whispered. “Your desire to protect the heart of our empire is admirable, but be silent. I need to think.”

The room silenced. All looked to the emperor, who stared at the figurine placed next to Orazca on the map.

The emperor smiled.

The imperial vanity was satisfied.

Huatli and her lancers left the capital via its riverside districts, accompanied by a ragtag group of auxiliaries—volunteers from regiments shattered in the initial wave of the invasion, and prisoners released to Huatli’s command. Roughly one hundred soldiers and half as many quetzacama scurried alongside the riverbank.

The river bordering Pachatupa fed the city freshwater from vast inland mountain ranges, plunging down from Itlimoc to whorl and tumble through heavily irrigated floodplains. Beyond, the river diverted to Pachatupa's north, where great canals channeled the river into urban use—washings, disposal, power for riverside mills, and leisure. From there, the river continued to the sea.

Huatli's company slipped out of the city on its northern side. To its south, the fields raged with fire and the thundering, trumpeting calls of imperial brontodons and monstrosaurs. Cannons boomed and echoed, reports rolling up the southern walls of Pachatupa into the black sky. A diversion, a furious barrage and single attempt at breaking the Phyrexian encirclement. The Phyrexians were canny enemies. A simple feint would not draw their attention: to buy Huatli's company cover to slip out from the city undetected, the imperial army needed to make a serious effort. Some generals voiced their opposition to this plan, but the emperor was firm.

Huatli hurried along the foliage-choked riverbank, bundled against the sunless cold. She wanted not to think of the battle raging on the other side of the capital, all those lives thrown to the slaughter for her hope. But she clutched them close. She was the imperial conscience; it was her job to remember this moment, to speak this pain into history. In the darkness, she advanced, following the quiet rustling of the soldiers ahead of her, followed by the subtle clinking and jangling of the soldiers behind her. The earth below was muddy and stank of smoke and rain. The wide river to her right, silent despite its size. The possibility of Phyrexians on the opposite bank, the coil of her muscles, the horrible waiting for the dark jungle to burst into buzzing, screaming machines.

Huatli missed Saheeli. She wanted to walk alongside this river with her love. She wanted to sit with her on the coast, in the white sand. She wanted to stand with her in the heart of the jungle's green anywhere, under Ixalli's setting light, and kiss her.

Instead: cannon reports in the distance. A bloated body in the river, floating slowly with the current, pale. A vampire, stalking behind her.

"What do you want, Mavren?" Huatli asked, whispering. She looked back to be sure it was him, happy to see the thin, white paladin looked just as fatigued and uncomfortable in his armor as she felt in hers.

"I want to thank you for this opportunity," Mavren said. He walked with an uncanny grace—his vision, unlike Huatli's, was not affected by this penumbral night. "My paladins and I found languishing in your imperial dungeons to be quite dispiriting. I much prefer a chance at martyrdom."

"I have no plans on to die, Mavren," Huatli said. "Nor a desire for glory. I do what I do for the people of the empire."

"No one plans to die," Mavren said. "But death has its own designs. Anyways, I wanted to bring your attention to our bargain."

"We have a bargain?"

"My compatriots and I were released to your command for this expedition," Mavren said. "Nothing specific was promised to us as a reward."

"No longer languishing in an imperial cell," Huatli said. "That is your reward."

"I was thinking something more concrete," Mavren said. "Freedom."

Huatli stopped. Mavren stopped. The rest of the line of soldiers continued, parting around the two of them like water flowing around boulders in a river. Inti approached and stopped with them.

"The vampires want to be released after we succeed," Huatli said to her cousin. "What do you think?"

"I would kill them right here," Inti said. "But we can use their swords until the invaders take care of them for us."

"I can understand you, you know," Mavren said. "I speak your language."

Inti shrugged. "I spoke slowly so you could understand," he said. He turned back to Huatli. "Your call, cousin."

Mavren was an aristocrat. Huatli, in her role as warrior-poet, understood aristocrats. The opulent imperials and cold nobility of Torrezon were the same in one regard: they did not beg, even when they begged.

"We never made a bargain," Huatli said. "March. We'll discuss what happens after, after."

Mavren bowed, dipping deep enough for Huatli to roll her eyes at the obvious sarcasm. She started walking again. Inti shoved Mavren forward, and the two of them fell in line behind her, marching with the lancer company and auxiliaries toward Orazca.

Huatli and her company arrived to Orazca in the decided morning. An acrid rain fell over the golden city, swelling its waterfalls to dark, raging torrents. Much of the foliage that had greened the city was now dead, choked to withered black rot. The crown jewel of the empire, reduced to a wet crater.

Movement to the right, muffled commotion. Soldiers, laying belly-flat on the wet earth, shimmying to make way for a small group of mud-streaked scouts returning from their expedition to the city.

"Warrior-poet," the lead scout whispered when she reached Huatli. "We have a route to the temple. Temilo here," she said, indicating one of the thin, dark men who approached with her, "has been garrisoned in Orazca since the start of the invasion."

"Poet," Temilo said, also saluting. "I praise Kinjalli for you and your lancers. We thought we were alone against the monsters. Do you have any water?"

Huatli offered Temilo her own canteen. "This night is terrifying alone, but dawn approaches and brings friends. Your report."

"The Phyrexians roam the city," Temilo said. He took a long drink of water, capped the canteen, then passed it back to Huatli. "It is dangerous to be outside—we have a garrison deep in the heart of the ritual district, near the Winged Temple."

"I need to get to the recitation chamber there," Huatli said, pointing at the grand temple. "Is there a route?"

"We had an observation post there," Temilo shook his head. "But no one has heard from them for days, and none of us have tried to make it up there—too exposed."

The Winged Temple was a grand monument. Built in ages past by the command of the Sun Empire, the temple was a testament to imperial might and the glory of the Threefold Sun. Lost and forgotten after imperial greed saw Orazca stripped from the empire, the Winged Temple was altered by the River Heralds; now once more under the rule of the Sun Empire, the temple bore aspects of both cultures.

"The only route to the top is the Three Hundred Steps," Temilo said. "There are internal passages which will get you to them; the designers ensured that no one approaching the temple top could do so without walking exposed to the light of the Threefold Sun."

"Outstanding," Inti muttered, sarcastic.

“Built in a more honest time,” Huatli agreed. “Thank you for your report, Temilo. Can you lead us to your garrison?”

“Yes, but we must move quickly,” Temilo said. “It is not safe outside.”

“Right,” Huatli said. She pressed herself up from prone and looked to her lancers. With a wave, her company and their quetzacama stood. A second sharp gesture sent them forward into the city. The company stretched into a column, weapons at the ready, and wound through Orazca’s golden boulevards. But for the distant sound of falling water and the clatter of their hurrying column, Orazca was silent.

A red flash lit the sky.

A roar split the waterfall chorus, shattering the soft rumbling that blanketed the city. It was a terrible sound, not the natural bellow of a quetzacama but something greater than sound.

Huatli stumbled, ducking for cover along with the rest of her soldiers as they looked to the sky, in awe at the web of red lightning spreading across the boiling clouds. For the long moment of the roar, they were not a company of veteran lancers, but terrified animals, humans humbled by the presence of a god.

On the horizon opposite them, at the lip of the bowl in which Orazca was built, stood Etali, one of the elder dinosaurs. He was huge, a creature magnitudes larger than the largest monstrosaur or dreadmaw; to be in his proximity was to crouch under an ancient king, to witness a mountain of teeth and scale walking, roaring, triumphant. Staring at his silhouette was difficult, the eye forced to capture an image one could barely hold.

The quetzacama of Huatli’s company thrashed against their restraints, breaking free, throwing their handlers to the side. Eyes rolling, many fled into the city.

Ink-black clouds belched from Etali’s core, his lungs turned to engines that spat thunderheads from between his ribs. Red lightning rippled up the elder dinosaur’s shining, metal spine, pulsing with a heartbeat rhythm, increasing its cadence as Etali reared back to roar, building to a flash that blanketed the plane in a crimson day. His roar forced Huatli’s company to their knees, hands over their ears, their own screams downed by Etali’s cry.



Art by: Ryan Pancoast

Etali was the storm. The Phyrexians had turned the elder dinosaur, twisting this embodiment of Ixalan to their own hideous purpose. Huatli knelt, palms on the cold gold-plated street. There was nothing beyond this fear.

The ridge upon which Etali stood boiled with movement. More Phyrexians, ground troops and greater horrors, dwarfed by the size of the elder dinosaur they now commanded.

Huatli's company and the auxiliaries started to run, following Temilo toward the garrison. Huatli lingered a moment, searching for any hope of Etali in the creature that occupied the elder's body. The great and primal storm belched choking clouds, rising like anvils. There was nothing of Ixalan left in him.

Huatli sketched a prayer to Tilonalli, to Kinjalli, and to Ixalli, then followed the last of her company, hurrying ahead of the advancing Phyrexians.

Huatli's company and auxiliaries sheltered in Temilo's garrison with the rest of the beleaguered defenders of Orazca for days. Though dark, the halls inside were dry and safe; the Phyrexians had not yet found their way inside.

Huatli, Inti, Mavren, and Temilo stood alone in the entry hall before the barricaded door. They carried small, dim-burning torches—after two days in near total darkness, a strong torch was too much.

"They've stopped trying the door," Inti said.

"Of course they know we are still here," Mavren added.

"Then why did they stop?" Inti replied.

"There might be other pockets of survivors," Temilo said, whispering. "We had warning of the invasion from the coast. The city guard stockpiled weapons, food, water—there were other garrisons." Temilo trailed off. The odds were against that hope.

Survivors. The word was a deathmark. Not defenders, not soldiers, but survivors. Huatli knew language was a weapon of the heart and the mind: as iron is shaped into a sword, words honed become rhetoric. To imagine themselves as survivors now was to chisel fate into stone.

Huatli couldn't do that.

"Temilo," Huatli said, interrupting the doom spiral brewing between the three men. "You said there are other ways to the top of the Winged Temple?"

"Not to the top," Temilo said. "But there are passages to the middle tier, the priests' chambers."

"Good enough," Huatli said, nodding. "Inti, Mavren, call the soldiers. We have done enough hiding."

"The Phyrexians control the city," Temilo said. "You saw Etali—"

"Do they control us?" Huatli said. She looked to Inti, who shook his head, then to Mavren, who, after a moment, followed suit. "No. So, you'll lead us to the priests' chambers," Huatli said, addressing Temilo. "Then we will fight to the top and call upon the elders. Then we will see the future fate holds for our plane."

"If they are turned?" Inti asked. Not doubting, no, her cousin would not doubt her. He asked as a healer or soldier might—only for clarity, to plan a response to achieve an objective.

"Then Ixalan is lost," Huatli said. "We will be the first to know the end."

Inti pressed his lips together and nodded his resolve. Temilo closed his eyes and whispered a prayer. Mavren smiled, bearing his fangs.

"You'll cover this empire in death," Mavren said. "But maybe glory, too."

"Inti, get my company ready," Huatli said. "Mavren, rouse your paladins, have them pray to your god. It's us against the invaders—let us face down this enemy together before we turn our blades against each other."

"Yes, poet," Mavren said. He bowed, then slipped away into the darkness. With a curt nod, Inti followed, Temilo in tow.

Alone, Huatli finally let out the trembling breath she had been holding. She kept her prayers—she would need them in the hours to come. Instead, she thought of Saheeli—how bright she was—and followed the others into the darkness.

There were three hundred steps beyond the archway at the Winged Temple's middle to the recitation chamber at its summit. A sacred number, one hundred steps for each aspect of the Threefold Sun. There were an uncounted number before, a number without order or meaning, to represent the plane without order or meaning before the grace of the Threefold Sun. Three hundred steps between now and fate.

Huatli's company of lancers hustled to form a defensive line at the archway. They arranged their shields and spears into a bristling wall, aimed down at the city below.

"We'll hold the gate," Inti bellowed over the sound of the buffeting wind. "It is a chokepoint: their numbers will be even against ours."

"But inexhaustible," Mavren added. "Hurry, Poet. I believe in death's salvation, but none of us want to meet it here." Mavren's small squadron of Legion paladins and human followers wore a motley of armor and weapons—whatever they kept from their initial capture, supplemented with the old equipment they were granted from the imperial armory. Nevertheless, the Torrezonés carried themselves with resolve.

“Good,” Huatli said. “Cousin, my company is yours. Mavren,” Huatli shouted to be heard over the rising wind. “This is my bargain,” she said, gesturing to the archway and the Phyrexians below.

Mavren flourished his sword, bowed, and then ordered his auxiliaries to the line. Sun Empire and Legion soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder as the rain began to fall. Slow at first, then steady.

Red lightning cracked across the sky, illuminating the swirling, writhing mass of flesh and machine that writhed around the temple’s base. Orazca’s dark streets were choked with Phyrexians—the turned, who moved in hordes that flowed like slow water, and the pure, who walked above them, their alien silhouettes taking the shape of demons, nightmares, and weapons. In ones and twos, they started up the lowest steps of the temple, taking notice of the soldiers arranged at its midpoint. A flood followed. Mechanized quetzacama, trumpeting and bellowing to the smaller things that scuttled around and atop them, lumbered up the steps. Ranks of the wretched turned marched in tight columns behind, ordered despite their disordered uniforms and weapons. Among them the elegant, copper-colored beasts from elsewhere strode on long insectile legs, multitudinous faces blinking and screaming and bellowing, facets on hideous, iridescent carapaces.

Beyond, in the dark distance, towering Phyrexian monstrosities lumbered through the city, their humanoid silhouettes a mockery of humanity. Near and far, there was only doom.

Huatli whispered a prayer of steel to her allies, turned, and started her climb, leaving the sounds of machine and human screaming behind her, the sound of swords and war behind her.

Some Time Ago

Why fight what you cannot defeat? A question for a poet, asked by an engineer, as the two of them lay awake in the predawn hours, on the morning before they would part.

“What do you mean?” Huatli asked. She was distracted by Saheeli’s dark hair, how it felt between her fingers. Like silk, like fine silk. She resolved to remember this, to commit this moment to her own history.

“It’s a simple question,” Saheeli said. “I know we must. I don’t want to die. I don’t want you to die, but there is a small part of me that wants to just “

“Give up?”

“Rest,” Saheeli said. “I don’t want to give in. I just want to stop fighting. Let it end, because then it will be done. The fear, the pain, the worry—it feels like we’re trying to stop the end of everything: the end of our planes, the Multiverse. Everything. I fear we can’t, and then we’ll die, and something terrible will take our place.”

The morning birds outside had begun their call, long whoops in the distance that spoke of a humid dawn. Saheeli’s voice was a soft breath against her chest, little more than a whisper. Huatli pressed her lips to Saheeli’s head and kissed her.

“Do you want my answer?” Huatli asked.

“I think you’re the only person who can answer this,” Saheeli said, nodding. “Show me the dawn, H.”

“There was a warrior-poet before me,” Huatli said. “Yolotzin, who carried the title centuries ago. Her life was one of pain. She was born to a family in a little village far from Pachatupa, during a time when the empire was young and hungry, not yet an empire but one in the making. Yolotzin’s village was taken in conquest and her family killed. She was taken back to the capital because she knew how to

speak our language and her voice was beautiful. As she came into her adulthood, she was granted the title of warrior-poet by the emperor.”

Saheeli pressed herself closer to Huatli. Her breath slowed.

“Yolotzin was a brilliant poet, her lyric precise and soft, and for her life she was the imperial conscience.” Huatli kissed Saheeli’s head again, resting her lips on her hair. The story would end, the sun would rise, and she would be gone.

“Why would she serve the empire?” Saheeli asked.

“For revenge,” Huatli said. “A long revenge. When Yolotzin passed, the empire mourned. Tears filled the streets, flooding them as rain after a storm. The emperor was said to wander the halls of Tocatl, his voice reduced to a moan as he searched for Yolotzin’s ghost to beg just a stanza more.”

The room, dark, was beginning to grey. The sun was rising. Dawn becoming morning.

“She lived at the end of the world,” Huatli said. “And then through it. What we face is no different than what she faced: a mighty foe who intends to conquer, to end everything, and rewrite reality. Our duty is to live through it. To daily reject despair and, should we die, take the heart of our killer with us. Like Yolotzin, we can’t stop this. We can only live through it.”

Warm light slipped through the drawn curtains of Huatli’s quarters. The bird calls outside were joined now by the distant but persistent sounds of Pachatupa’s morning streets, waking.

“That doesn’t exactly inspire hope.”

“I love you. I will never lie to you.”

“I think I spoke to the warrior there,” Saheeli said, pushing herself up. She propped her head on her hand, resting her elbow on her pillows. She looked out at the day, and then back to Huatli, a soft smile on her face. “I want to talk to the poet. Tell me it’s going to be okay?”

It was a lie to say that everything would be alright, but Saheeli’s eyes were wide and the morning warm and this was the last moment for the two of them, the last moment before the end.

Huatli reached up to Saheeli, ran her fingers through her hair, and pulled her close. They kissed, forever. When they parted, Huatli cupped Saheeli’s cheek, tears in her eyes.

“It’s going to be alright,” Huatli said.

Now

The storm raged, a hurricane that hated and swirled with hunger. Hail, dark rain, and red lighting. Etali must have arrived into the city. Huatli had only looked back once during her climb to see that the soldiers held the gate—they did, against a writhing wall of flesh and machine, too great to pass the narrow entry.

Huatli gripped the edges of the altar and prayed, a prayer for time before the recitation. Time for her little company to hold the gate. Time against Etali’s impending arrival. Time for another morning. Just a moment longer on this plane. Huatli summoned up her voice. Closed her eyes. The wall of the hurricane loomed above her, and everything outside dropped away to nothing but the howl of wind, a ruin wind, the sound of the end.

Huatli spoke to the hurricane. She spoke to death, to the predator’s appetite, to the surging ocean, to all calamity, and the dawn. She told them all about their brother the hurricane, how he was taken from

them and turned against them, and how Ixalan needed death, needed hunger, the sea, terror, and the dawn to stand with it against a greater enemy: the end.

Their answer was silence.

The storm faltered. Huatli opened her eyes to see the red wind swirling outside. Stilling.

The warrior poet stepped away from the altar. She walked toward the doorway out from the recitation chamber, to stand at the top of the three hundred steps and look out over Orazca and the battle raging below.

Huatli's company still held, their line fortified by a wall of Phyrexian corpses. Looming before them was Etali, stopped only one terrace down, nearly upon the gate. The elder had been climbing the Winged Temple, clawing his way up the lower tiers over the surging bodies of his own allies when he froze. Lightning rippled across the metal spines of the corrupted deity's back fin, sputtering, misfiring. The Phyrexians fought on, but they were forced around the elder, slipping and scrabbling to climb over the bodies of their fallen comrades, meeting the company's long lances as they crested the mound. Slain, they tumbled back down the slope, barreling through the waves of monstrosities that followed. Shafts of sunlight illuminated the grim scene, so bright that Huatli winced and raised a hand to cover her eyes.

The light!

Huatli looked up toward the sky and the light breaking through just as the titanic silhouette of Zetalpa, the elder of dawn, pierced Etali's hurricane, plunging toward the earth. Zetalpa's wings spread wider than the horizon—or at least seemed to—and her cry banished the night. Dawn came with fury, slamming into Etali talons first, wrapping him up in her wings, her mighty jaws closed around Etali's neck. The Winged Temple trembled with the impact and a shockwave blasted out across its face, scattering hundreds of Phyrexians, sending them tumbling off the steps and terraces. Huatli's company staggered back but were protected from the worst of the blast—they recovered within moments and took up their defensive positions.

Zetalpa's breaking dawn may have been silent or—like Etali's first roar—may have been so loud as to render Huatli unable to hear anything, but the twin, rising roars around the base of the temple split open the day. Huatli ran to a nearby observation platform, a viewing terrace where priests could raise tributes to the Threefold Sun in full view of the people who walked the streets of Orazca. From there, she could look down into the golden city's streets.

Another river choked the boulevards and plazas: unturned quetzacama, mighty creatures of all shapes and sizes, carnivores and herbivores and omnivores, charging together against the beleaguered Phyrexians. Moving with them was Tetzimoc, death itself, covered in quills and spines that quivered and launched in thick volleys toward the retreating Phyrexians. Stragglers were swept up in the lumbering advance of Tetzimoc's lieutenants, armored quetzacama whose sledgehammer tails crushed metal and bashed aside the ranks of Phyrexian legionnaires.

Another roar called Huatli's attention. She turned to look out across the city to see Ghalta standing astride a distant temple, bellowing a challenge to the towering Phyrexians that stalked the city. These giants carried weapons made from living, screaming metal: they fell upon her, their swords singing, and she leapt to meet them, fury against fury. Ghalta pulled one down, bashing aside its sword to close her jaws around its midsection, tearing through its sinew and metal trunk. Another approached from behind, its weapon raised above its cloud-lost head, about to strike, when a geyser of steaming water erupted beneath it. The columnar blast hid a dark shape in its center: Nezahal, the elder of the tides. Nezahal wrapped the giant up from legs to wrists, threading its long, whip-like body around

the creature, crushing it under an ocean's worth of pressure. The water fell like rain, and Ghalta and Nezahal tore through the remaining giants.



Art by: Zezhou Chen

"Where is she?" Huatli whispered, scanning the city horizon. There was one more elder to answer Huatli's call. The warrior poet paced the observation deck, daring to hold hope high in her heart. The other elders—Zetalpa, Nezahal, Tetzimoc, and Ghalta—had responded to her call, leaping to protect Orazca. One elder was missing.

Zacama.

Was she turned? Was she dead? A clamor from the gate below drew Huatli's attention: Zetalpa and Etali, tangled in vicious combat, broke for a moment. Zetalpa clawed back into the sky, her great wings buffeting the temple. She roared, her blood falling like rain as she ascended, recovering from the terrible clash. Etali bled dark oil, staggering but not mortally wounded, clinging to the steps. A stalemate.

Huatli ran, taking the three hundred steps down to the gate at the edge of her balance, slipping near the bottom on the rain-slick stone but not falling.

"Inti!" she cried over the sound of the desperate battle. "Inti, where are you?"

"Here, poet!" Mavren responded. A blood-slick and oil-stained Mavren limped toward Huatli, dragging a wounded Inti with him. He carried the bigger man a few steps back from the line, ducked out from under his arm, and set him down, gently. "Where did he get hurt?" Huatli asked, sliding to Inti's side. Her cousin moaned, his eyes closed and fluttering. Like Mavren, he was streaked in blood, oil, and ash.

Huatli checked Inti over, wiping the blood and ash and oil away from his face. Nothing cut, none of it was his. Gently, she laid his head down—nothing she could do for him now.

"Huatli!" A shout from the line—Temilo, calling her over. He clutched a spear. Bandages wrapped his forearms. He was, but for his voice, indistinguishable from the other living soldiers on the line—Sun Empire or Legion, they all were streaked in ash and sweat, wrapped in ragged bandages, exhausted.

Huatli crossed the courtyard and joined Temilo and her company on the line. Mavren followed.

"Look," Temilo cried, pointing down the steps, toward Etali and the streets of Orazca beyond.

The Phyrexians were retreating, tumbling down the steps, an avalanche of metal and flesh routed without direction or leadership. They streamed around Etali, who stood with his back turned to Huatli and her company. Dark oil fell from the turned elder's wounds. His dorsal sail was torn, shredded by Zetalpa's talons, spines cracked and broken by the other elder's assault. Waste heat vented from Etali with each breath, the stinking smell of lightning and ozone rankling, acidic. The great storm corralled by foreign machine, reduced to a disposable weapon. Huatli could weep.

A great shape moved in the dark streets of Orazca below. A mighty form so large that Huatli at first thought the earth itself was heaving up, as if an earthquake was shifting a mountain. The Phyrexian forces streaming down the temple shuddered in response, the front ranks hurrying to stop and change direction while the middle and rear pressed on, not yet seeing the danger before them.

Zacama, the final and greatest of the elders, loomed up from the shadows, her three heads bellowing a tri-tonal roar. The front ranks of the Phyrexian army disintegrated, metal flaring bright as daylight as the titanic sound washed over them, rolling up the flanks of the Winged Temple like a wave crashing upon the shore. Huatli called for her company to dive to the ground. They did, and a heartbeat later the wall of heat that followed the sound of the roar blasted through the gate. Huatli covered her head with her arms and screamed, a primal reaction to the overwhelming sound, the blasting heat, the shaking temple—the sound of the end, and the plane denying the end.

The wave passed, and Huatli lived. She stood and helped the lancers on either side of her to their feet. Together, they looked through the gateway to see the result of the great elder's entrance.

Zacama took to the first terrace, main head ignoring the scrambling Phyrexian forces as her other heads snapped and bellowed at them. None of the turned forces tried to attack Zacama. Only those pale white monsters of the main invasion force attempted to bring her down, wading through their fleeing comrades to throw themselves at Zacama's ankles. The great elder strode through the Phyrexian forces without care, as if walking through tall grass as she climbed the temple toward the turned Etali. He lowered himself into a ready crouch, lightning sparking and buzzing across his broken sail.

Zacama's main head opened her mouth, a yawning maw packed with human-size, dagger-shaped teeth, and inhaled.

"Down!" Huatli shouted.

Zacama roared again, unleashing another wave of heat and sound up the flank of the temple toward Etali. The Winged Temple's golden facade flash-melted before her, revealing a fan of dark stone beneath. Etali staggered, exposed metal endoskeleton superheating, twisting, flaring and spitting as the sheer force of Zacama's bellow buffeted him. He fell to a knee, bracing with one of his razor arms to stop any further fall, and raised the other in defense.

Zacama bit down on Etali's arm with her main head and tore it free with a single, swift movement. Etali struggled to stand, but Zacama's other two heads lunged forward, pinning the turned elder to the ground.

For a moment, Etali stopped struggling. Zacama held him fast, pinned, submitted. Her main head loomed close to Etali's and sniffed, inhaling the scent of her turned cousin. Huatli wondered what the two of them exchanged—was it recognition? Was it a plaintive question—a furious one?

Zacama reached out with her main head and bit down on Etali's neck. Etali shuddered, but did not roar or struggle, as Zacama tore his head from his body, then flung it into the city below. Etali's body kicked, spasming, and then stilled.

Zacama stood, triumphant. The dawn broke out behind her. Her two smaller heads roared her victory, breath steaming in the morning air. The other elder dinosaurs cried out in response, and were joined by a resounding, city-wide chorus of the quetzacama hosts that followed them.

Huatli stood. While Zacama's other heads bellowed her victory, her main head turned to look down at her. Huatli raised her hand to acknowledge the elder.

Zacama sniffed. A word, a thought, a feeling of gratitude outside of Huatli but familiar to her. Speaking with an elder was addressing something elemental; speaking with Zacama was engaging with the soul of the plane itself, and yet Huatli could only think of a warm truth, almost impossible to consider.

I did not lie to her.

Zacama turned and descended the temple. The earth trembled.

The dark curtain of smoke, ash, and raging red hurricane had been torn and pierced. The sun was breaking through. Orazca welcomed the morning light, and the city shone gold through the oil. Dawn had arrived: the day, though not yet won, was here.