

# The Mentor

## Reinhardt Suarez

From set *Strixhaven: School of Mages*

Five minutes into his first encounter with Asterion, Quintorius decided that he had heard just about enough from his spirit mentor. This was not a comfortable revelation, nor was it something he was prepared to deal with. He had been under the impression that a profound mentor-mentee relationship would be the key to a successful Strixhaven experience. After all, how often did the poor son of a shepherd get the chance to speak to a personage of historical renown about momentous events experienced firsthand?



Quintorius, Field Historian | Art by: Bryan Sola

So when Quint finally received his mentor match, he rushed to Effigy Row—arguably the most important section of Lorehold College. Over the entire first year and a half of his studies, Quint had made it a habit to walk Effigy Row’s stone pathways, stopping to marvel at the statues of revered professors, prominent former students, and legendary heroes from ages past. Imagine having one of them as a mentor! What kind of history could he learn from Golwanda the Bloodspiller and Xandril the Executioner? In life, these two warlords had been bitter enemies: Golwanda with her Thunder Riders, fearless orcish cavalry who united the steppe peoples under the seal of the Crimson Glaive; and Xandril, the kor war hero who rallied the hardscrabble Hordeland fiefdoms. Their forces clashed on blood-soaked battlefields three thousand years before any current Strixhaven students were born. Yet there they were in the present day, waiting to bequeath centuries of wisdom upon a lucky student.

Quint never considered himself very lucky. Still, when he conjured his mentor’s spirit into its statue for the first time, even he could not have anticipated the bulk of that initial conversation to be about scones. But it was. Extensively. With brambleberry jam and clotted cream. The second and third ses-

sions did not fare better, with topics vacillating between efficient cummerbund implementation and proper hygiene for certain breeds of dogs—small ones most often found in the purses of noblewomen and possessing an uncommon degree of surliness belying their stature. It was no surprise Quint’s enthusiasm for his end of term project had more or less cratered heading into the fourth session.

Alas, a grade was a grade, and high grades were important for scholarship students. Quint had thought about approaching Dean Plargg about a mentor change, but he knew that it was a lost cause. It had been Plargg’s idea to pair students with recently excavated statues. “Lorehold students should want to be the vanguard of history!” Besides, Plargg didn’t look very kindly on students he deemed to be “quitters.”

With a sigh, Quint stared up at the statue of his mentor. It depicted a young man clad in what would have been the finest plate armor a smith could make and sporting the steely countenance of a shrewd tactician. He stood with hand on sword hilt, ready to strike out at his foes. If a person were to pass it by, it wouldn’t have been out of the question to think Asterion a fierce knight commander.

That person would be wrong.

Raising his hands in front of him, Quint drew the sacred sigils of “The Rousing” in the air. This was Lorehold’s most important spell, the lynchpin for any constructive understanding of archaeomancy. The sigils were a focus for the mind, allowing the caster to project their will backward along the currents of time constantly swirling around all of Arcavios. Once in tune with these currents, the archaeomancer simply had to tease out a name or face or event, latch onto it, and pull it into the present.

*Best to get it over with*, he told himself. *The sooner I complete this project, the better.*

Quint’s stomach tightened and twisted inward as he reached the spell’s crescendo—a bright burst of heatless flame engulfed the statue, filling the cracks in the stone with golden incandescence. No matter how many times Quint performed this spell, it was always accompanied by a sensation not unlike drinking sheep’s milk after eating a bit too much prairie melon, though he had to wonder if his current queasiness could be attributed to the prospect of once again engaging with his mentor.



Stonebound Mentor | Art by: Svetlin Velinov

“Quint, my good loxodon!” said Asterion, stepping off his pedestal. “I’d been thinking about your question from our last discussion, and my answer is *I absolutely would love to*.”

Quint pulled out a journal from his pack and flipped to his notes. The last thing he’d written down were Asterion’s ruminations on the pros and cons of parasol usage. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I would love to accompany you on a grand tour of your fine campus!” Asterion pointed down the path toward the imposing spire of Kollema Hall. Dozens of second-years, some Quint tangentially knew, were busy doing the same thing he was doing, only with more significant historical figures. “I thought you’d never ask.”

“I didn’t ask,” said Quint, taking a seat on the ground. “How about we just talk?”

“Every time we’ve met, we’ve done nothing but talk. Surely, that’s not all your project entails. How about getting to know each other?”

“I think we know each other well enough,” said Quint. He pressed a pen to his journal page.

Asterion started to pace. “Very well. I suppose you want to know about my life, where I lived, my genealogy, then?”

“Actually, I have all that information already.”

“You do?”

“The school has extensive records. After our last meeting, I figured that I’d save us the trouble of remembering minor details.” Quint turned back a few pages to the summaries he’d written up the previous day after scouring the Registry of Accounts in Kollema Hall. It was clear from the dust and the relatively good condition of the scrolls pertaining to Asterion and his family that he’d been the only person in several hundred years to look at them. “Your father was Lord Teutamos of Pallad Reach, a province in the central Vastlands. Your mother was Lady Crethea.”

“Look at you! The student doing his homework.”

“You had two first cousins on your mother’s side, Pasiphaë and Deianira.”

“I never did like those two. Quite spoiled.”

“And on your father’s, just the one cousin, Achelous. His father, your Uncle Arboron, was a fairly well-known general, formerly in the employ of the last Jetelothian monarch. He was also called ‘The Beast.’”

“On account of his smell more than his fighting prowess.” Asterion stopped pacing and crossed his arms in front of Quint. “Since you know so much, I cannot conceive what more you need to ask me.”

“It’s about the end.”

“Oh.”

“A series of reports indicate that you were last seen leaving the school grounds traveling toward Pillardrop. A month later, a search party arrived, but a week of investigation came up empty. Your mother commissioned a monument to be erected next to a cave entrance. That’s where the statue was found two months ago.” Quint looked up from the page. “Does this agree with what you remember?”

“I don’t see why my memories are important. You have your files.”

“Accuracy in historical accounts is extremely important.”

“Ah. I imagine that it would also contribute positively to your final grade?”

“I yes.”

“Would you believe me if I told you that I can’t quite recall? I remember up to a point, and then s-natches. Fragments, like blurs lit by torch flame.”

Quint closed his journal and placed it back into his pack. “Then, I suppose that is that. I think I have what I need from you. Thank you for your patience.”

“Wait!” said Asterion. “Can you take me to this place—where the statue was found?”

Quint stood and shook his head as he hoisted his pack onto his back. “Spirit statues aren’t permitted to leave Effigy Row.”

“Says who?”

“Says the rules. No statues outside of Effigy Row without permission from a Lorehold dean.”

“I remember rules. They were around in my time, and you know who followed them? Cowards and fools.”

Quint glared at his mentor. “It’s important to follow the rules.”

“Then what was the point of bringing me here? To tease me with all the possibilities and then say ‘not allowed’ or ‘not possible’?” A couple of students leered as they walked past.

“If I get caught, I’d lose my job, maybe even get kicked out of school altogether.”

“Job,” said Asterion, amused. “What is it that you do at this job?”

“I help a team of researchers at a dig site. It helps pay for tuition.”

“Hmm. I respect that. Tell me more about this dig site.”

“If you must know, it’s the cave where they found your statue buried under an ancient rockslide. We’re fairly certain we’ll find evidence that this school was built on top of the ancient city of Moragitzu-Kesh.”

Asterion’s face twisted into a grimace, and a second later, he was splayed on the ground laughing hysterically. “You think Moragitzu-Kesh is anywhere within a hundred leagues of this place? Are you mad?”

“It’s not only me. Lots of experts think the same thing.”

Asterion laughed harder. “Experts? More like con artists.”

Quint eyed his mentor. He wasn’t the best at reading faces, but even the most exceptional mind-mage would have a difficult time scrutinizing the stony countenance of a spirit statue. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know enough not to mistake Zantafar for Moragitzu-Kesh. You have heard of Zantafar, haven’t you? *Descend the steps, O pilgrim, O wanderer?*”

Of course Quint knew about Zantafar. All loxodon on Arcavios knew the story of the famed lost city. Poor nomad children would tell each other their families’ versions of the tale around nightly campfires. Treasure hunters of all persuasions sought the city out for its promises of fortune and glory. It did not surprise Quint that Asterion was aware of Zantafar. What gave him pause was the line of poetry his mentor had recited.

“How do you know the Canticle of Jed?” asked Quint. Its authorship most often attributed to Xyrun-Jed, the last loxodon emperor, the Canticle of Jed had persisted through the ages as a prayer in times of distress, a meditation for loxodon in dire circumstances.

“A little loxodon told me,” Asterion said with a grin. “Well, he was quite large—Vis Svokunol, my childhood caretaker. I know many of the tales—including the one of your lost city. What do you think I was doing out here all that time ago? One does not simply venture into forlorn caves for his health. Probably the opposite, really.”

“Zantafar? At Pillardrop?”

“Yes, my prehensile-nosed friend. There’s a lost city to discover. And you are just the loxodon to do it. Think of it as your responsibility.”

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While the students assisting the researchers at the dig went home in the evenings, the researchers themselves stayed on-site in a small encampment a few yards from the cave entrance. This allowed them to continue their efforts at cleaning and identifying artifacts, as well as deliberate the significance of finds, which promoted camaraderie and ensured that knowledge was properly disseminated among the experts responsible for documenting significant findings for the Lorehold repositories.

Fortunately for Quint and his unauthorized companion, this excavation was not the one they had set out to explore. Unfortunately, they would have to pass through the camp en route to their destination. They watched from behind an outcropping as the camp bustled with activity. Quint spotted Professor Hofri Ghostforge, the project lead, warming himself by the fire and staring outward into the star-speckled expanse of sky while he braided his beard.

“Ha!” said Asterion. “The fools won’t find anything in that hole.”

“They’re not fools,” said Quint. “That’s where they found you—well, your statue—under several tons of rock.”

“My mother was never good at geography. Besides, I’ve been in that cave, and I assure you that there is nothing more of interest in it.”

“That was six hundred years ago.”

“That proves my point. Sure, you’ll find a few shards of pottery, a rusted weapon or two, probably left by travelers as a practical joke on blowhards like your professors.” He pointed to a dark area outside of the firelight and next to a cliff wall. “We can hide in the brush and make our way around.”

Quint third-guessed himself, having already second-guessed himself on the way up to Pillardrop. Despite Asterion’s derision, Strixhaven rules were clear, as all good rules were. If he got caught sneaking Asterion off campus, he’d be in a position similar to that of two years before when Commandant Huerty Kostambul of Rundlestrom Military Academy levied every threat he could think of to Quint’s physical health, the health of his family, the honor of his father, and the countless generations of loxodon who would emanate from his line.

“How did an insignificant runt like you best three of my best cadets?” Kostambul had screamed across a desk strewn with all manner of edged weaponry. For his part, Quint stayed silent. Nothing he said in that room, to that individual—a fellow loxodon notwithstanding—would have saved him. The truth was Quint had no hope of defending himself from the three brutes who’d decided that it was his day to be hazed—no physical hope, at least. Luckily, he’d always known that he could cause things to move, to twist and turn, to suddenly fall at opportune times. At home, he’d used these magical gifts to stop runaway sheep from straying too far from the flock. One time, he prevented his father from falling into a well by causing the cover to snap shut. It was a fairly simple matter to reach out and drop a wall banner on the head of one attacker, suddenly undo another’s boot laces, and cause the last to trip, fall, and break his arm. He liked to think of it as extending his own clumsiness to others. Quint’s talents (and his magnanimity) did not endear him to his instructors.



*Expelled*, read the piece of paper he was given before being shown out.



Expel | Art by: Billy Christian

“Quint, are you ready?” Asterion asked.

“What if we get caught?” Quint couldn’t help but imagine his parents’ faces if he returned home in shame again. Last time, it had cost them a useless suit of armor and weapons. This time, it would arguably be worse. They’d lose any notion that Quint had a destiny outside of herding sheep.

“Don’t think that way,” said Asterion. “Life is about risk! Let’s go!”

Asterion led the way, and Quint had no choice but to follow. They ducked into shadows and slowly made their way around the camp. As they reached the halfway point to the trail that led down and around a lower cliff, Quint’s toe snagged on a root jutting up from the ground. Before he could grab onto a branch, he stumbled forward and slammed onto the ground. Worse was his pack, which flipped open, spilling out his papers and tools onto the rocky terrain.

“Who’s there?” a voice called out from the group huddled around the fire.

Quint grimaced. What was that comment on his expulsion report? Ah, yes: *Quintorius Kand has the coordination of an elderly packbeast, one blind in both eyes and riddled with pox*. While he wouldn’t have put it quite that harshly, Quint had to admit that he wasn’t exactly the lightest on his feet, even for a loxodon. He looked over to where Asterion was, only to find him gone. Turning his head, he spied a member of the research team approaching his location, torch held aloft. By the time he got up to his feet, Quint saw that it was Professor Ghostforge himself.

“Quintorius?” he said, holding his torch upward. “Why are you not back at campus?”

Thinking fast, Quint got onto his knees and began to haphazardly throw his belongings back into his pack. “Uh, yes I should be at campus, sir.”

“Explain yourself.” His professor eyed him in a way that made Quint feel uncomfortable. Hofri had gained acclaim at Strixhaven for rousing spirits of the dead even without a material focus like a statue.

How else could he accomplish that without having keen insight into others—including knowing when people were clumsily dodging direct questions?

“I, um, forgot some tools at the site.”

Hofri looked down and toed the mess of picks and brushes Quint was stuffing into his pack. “You mean those?”

“No I mean my other set. The good one. Not that I think anyone would steal—”

“Why don’t you join us by the fire?” said Hofri. “Stay for a while, have some tea. Then you can get your toolkit and return home.”

Quint opened his mouth to refuse, but then reconsidered. A quiet night with some of Strixhaven’s most learned scholars? Most students would kill (or at least seriously maim) to have that kind of opportunity. These professors were active practitioners, not like the fat retired generals at Rundlestrom drilling cadets on battlefield maneuvers they themselves hadn’t executed in decades. Having any time with them outside of an official capacity was rare and valuable. He wanted to take it, to learn what it was like to be a successful archaeomancer, a successful person in the world.

On the other hand, if there was a possibility that Zantafar was right under their feet, Quint wanted to be the one to find it. He thought about how Kostambul dismissed him and then imagined his face if he found out that Quintorius Kand was the one responsible for returning Zantafar to the loxodon people. He thought about the pride his mother and father would feel, how others would revere their family.

That’s what he wanted.

“I should be getting back,” said Quint. “I appreciate—”

“This isn’t about your tools, is it?” said Hofri. “How are things with your mentor coming? Still a disappointment?”

“Well, you know “

“You remember Siulogma, right?” Siulogma of Valdrasheen was not a name any Lorehold student could forget. In life, she had been a celebrated scholar responsible for some of the most revered illuminated histories including *Ichor and Iron: Dialogues from the Blood Age* (a required text in Dean Plargg’s course on military tactics). In death she was, among other things, Hofri’s assigned mentor back when he was a young Lorehold student newly transferred from Prismari College. “We didn’t see eye to eye ever. What did she say about me? Oh, yes. ‘I was informed that you had artistic experience! But what I got was a hopeless dullard who besmirches the entire pursuit of creativity! I wish nothing but ill fates for you and your distant kin.’ All because I couldn’t tell mauve from turquoise.”

“Those are very different colors.”

“Indeed,” said Hofri, smiling. “Will you be okay going back to campus?”

“I think so.”

“You know you can talk to me any time. So many think they’re alone. I know I did.”

“I will,” said Quint. “I’ll be okay.”

Hofri nodded and proceeded back toward the fire. If Quint had any conventional mentor at Strixhaven, Hofri would have been it. How was it that someone not much older than Quint had more wisdom than a spirit who had existed for hundreds of years? Quint finished gathering up his belongings, only to turn around and see Asterion waving his hand from behind a patch of shrubs. He hurried back to the darkness where his mentor was crouching low to the ground.

“Deft talking there, Quint,” said Asterion. “Now, onto bigger and better things, eh?”

“Bigger and better things,” Quint repeated.

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The cave Asterion took Quint to did not bear any hallmarks of a remarkable location. There were no signs—at least on the outset—of a city, whether lost, found, or merely misplaced, nor were there any indications that the cave itself was anything but a natural formation. On the way there, he and Asterion skirted a few irregular pits that Quint surmised to be ancient quarries where the stone meant for Strixhaven was mined.

“We’re here,” said Asterion, who led the way holding Quint’s ever-burning torch. The cave floor sloped gently, but not uniformly; rather, the ground descended as a set of natural steps until it flattened out into a large chamber with a single stone column in the center and no other egress. Asterion walked around the column, holding the torch close to the rock to inspect it while Quint stood to the side with his arms crossed. “I remember this formation distinctly.”

“And then?”

Asterion laid his hand onto the surface of the column and stared at it, as if he had only then realized his body was not flesh and blood but cold stone. “And then”—he stood up straight and took his hand away from the column—“we’ll find out together, shall we not?”

Together, they inspected the chamber for any sign or sigil, any slight trace of anything out of the ordinary. “Something doesn’t make sense,” he said.

Asterion looked up from analyzing the base of the stone column. “Like what?”

“No one came across this cave between when you were here and now? Thousands have been all over Pillardrop over the centuries. Its discovery should have been inevitable.”

“Possible is not the same as inevitable, Quint.”

“But over that amount of time—”

Quint set his pack down and scrounged around until he pulled out a bronze-colored scroll, which he unrolled flat onto the ground. Asterion approached and leaned down, holding the torch’s silent fire close to the paper.

“Blank,” said Asterion. “Rather anticlimactic, don’t you think?”

“It’s magic,” said Quint, annoyed both at Asterion’s stubbornness and his own obvious oversight. Both research and military operations held the same first principle—know what you know before looking for what you don’t know. He imagined Commandant Kostambul laughing at his foolishness for not accounting for his resources until this moment.

He hovered his hands over the paper and whispered, “*Radiance, remembrance.*” A single point of golden energy flared upward from the page. From there, several rays spread out like controlled lines of electricity drawn by an invisible cartographer charting the whole landscape of Pillardrop. Quint pointed at a location next to a cave entrance marker. “This is where the location of the dig site is.” Then he traced his finger along a path passing through the encampment—the one that he and Asterion presumably followed—noting the quarries and the riverbed. “And here we are,” he said, tapping another marker at the far north end of the ridge.

“I don’t see how this changes things.”



“These are landmarks charted by other explorers in Strixhaven’s past,” said Quint. “Others have been here.”

“This is the place, Quint.”

“Then I don’t know what to say,” said Quint, rolling the scroll up and taking a seat with his back against the cold stone wall. “There’s nothing.”

Asterion seated himself next to Quint. Neither spoke. Thoughts raced through Quint’s head. Why had he believed Asterion with no evidence? Why hadn’t he used the map when they were back at campus to prove him wrong? What had possessed him to lie to the one professor who’d shown him any sort of empathy?

He turned his anger onto his mentor. “You were so sure!” he shouted, his voice echoing around the cave. “This was a waste of time, and you you’re “

Asterion patted Quint on the knee. “I believe the precise term is ‘a disappointment.’” He smiled as Quint’s expression shifted from anger to surprise and guilt. “In life, I was partially deaf in the left ear. It trained me to be highly attentive.”

Quint hadn’t realized his mentor had overheard his conversation with Hofri. “Why didn’t you say something back at the dig site?”

“I was hoping to prove you wrong,” said Asterion. “I have been a disappointment, haven’t I? Here you are, seeking guidance from an elder, and all you get is a buffoon blustering about lemon curd and his inflated tales of romantic conquest.”

“Inflated?”

“Some, not all,” he said. “But you must believe me that Zantafar is something I am not exaggerating about. That is the truth.”

“I don’t believe you’re lying,” said Quint. “I just think you’re mistaken.”

“Vis wasn’t mistaken,” Asterion said with a quiet gravity.

“You must have been close to him.”

A human being close friends with a loxodon wasn’t anything too remarkable in the present day. Quint only had to walk around campus to see vampires, kor, and goblins engaged in the everyday together. But in Asterion’s time, a noble like him befriending a grizzled loxodon veteran from the wars was no small victory. His reputation only stood to lose from associating with a rustic yokel who could not possibly understand the nuances of finer society—at least that’s how Asterion’s contemporaries would have perceived it. That friendship was a quiet explosion, one that provided the foundation for Strixhaven to become a refuge for all.

“Vis was a good man,” Asterion began. “But everyone has a past. Some celebrate theirs. Others run away. Vis cared for me until I took over my father’s lordly duties when he became too infirm to travel. I visited towns, administered to village councils. That sort of thing. I wasn’t very suited to it. Let’s just say that it was hard for me at the time to empathize with those who had so little. But I played my part because I had to. One day when I was out at a border village, I received a communiqué from my mother telling me that Vis had been arrested.”

“Arrested for what?”

“A merchant traveling through Tarangrad identified Vis as an infamous loxodon mercenary known in human tongues as ‘The Butcher.’ Allegedly, he had torched villages in the name of the Kathorran Empire, then turned around and did the same for its various enemies. By the time I reached Tarangrad,

it was too late. Vis had been placed into the stockade in the town square. For three whole days, they left him stripped and humiliated. No food, no water. The people went about their business, ignoring his cries. They chatted with their friends, bought goods at the central market, mused about the weather while he slowly grew quieter and quieter, until he was silent. Afterward, his body was dumped into an unmarked pauper's grave."

"Why didn't your father intervene?"

"He did. The townspeople demanded that a hobbled old man do his lordly duties and pronounce a sentence. Far be it for a man of the people to refuse, right? When I confronted him, he wouldn't give me an answer as to why he condemned Vis to death—only that he was bound to the law. 'These are the rules,' he insisted."

Stories like this one didn't make it into grand historical epics—minor nobles and arms for hire had been around as long as people had been vying for power. Most never warranted an entry in a historian's encyclopedia. Certainly someone like Siulogma wouldn't waste ink writing the names of Asterion or his family, let alone a servant who'd been pilloried. Lorehold students wouldn't learn about Asterion's story in any class they took, no matter how advanced.

"I don't know if Vis did those things," said Asterion. "I'd like to believe that he didn't. But even if he did, he deserved his say instead of a summary judgment. When the rules are unjust, Quint, they make us into tyrants. I left that day never to return. One way or another, I was going to make up for my father's crime. Finding Zantafar in Vis's name seemed like a good first step."

Quint stood up and extended his hand down to his mentor. "Maybe we're overlooking something."

Asterion took Quint's hand and pulled himself up. "You believe me?"

"I believe in the possibility," said Quint, unable to stop a smile from spreading across his face. "And we've gotten this far, so why not make extra sure we've checked everything?"

"That's the spirit! So where do we start?"

"The legend," Quint began. "Most versions start with a description of the city."

"That's how I remember it."

"And then the fall. Sometimes the elves are to blame, other times trolls or dwarves."

"Correct. Always a betrayal," said Asterion. "Witnessing the destruction of his people, Xyrun-Jed decided that he'd rather see the city fall than have it be plundered and overtaken."

"Some said that the gods of antiquity sent a great earthquake out of justice. Other tellers speak of a spectral army of loxodon ancestors pulling the city into the abyss. And yet others conjectured that Jed himself was a secret wizard and used his magic to seal the city into a realm where its enemies could not enter and claim its secrets. The end result was the same no matter what: the loxodon were spread to the far corners of the Vastlands, never to be reunited until the city of Zantafar was no longer lost."

"And then the Canticle of Jed."

"No," said Quint. "It references Zantafar but isn't part of the legend."

"Vis always included it when he told the story," said Asterion. "He'd say that it was the most important part—the heart of it. That's what his father told him and his father before that."

"Why would"—an idea invaded Quint's mind that was so absurd that it had the ring of truth—"if Zantafar had been swallowed by a cataclysm or a curse from ancient spirits, it is truly lost forever. However, if Zantafar had been hidden, those who hid it would have made sure that only the right people could have access."

"A loxodon," said Asterion.

"Or one who knew the stories of the loxodon people." Quint approached the stone column and spoke the lines of the Canticle of Jed aloud:

*Descend the steps, O pilgrim, O wanderer. To find Zantafar, you must seek it, To seek Zantafar, you must embrace it, To embrace Zantafar, you must accept it, To accept Zantafar, you must know its heart.*

A low rumble shook the cave, and with a grinding sound, the column retracted into the ground, leaving a hole that led to pitch-black darkness.

"I remember," Asterion began to say as he and Quint approached the hole. His whole body feeling revived, Quint dug into his bag until he fished out a mallet, pitons, and rope. He hammered a piton into the stone and lashed one end of the rope onto it, pulling the knot taut.

"I'm going down," he said, holding his torch with his trunk. Quint crept to the side of the hole and tightened his grip on the rope. There was no sound coming from below—no wind, no water, no evidence of movement. "When I yell up, you can follow, okay?"

"Wait," said Asterion. "You do realize that if I did make it this far, I didn't return."

"I do. But this is too important to back out now."

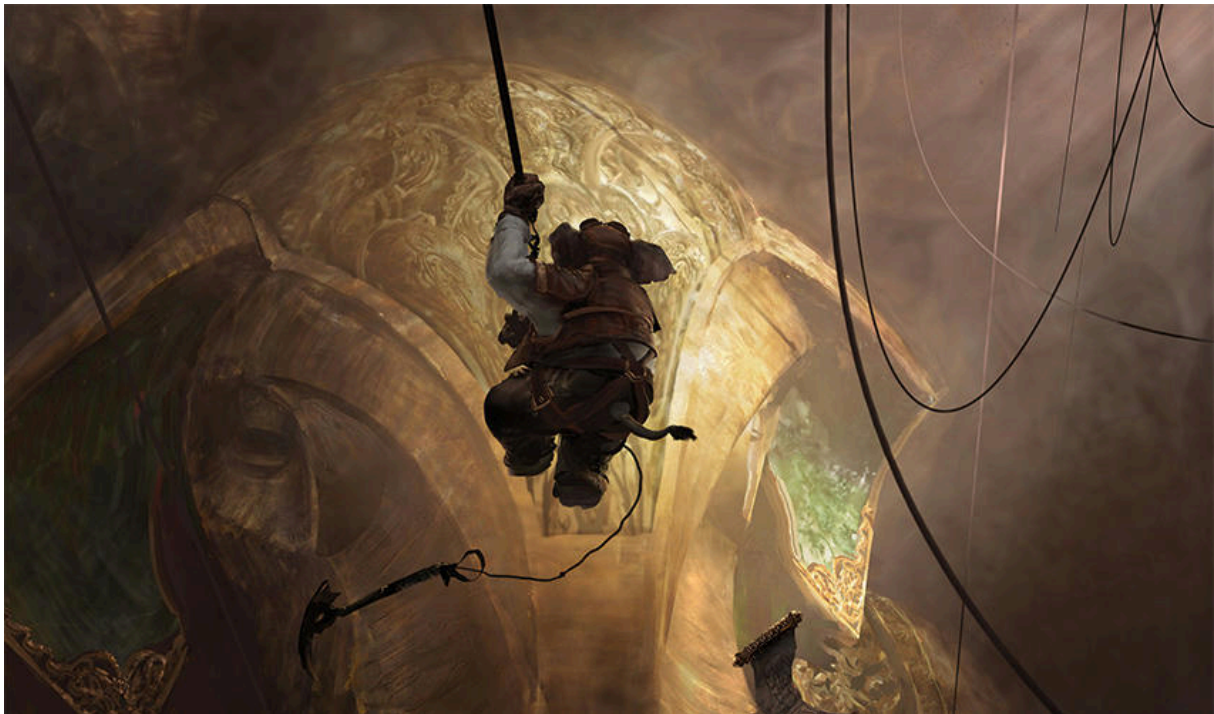
"As your mentor, I'd like to advise you to be more prudent."

"Now of all times?"

"Do you know what it's like to be dead?" asked Asterion. "It's being in a place of mist and silence, wandering hallways that end abruptly or turn in upon themselves endlessly. Stairs that go nowhere and hills that descend into infinity. It is existing in a place of forgetting, of endless wandering with no purpose. Every grand door leads to a dingy broom closet. Every shutter opens onto a window obscured by relentless grime. It's where I go when I'm not with you. I don't know if it is my penance or if this is the fate of all who die, but I would spare you this if I can. I'd like to not have more death on my conscience."

"I understand. But I'm not here alone, like you were. If something happens, pull me up."

Quint bent his knees and squared his shoulders as he leaned back over the hole. Asterion knelt by the piton and gave him a nod. With a push of his legs, Quint lowered himself into the darkness. For the first minute, all he could see was the rock wall. But soon, the opening widened into a large chamber. At first, he thought the glint off the chamber wall was some kind of mineral deposit. But as he descended, the shine proved to be coming from an enormous golden statue of a loxodon in repose, laden with inset gemstones and jade that dazzled his eyes. It easily dwarfed the statue of Kollema, one of the first professors of Lorehold, in the center of the hall that bore his name.



Thrilling Discovery | Art by: Campbell White

Quint reached the ground and yelled up to Asterion to climb down while he got a closer look at the statue. No nameplate present, but he couldn't help but think that this was a monument to Xyrun-Jed himself. If it was made of pure gold, as Quint suspected it was, its value might exceed the treasures of some of the greatest nations in the Vastlands. This treasure was nothing, however, compared to what lay beyond it.

"Quint," he heard from behind him. It was Asterion standing over what Quint had thought was a mound of dirt on the ground.

Quint approached and saw a human body, or what was left of one after six hundred years. Bits of metal bound to scraps of cloth covered the gray-blue of mummified flesh. Upon closer inspection, Quint spotted breaks and fractures in some of the exposed bone. The left leg was bent in an unnatural way, opposite the knee, and the left arm looked like it had been broken in several places.

"I fell," said Asterion. "I didn't think it would be so far down. Such a stupid, impetuous mistake. I thought I had done something tremendous when I was simply a fool whose life amounted to nothing and whose death was meaningless."

Quint put his hand on his mentor's shoulder. "That's not true. You found something meaningful to every loxodon on Arcavios." He extended his torch and directed Asterion's gaze to the cavern beyond. "You found *that*." Nestled into the rock far below, a sprawling ghost metropolis rose from the stone, lit in an eternal twilight by luminescent fungi above. A distant palace spire rose over the rooftops, inviting the first guests in millennia to enter and explore its secrets. "How about we look around?"

"Quint, my friend, I've been waiting for centuries. Not a moment longer."