

Episode 1

Valerie Valdes

From set *Lost Caverns of Ixalan*

20. 10. 2023

Quint

As Quint planeswalked from a dimly lit stone corridor into leaf-dappled sunshine, the heat slapped him like a moist towel. It reminded him of Detention Bog, but the ground here didn't squelch, and the bell-shaped flowers on the vines twining around the trees smelled pleasant rather than corpselike. He turned in a slow circle, examining his surroundings with interest until he stepped into a cloud of tiny bugs. Then he did a lot of spitting and waving his trunk around, tripping over a rock and falling to one knee.

Clumsy as always, he berated himself. At least no one was here to see it.

Except, unfortunately, something was. He looked up and found himself dangerously close to an open mouth full of curved pointy teeth. They belonged to a two-legged creature covered in bright feathers, its sharp talons carving grooves in the ground. His heart sped up in fear and wonder. Mostly fear. This, presumably, was one of the infamous dinosaurs of Ixalan.



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Art by: Néstor Ossandón Leal

With a sound between a growl and a screech, it leaped toward him.

Quint dodged sideways, landing in front of another dinosaur. They were smart enough to flank. That was bad.

A third, larger creature joined the others. They circled, beady eyes tracking every twitch of his trunk. Perhaps he could use his magic to drop a branch on them, or make them run into each other? He started to trace a sigil in the air to drive them away. Before he completed the spell, the dinosaurs froze and looked to his left.

Someone emerged from a crumbling stone structure. Tan skin, dark hair pulled back from a face he saw in profile. Her muscled arms, bracers, and the sword tucked into her belt suggested she was a warrior, while the smoothness of her skin marked her as a youth—no older than her late teens, maybe early twenties.

“Pantlaza, come,” she said. The third dinosaur trotted obediently to her side, even though it was tall enough that its head was at her eye level. With the flick of a hand, she dismissed the others as if they were trained pets, and they disappeared into the jungle.

The girl faced him, one of her brown eyes covered by a metal disk, like an eyepatch. “Are you Quinto-rius Kand?” she asked.

“I am,” Quint replied, eyeing the vine-covered ruins. A pyramid? Was that limestone? With effort, he shifted his attention back to his savior. “Call me Quint. Thanks for the help. And you are?”

“I’m called Wayta,” she said. “The warrior-poet told us to expect you.”

“I can’t wait to meet her,” Quint said, fanning his face with his ears. Ixalan was a sauna compared to the dry heat of Pillardrop. “Do all new arrivals receive a dinosaur welcoming party?”

“No,” she said. “We’ve had strangers appearing in odd locations, so patrols have increased. Can’t be too careful after the war.”

“Understandable.” Quint stepped toward the ruins. “Is this Orazca? From Saheeli’s descriptions, I expected more gold.”

Wayta followed his gaze. “That isn’t Orazca. Come this way.”

Quint trailed after her. Through a gap in the trees, sunlight glinted on metal. He moved toward the light, shading his eyes as he stepped past the barrier of foliage and saw the full, blinding brilliance of the golden city in the valley below. Spires like needles reached high into the blue sky, burnished roads and buildings stretched into the distance, and at the center, an enormous temple rose like a gleaming mountain.

“Ah,” Quint said. “Yes. That is more gold.” He rubbed the afterimages from his eyes. “I don’t suppose you could guide me? Are you busy? Do you know the city well?”

“Well enough,” Wayta replied, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Better than I do, I’m sure,” Quint said.

“True.” Wayta cracked a smile. “You trust easily.”

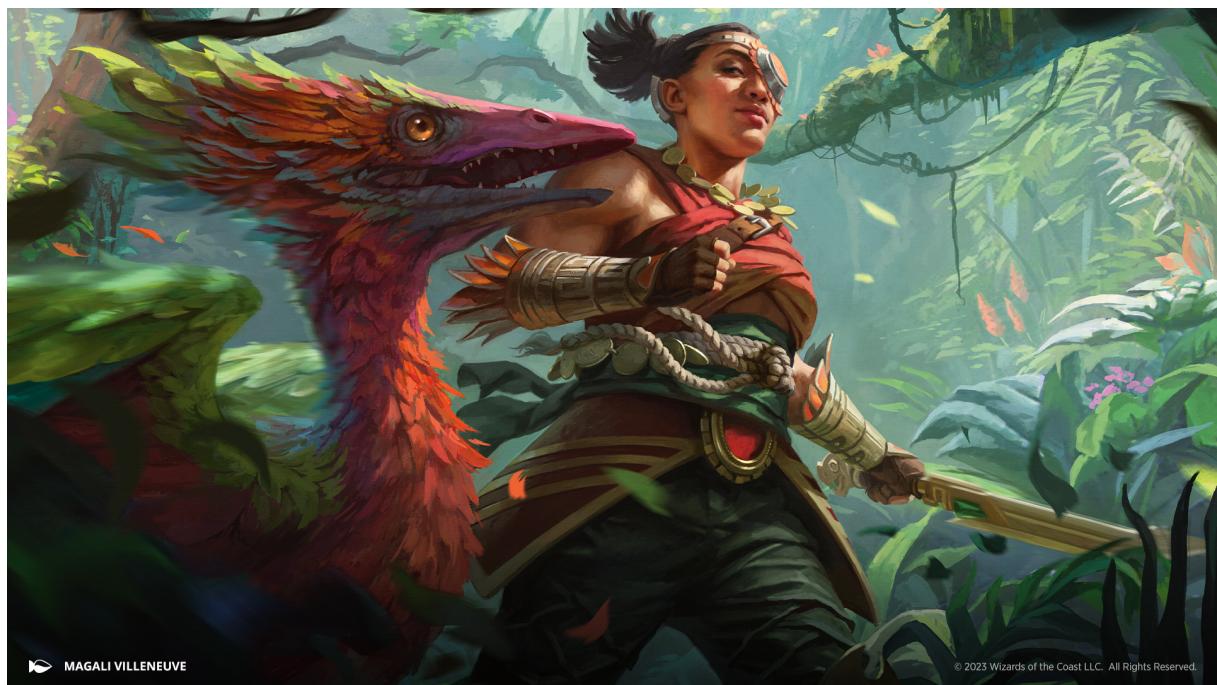
“You didn’t let the dinosaurs have loxodon for lunch,” Quint said. “That’s good enough for me.”

They hiked down the hillside to the arch towering over the gates to the city. People, carts, and dinosaurs jostled for space, watched by guards wearing silver helmets with winglike crests and wielding spears adorned with bright orange feathers. The broad central avenue funneled them into a market, stalls and blankets arranged in concentric circles that spread out from a fountain at the center, fed by aqueducts. Some stares followed Quint, but he ignored them as he trailed after Wayta, examining spiny pinkish fruit here, gem-studded necklaces there. It was hard to believe this place had been battered by war,

but the wounds still showed, in fallen buildings and gouged walls and unevenly colored patches in the streets beneath his boots.

They reached the palace entrance, where Wayta consulted with a guard while Quint inspected the designs on the walls, the red and white paint faded with age. He was surprised to find depictions of a sphinx; he hadn't realized their influence extended to this plane as well. This one seemed to be giving something to a smaller figure, or perhaps receiving a gift? Before he could continue his examination, another guard appeared and led them, not into the vast pyramid, but around it, to an unadorned building partially damaged by magic near the edge of the city. Acid-eaten holes marred the door, while scorch marks on the walls traced gruesome outlines of the presumably deceased humans who had once stood there.

"This way," Wayta said, gesturing for him to precede her.



Art by: Magali Villeneuve

Quint stepped into a bare room with stairs at the back. Voices drifted up as he descended, finding himself in a much larger room covered in painted murals and reliefs of warriors emerging from a cave to worship a figure with a sun glyph behind their head. On the floor, a series of copper tablets were laid out, carved with glyphs and inlaid with jade, cinnabar, and gems—amber, turquoise, and rose quartz, if he wasn't mistaken. Along another wall, this one decorated with warriors fighting some impossibly tall bipedal creature, a door made of gold and silver and copper stretched from the floor to the ceiling. Rectangular alcoves in the door suggested the tablets had been set into them.

Two women paused their conversation as he entered. Both had brown skin, dark hair and eyes, but the similarities ended there. Saheeli was taller, with sharper features, and wore a deep red dress and elaborately wrought golden jewelry, while the other—presumably Huatli—carried herself like Wayta, like a warrior, her silver armor supporting that assessment. She sat on the floor, surrounded by the tablets, until the dinosaur Pantlaza ran over and knocked her down like a massive, eager puppy.

"Quint, you made it!" Saheeli exclaimed, rushing to his side. "Welcome to Ixalan. Sorry I wasn't there to greet you, but the Omenpaths are less ... flexible than planeswalking. This is my partner, Huatli."

“A pleasure,” Huatli said, trying to see him past the dinosaur’s head. “I had hoped Pantlaza would be less energetic after some exercise outdoors, but clearly I was mistaken.”

“He had fun sneaking up on me, at least,” Quint said. “Thanks for inviting me here, by the way. When Saheeli told me you’d found evidence of the Coin Empire here, I knew I had to see it.”

“Have you figured out who your long-dead friends are?” Saheeli asked, touching his arm lightly.

“Not yet,” Quint said. “I’ve tracked them through various planes, but they’re still an enigma. The Coin Empire isn’t even their name, just something I call them ...” He trailed off, examining the tablets. “Is this the project you needed help with?”

“It is,” Huatli said, smiling up at Saheeli. “I believe they’re the key to opening this.” She gestured at the huge door. “The glyphs form a poem, and the parts I’ve translated suggest we’ll find the birthplace of humanity and home of the gods somewhere beyond.”

“That’s quite a claim,” Quint said, squinting. A trumpet of excitement escaped him as he pointed to one of the tablets with his trunk. “Those are the coins! They’re just like the ones—”

“Huatli, are you still down there? The sun will forget your face if you don’t come out occasionally.” A man descended the stairs, muscular and armored, radiating calm and amusement.

Huatli grinned at the newcomer. “Inti, welcome,” she said. “Did one of your sisters send you because I missed a meal again?”

Inti smirked as he scratched Pantlaza’s head ridge. “I heard our guest had arrived, and yes, I came to check on you and Saheeli. You can’t eat ancient rocks, no matter how hard your head is.”

“Quint, this is Inti,” said Huatli. “Seneschal of the sun, dinosaur rider, hero of the war against the Phyrexians.”

“And her cousin,” Saheeli added.

Quint inclined his head politely, his gaze sneaking back to the coins on the tablets.

“Before you ask,” Huatli said, raising a hand, “I haven’t found anything about weapons or magic we can use against the Dusk Legion.”

Quint flared one of his ears in her direction. Weapons? Dusk Legion?

“The emperor grows more impatient,” Inti said, his voice now carefully neutral, as if he were reciting someone else’s words. “He once again asks if the door could be opened using other methods.”

“He wants to break it down,” Saheeli explained.

Quint grimaced. Break a priceless artifact? How could anyone even suggest it?

“The tree with shallow roots will not weather the storm,” Huatli replied, shaking her head. “Tell him I’m almost finished.”

“We’ll continue preparations then,” Inti said. “You’re sure this won’t just be a closet? If it’s full of rubber balls, I’m going to tease you about it forever.”

“I’m sure,” Huatli said. “Be ready for a long journey, not a game.”

Inti left, Pantlaza curled up in a corner, and Saheeli began to massage Huatli’s shoulders. Huatli sighed and rolled her head forward.

“You’re doing your best,” Saheeli said.

"So are you," Huatli replied. "How are your creations coming along?"

Saheeli laughed. "I made the mistake of wondering aloud if I could make them breathe fire. The emperor was extremely interested."

So was Quint, honestly. Saheeli's artificer skills were legendary. Strixhaven could charge double tuition for any class she taught, and it would still be full to the rafters.

Huatli wrapped an arm around Saheeli's leg. "I just don't want more war," Huatli said softly. "A fine sentiment for the empire's warrior-poet, eh?"

"And I want you to be safe," Saheeli said, crouching down to embrace Huatli more tightly. "Hard to imagine safety with every plane devoted to discovering new forms of danger, but that's what fire-breathing dinosaur constructs are for."

"I suppose you should get back to your workshop," Huatli murmured.

"I suppose I should," Saheeli agreed.

Quint averted his eyes to give them a semblance of privacy. Saheeli waved at Quint as she climbed the steps, blowing a last kiss to Huatli before she left.

Huatli cleared her throat, skin flushed. "Ready to begin?"

"Always," Quint said, preparing to call the magic that would help him translate. "What do you have so far?"

Within moments, they were settled into their task, and Quint couldn't have been happier.

Malcolm

The body slumped in a pile of half-rotted leaves in the jungle, close enough to Sunray Bay that Malcolm could have walked instead of flying. Bluecoats milled around him, taking measurements and drawing pictures, speaking in low voices that grated on his siren hearing—and his nerves.

"One of your people, Lee?" asked the man in charge of the scene.

It was hard to tell. Strange clusters of mushrooms obscured the corpse's features like red sores, erupting from his mouth and one of his eye sockets. Black veins traced his ashen skin, more fungi growing along his neck and arms. He seemed to be rapidly deteriorating, and yet he'd been alive only a few hours earlier, according to the local who found him.

"I think this is Lank," Malcolm said finally. "He was a miner in Downtown." He raised his eyes to the Bluecoat's. "Captain Vance said he had a note?"

The man held out a scrap of folded paper to Malcolm, who pinched it between two fingers and shook it open.

Downtown under attack, it read. *Send help*. It was signed by the mayor, Xavier Sal, the spattered, uneven ink suggesting he'd scrawled it in an enormous hurry.

That explained why deliveries from the mine had slowed, then stopped a few days earlier, bringing the rest of Sunray Bay's economy—and by extension, the entire Brazen Coalition's—to a grinding halt. Captain Vance had already ordered Malcolm, Downtown's official emissary, to go back to investigate, and Malcolm had been eager to oblige. He owned shares in the lucrative mine, and more importantly, he had friends there.

Now he knew to expect the worst.

"What do you think?" the Bluecoat asked. "Foul magic?"

"Looks like it," Malcolm said. But who? And why?

The Brazen Coalition had plenty of enemies. The Sun Empire was eager to push so-called invaders out of their territory. The River Heralds raided on and off, trying to stop the earthquakes and runoff caused by the mines, though they'd been quieter of late—too quiet. The Dire Keel fleet chafed against the edicts of Governor Brass and might see this as a way to take High and Dry back for themselves by undercutting their source of wealth. Even the Dusk Legion vampires were trying to gain a foothold, wanting riches to take back to Torrezon: They'd just as soon move in like hermit crabs and run the place themselves. Any one of their rivals would be happy to cause trouble in Downtown, but no one had yet stepped forward to claim responsibility.

Sadly, the corpse had no answers. Malcolm would have to do his own digging, and hope he struck gold.

Amalia

Come to me, the voice whispered.

A vast sea of sand stretched before Amalia, dotted with stone islands, the far shore lost in shadow.

Come to me.

Waterfalls of fire poured like molten metal down the walls of a vast cavern, bright and scorching.

Come to me.

A round, golden door loomed, etched with sigils in a language like the Sun Empire's Itzocan, yet different.

Come ...

Amalia bolted upright in her saddle, her arm aching as if she'd been pushed. She blinked owlishly at Clavileño, commander of the soldiers who protected the expedition. He scowled, showing his fangs.

"You were about to fall," he said accusingly, his voice rough.

"Thank you," she replied, still catching her breath. He rode away, cold-eyed as always.

Above her, the branches of the jungle trees wove together like a ceiling of leaves and vines, the air musty with the scent of wet earth from recent rains. Amalia felt a pang of homesickness for the library on her family's estate. It was easy to dream of adventure surrounded by books and peace. Much harder to savor it when tiny worms hanging from invisible threads fell into her collar, and dinosaurs sprang out at her from the green, and storms tried to soak all her maps every afternoon as regularly as the chiming of a clock.

Still, after the war, she wanted to do something worthwhile with her life, something more than poring over dusty tomes. The position of cartographer for the Queen's Bay Company promised precisely that, and now here she was, mapping the wilds of Ixalan.

"How are you feeling?" Bartolomé del Presidio, one of the high officers of the Company, smiled kindly from her left.

Amalia couldn't tell him about her strange visions, or the voice that whispered to her. If she were in the throes of a blood fast, it would have been understandable. But she had fed recently, and yet she kept falling into a trance, seeing and hearing things that weren't there.

"I'm fine, thank you," Amalia replied. "I'm still becoming accustomed to the ... travel arrangements."

"Rough, yes?" Bartolomé said. "Do your best. I have a balm that helps with fatigue. I'll give you some when we stop."

"I'm very grateful," Amalia said.

Bartolomé flicked his reins and moved up in their procession. They were about thirty all told, between the soldiers, the servants, and the penitents seeking absolution for crimes committed in Torrezon. At the front, stiff backed on his massive mount, Vito Quijano de Pasamonte led their expedition. He'd barely acknowledged her when they first met, seemingly absorbed in his own thoughts and priorities, and that hadn't changed during their long sea voyage, or in the days since they left Queen's Bay. When he wasn't barking orders or staring moodily at nothing, he read and reread a battered book no one else was allowed to see. Bartolomé tried to borrow it once; Vito grabbed him by the throat and pinned him to a tree.

She got the sense that the two vampires didn't share the same goals, for all that they purported to have a common purpose.

A Temple of Aclazotz supposedly awaited them in the depths of this continent. Inside that temple, a door. And behind that door, hopefully, a solution to the growing schism that threatened to split the Church of Dusk in a spasm of violence worse than the Apostasine Wars.

Was it the door in her visions? Amalia wouldn't know until they found it. Until then, she had work to do.

She returned her attention to her cartomancy, pulling out the increasingly detailed map of their journey. Their path from Queen's Bay was a red trail that shimmered faintly at their present location. She pricked her smallest finger with one of her fangs, then daubed the bloody digit in a small well of ash, mixing it. So combined, she smeared the solution across the surface of the map, imbuing it with her intent. Slowly, like ink feathering across wet paper, the mix of blood and ash spread to fill the blank portions of her scroll in precise detail.

Come to me ...

Amalia shivered, wishing she knew whose voice called to her. Hoping—dreading—that she'd soon find out.

Huatli

The translation was finished.

Huatli stretched and glanced at Quint, who studied his notes. Wayta stood in a corner, watching them with interest. Huatli repeated the translation to herself, savoring the rhythms of the poem.

We are the Komon, of the Fifth People, sticks and spades of the good place granted to us by the Deep Gods, exiled to the surface by our failures.

We defeated the Great Betrayer, we fought the traitors, invaders, prisoners of Chimir, the Riven Star, the glory of her threefold light hidden.

The Age of the Sun ended in darkness for sixteen full counts of her turning, until the Thousand Moons shattered the circling shell of her prison ...

“What is a full count?” Quint asked.

“Twenty,” Huatli replied absently. “A turning is likely a year. If their system is like ours, that would mean 320 years.”

“Three centuries of darkness?” Quint exclaimed. “Incredible.”

“Horrible,” Huatli murmured. “How could anyone imprison a god?”

“This is the god you believe is like yours?” Quint asked.

“Yes,” Huatli said. “Ours is the Threefold Sun, though we never called them Chimir.” She closed her eyes. “It may be heretical to think they are the same.”

Quint made a shrug-like gesture with his trunk. “The mysteries of the planes are never-ending. New discoveries often rewrite old histories.”

Huatli cocked her head at him. “You sound like you’ve had experience with that.”

“I certainly have. Remind me to tell you about my mentor sometime.” Quint tapped a line on his notes. “What about this part?”

Huatli scanned that tablet.

We leave this memory and key and map, so the seeds of our fruit may spread through the winding ways of Topizielo, to Matzalantli, golden door of the gods, and find the lost roots of our tree.

“I don’t think it means this door,” Huatli said. “There must be another beyond it.”

“Far beyond, if ‘winding ways’ are an indication,” Quint said. “Not that we’ll ever find it unless we get this one open.”

Huatli examined the door. The tablets containing the poem had been embedded in the metal when they were found, but she’d quickly discovered they were removable. Behind the tablets were faint glyphs, one per tablet recess, each a single word.

“Have you replaced the tablets in the order you found them?” Quint asked.

“Yes, that didn’t work,” Huatli said.

“Perhaps a verbal command?” Quint suggested. “I opened a similar door by reciting part of the Canticle of Jed.”

“The what?”

“It’s an important loxodon story. Never mind, it was just an idea.”

“What could I recite?” Huatli mused.

“The poem?” Quint asked.

Huatli frowned pensively. “It’s quite long, and my pronunciations of the old tongue might not be correct.”

“You have a point,” Quint agreed. He flipped one of the tablets over. “Interesting that there are symbols on the door, but not on these.”

Huatli examined the door's glyphs again. Warrior, leaf, farmer, shadow ... simple, common words. None of them matched the glyphs on the various tablets. She read through the poem one more time, looking for patterns she might have missed.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I have an idea."

She reached for the tablet with the line, "we fought the betrayers," and slid it into the hole with the symbol of the warrior.

Nothing happened.

"You might need to put them all in the right spots first," Quint said encouragingly.

Huatli placed the tablet with "lost branches of our tree" with the leaf symbol, then "sticks and spades of the good place" with the farmer symbol, then "The Age of the Sun ended in darkness" with the shadow glyph. On and on she went, until all the tablets were slotted back into the door.

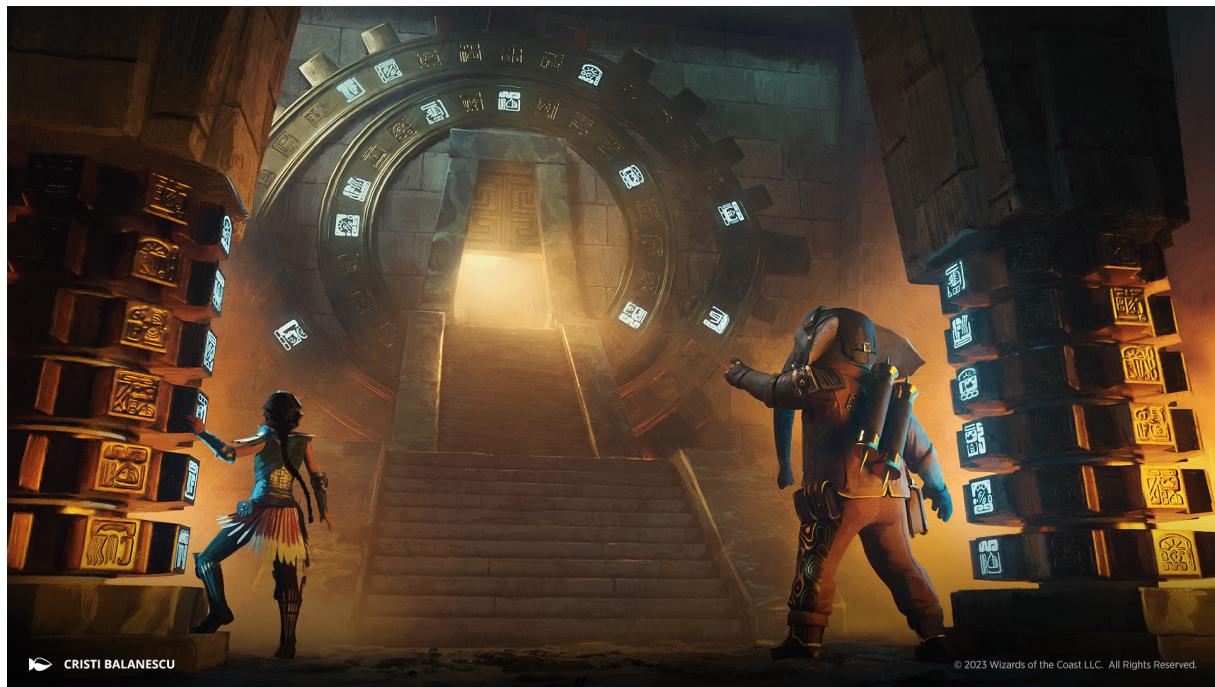
A whisper of magic touched her fingers, and the space around each tablet glowed softly. The glow spread to the edges of the door, and with a deep bass note, it cracked open.

"How did you—" Quint began.

"The glyphs on the door matched the tablets," Huatli said. "Just not directly. Symbolic motifs."

"Ah, of course." Quint gestured with his trunk. "Care to do the honors?"

Huatli gripped the edge of the door and pulled. It made a grinding noise where it dragged across the floor, stale air rushing through the gap. Beyond, a sloping tunnel awaited, cold and dry and dusty, broad enough to fit the smaller pack dinosaurs.



Art by: Cristi Balanescu

"Get a torch," she told Wayta, who quickly complied.

They descended, Huatli leading the way with Quint behind her, Wayta and another warrior in the rear. At the bottom of the tunnel, they found a room large enough to fit a pyramid inside. A row of corpses crouched on the ground in front of the tunnel entrance, wrapped in linen cloth. Strands of jade and

cinnabar beads hung from their necks, and strips of bark were tucked into the bands wound around their eyes. They seemed to be warriors, their weapons resting near their bony hands, though their armor was different from what she and Wayta wore. Beneath their burial linens, their bones glowed a faint pinkish purple, in strange patterns that throbbed with magic.

“What is that?” Quint asked, pointing.

The remains of a massive humanoid creature dominated the opposite corner of the room, its helmet—no, its horns—brushing the ceiling. Dozens of spears bristled from its body, looking small as arrows, some of their hafts snapped despite being made of metal. Rust-colored armor encased its body, with curves and gaps like something between a skeleton and a cage. Desiccated gray skin was visible beneath, and hands the size of a person ended in curved talons.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Huatli muttered. “It’s bigger than the largest dinosaurs—Zacama excepted.”

“Safe to assume it killed these people,” Quint said. “But it was wearing armor. No ordinary beast, then. Why were they fighting, I wonder?”

“Perhaps answers await further in,” Huatli replied. To the guard, she said, “Find the seneschal and the Imperial champion. Tell them we leave as soon as the pack dinosaurs are ready.”

The guard saluted and hastened to deliver the message to Inti and Caparocti. Huatli retreated more slowly, leaving Quint to inspect the remains with Wayta, the torch’s flame casting eerie shadows on the walls.

She cast a last glance at the kneeling warriors and the monstrous corpse in the corner before climbing back up the stairs. Would she be able to find a path to peace down in the deeps, as she hoped, or was this long-ago battle an omen that her quest was doomed from the start?

Saheeli waited in the room above, and Huatli sighed in pleasure as she buried her face in her partner’s neck.

“I wasn’t gone that long,” Saheeli said, her calloused fingers sneaking into a gap in Huatli’s armor to brush her skin.

“And yet it always feels like forever,” Huatli replied. “Let’s have a coffee, just us. Now that the door is open, we’ll be departing soon.”

“To where?” Saheeli’s eyes, lined with kohl, widened. “What did you find?”

“Death and darkness,” Huatli muttered. “Come on, my heart. I need to take my fill of you before we part.” She pulled Saheeli out into the sunlight, twining their hands as they walked the golden streets together in companionable silence.

Malcolm

The name “Downtown” started as a joke and stuck. The mining camp was split between an outpost on the surface and the main village underground in a huge cavern. The actual mine was an ancient, dry cenote that delved deep into the earth, tunnels extending into the rock at various levels like spokes in a machine with hundreds of wheels. Wooden buildings were scattered around the lip of the vast hole, no particular rhyme or reason to their placement beyond the whims of their builders. Cranes and catwalks extended over the void, supporting pulley-operated elevators, while hydraulic lifts and switchback stairs hugged the walls. More pulleys hauled up buckets of ore that was piled into carts

on tracks that crisscrossed the ground. Refineries handled chemical and magical conversions, other processing areas managed the manual cleaning, and silos were filled with product ready for delivery to the surface. Everything was usually lit by giant daylight lamps, magical and mundane, as well as personal torches and candles and lanterns.



Art by: Cristi Balanescu

The lamps were dark, and as far as Malcolm could tell, Downtown was entirely empty except for himself and the people he'd brought from Sunray Bay to help with the investigation.

Breeches adjusted his three-cornered hat with a blue-furred hand, his gold eyes narrowed. "ALL GONE?" the goblin screeched.

"All gone," Malcolm agreed, frowning.

Raw ore sat in mine carts left mid-track, and in barrels and crates, some overturned. Sorting tables were piled high with partially cleaned metals or crystals, brushes and chisels resting nearby as if their users were about to return from a break. The doors to the dormitories stood open, beds rumpled as if hastily abandoned. Food rotted in kitchens and eating areas, and the smell of mold permeated everything.

The only signs of violence were scorch marks on some buildings and a scattering of dropped weapons. Malcolm examined a pickaxe with a strange, sticky substance on it—blood? He wasn't going to touch it to find out.

All of Downtown's pulley elevators were fastened at the top of their cranes, as if they'd been pulled up to defend against a siege from below. All except one.

Malcolm held up his lantern as he approached that lift. It was so dark, he almost stepped in the lines of ichor painted on the ground nearby. He knelt to examine them more closely. One word, the letters thick and blocky.

DOWN.

The feathers on his arms ruffled. If this was a trap, they'd be walking right into it. But how else could he find out what happened to an entire missing town? Like the guttering flame in his lantern, he nursed a faint hope that survivors might be found and rescued.

"You," he said, pointing at one of his companions. "Go back to Sunray Bay and tell them what we've found. You," he said, pointing at another. "Stay up here and wait for us."

Breeches stood at the edge of the void, an inscrutable expression on his goblin face. "DOWN?" he asked.

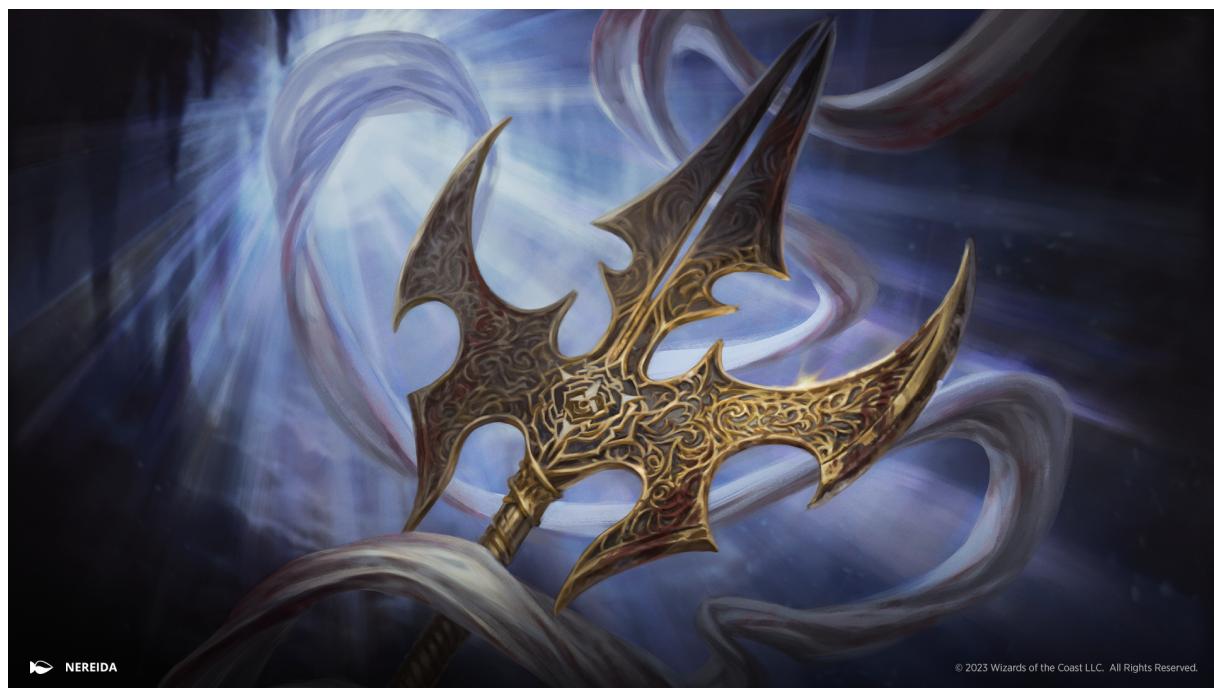
"Yes," Malcolm said, staring at the message. "Down."

Amalia

The crumbling ruins of the temple to Aclazotz were partly reclaimed by the jungle, vines choking the walls, tree roots cracking the stone floors, branches piercing the fallen ceiling. As the blood-red ink of Amalia's spell filled out another area of her map, the soldiers and servants milled around the forward camp established by those who had arrived days earlier.

A hush fell over the gathering as Vito walked among them, radiating resolve and menace. In one hand, he carried a lance, its point a few handspans above his head. In the other, he gripped the book that never left his sight. His blue eyes seemed to blaze with an inner light, and the vampires moved closer as if he were a magnet and they were all metal shavings.

"This lance," Vito began, holding up the weapon, "was wielded by Venerable Tarrian, in whose footsteps we follow. This is his journal." He held up the book. "It contains a record of his travels with Saint Elenda and his revelations, suppressed by the church and recently recovered by true believers."



Art by: Nereida

True believers? Amalia stiffened. Surely, he didn't mean supporters of the Antifex. She'd heard some of the stories—

"Inside this temple," Vito continued, "is a door that leads to the resting place of our ancient god and sire, Aclazotz, creator of the first vampires. Though he slumbers, he can be reawakened by his most faithful servants."

Awaken a god? Was such a thing possible? Amalia bit her lip, wincing as her fangs pierced her flesh. Perhaps she wasn't alone in her thoughts, because a low murmur went up among the crowd.

Vito raised the lance and silence fell again. "If we return Aclazotz to Torrezon, as this scripture promises, he will heal the faithful and bring peace to the land. The schism will end, and we will once again be free to spread our catechism to this savage continent."

Something in his tone made Amalia shiver, despite the heat. Healing and peace sounded like a righteous cause, but at what cost? Was anyone else as unnerved as she was? Bartolomé watched Vito with a carefully neutral expression, so she hid her feelings as well. Who knew what Vito might do if challenged?

"Onward, then," Vito said, gesturing with the lance. "To our destiny."

Vito entered the ruined temple, and with a prescient chill, Amalia joined the procession that followed him.

Inside was a cenote, broad and deep, the curving stairs carved into the side slick with moisture. Some vampires carried lanterns, others lit their way with floating candles tethered to their packs or belts by long chains. At the bottom of the staircase, a doorway led into a room with multiple recesses in the walls. Amalia peered into one, finding a moldering pile of bones. She backed away, bumping into Clavileño, who hissed at her and shoved her forward.

The catacombs continued, room after room filled with the bones of the dead. Priests? Old sacrifices? Did she really want to know? The flames at her back flickered as she walked, casting shadows on every wall.

At last, they reached a large, circular room full of empty candelabras, with a grooved obsidian altar in front of a golden door. Saint Elenda was said to have emerged from such a door.

To Amalia's surprise, this was not the door in her visions.

One of the soldiers attempted to open it, but it remained stubbornly closed. Two more soldiers joined the first to no effect.

"Perhaps it cannot be opened," Bartolomé mused. "Have we come so far for nothing?"

"Aclazotz guides me," Vito said, his voice echoing in the enclosed space. "Clavileño, bring me one of the porters."

Clavileño did as commanded, and soon one of the pale-faced human servants from the camp entered, hands clenched nervously.

"Be not afraid," Vito said. "Venerable Tarrian has written, 'The blood of the lamb shall open the door to paradise.' We are being tested, and we must be strong. Come to me."

The porter approached him hesitantly. Vito rested his hand on the man's head, gazing into his eyes with a benevolent smile.

"Put him on the altar," Vito said.

Clavileño obeyed, lifting the man off the ground with vampiric strength. The porter struggled, wailing as the soldier attempted to lay him on the obsidian slab. Clavileño did not budge.

Vito's gaze fell on Amalia, and she shivered. "You," he said. "Help hold him down."

Amalia cringed, arm raised as if to shield herself.

"His sacrifice will mean his salvation," Vito said. "Do as I say."

"You corrupt the sacred blood rites," Bartolomé protested.

"The rites of the church are a pale imitation of the true sacraments of Aclazotz," Vito said dismissively.
"The journal will help us unlock his power, and you will understand."

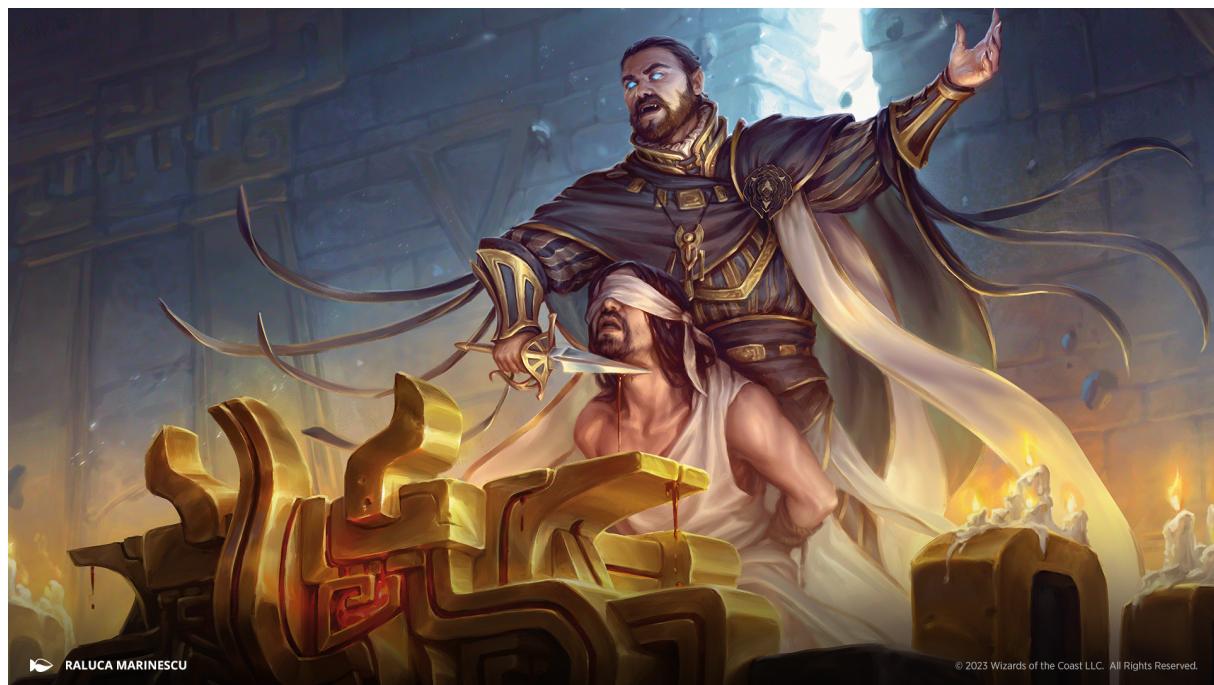
Amalia stared at Bartolomé, appalled, hoping he would stop this travesty. Instead, he backed away, his face once again a mask.

Vito gestured at another soldier. "Help Clavileño." His orders were obeyed, and soon the porter lay prone on the altar, limbs outstretched, keening piteously.

Vito tucked the journal under one arm and unsheathed the knife at his hip. "We offer your life to Aclazotz. This blood is our covenant, everlasting as the life promised to us. In his darkness we are made holy."

With a single swipe, Vito cut the victim's throat. The altar blazed to life, its blackness seeming to glow. Instead of spraying into the air, the blood flowed down the grooves in the altar, to the floor and across to the door, which brightened with the same luminescent darkness.

The door groaned open. A gust of stagnant air emerged from the tunnel beyond like the breath of some foul carrion eater, the flames in the room guttering wildly.



Art by: Raluca Marinescu

"Praise Aclazotz," Vito intoned.

Bartolomé remained silent as Vito issued orders to the soldiers to prepare for departure.

Come to me ...

Amalia drew a shaky breath, telling herself the whispery voice wasn't stronger than the last time it spoke to her. One of the candles hovering at her back abruptly blew out, deepening the shadows around her, and she hoped it wasn't a portent of what was to come.