

Episode 3

Valerie Valdes

From set *Lost Caverns of Ixalan*
20. 10. 2023

Wayta

If someone had told Wayta a few days earlier that she and a loxodon archaeologist would be chasing a ghost through underground ruins, she would have told them to see a healer. Also, she would have asked what a loxodon was.

The ghost—Abuelo, he'd called himself—floated instead of running, his poncho flapping in an invisible breeze as he darted between buildings. Quint raced after him, trunk curled out of the way, and Wayta followed, scanning their surroundings for potential dangers.

Unfortunately, being at the back meant she was the last to see what awaited them around a corner, next to an underground river.

"Titan!" Abuelo shouted, then vanished in a swirl of purple-pink energy. Wayta skidded to a halt, nearly running into Quint's back.

Ahead, a hulking figure loomed, easily twice her height. She might have mistaken it for part of the fungus growing from the walls, until it moved. Its head was a huge, layered mushroom, like those that grew from jungle trees, while its shoulders and chest were clusters of smaller round-topped morels. Jagged, chitinous spikes jutted from the backs of its massive hands and up its forearms.



Art by: Domenico Cava

A low, discordant buzzing, more seen than heard, raised the hair on Wayta's arms. Before she or Quint could do more than stare, the creature charged at them.

"Get back," Wayta told Quint. She brandished her sword to attract the creature's attention, circling toward the rushing river and away from Quint. Tilonalli, smite my enemies, she prayed.

The titan grabbed half of a crumbling wall and threw it at Wayta. She danced sideways, the huge stone block breezing past and landing with a crash behind her. Its impact sent pebbles and splinters flying, slicing her bare skin and rattling off her armor.

With a roar, the titan thundered toward her and reared back to strike. Wayta ducked, lunging under a swipe from an arm big as a tree trunk. She rolled into a crouch and sliced at the back of its leg, then hopped back to her feet. A human would have been disabled; the titan was unaffected. It turned and swung again, and again Wayta slipped between its legs, darting toward its back. She hacked with her sword, carving out a chunk of fibrous material to no effect. She might as well have been fighting an ahuehuete tree.

The point of a spear drove through the titan's chest. Huatli, Inti, Caparocti, and the other warriors had arrived while Wayta was fighting, and as one they screamed and attacked. They surrounded the creature, taunted it, stabbed it, carved away pieces until mushrooms and chitinous bark littered the ground. The pack dinosaurs were kept away for their own safety, but Pantlaza leaped and clawed with the sharp talons on his feet, leaving long score marks in its back.

The longer they fought, the more Wayta's muscles sang with fatigue, her breath burning raggedly in her lungs. None of their strikes slowed the titan down, and it showed no sign that it felt pain. It knocked away their spears, grabbed their swords in its massive hands and tossed them into the ruins. Its wounds oozed black fluid that formed into viscous strands, weaving together until they solidified and burst into new fungal growths. It pulled the spear out of its own chest and swung it at one of the warriors. The weapon missed, but the titan's spiked arm slammed into her like a stegosaurus tail and flung her backward into a wall. She crumpled and lay unmoving. More blackness spilled from the creature's mouth, and it spat at a nearby warrior, who screamed as the tarry substance ate through his armor. Wayta ran to his side to help, but the sight of bloody bone through the remains of the man's flesh told her she was too late.

Wayta would pray for the spirits of the dead later. For now, she fought.

"More incoming!" Quint shouted, pointing deeper into the city.

A dozen new creatures surrounded them, crossing the crumbling bridge over the nearby river, creeping through the deserted roads and clambering over half-fallen walls. Smaller versions of the titan, formed of different shapes and sizes of mushrooms. Some were armed with crude weapons, likely taken from the many corpses in this empty place.

The Sun Empire warriors were now outnumbered and outflanked. One of the unarmed creatures plucked a mushroom from its own body and threw it at the feet of another warrior. The mushroom glowed an eerie green, bursting into thick black mold that encased the man's boots and spread up his legs. He stumbled, and the mold surged into his mouth.

Wayta's heart clenched with the sudden certainty that she would fall in this place, never to see the light of the Threefold Sun again.

Then, the tides turned.

A wave lashed out of the underground river, knocking two of the creatures away. A moment later, a half-dozen River Heralds leaped onto the shore, joining the battle with jade spears and blades and magic.

“This battle is lost,” one of the Heralds said. “Come with us to safety.”

Wayta hesitated. After what happened at Orazca before the war, relations between the Sun Empire and the River Heralds had been tense, even hostile. Could they trust these people?

Trust had to start somewhere. Might as well be here.

Wayta searched for Quint, finding him weaving a spell from behind a wall nearby. An ancient weapon rose from the ground as if wielded by a spirit, spinning through the air and embedding itself in a mushroom creature’s neck.

“Quint, let’s go!” Wayta shouted. He immediately obeyed, and she cleared them a path to the river.

One of the Heralds noticed them and grabbed her free hand. They murmured an incantation, rotating their finger around her face. Suddenly, the air tasted different, thick with moisture. A rainbow sheen covered Wayta like she’d been encased in a bubble molded to her form, and she prodded her own arm, feeling nothing unusual.

“Swift travels, little sister,” the merfolk said, and shoved her into the river.



Art by: David Astruga

Malcolm

The elevator descended deeper into the cenote, cables creaking and wooden supports swaying. Malcolm watched his injured companions out of the corner of his eye, a cold lump of dread in his stomach. Breeches seemed fine, and the ones who hadn’t explored the cave with those horrible dinosaurs, but the others ... They weren’t right.

The black markings on their wounds had spread, a delicate filigree of circles and lines along any exposed skin. Worse, they had begun to glow a sickly shade of green. The pirates didn't complain of pain or discomfort, when normally they'd be grumbling and asking to rest. Instead, they alternated between foggy detachment and examining their surroundings with oddly keen interest.

In the light of his shoulder lamp, the walls of the cenote gleamed wetly, coated with slick fungal growths that were spreading at an alarming pace. The caves had never been entirely dry, but this was excessive. As the scent of rot and mold strengthened, Malcolm pulled a cloth from his pack and tied it around his face, covering his nose and mouth. Breeches mimicked him, and Malcolm nearly laughed at how comical they must look. Like common thieves or bandits instead of pirates.

Not that he'd engaged in much piracy lately. The Brazen Coalition kept him too busy.

The elevator lurched as it hit something. One of the pirates leaned over the edge of the guardrail to check.

"Looks like a big mushroom," she said.

"Can you cut through it?" Malcolm asked.

She nodded, drawing her sword. After hacking at it a few times, the elevator shifted. The pirate sneezed and stumbled backward.

"Gross," she said. "It burst like a sack of flour." She coughed and rubbed her eyes as another pirate thumped her on the back.

Where she had stood, a cloud of glittering green spores rose in the still air, thickening like smoke. Malcolm retreated, eyes narrowed. He glanced at the injured pirates, standing impassively in the center of the elevator, their wounds glowing the same color. Was there some connection?

As if in response, those pirates lunged at two of the uninjured ones and shoved them into the glowing spore cloud. Cries of surprise turned into wet coughs, then gagging and retching, black fluid splattering against the floor.



Art by: Izzy

As quickly as it had begun, the sudden attack of sickness stopped. The affected pirates rose jerkily and faced the others. Their eyes were glassy and green, and black veins stretched across their faces. Air hissed from their mouths like leaking rubber bladders. Malcolm unsheathed his sword and backed away, adjusting the bandanna that still covered his nose and mouth. The surviving pirates had just enough time to draw their own weapons before their infected allies attacked. The tight confines of the space made dodging nearly impossible; every slice or thrust could hit a friend instead of a foe.

“BIG BOOM?” Breeches asked.

“No! You’d kill us all,” Malcolm yelled.

He leaped over the guardrail, the lack of air currents forcing him to rely on his magic to fly. He circled back and clung to the elevator ropes, which pulled him up and away. Below him, the pirates fought desperately, but like the dinosaurs in the cavern, the infected seemed impervious to pain or injury.

Breeches joined Malcolm on the ropes as the elevator continued to descend. “ESCAPE?” Breeches yelled.

At the sound of his voice, the infected looked up in unison with their vile green eyes.

“Cut the lines,” Malcolm said, his blood cold. “Hurry.”

Breeches gripped the rope with both feet and his tail. He sliced one cable with his knife, while Malcolm sawed at the other. The lines were thick, intended to hold substantial weight, and they were less than half cut when the infected started clambering up the side of the elevator.

Though Malcolm’s muscles burned, he sawed faster. The cable in his hands unraveled and thinned, then came apart with a force that knocked him loose. The elevator jerked, the infected pirates inside stumbling. Breeches grimly held on as his line snapped, and with a terrible silence, the elevator fell away into the dark.

Closing his eyes, Malcolm tried to calm the hummingbird flutter of his heart. “Come on,” he said finally. “We can’t stay here.”

He alternated flying up and climbing, Breeches pacing him on the ropes. He diligently avoided a tendril of fungus on the nearby wall, shuddering as an eerily eyelike mushroom seemed to track their movements. Malcolm would have previously assumed it was a figment of his imagination.

Now, he wondered what terrible creature could turn pirates and dinosaurs into mindless puppets—and why.

Bartolomé

As unpleasant as a waterfall of fiery molten rock might be, multiple such spouts and even rivers of the stuff were infinitely worse. If the path to Aclazotz continued through such inhospitable and deadly terrain, Bartolomé wondered whether, despite Vito’s assertions, a god as powerful as theirs was meant to be found.

The goblin-like creatures who had pursued the strange newcomer, Kellan, did not reappear. Even so, the farther their pilgrimage led them into the underground, the more signs of habitation they discovered: buildings carved into cliffsides and stalactites, glowing markers covered in unfamiliar glyphs, gardens of pale leafless plants in sandy soil. They never encountered any inhabitants, but scuttling sounds and glimpses of movement suggested they weren’t alone.

Amalia conversed with Kellan, who examined their surroundings with wonderment and unease. Bartolomé saw his own daughter in the young cartographer, still so innocent despite surviving the deprivations of the recent invasion. To protect that innocence, to guard the future of those like her, he would make any sacrifice necessary.

Thus far, that meant capitulating to Vito's orders. When Queen Miralda assigned Bartolomé to join this expedition, he was told to play along and discover Vito's true intentions and loyalties. He hadn't realized how heretical the hierophant's ideas had become, how far he had turned from the church. He also hadn't been able to discover who gave Vito the lance and journal of Venerable Tarrian, but it suggested that the opposition to the queen, the faction supporting Vona de Iedo and other so-called prophets, was larger and more unified than they had hoped.

What if Aclazotz himself aligned with the Antifex? Bartolomé shuddered to consider it.

The Legion entered a larger, flatter plateau overlooking a pair of lava falls. From one moment to the next, silence yielded to shouting and a clatter of motion. Clavileño's soldiers circled the others protectively, weapons drawn.

Two dozen warriors surrounded them, taller than the vampires, broader, with faces like great cats and spotted fur to match. They wore elaborately decorated helmets and armor and wielded bows and vicious-looking serrated obsidian blades and polearms. Bared fangs promised violence, and Bartolomé wasn't eager to test their skills at arms. They had sheer numbers on their side, unless one counted the Legion's porters and prisoners.



Art by: Marie Magny

"You will come with us," one of the cat-people said, brandishing a polearm covered in glyphs.

"Who are you?" Vito asked, his voice cold with authority.

"I am Kutzil, champion of the Malamet," was the response. "You will come with us, or you will die."

Bartolomé cleared his throat. "We are on a holy pilgrimage," he said. "We seek only safe passage through these lands. We mean you no harm."

Vito's glare suggested he resented either Bartolomé's intrusion or his lies.

Kutzil shifted her gaze, head tilted. "Your mission is not our concern. Sovereign Okinec Ahau will decide your fates."

Clavileño looked to Vito. "Orders?"

"We've fought too much already," Bartolomé told Vito quietly. "Morale and supplies are low. Diplomacy may serve our cause better than making enemies."

Vito returned his attention to Kutzil. "I would meet your sovereign," he said. "Lead us."

The Malamet warriors kept their weapons trained on the Legion. With her polearm, Kutzil gestured for them to follow.

Vito leaned closer to Bartolomé. "Do not undermine me again," he said quietly, his voice thick with menace.

Bartolomé inclined his head in acknowledgment.

They followed Kutzil across more stone bridges, deeper into a city of these people, the Malamet. Now that they were escorted, the denizens of the homes appeared, as well as some of the odd, pale goblins. Bartolomé marveled that an entire culture existed in these caves and tunnels and had never traveled to the surface and made contact.

Perhaps unsealing the doors as they had would lead to something fruitful. Or, given how distrustful these people were, perhaps not.

Kutzil halted the company. "Behold," she said. "You are the first strangers to see Ban Koj since the time of the Oltec."



Art by: Steven Belledin

Bartolomé stepped back, a hand rising to his mouth in awe. The few huts their group had passed in the hours before were nothing compared to this sight. An entire city—easily the size of Alta Torrezon—was built into a cluster of stalactites so large they might have been inverted mountains. Some buildings

looked hewn directly from rough rock, while others featured painted white walls like pottery. Rope bridges and nets extended between buildings, as well as thick cables from which strange carriages hung, their wheels at the top to let them move back and forth. Passengers rode inside, climbing out to join other Malamet as they stalked along the unsettling, suspended streets.

Bartolomé hid his nerves behind a placid exterior as the catfolk split the Legion into two groups for transport up into the city. Escaping from this place would be nearly impossible if diplomacy failed. Some of the soldiers could fly, being skymarchers, but everyone else ... His gaze slid to Amalia, who was standing close to Kellan, the twitch of her fingers near her sword showing her anxiety.

The Malamet warriors continued to guard them as they marched across a wide stone bridge to the largest of the stalactites. Unlike the rest, this one didn't have any buildings carved into the exterior, not even windows. Instead, hundreds of enormous glyphs covered every visible surface, glowing intermittently.

They passed through a huge opening at the end of the bridge with a rotating door at the center. More armed guards stood at attention as they passed, silent as the stalking predators they resembled. One of the Legion's porters veered too close, and the nearest guard growled.

The interior of the stalactite was filled by an enormous pyramid carved from the rock, hundreds of steps leading to a small room at its peak. A strange susurrant echoed in the cavernous space, its source invisible.

Thankfully, they were not forced to ascend the staircase, and were instead led inside the pyramid to a long room flanked by carved pillars, between which Malamet crouched on woven mats. Their elaborate headdresses and collars suggested some form of nobility or priesthood, and they all stared at the Legion members as they passed, some showing fangs that made vampiric teeth look tame by comparison.

Seated on a throne on a raised dais at the end of the room, a large, armored Malamet idly toyed with a massive, serrated sword. This, presumably, was Sovereign Okinec Ahau.

"What have you brought us, Kutzil?" He asked.

Kutzil bared her throat deferentially as she spoke. "Invaders from the surface, Sovereign," she replied.

"We are only passing through," Vito said, bowing politely.

"You will speak when spoken to," Kutzil growled, pointing her polearm at Vito. With a sneer, Vito ignored him.

Sovereign Okinec Ahau eyed Vito curiously. "What is your purpose in my realm?"

"We are pilgrims," Vito replied. "We are on a journey to the land of Aclazotz, our god."

"There are no gods here but me," Okinec Ahau said, gripping his sword. "Poq," he said, looking to a group of robed advisers to his right. A tawny-furred, burly Malamet stepped forward, his arms crossed behind his back. They wore a simple silver harness, richly etched with glyphs and pictographs. His hair hung down in locks, weighted at the end with small, flashing silver medallions.

"Poq is my mythweaver," Okinec Ahau said, introducing the Malamet. "He will speak. With our words, he will see through yours."

Poq nodded. He raised his arms in front of his chest and ushered one small, soft word. The scent of rain, scouring lightning, and the heat of a dry summer day filled the air. Swirling green mist appeared between his claws, coalescing into shapes that built upon themselves, revealing a cloudy, but discernible image:

A snarling face, its fangs bared and growing long. The face twisted, rippling, as it noticed the Malamet around it. With a screech, it snapped forward, biting at Mythweaver Poq like a beast snapping at food.

Mythweaver Poq dropped his hands, dismissing the image. He looked to Okinec Ahau, shook his head, then walked back to his place among the assembled advisers.

Okinec Ahau stood and addressed the assembled Malamet, speaking above the Legion soldiers. “One invasion begets another,” Okinec Ahau said. “We will not allow it.”

The Legion soldiers shifted to defensive postures. Bartolomé rested a hand on Amalia’s arm, and they exchanged a worried glance.

Sovereign Okinec Ahau gestured at the seated figures. “I sentence these trespassers to be given to the sand. Let my justice be done.”

A few of the vampires drew their swords, and Vito aimed his lance at the sovereign. Before they could attack or defend themselves, however, the Malamet flanking them growled and raised their arms.

Glowing glyphs seared the air, mimicking the spots on the Malamets’ fur. The magic lashed out and wrapped around the Legion members like chains, forcing them to kneel. Vito struggled, but his lance was pressed uselessly against his chest. He glared at Bartolomé so venomously that if looks could have killed, Bartolomé would already be dead.

“This isn’t fair!” Kellan shouted from the back of their group. “We haven’t done anything!”

Sovereign Okinec Ahau bared his fangs. “The fire does not concern itself with fairness. It simply burns.”



Art by: Adame Minguez

One by one, warriors carried the Legion to a large fountain, a jaguar head at the top. But instead of water, sand flowed from the carved mouth, pooling below and draining into a large hole. Vito was the first of their party to reach the structure, his eyes blazing with wrath.

“Though I am beset by enemies,” Vito intoned, “my god will grant me strength and vengeance. His will be done.”

Bartolomé watched as the Malamet threw his comrades into the basin of sand, some succumbing silently while others screamed or fought. Vito went in head first, the lance still pinned to him by the magic chains that kept him bound. Clavileño followed, hissing and baring his fangs. Amalia stayed still and eerily calm as she sank down, first her legs and then her arms disappearing below the surface. She murmured something to herself that he couldn't read on her lips, eyes wide and unseeing. Kellan, across from her, struggled and flailed at the sand, panic obvious on his face as he slid closer to the gaping drain.

Just before Amalia vanished, she told Kellan, "Hold your breath."

Had she been granted a vision? Bartolomé hoped so, because otherwise their mission was at an end, and he was to blame. He followed her lead and let the Malamet lift him in their large coarse-furred arms, fighting his own fear as he was unceremoniously tossed into the fountain's basin. His only consolation as the sands claimed him was that Vito wouldn't have the chance to do more mischief in Torrezon. He only wished that goal hadn't come at so high a cost.



Art by: L.A draws

Wayta

Wayta tumbled through the cold dark of the river. An impossibly fast current pulled her forward, the light of the Threefold Sun affixed to her belt casting wild shadows around her. She realized that she could breathe, no doubt thanks to the spell the merfolk had cast. Even so, she had little control over where she went, and could only do her best not to be dashed against the walls or the riverbed.

Sometimes she glimpsed a wider cavern above her, or the ground opened below like a lake or cenote. Sometimes flashes of glowing green teased at the edges of her vision, or the tunnel forked, and she glimpsed some unreachable alternate path.

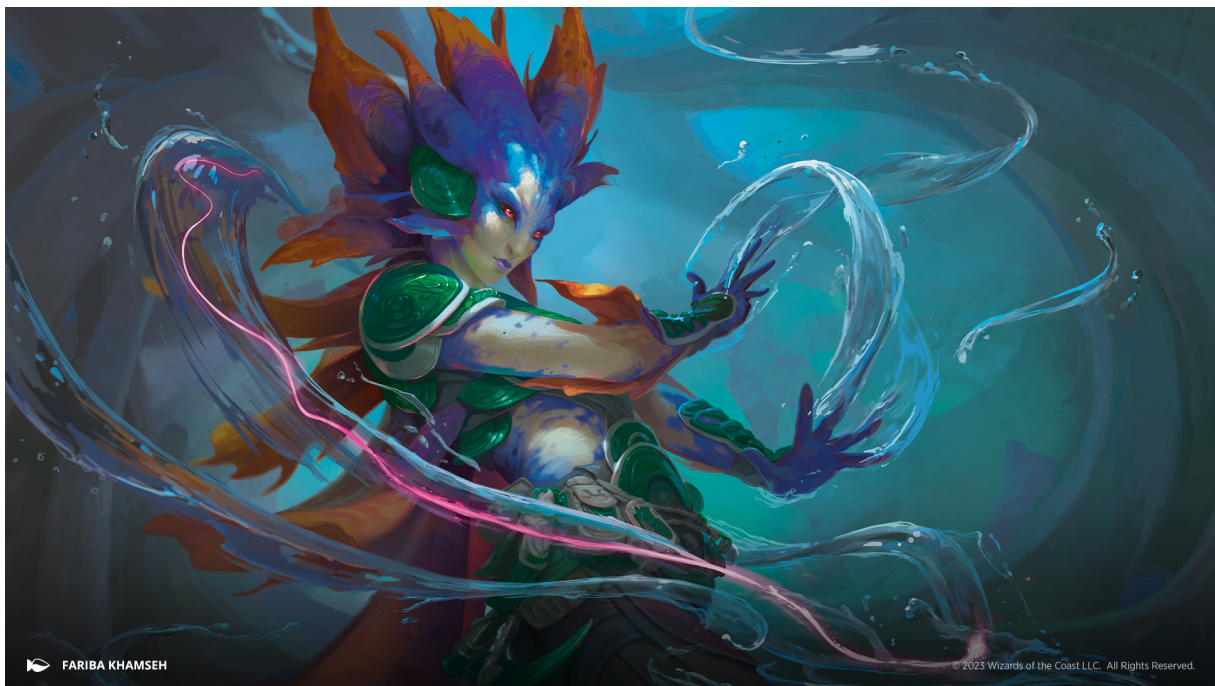
Through it all, the current carried her toward its unknown destination. Finally, after an age, a new light appeared in the distance.

With a brief increase in pressure, she burst out into open water, cold and clear. Wayta kicked her way to the surface, searching for the others, finding some of them already swimming toward the nearest shore, including the scout who had pushed her in. Merfolk guards lingered nearby, their fins rippling as they bobbed in place, watching her progress but not moving to help or hinder her. She soon flopped onto the land, glad to see Quint beside her already sitting up and peering at their surroundings with undisguised awe.

A massive stone city rose from an underground ocean—freshwater, not salt—and extended down into the depths even farther, stepped in a manner like temples to the Threefold Sun. Bright lamps burned above low buildings, while long strings of bioluminescent baubles and baskets holding firebugs lit the visible streets and alleys. Everywhere she looked, River Heralds walked or swam or rested, watching the newcomers warily and talking among themselves.

Huatli wrung out her clothes, surveying the area. “There must be thousands of Heralds here,” she said, wincing as Pantlaza shook himself and flung water everywhere.

The young merfolk scout flared her gills. “My mother says it’s the greatest assembly of merfolk bands Ixalan has ever known.” She held out a hand to Wayta, who accepted it and stood. “I am Nicanzil,” she said. “Be welcome.”



Art by: Fariba Khamseh

Huatli furrowed her brow. “Why are you here, if I am not too bold in asking?”

“We await the opening of the final gate to the source,” Nicanzil said, gesturing at the corroded door at the top of the temple’s staircase. “My mother, the Great Shaper Pashona, can tell you more. She found this place after the death of the Deeproot Tree.”

Huatli stared at the door, squinting as if to see it better from a distance. “Could this be Matzalantli?” she murmured. “Have we truly discovered the door that leads to the birthplace of humankind, the home of the gods, as the poem claimed?”

“If it is,” Quint said, “I wonder what else they’ve found here. Did the Coin Empire make it this far, or did they remain closer to the surface? And imagine what historically significant artifacts might be lurking

in some ancient cupboard.” He checked the seals on his scrolls, apparently satisfied that everything was intact.

Wayta regarded him with curiosity and faint unease. “What would you do with artifacts if you found them?”

“I’d love to establish a proper excavation site,” he said. “To be sure everything is treated as carefully as possible.”

“And then what?” Wayta asked. “You dig things up and leave them there?”

“Not necessarily leave them there,” Quint said. “I suppose it depends on what all of you want to do. Whether you want to keep everything here, or take some items back to Orazca, perhaps even set up a museum.”

“So, people would come here to ... ogle things?” Wayta frowned. “How strange.”

Quint laughed. “I suppose it does seem odd. It’s one way of making sure the stories of the past aren’t forgotten.”

“Ah, like the warrior-poet,” Wayta said, glancing at Huatli.

“Right, yes!” Quint exclaimed. “I’d make notes over the course of the excavation, then write up a detailed account for my colleagues on Arcavios, to share what we found.” His gaze grew distant. “Maybe I could publish it across the Multiverse somehow ...”

Wayta’s frown deepened. “But it is not your story.”

Quint’s ears flared slightly. “Well, no, I would just be the one telling it.”

“Why you?” Wayta pressed. “You are not from Ixalan. You are not of the Sun Empire, or the River Heralds. You shouldn’t be telling our stories for us.”

“Perhaps not telling, then,” Quint said, looking away over the water. “Recording. Disseminating. I am trained in this, you know,” he added with a hint of ire. “I won’t trample all over your history.” He pulled his goggles off his head with his trunk and began to clean them with a cloth. Wayta huffed a breath, wondering why she cared so much. Why this bothered her. Sure, she had once dreamed of following Huatli’s example and earning the mantle of warrior-poet herself someday. But the war had shattered those dreams like the pottery they’d found in these caverns. She’d been a soldier, and a pirate, sometimes helping the Brazen Coalition steal and sell not only artifacts from Torrezon but from her own people as well. Those thefts had paid her passage and kept her fed, never giving her more than an occasional hint of guilt. She’d deserved more than she’d gotten from the army, hadn’t she? But she’d left all that behind. And now she was—what? An explorer? Could she also be a collector of stories? Those of her homeland, and her people?

Huatli, who had sat quietly nearby as the conversation proceeded, now offered Wayta a soft smile. “Not everyone understands the power of words,” she said. “The control it can give over others.” She began to recite part of a poem Wayta didn’t recognize.

When my bones sleep in the earth, Who will share memories of me? Friends may raise monuments while enemies profane my grave. When they, too, have passed on what will their children remember?

“Sad, to think of how so much is lost,” Wayta murmured, looking up at the strange door atop the pyramid in the distance.

Huatli squeezed Wayta’s shoulder companionably. “And yet, such joy when something lost is found, and when what is found is shared.”

Wayta glanced at Quint, then at Inti and Caparocti, organizing the other soldiers and issuing quiet orders. Perhaps it was best if some things remained buried, depending on what people intended to do with them. Perhaps some monuments deserved to be brought down.

She hoped whatever was behind that mysterious golden door to the so-called home of the gods was a blessing and not a curse.

Malcolm

The tunnel where Malcolm and Breeches settled to catch their breath smelled dry and disused, possibly abandoned after the veins had been exhausted, or because nothing was found to warrant further exploration. He and the tunnel's creators had that much in common: He had no desire to delve any deeper. His muscles ached, and his head throbbed from using too much magic.

The mystery of Downtown's mass disappearances almost certainly related to all the mold and fungus. He didn't fully understand how it worked, but he'd seen enough of what it could do to be afraid. Their supplies were at the bottom of the elevator shaft, and of the eight people he'd brought down here with him, only he and Breeches had survived.

"All dead, no gold," Breeches muttered morosely.

"Too true," Malcolm agreed.

Should they continue or turn back? If they left now, Malcolm would have to report to Vance that he'd found few answers and even more questions. If there were survivors from Downtown or his Sunray Bay squad somewhere down in the dark, he'd be abandoning them to their fates—and some of those people were his friends, and none of them deserved to be left behind. Moreover, Downtown would remain empty, and recruiting new miners would be difficult, if not impossible; who wanted to work in a place where all the previous denizens had disappeared? And if no one was mining, then no money was flowing to the Brazen Coalition, and it was only a matter of time before the fragile economy fractured into the old feuding pirate fleets.

Malcolm had loved his time sailing, navigating, flying free over the rolling waves through sun and storm. Feeling the thrill of divesting pampered merchants of their goods, and rival pirates of their lives. But after the war, he'd been almost relieved to settle into a more stable existence. To lose that now ... It wasn't something to consider lightly, not when he might still solve the problem. Not when he might save people if he chose not to give up yet.

"What do you think, Breeches?" Malcolm asked, leaning against the tunnel wall. "Do we head back up and live to fail another day? Or do we keep going down into the unknown?"

Breeches removed his hat and scratched his head, then shrugged. "NO MINE, NO GOLD."

"There are other mines," Malcolm said. But none as large or productive as Downtown, if he were honest. "And anyway, the dead can't spend coin, can they?"

That was it, then. He'd all but talked himself into leaving. Vance could send someone else—a lot of someones, Malcolm would recommend. Though that might end with many more people turned into ... whatever had become of his companions.

A faint glow in the shaft caught his attention. Malcolm struggled to his feet and peered over the edge of the tunnel, a hand on the hilt of his sword.

Fungus climbed the wall, growing at an impossible speed. Black tendrils formed networks of circles that bloomed into various mushrooms, some small and feathery, others stepped like stairs, still others ridged like coral. The effect was chaotic and eerily beautiful even as it turned his stomach.

Some of the tendrils moved like ink on a page. As Malcolm watched, he realized the fungus was forming words, too dark to make out. Slowly, those words began to give off the same sickly green glow that had overtaken his lost people.

SAFE, the first word read. Then, DOWN.

Was this a truce, or a trap? Malcolm couldn't be sure. But now he knew that whatever had done all of this was sentient. If that was the case, perhaps diplomacy wasn't out of the question. Perhaps the residents of Downtown really were alive somewhere below, and he could get them out safely.

Hope was the most dangerous weapon of all, and Malcolm felt it slide between his ribs to his heart, sharp as a blade.



Art by: Daarken

Amalia

The sand pressed against Amalia's body, dense and heavy, worse than water. The grit seeped into her clothes, her nose, even her mouth and eyes, though she closed them as tightly as she could. Distantly she remembered telling Kellan to hold his breath, and she had done so, too. The longer she held it, the more she wondered whether her vampiric abilities would shield her from suffocation, whether she would spend eternity trapped in this river of sand, unable to die, unable to drink life-giving blood.

As if summoned by her fear, visions once again consumed her.

The mysterious door, round and covered in glyphs, clearer than before. It was set into the stone of a cavern wall, its coppery surface tinged with green corrosion.

A sky filled with faintly purple-tinged clouds, only beyond the sky was ... ground? As if someone held a vast map somewhere above her, painted with all the colors of the land it was meant to represent, greens and browns and blues and snowy white.

A sphere burning brightly as the sun—was it the sun? It couldn't be. Strange metal scraps floated around it, reminding Amalia of broken plate armor. More pieces trailed behind like debris from a shipwreck, glowing a purple-pink.

Come to me ...

The pressure around Amalia suddenly eased, becoming a sensation of falling. Without warning, she hit water, her eyes flying open. How had they reached the ocean? No, this was freshwater. Disorientation sent her swimming in the wrong direction, toward what looked like a city, before she realized the buildings were underwater. She turned and kicked the other way, finally breaking the surface with a gasp. Around her, others did the same, including Kellan, to her relief.

They weren't dead. She had been so sure the Malamet were going to kill them all, then that the quicksand would do that work, yet once again they had survived. Simple luck? Or the will of Aclazotz?

Before she could feel more than a momentary pang of relief, a flurry of motion in the water surrounded them. River Heralds, dozens, all armed with their strange jade weapons and elemental magics.

"Do not provoke us," one of the merfolk said. "Come quietly or you will be subdued by force."

Vito snarled and Bartolomé cast a worried look at him. Certainly, trying to fight Heralds in their element seemed a fool's errand.

Kellan coughed and swam closer to Amalia. "I can't believe this is my third time being ambushed in one day," he said mournfully.

Amalia snorted a laugh. "Careful that you don't make it a habit. Those can be hard to break." Kellan grinned and playfully splashed her, then they followed the other vampires as the merfolk herded them toward the shore to an unknown fate.