

Pawns

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Saheeli stood on the white sand of some lonely strand of Ixalan's northern coast. She held herself and contemplated simply walking out into the ocean. Sparking blue out to the cloudless horizon. In another life she could have stepped out across that distance with a thought. She had traveled some, but save for short moments with Huatli, her adventures around the Multiverse were always driven by a mission: Save the plane. Save every plane. How far could she go now?

Saheeli rocked her heels back and forth, sinking a little into the sand with every gentle wash of the waves up the beach. It was a hot day, and the water around her ankles was cold. Save the planes, she thought. There were so many of them. So many to see, so much wonder—terror yes, but wonder besides. It was all so much larger than her. And now there was only one plane, one ocean, one unknown land beyond the horizon. From the infinite to the miserably finite; the swirling portal, the rip in the Multiverse—an Omenpath—that she followed here had closed behind her. Foolish to take the risk, maybe. A rare moment of acting before thought.

She watched little clams wriggle into the sand around her feet. Blind, reactive little creatures, tossed and tumbled through a great ocean to wind up here with her. Saheeli reached down, plunged her hands into the sand, and scooped up a double handful. She washed most of the sand away, using her fingers to act as a sieve until the sand was washed away and only clams remained.

"Hello," Saheeli said to the clams. She watched their white tongues probe around the creases in her palms, searching for a way out.

"Where do think you're going?" Saheeli whispered.

The clams ignored her and continued to search. Eventually, they stopped, accepting their fate. Saheeli knelt, the cold water soaking her rolled-up trousers, and gently lowered her hands back into the water. The next wave washed the clams away, tossing them back to the sand where they dug in and disappeared, all trace of them washed away with the receding water.

She tried. Nothing. She plunged a hand into the water and into the sand to stop her from falling—a brief, dizzy sway, consequence of grasping and finding nothing.

Huatli's laughter called her back to the present. She turned to see Huatli and Pantlaza—her new quetzacama companion, one of the most promising of a new litter of raptors—running through the shallow surf, splashing and darting around each other. Huatli held a wooden sword that she used to direct Pantlaza—nominally this was training, call-and-recall close quarters practice for combat, but to Saheeli it looked indistinguishable from play. The joy on Huatli's face, Pantlaza's eager bounding and chirping, the clack of his jaws snapping the air with excitement and the boundless energy of youth.

Saheeli smiled. She stood, brushing the water from her arms and legs. She waved to Huatli, who came jogging over through the surf, Pantlaza in tow.

"You and he seem like a good fit," Saheeli said, bracing herself as Huatli threw her arms around her.

“He is beautiful,” the warrior-poet laughed, out of breath, smelling of sweat and sun cream and the ocean. “And I am sun-drunk and exhausted. I need to cool off—back to the shore or into the water?”

“To the shore,” Saheeli said. She kissed Huatli, then pushed her ahead. She followed Huatli up the hot sand to the shade of the oceanside jungle, where they laid out on a wide blanket. Huatli rummaged around in her pack and pulled out a flask of water, from which she drank, then offered to Saheeli.

“Right,” Huatli said, watching Saheeli drink. “What are you not telling me?”

Saheeli smiled again, soft. “It is so beautiful here.”

“And you seem so sad about that,” Huatli said. She squinted and looked out to the ocean, where the waves glittered and crashed. “Did you try to walk again?”

“Yes,” Saheeli whispered. “I felt nothing.”

“Worse,” Huatli said. She threaded one finger through Saheeli’s hair, slowly twirling it. “You feel a hole. A cavity. Pain, like a missing limb that has been sunburnt.”

Saheeli nodded.

“With my spark, I felt whole,” Huatli said. “A part of me revealed. Freedom. Now that it is gone,” Huatli cupped a hand before her chest, as if holding her heart. She squeezed that hand into a fist, her knuckles cracking, then shook her hand—dispelling again what had been dispelled already.

“Sorry H, I didn’t want to bring you down here with me,” Saheeli said. “I don’t like being sad on the beach. It’s too nice today.”

Huatli shrugged. “It’s nice every day,” she said.

Saheeli snorted. She flicked Huatli’s arm. “Don’t be funny, I’m actually sad about this, *and* I feel silly for being sad about this. For a little while there we were blessed by the infinite; I don’t think I ever considered we could lose that blessing.”

“It’s ok to be sad,” Huatli said. “It is as you said—we lost a gift. We lost the Multiverse. All its stories and all its wonders.” She sat up. “What do you think happened?”

Saheeli smiled. Huatli knew her well—of course she had already thought this out.

“There is a rule,” Saheeli said. “A law of reality that asserts that its fundamental elements—mana, aether, those things—cannot be created or destroyed. Only changed,” Saheeli mirrored the way Huatli had cupped her hand with her own, then moved it out, away from her chest. “Movement is change.”

“So you think our sparks ‘changed’?”

“Right. Our sparks were moved. Not destroyed,” Saheeli dropped her hand back into her lap. “You cannot destroy the fundamental elements of reality. Life and death, being and nonexistence. It is all the same substrate, only the expression changes.”

“And the location.”

“And the location,” Saheeli agreed.

“Where?”

Saheeli shrugged. “Somewhere. I don’t know.”

“If they were taken, we can get them back.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“Someone can,” Huatli offered. Saheeli smiled, looked away. “In the meantime,” Huatli said, “we have Ixalan. And all of this.” Huatli pointed to the horizon. “What do you think is over there?”

“I don’t know,” Saheeli said. She looked back to Huatli, who was grinning. “What?”

“I don’t know either,” Huatli said. “The pirates of the Brazen Coalition might know, but I don’t. Officially, the Sun Empire has never sailed north.” She stood, offered her hand to Saheeli, and pulled her to her feet as well. “We can go together, the slow way, and find out. Explore this world that is new to you and me both.”

Saheeli would like that, she thought. The slow way, with Huatli. She leaned in. “I’m still sad,” Saheeli said, whispering, her lips brushing Huatli’s.

“Me too,” Huatli replied. “But we are here together. And we can go there together.”

Saheeli smiled. She would like that very much.



Art by: Kieran Yanner

Days later, Huatli and Saheeli stood among the assembled advisory council in the temporary throne room of the citadel at Orazca. The boy-emperor, Apatzec Intli IV, had traveled here with a great retinue as part of his post-invasion, post-coronation tour of the lands under his dominion. His arrival to Orazca was the cause of much celebration—the Emperor of the Sun Empire, once more in the City of Gold, the place of legends and potentials. The people sang and cheered all through his arrival; though the work of repairing the city of the wounds it suffered during the invasion continued, it progressed with vigor. This was not the solemn remaking of a city that had been lost; this was the triumphant resumption of business as usual.

Intli IV clutched a bright, stuffed, knit quetzacama, sucked his thumb, and struggled to stay awake. He wore dark colors and muted metals, still in mourning following his father’s death at the end of the war. This world, like the boy-emperor, was new and rich with possibility—and burdened by the aspirations of the old guard that survived. The advisory council had just finished with lunch, and the emperor’s afternoon retirement was approaching. Amid the soft clatter of attendants cleaning up the

council's lunch spread, the susurrus of private conversations, and the distant roar of Orazca's repopulated streets far below, sleep beckoned.

It was a humid afternoon, alternating between golden sun and driving rain as the day's clouds marched over the city. Saheeli sighed, looked out at the grand panorama of golden Orazca and green Ixalan beyond, spreading out to the hazy horizon. She sipped her sweet, iced hibiscus drink and tapped her nails on the fine glass.

Home. For now, or until the end of her time? Saheeli savored the delicate hibiscus flavor, then chewed on an ice cube, crushing it. She looked over the council and the boy-emperor, knowing that she should be paying closer attention, but struggling against a deep exhaustion. She took another sip of her drink, trying to shake that fatigue, and forced herself to run through what she knew again.

Apatzec Intli IV would continue his father's rule, but the previous emperor had not planned to die at the hands of a Phyrexian assassin: the boy ascended the throne in the wake of the invasion, still a child, barely able to sign his name much less understand and sway the politics of his court or his empire.

And what politics! Soon after Saheeli's arrival and subsequent stranding on Ixalan, Huatli schooled her in the game that gripped this high court. On the one side was Atlacan Huicintli, the boy-emperor's uncle and posthumously legitimized paper son of the late emperor. To the naive, Atlacan's charge was to rule over the day-to-day of Pachatupa as majordomo to the emperor. To anyone with a modicum of political awareness, his desire for the throne was evident as the dawn.

Opposing Atlacan was Caztaca Huicintli, the apex priest of the Threefold Sun and eldest daughter of the late emperor. Prior to its destruction in the Phyrexian war, Caztaca held dominion over Otepec, a vast city of temples built in reverence to the Threefold Sun. While the empire worked to rebuild her domain, she resided in Tocatli, the Imperial citadel above Pachatupa, steering the course of the faith and ministering to the young emperor as his chief tutor.

A volatile situation. An empire split between aunt and uncle, both attempting to sway the boy and shape the future of the nation according to their desires. What history led to this moment would be upended as these giants struggled for command, racing against time to win the boy-emperor's heart and mind before he grew wise enough to understand that he was only a gilded tool for their ambition.

This was peace. A sweet drink, a meal of spiced meat and citrus, and boredom. Saheeli half-listened as the mighty of the Sun Empire discussed the course of things to come—translated to her in a soft whisper by Huatli, who sat at her side. It was odd, this boring moment: Saheeli was sure that she should feel something *more* than boredom while party to the power struggle unfolding before her over the rudder of Ixalan's mightiest state, but ever since the nerve-burning terror of the Phyrexian war and stripping of her spark, this struggle felt so small.

"Darling," Huatli whispered, leaning in to interrupt Saheeli's moment of reflection. "They want to know how far along your automatons are. Your mechanoquetzacama."



Art by: Cynthia Sheppard

“Mechano—” Saheeli snorted, stifling a laugh. Huatli’s eyes went wide, and Saheeli remembered the rest of the council and emperor were there with them. She turned her laugh into a throat-clearing cough, buying a moment to recompose herself. “The mechanoquetzacama, yes,” she said, using the emperor’s word—in reality, Atlacan’s word—for her filigree quetzacama. “Production is slow at the moment, but—”

Atlacan spoke, interrupting her.

“Please stand when you address the emperor,” Huatli translated, saving a sharp look for Atlacan.

Saheeli could tell Huatli withheld the worst of what Atlacan said—she understood enough Itzocan—High and Low Imperial—to get the gist of it. She obliged, though, standing and smoothing down the front of her tunic. Huatli stood with her, as she would be interpreting. Saheeli folded her hands before her and spoke, evenly and slowly while Huatli translated what she did not yet have the vocabulary to articulate.

“We produce around a dozen of my filigree quetzacama daily,” Saheeli said. “My first cohort of engineers are all experienced enough now to teach their own pupils, which some of them have begun to do.”

“The emperor wishes to know why production is slow,” Huatli translated. “We have given you every ingot you need. Why do we not have a—” Huatli frowned at Atlacan’s words. “Why do we not have the full amount of our laborers?” She finished, brow still furrowed at Atlacan, who had leaned into the emperor’s ear, preparing to speak Saheeli’s response to the boy.

“We have a talent bottleneck,” Saheeli said. “It is true that we do not lack for resources, and for that I am ever grateful. Your grace and generosity know no earthly bounds.” Saheeli dipped a courtesy toward the boy-emperor. “But the burdens on myself and my engineers to teach and build are too great to overcome. Though our warehouses are full, we only have a handful of people experienced enough to assemble the parts our artisans create.”

“Then you cannot deliver what is promised?” Atlacan asked.

“No, Lord Steward,” Saheeli said. “We can deliver what the emperor has asked for, it will just take longer to fulfill. At our current rate of production, I anticipate a delay of six to eight months.” Saheeli smiled through the surprised murmurs that followed Huatli’s translation. She let the consternation pass, and then continued.

“I have every intent to finish this project as planned,” Saheeli said, raising her voice to be heard over the rising din of side talk, mutterings, and rumblings. “I have sent for aid from the colleges at Strixhaven and the Consulate in Ghirapur. Both planes are home to consummate scientists and engineers who would bring prestige to the empire.” She was losing them, she thought. An appeal to the heart, then. “Like Huatli,” Saheeli said, “I have lost my ability to walk the planes of the Multiverse. Ixalan is my home now, and the people of the Sun Empire are my people now.”

“And the emperor is your liege,” Huatli translated, her voice soft in the fading echo of Atlacan’s bellow. “Whose word is the word of Kinjalli, the command of Tilonalli, and the will of Ixalli. You will have the emperor’s mechanoquetzacama complete in the time first promised, or there will be consequences—consequences any servant of the Sun Empire would expect, rather than leniency given to our guests.” Huatli listened to the rest of Atlacan’s shouting, one hand drifting up to the small of Saheeli’s back. “He hasn’t said anything else that needs translating,” she whispered, shaking her head.

Atlacan finished, composed himself, and then waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. Saheeli understood that. She nodded. Huatli spoke for them, begging their departure and forgiveness, blessing the young emperor and promising glory to the empire and assurance that the project would be complete as promised.

“Poet,” Atlacan called out, halting them.

Huatli held Saheeli’s arm and squeezed—a comfort. Steady.

“We have heard tale and rumor of ancient chambers far below this city,” Atlacan said. “Secrets long buried, only just uncovered by our soldiers during their patrols.”

“What chambers?” Huatli asked. “I have been over, above, and below Orazca. No such chambers exist.”

“Maybe you have,” Atlacan said. “But you did not delve deep enough to discover what the emperor’s own soldiers have found.”

Huatli kept her face composed, but Saheeli could see the vein pulsing near her temple. “I would ask some time to outfit and prepare my company.”

Atlacan leaned over to the boy-emperor, ignoring Huatli to whisper to the child. Emperor Intli IV listened, grinned, and nodded. “An adventure,” he said, his voice high and bright.

“The emperor blesses your campaign,” Atlacan said. “You are dismissed. Go and gather your things.”

“My company—”

“Your company will remain in Pachatupa,” Atlacan said. “It will take far too long to march them here. Instead, you will accompany Caparocti Sunborn and his lancers on this journey and serve as the eyes of the empire. They have been told to expect you and await your presence before they depart.”

“As you wish,” Huatli said.

“As the emperor commands,” Atlacan corrected.

Huatli said nothing. She bowed, then led Saheeli out of the throne room.

“What was that?” Saheeli asked.

“Orders, that is all,” Huatli said. She held a finger to her lips, shushing her. “We need to go somewhere private. Follow me.”

The streets of Orazca were crowded and loud, hot and rich with the smell of cooking meats, spices, and roadside industry. Hawkers and vendors shouted their appeals while buyers haggled in groups. Children laughed and chased small quetzacama, while larger beasts snorted and bellowed, driven by their handlers, hauling carriages of goods into the city from the healing lands outside the walls. The empire, so close to death during the invasion, was alive now, though wounded: quetzacama carted loads of ruined masonry and contaminated debris away from the city to distant dumping grounds. Even though the oil was rendered inert, the city leaders would not risk exposure. The oil being rendered inert was as sudden as its arrival, with no guarantees that it would stay harmless.

Huatli guided Saheeli through the busy streets. It was a festival today—kites flew over the city and children darted between the thronging crowds of happy celebrants. Tens of thousands of people crowded Orazca—citizens of the empire who came here after the invasion’s end left their home states ravaged and inhospitable. Saheeli and Huatli were anonymous in the crowd, their conversation protected by the sound of the city and its people.

“H, what’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Huatli said. “I need to make some arrangements before I depart. Come with me.” She pulled Saheeli through the crowd, navigating the both of them through the crowded streets. “This peace is an illusion. Pieces are moving faster than I thought.”

“And what pieces are we?”

“Pawns, my heart,” Huatli said. “But pawns who know they are being played. Here.” Huatli pulled Saheeli into a cluster of stalls off the main avenue, where vendors were busy grinding masa and singing work songs. It smelled richly of earth and the cigarillos the women smoked. None of them looked up from their labor—other people wandered in off the main street from time to time to buy goods, so Huatli and Saheeli stepping into the plaza were not noticeable.

Huatli checked that they had not been followed.

“Atlacan wants to resume his father’s war,” she said, satisfied that they were alone. “He wants to punish Torrezon.” She pressed herself close to Saheeli, cradling her, acting as if they were stealing an intimate moment in the shadows between the stalls. “He is already building a second Dawn Fleet in Queen’s Bay, larger and mightier than the first.”

“Another war,” Saheeli groaned. “The people won’t stomach it,” she said. “They can’t—there are still Phyrexian wrecks in the streets and the jungles. The empire is still rebuilding.”

“It does not matter,” Huatli said, gripping Saheeli’s arms. “The banners will rise, the priests will bless them, and the people will be swayed,” she whispered. “Atlacan will have the emperor order me to write an oration, and if I do not, then he will have one written for me to issue—a recitation to open the campaign, to invoke the Elders.”

“Can’t you—”

“I can’t,” Huatli said, shaking her head. “I am the warrior-poet. I serve the empire.” She clenched her jaw and stepped back from Saheeli. “Without my spark I cannot escape the consequences of resistance. I must play my role. He cannot know that I oppose him, not yet.”

“What can we do?”

"There are other players."

"Caztaca?"

"She holds the emperor's heart and mind. Atlacan commands his gut, but Caztaca can turn him to be kinder, to not be his father's son or his uncle's instrument." Huatli nodded while she spoke, as if working to convince herself even as she laid out the choice she made. "The future of the empire should be with her."

"What do you need me to do?" Saheeli asked.

"I don't know how long I will be gone," Huatli said. She slipped into her command voice, Saheeli noted. A deeper register, to protect herself. "There was a meeting planned. I need you to attend it."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"That cannot be it. I should come with you—"

"No, my love," Huatli said. "You have sent for help through the portals, right?"

"Omenpaths, yes." Saheeli said. "I lied about Ghirapur. The last Omenpath that appeared opened only to Arcavios; I immediately sent a request for aid, and they said they would send a student of history. A Planeswalker," Saheeli frowned. "Quintorius Kand."

"A Planeswalker?" Huatli asked.

"Evidently. The courier sent me his dossier and we have been corresponding intermittently—the path to Arcavios appears with some regularity." Saheeli said. "Should I tell them not to bother?"

"No," Huatli said. "I might still be able to find a use for him." She crossed her arms, one finger tapping a bicep. She looked away, down. Thinking. Saheeli reached out to Huatli, drawing her attention back. "What do I need to know about this meeting?"

"The meeting is to plan how to depose Atlacan, defang the emperor's guard, and move Caztaca to power at the emperor's side." Huatli said in one breath. She came back, regarding Saheeli with a look of great resolve.

Saheeli exhaled. Pushed a hand through her hair. "You're planning a coup."

"Yes," Huatli said. "We are."

"I need to sit," Saheeli said. In the corner of the little plaza there was a ring of tables and chairs for vendors, buyers, and passersby to sit, eat, and rest. Saheeli led Huatli to an open table and sat. Huatli flagged down a passing vendor and ordered them iced drinks and cold, spiced mangos.

Another revolution. Saheeli's heart ached, recalling the years of Kaladesh's revolt. "This is my home now," she said, "but it is not my land. What do I say at this meeting without you there?"

The mangos and drinks arrived. The two women ate and drank in silence for some minutes, and then Huatli spoke.

"This is an empire of many different dreams. Many different possible futures." She reached across the table and placed a hand on Saheeli's chest, over her heart, then touched her free hand to her own. "Your dreams and futures. Mine as well. This must happen now, or the people will suffer another war." Huatli kept her warm amber eyes fixed on Saheeli's, ignoring the food and drink. "I love you. We are each the other's. At this meeting, you speak with my voice." Huatli said. "My aide, Chitlati—I'll have her

meet you after I'm gone. She will be your interpreter if you need her. In the meantime, I'll let the right parties know you act as my proxy. They will contact you when it is time, and you will go with them."

"You will be safe during this stupid expedition," Saheeli said. A command, not a request. "It is not yours to lead, no matter what Atlacan or the emperor says. You will be a poet and a scribe, not a hero."

"Of course," Huatli agreed. "Whatever waits below this city, I will find out last."

"Good."

"We were ready to act," Huatli said. "We just needed a push—this is it."

Saheeli placed her hand atop Huatli's and squeezed. She understood.

Huatli turned her hand over and squeezed back.

They shared the rest of the chilled mangos and sweet drinks in silence, the two of them lost in the sound and clamor of Orazca, neither wanting to be the first to let go.

Huatli's allies contacted Saheeli only days later, just after the warrior-poet's expedition descended into the caverns below Orazca. The small group of co-conspirators secreted Saheeli out from the golden city to the coast, where she boarded a ship to Queen's Bay. There, in the dead of night among the raw hulls of the new Dawn Fleet, Saheeli boarded another ship, which slipped away from Ixalan and out into the open ocean.

The journey from Queen's Bay across the eastern ocean took nearly a week. Saheeli spent the duration clinging to her bunk belowdecks, sick from a roiling ocean the Brazen Coalition crew assured her was mild and calm. Her first day aboard the *Gunwhale* had been exciting—despite her reservations—but soon enough sea sickness overwhelmed her and sent her below.

A constant surging up and down, swirling without a horizon. Nausea and dizzy spinning, creaking and thudding and coughing and retching. Saheeli spent several miserable days trembling in her bunk, sick and sleepless, drifting between half-sleep and half-wake. In that horrid half-life she dreamed of home and the distance between here and there. She cried out to Huatli. She reached deep within herself and tried to planeswalk away from this place—Ixalan, the rolling ocean, the sickbed ship—and remembered she could no longer do that. She sobbed. She slept for a handful of blessed hours, only to wake parched, her head swimming.

Saheeli emerged from her quarters into a midday as gray and pallid as she, finally able to walk, her stomach settled by the resolution of that argument between balance and motion. Her nausea had broken, and she was famished. The ship was blessedly still, finally at anchor in a calm sea. Dark islands crouched off the starboard side of the ship. Beyond, hazy in the low clouds, was the edge of a continent, rising from the horizon line.

"What is that smell?" Saheeli asked, approaching a mixed group of Sun Empire and Brazen Coalition sailors. The motley crew collected around a coal-fed cooking grate, one coalition salt turning a rack of skewered fillets while a Sun Empire soldier painted the sizzling meat with a rich, dark sauce.

"She walks!" one of the coalition sailors said, calling the others' attention to Saheeli. "Compañeros, make room."

The group shuffled to do as the sailor asked, making room for Saheeli to crowd in around the cooking grate. She wore a blanket around her shoulders. It was a cold and damp hour in the morning, and the heat thrown off by the grate was welcome.

“Drink.”

“Thank you, Chitlati,” Saheeli said, accepting the mug of water Huatli’s attaché offered her.

“Hungry?” Chitlati asked. “They caught a golden thunnini this morning. Apparently, you hardly need to cook it before you can eat it.”

“Aye,” one of the coalition salts said. “Fresh is best. A quick sear with salt and pepper is all you need. Gift of the ocean herself—tender as butter.” He held up a skewer of cooked fish, eyeing the dripping sauce the Sun Empire sailors had painted on.

Saheeli’s stomach rumbled at the rich smell. The pirate offered her the skewer and she took it, biting off a cube of seared thunnini. Pepper, salt, tangy lime, and the rich, clean taste of the fish itself.

“This is the best meal I’ve ever had,” Saheeli said around a second mouthful. “I never thought I’d eat anything other than broth again,” she laughed.

“You were down longer than anyone,” Chitlati said. “Impressive work.”

Saheeli let that go unremarked. “Where are we, anyway?”

“Nearly upon the Sens,” Chitlati said. “I hope you’re ready,” she said. Chitlati looked around Saheeli at the sound of a party approaching from the other end of the ship. “The Apex Priestess approaches—she’s been asking after you.”

Saheeli turned, eating another bite of thunnini, to see a small party of priests and administrators bundled against the cold and wet approaching them. At their center, walking with purpose unaffected by the swaying ship, was a severe woman in fine, if muted, Sun Empire regalia.

“Not for my health?” Saheeli said to Chitlati, who only just managed to suppress a laugh. Instead, she knelt and bowed low, motioning for Saheeli to follow—she was a subject of the empire now, no longer a guest.

“Your worship,” Chitlati said, bowing.

Apex Priestess Caztaca Huicintli, eldest daughter of the late emperor and beloved aunt to the new emperor, waved her hand, dismissing Chitlati and the bowing sailors. “Saheeli Rai,” she said. “I am glad you are well. Please,” she said, slipping her hand out of her robes to give a slight gesture. “Walk with me. We have much to discuss.”

Saheeli did as asked, standing to walk alongside the Apex Priest. Caztaca was tall, made even more imposing by the broad helm of office she wore. She was flanked by a retinue of canchatan—temple guards chosen for their faith, loyalty, and prowess—who were similarly garbed and additionally armored.

“Did Huatli prepare you before she departed?” Caztaca asked. She walked as a glide, unaffected by the heavy robes she wore or the swaying of the ship, her voice always a low lilt—the speech of one who thought in verse, chapter, liturgy. Like Huatli, Saheeli thought, Caztaca knew speech could be a weapon or a balm.

“Yes,” Saheeli said. “She told me of the ... vision that you and others have for the course of the Sun Empire.”

“And you,” Caztaca asked. At no point did she look to Saheeli—her eyes were on the horizon, away with her thoughts. “What is your vision for the course of our empire?”

“I share Huatli’s dream,” Saheeli said. “Peace above all else.”

“Admirable,” Caztaca said. “I have some questions before we proceed. Your quetzacama. You built them and gave them over to the emperor’s engineers. Are they loyal to them or to you?”

“They are machines,” Saheeli said. “They’re loyal to whomever holds their command codes.”

“And the codes?”

“Kept by the Imperial engineers, but there are master keys—physical keys, in my production facility in Pachatupa.” They walked slowly, but Saheeli already felt out of breath.

Caztaca smiled. “Good,” she said. “Your High Imperial is good, by the way.”

“I learned from the best.”

“What did she teach you of Torrezon?”

Saheeli could not stop the look of surprise as it flashed across her face. Mild, but evident. “I know that the Sun Empire and Torrezon have warred before and remain great enemies.”

“Alta Torrezon,” Caztaca said. “Torrezon is the continent. Alta Torrezon is the land of vampires. We are not enemies with Torrezon—nor Alta Torrezon in truth—but with the church and the Legion of Dusk.”

“I assumed those were distinctions without a difference.”

“Never mistake the map for the land,” the Apex Priest said. They reached the captain’s cabin, waited for an attendant to open the door, and then walked inside. The quarters were warm and lit by sunstones, filled not only with the raiment and textiles of the Apex Priestess, but a heavy table, upon which were staked large charts. Saheeli approached them with curiosity.

“Where are we?” Saheeli asked, leaning over the map.

“The Sens. Here,” Caztaca said, pointing to a small scattering of islands off the western coast of Torrezon. “Alta Torrezon hides behind the Deoro,” she said, pointing deep into Torrezon’s interior, where a vast mountain range loomed behind a continent-bisecting river. “Between us and them are the Free Cities on the coast and among the planes.”

“More vampires?”

“Humans,” Caztaca said. “Aspirants. The faithful. Food.” She grimaced. “I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Of course.”

“Take notes in your language,” Caztaca said. “I cannot trust any code in my language to withstand scrutiny, but you are the only soul on all of Ixalan who can read and write your script.”

“I can do that,” Saheeli said.

“Good. Gather your things. We leave before the hour is out.”

Saheeli stood on a dark, cold beach on the eastern coast of Sen Gael, the main island of the Sens, and looked out over the gray ocean toward Torrezon. The vampires’ continent lurked behind a front of rain and low clouds, picked out by strings of coastal lights, lighthouses, and fishing vessels dispatched from the Free Cities. This was a cold shore, far from Ixalan’s lush, warm green. Saheeli shivered, pulling her raincoat tighter around herself. The sooner she could be done with this the better.

A lone coalition ship, twin to the one Saheeli arrived here on, weighed anchor a hundred yards off the beach. A solitary launch beat against the waves, a huddle of cloaked figures aboard it, hunched against the wind-whipped spray.

They were here.

Saheeli turned and walked back to the lighthouse where Caztaca and the rest of the Sun Empire party waited, crossing the short distance slowly, considering her steps as she mused over what Caztaca had told her over the last two days: War makes for strange alliances. Death shifts equations. Desperation forces action when otherwise there might have been peace.

Caztaca told Saheeli of mercenary spies from the Brazen Coalition, loyalty assured through weights of gold, returned from the Free Cities to whisper to her priests. The news they returned prompted fear, but also action: Doomsday fervor spread across Alta Torrezon like a plague of eager fear. In place of rats, this pestilence spread from the lips of fanatic cults, whose rhetoric sent spalling fractures through the foundations of the Church of Dusk. A dark figure rising from the swirling discontent, and a queen seeking allies.

Meanwhile, war fever raged through Pachatupa and the Sun Empire. A people staggering, wounded, one fist of state clenching a sword hungry to bite flesh. An emperor's son passed over and a child on the throne who could not yet understand the gravity of the role he would play.

A queen in the east and a priestess in the west with twin ambitions. An empire ascending that could still be captured, and a realm suspended above a precipitous drop that could still be pulled back from the edge. Strange alliances indeed. Faced with an unreasonable enemy, the foe you could reason with might stand alongside you—not as a friend, but as a collaborator.

Saheeli recalled Huatli's story of the battle at Orazca during the Phyrexian war: Vampires and humans fighting together against the Phyrexians. Sen Gael was not Orazca. The enemy Caztaca and her momentary collaborators faced were not the Phyrexians. This meeting would not be a battlefield, but it would decide the fate of nations all the same.

Saheeli hurried the rest of the way up the path to the lighthouse and entered the small cabin at its base without knocking. The Sens were the home islands of the orcs, who had been reduced terribly by Alta Torrezon; the countryside was quiet. There was no one else here but them.

The interior of the lighthouse cabin was warm and smelled of coffee, ink, and the sea. A large table had been dragged to the center of the room, around which Caztaca and her advisers sat. As Saheeli entered Caztaca looked up, registered who it was, and then flicked her eyes to the open seat next to her: Saheeli's station for the evening.

Saheeli made her way through the room, navigating the tense, murmured conversations. The canchatan kept their hands near their belts at the empty loops where they usually wore their macuahuitls, fingers surreptitiously brushing the hard silhouettes under their clothing where they kept concealed knives.

"Trust," Caztaca said to Saheeli as she settled in, "will be forged tonight by shared betrayal. Do you understand?"

Saheeli nodded. "My cousins and I stole a sheet of soan papdi from the window of a sweet shop once. We vowed never to speak of it to anyone." She scribbled a few loops of ink on the writing pad, priming her pen. "Our friendship only grew from there."

"A heartwarming recollection," Caztaca muttered.

"All that to say: I understand."

A rapid knock at the door, followed by the rising whistle of wind and rain as a canchatan stepped inside.

"They're here, your grace," the soldier said, brushing water from her shoulders. She dipped a quick bow while addressing Caztaca. "Elenda is with them."

Caztaca looked up from her notes with surprise—muted, but evident. "You are sure?"

"I saw an unnatural light emanating from a figure in their party," the canchatan said. "Not torch light or sunstone. It was thin, a crown of beads that appeared to float behind the back of the figure's head." She said, eyes wide. "I have heard that only the Venerables are graced with that light."

"Indeed," Caztaca said, a smile crossing her face. "Thank you. Dry yourself, that will be all."

Saheeli recalled what little Huatli had told her about Elenda. The first vampire, the early, unnamed battles against the Legion. The race to Orazca, the Immortal Sun, and Elenda's castigation of her own people.

Here are the pieces machined by history's lathe, falling into place.

A knock at the door. Silence in the lighthouse cabin.

"Enter," Caztaca said.

The door swung open. Four dark figures entered, ducking to fit their peaked helmets under the door-frame. Their footfalls were heavy, boots thudding on the plank floor, the soft clink and rustle of armor under their waxcloth cloaks. One by one as they entered, they stripped off their scabbarded swords and leaned them against the wall by the door.

Saheeli searched the dark faces of the men who had entered. Pallid skin, gray eyes lit from within with soft silver light. An austerity so severe it radiated from them like a terrible cold. They looked over the group of Sun Empire soldiers and dignitaries, their faces neutral, hands resting—as the canchatans' did—near the empty loops on their belts where their weapons typically hung. Satisfied, one of the soldiers stepped back outside. A moment later, Saint Elenda walked in.

The Venerable swept her hood back as she entered the cabin, uncovering her face and revealing a soft, steadily glowing diadem that crowned her head. A halo, the sign of canonization, of veneration—a divine investiture in this single person. Though Elenda's skin was as gray as her companion's, it lacked the austere cast: her cheeks were flush, as if the cold and wind had chapped her face—or, rather, as if she had just fed. The Venerable looked over the Sun Empire party, her eyes glowing a soft, warm gold. She smiled, and Saheeli could see the tips of her fangs poking just out from under her lips.

"Elenda," Caztaca said, standing. "Please, sit. And tell your soldiers they can relax. We are all collaborators here."

"Collaborators," Saint Elenda said. "Collaborators," she repeated, as if tasting the word. "I prefer friends."

"Is that what we are?" Caztaca said.

"It's what we must be," Elenda replied. She shrugged off her cloak and settled into her chair. "After tonight, the only friends we have will be the people in this room. Home will become a nest of ash-toothed vipers. Trust or respect—we must be friends."

"Friends, then," Caztaca said. "So we are here. Let's begin."

Elenda leaned forward, listening.

Saheeli wetted the tip of her pen.

"Our emperor will lead us to war," Caztaca said. "He is a child. My brother Atlacan craves the throne but can never have it, so he has instead worked his way into the emperor's mind. He whispers dreams

of conquest to the boy, who demands ships and regiments like he's piling his dinner plate with sweet desserts. Our people cannot stomach another war, no matter how much they prepare. Neither can yours."

Elenda raised an eyebrow. "You think?"

"I know," Caztaca said. "Your church and your queen. 'A nest of ash-toothed vipers.' Am I wrong?"

Elenda smiled. "You are not wrong," she said. "Your whispering brother and pliant emperor are a match for the zealots in my domain. Pontifex Fein struggles to hold the Church of Dusk together. The call for revival is ... strong. You are aware that there is a second expedition to Orazca underway?"

"I am aware," Caztaca said. "I assumed they were yours."

Saheeli looked up from her notes, catching herself only moments before blurting out that she most definitely was not aware of another Legion expedition to Orazca.

"Not ours," Elenda said, shaking her head. "Ixalan is no longer of interest to the crown, not since the departure of the Immortal Sun. This group is led by Vito Quijano de Pasamonte, one of the Antifex's hierophants," Elenda said. "Not sanctioned by the church. The Queen's Bay Company: one of the queen's ventures, infested now by backward, bloodthirsty eschatological fanatics who think they can bring about the Age of Blood by returning Aclazotz to Alta Torrezon."

"Can they?"

"Yes, unless they are stopped."

Saheeli's hand ached. She gripped her pen hard enough to white her knuckles as she transcribed. Elenda spoke with a lightness to her voice that sounded unserious to Saheeli. She spoke of a schism that threatened the church that had canonized her, of a low boil of apocalyptic fervor that, checked or unchecked, could only end in Alta Torrezon tearing itself apart. She spoke of Huatli in danger: Her voice should have trembled. She should be begging for help.

"Huatli will stop them," Caztaca said. "Regardless of what my brother hopes they accomplish in Orazca, the Sun Empire's soldiers know what to do when they meet the Legion on our land."

Huatli, in the darkness. Saheeli looked past the table at the Legion soldiers who stood behind Elenda. Broad men each standing over six feet tall, all ironclad in thick, burnished-gold plate armor. Etchings of roses, thorns, and human figures kneeling, their arms raised as if to buttress the plate that shielded these butchers' forms.

"If Aclazotz sets one claw on Torrezon, the realm will tear itself apart," Elenda said, repeating herself. Elenda's face lost its light. For a moment, the luster that suffused her cheeks flickered. "I cannot let that happen," she whispered. "And you cannot let your brother lead your emperor to war."

Despite her anger, Saheeli found herself drawn to Elenda. Divinity, she deduced. Of course. Proximity to the divine—any divine—was difficult to resist. She understood that magnetism, some fundamental principal of the Multiverse that she, a mortal being, felt as something *more*. Saheeli pushed back against that desire to follow, turning it instead into an examination of the small details of Elenda's mortality that lingered: The wisp of gray in her long dark hair. The gentle spray of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

Elenda's eyes flashed cold as steel.

"There is someone else here," she said. She turned in her seat to face the door just as it slammed open.

A broad figure filled the doorway, hands gripping either side as if holding on against the howling wind that roared in with them. Behind them stood a clutch of orcs and humans bearing cutlasses, scarred and patched, with a motley of armor and clothing to protect them from the elements.

A commotion. Elenda's loyal guards and Caztaca's canchatan shouting, standing from the table, moving between this new group and their retainers. The new arrivals stood between them and their swords, but they all drew daggers, saps, spikes, and other concealed hand weapons, brandishing them. Saheeli herself stood and drew upon her own magic, weaving the metal nib of her pen into a razor-edged shank.

"Quiet!" The interloper bellowed. A woman's voice, one accustomed to command, to needing to be heard over the howl of wind and angry shouting. "Stand down, all of you!" The woman strode into the cabin following the steady point of her straight-bladed cutlass. She was older, wrinkled and sunburnt, but carried herself with an oaken strength. She wore sailor's clothing—a heavy wool coat, a bicorne hat which she swept off her head, and sturdy, salt-stained boots.

Caztaca snapped a quick command to her canchatan, who held their concealed weapons steady and did not back down. The Apex Priestess herself clutched a small knife, ready to fight.

"Do as she says," Elenda said, standing. She placed a hand on the shoulder of her nearest guard and motioned for them to lower their weapons. "Admiral Brass," Elenda said, addressing the woman who had just burst in. "You weren't expected."

"You came here on my ship, to haggle over nations on my island," Admiral Beckett Brass smiled over her sword at Elenda. "Mate, you need to adjust your expectations as to the role of the courier when the cargo is this good."

"What do you want?" Caztaca interjected. "Gold? Information? We have already paid your mercenaries. Our debt is settled."

Brass flicked a glance to Caztaca, her cutlass unwavering. Behind her, her sailors chuckled.

"Quiet," Brass snapped. A lock of pale, golden hair slipped down across her face. With her free hand she tucked it back, wiping the rain and sweat from her brow. She looked between Elenda and Caztaca, weighing the two women.

Saheeli unwound her filagree needle, reshaping it back to a simple pen. In this room were three of the most powerful people in Ixalan. Venerable Elenda, the living saint of the Church of Dusk. Caztaca Huicintli, Apex Priestess of the Sun Empire. Admiral Beckett Brass, leader of the Brazen Coalition. She tried to recall what Huatli had told her of the Brazen Coalition and Admiral Brass but found herself at a loss beyond pirates, gold hunters, something to do with stolen magics.

"You and yours have paid your debts to me," Brass said. "But I'm no merchant or banker."

Caztaca looked to Elenda, who kept her face beatific, neutral.

"We will listen," Caztaca said, speaking to Brass without looking at her. "You," she said to Saheeli, "will write."

"Record this well," Brass said to Saheeli as she sheathed her sword. "I will have a nation," the Admiral continued. "A land of free people, the open ocean, and every island between here," she gestured to the ground beneath their feet. "And there," she said, pointing west toward distant Ixalan. "There is a great game being played here. You two are prepared to wager thrones and crowns like coins. Regicide and fratricide are on the table and the players' hands all but dealt." Brass flicked the sword tip between the two other women as she talked. "Well, ladies, I'm here as well, and I'm the one with a grip full of

cutting steel.” Brass’s eyes shone like chips of sky, piercing, clear. “One more hand to deal: my coalition demands recognition as a player of this game on equal terms.”

“And if we refuse?” Elenda asked.

“Then I’ll kill the two of you here and the stink of cannon smoke will choke Torrezon and Ixalan,” Brass said. “Your people will never touch the ocean again without a coalition ship on appearing on the horizon. The seas will be a graveyard and the land a prison.”

Silence, but for the sound of Saheeli’s rewoven pen scratching the last of Admiral Brass’s dictation.

Brass lifted her cutlass again, then threw it into the plank floor of the cabin, where it stuck deep. “An answer,” she demanded. “What’ll it be? A state, or the guns?”

“A bold courier,” Caztaca muttered. She crossed her arms.

“Is that your answer?”

“A moment,” Caztaca said. “I’m thinking.”

“This pirate is holding us hostage,” Elenda said, a bemused tone to her voice. “What is there to think about?”

“Her offer is not without merit,” Caztaca said.

“Will you be our ally, Admiral?” Elenda asked.

“Governor,” Brass corrected. “And I will pledge my fleets to those who pledge themselves to our cause.”

“That’s not a yes,” Elenda said.

“You haven’t made your decision,” Brass shot back.

“You should say yes,” Saheeli said, speaking up.

Another hush fell over the room.

“Pardon?” Elenda asked, turning to Saheeli.

“Accept her demand,” Saheeli said. She had faced down worse than Elenda, but the Venerable’s gaze was still unnerving, mesmerizing. A glimpse at the divine, a pinprick in the veil between mortal and immortal. Not of her own faith, but awesome nonetheless. Saheeli cleared her throat and continued. “You both need allies. You both are working against a clock that is working against you, without knowing how much time is left.” Saheeli said. “As Governor Brass said—this is the game. Nations are at stake. Deal now and secure the seas,” Saheeli said. “It makes sense.”

“How much of our history do you know?” Caztaca asked. “Did Huatli tell you anything of the coalition’s rampaging up and down our coast before the Phyrexian war?”

“I only know a little,” Saheeli admitted. “The race to Orazca, mostly.”

“They raided our fishing fleets and pillaged our temples,” Caztaca said. “They have killed thousands of our citizens and looted hundreds of our artifacts to their adventures.” Caztaca spoke firmly, but without anger. “The war forced us to stand together. Those bonds have only grown, but as a scar. The wound still aches.”

“What Brass asks is difficult to agree to,” Elenda agreed. “A nation of pirates and castaways who claim the ocean.” She sighed. “I don’t see it.”

“And a queendom of vampires is easier to countenance?” Brass laughed.

"We don't need to beg for recognition," Elenda shot back.

"You'll beg for mercy," Brass growled, reaching for her cutlass.

"How many ships do you have," Saheeli interrupted. "Admiral Brass. Your ships?"

Admiral Brass let go of her cutlass. "I'll need a guarantee before we go any further," she said, addressing Saheeli.

"Caztaca, you can't let this scribe—"

"I can," Caztaca said. She waved a curt gesture to Elenda, silencing her. The Venerable blinked, surprised at Caztaca and, Saheeli assumed, herself for obeying. "A fair trade of information?" She said, addressing Brass.

"On my word," Brass nodded.

Caztaca took a deep, grounding breath. "The emperor is building another fleet of ten thousand ships," she said. "He intends to use them to invade Alta Torrezon."

"And how many has he built so far?" Brass asked.

"At least two hundred," Caztaca said.

"That matches with what we know," Brass nodded. "We have six hundred fighting ships stocked and seaworthy, all veteran crews, with reserves in drydocks across the sea. The Legion fields a mere eighty fighting ships the rest are merchantmen and other traders. Is that correct?" She asked, looking to Elenda.

"What makes you think I'll tell you?"

"Because it is your turn to play," Brass said. "My pieces, your pieces, her pieces—all on the table. Mutual trust, or mutual destruction. We are discussing terms, is that right Caztaca?"

"That's right," Caztaca agreed. "The coalition is already woven into this plot, Elenda: The spies we hired in your land, the spies you hired in ours. The ships the both of us took to come here undetected by our foes. This very island—they have been at the table with us the whole time. Brass offers us an alliance for the moment. If we accept, we all get what we want," Caztaca said.

Elenda looked around the room, silent for an overlong moment. When she spoke, her voice sounded tired, her pride bruised. "We will write you letters of marque," Elenda said to Brass. "Stop Vito and his acolytes from returning to Alta Torrezon. Kill them in Orazca or sink them in the ocean, I do not care. If you can do that, I will see the queen recognize the coalition's claims as legitimate. Gratitude for service to the crown and church."

Brass grinned. She reached out, offering Elenda her hand. Elenda met hers and shook, grimacing.

"And you?" Brass asked Caztaca, reaching out to her. "What will you have us do for our nation?"

"Our second Dawn Fleet," Caztaca said. "At the end of summer, after the first of the hurricanes announce the end of safe construction: Burn those ships in their docks. Draw the Imperial army to the coast, away from the capital. Expose the emperor and his whisperer to me."

Brass extended her hand. "It's a deal," she said.

"The Apex Priestess does not shake hands," one of Caztaca's canchatans said, stepping forward to place himself between Brass and Caztaca. Brass pulled her hand back and held it up, smiling, apologetic.

Caztaca reached into the folds of her cloak and plucked a single feather from the garment she wore below, then offered it to Brass. "Return this to me when I rule in Pachatupa, and I will give you your nation."

"That's it?" Brass asked, taking the feather.

"That's it."

"And after?" Brass asked. "Trade, alliances, diplomacy? You'll deal with us on equal terms?"

"I promise you nothing beyond a state to call your own, governor," Caztaca said. Her smile was a raptor's smile. "One nation recognizing another at its border."

Brass considered this. She passed the feather back to one of her sailors, who tucked it safely away in a weatherproof pouch. "It is done," she said.

"Done," Caztaca agreed.

"Done," Elenda said.

"Done," Saheeli said, finishing her transcription of the meeting. She placed the paper on the table, set her pen across it, and stepped back. One by one the three leaders signed, sealing their contract. Saheeli blew on the ink to dry it, then rolled it up into a tight scroll.

"Metal," Saheeli said, looking to the soldiers in the room. "Coins, on the table please."

Reluctantly, the soldiers all fished coins from their pockets and purses and stepped forward to toss them on the table. Under this rain of coins, Saheeli spun a fine, copper, silver, and gold container around the document. She embellished it a little, etching a filigree pattern across its face, but was sure to seal it against the elements. When she was done, she lifted the seamless metal cylinder up, inspecting her work.

"Who carries that document?" Brass asked.

"Elenda," Caztaca said. "Consider it a receipt. Saheeli is the only one who can open that case without destroying the document inside. Is that correct?"

"Right," Saheeli said. "If you cut or melt the case, you'll destroy the paper inside and this deal will be voided."

"It may be that we do want it destroyed," Elenda muttered. She turned the cylinder over in her hands, delicate, and then passed it to one of her soldiers.

"Mutual destruction if revealed," Caztaca said, looking at Elenda. "And an unalterable, agreed-upon debt to be paid," she said, addressing Brass.

"Good enough for me," Brass said, nodding. She tugged her cutlass from the plank floor. "I'm off," she said, sliding her sword into its scabbard. "Pleasure doing business with you two. The ships you sailed here on will be resupplied, their crews replaced, and otherwise made ready for your voyages home. Best of luck to you both," she said on her way out. "And see you in the new world."

Brass and her retinue left the cabin, heading out into the howling storm with their coats tight around them, cheers rising to meet the raging wind.

"The new order of the world decided in, what, 30 minutes?" Elenda said. She stood and gestured to her soldiers. "You'll excuse me, Your Eminence," she said to Caztaca. "I have a queen to inform and a church to hold together." Elenda, like Brass, paused at the open door. "See you in the new world,"

she said, an unsaintly twinge of sarcasm in her voice. She flipped up her hood and departed, leaving Saheeli, Caztaca, and the Apex Priestess's canchatan soldiers alone in the lighthouse cabin.

Silence followed the Venerable's departure. The rain beat on the tiled roof. Wind rattled the storm-shuttered windows in their frames. Caztaca sat quiet, frowning, staring at the divot where Brass had plunged her cutlass. Further, Saheeli guessed, into the belly of the plane, where agents of both nations raced on errands of opposed sovereigns.

This diplomatic artifice was hideous to Saheeli. Disorganized. Messy in cost, efficiency, trust, and human lives. Alliances shifted, decisions were made not on facts but leaps of faith and trust. Friends and rivals traded masks constantly. As in Kaladesh, power never settled into equilibrium but was always up for grabs: no decision was final if it was a decision made by multiple people for multiple people. At the same time, Saheeli rejected the tyrant's logic of stability contained in a single body: the capricious, selfish aims of an autocrat promised a doomed, fatal consistency. No equilibrium in many, no justice in one—where could there be peace?

"Saheeli," Caztaca finally spoke.

"Yes, Your Eminence?"

"Huatli will support me?"

Saheeli hesitated. Caztaca waited, and Saheeli was distinctly aware of how vulnerable she was, alone on this island and surrounded by the Apex Priestess's soldiers.

"She assured me she would," Saheeli said.

"Nevertheless, Huatli worries me," Caztaca said. "She is the conscience of the empire. The people's heart and voice, but she is empire's hagiographer as well."

"She told me how much she admires your cause," Saheeli said. "She asked me to speak with her voice at this meeting."

"Speaking, writing, admiration," Caztaca shook her head. She stood, motioning toward the door. Her soldiers sprang into action, some hurrying out of the cabin to make for the ship, others preparing to escort her. "When the day of action comes, the only thing I need are swords. Many people who admire me now, who write and speak kindly of me now, will side with the emperor." She waved Saheeli toward her. "We are going to unmake the natural order. We are going to ask the people to make one more effort to secure their future. So, no words—I need action. I need swords. I need the warrior-poet."

And there was her answer, Saheeli realized. Solving for peace was an equation without an end: a blueprint that must always be revised while in practice. Shed the hubristic dream of being the one to finish the design and find purpose in the struggle to clutch the pen with which the design is drawn. Begin. Start. Make your play; at least then you will be an actor, rather than a subject.

Pick up a sword, Saheeli, she thought to herself. That's the answer.

"It is natural to follow one's emperor to war," Caztaca continued, her voice a fierce, gravel rasp. "It is natural to hate those across the ocean, though Tilonalli's light shines on them, too," Caztaca said. "I aim to do the unnatural thing."

"Huatli and I will be with you," Saheeli repeated herself, recalling her lover in the market, the same fierce tone in her voice as Caztaca, the same fear, the same hope.

Caztaca fixed her gaze on Saheeli. The two women were roughly the same height, but in that moment the Apex Priestess stood as a pyre, stretching toward the gray sky, history and the days to come embodied.

Caztaca extended her hand to Saheeli. Saheeli reached out with her own. The two women shook hands, and then walked out into the howling gale, escorted by the temple guards.

Saheeli followed Caztaca toward the shore, down from the lonely cabin and out across the dark sand of Sen Gael. The launch bobbed in the shallow water, held in place by Brazen Coalition pirates and a pair of Caztaca's canchatan, who stood knee-deep in the breakwater. Chitlati already sat inside the launch, waiting for them. Cold surf surged up the strand, rippling and rolling around their ankles. The chill was sharp, clarifying. A bitter rain lashed down from the tumult above, and the ocean rolled, and distant bosun whistles trilled.

This was her world, Saheeli thought. Hers and Huatli's. She whispered a short prayer, old scripture long ago memorized and rote but now, even if only for the moment of its utterance, genuine. She reached up to the canchatan who offered her a hand, stepped from the water into the knocking launch, sat next to Chitlati, and pulled her rain clothes tight around herself as the other soldiers piled in.

With help from the coalition sailors, they shoved off the sand, undocked their oars, and rowed against the rising surge toward the distant ship that would bear them back to Ixalan, where the next round of the great game would soon begin.