

Hour of Eternity

Ken Troop

From set *Hour of Devastation*

The God-Pharaoh has returned, and the five Hours have arrived as foretold. The Hours of Revelation, Glory, and Promise unleashed disaster upon Naktamun, and now the Hour of Eternity brings an unimaginably personal terror to the city's denizens.

Now was faith justified.

Nylah had never understood the zealous before, never understood their endless need to proclaim their faith. The gods walked among them, their divinity requiring no faith to believe, only eyes to see. Hands to touch. Ears to listen. Words spoken from the mouths of gods reverberated through the city, their divine weight more solid and true than anything that merely existed.

She had never understood faith itself. She thought it weakness, an affectation of piety for those weak of character. What use was faith when the gods were so abundantly *true*?

But now she believed.

The God-Pharaoh's return had occupied little thought for her. There was still so much to learn, so much training to do. She wanted to be the best, as did they all. What point was there in thinking past her Trials, when the Trials were all she aspired to? No lover, no child, no friend had ever stayed long in her life. None could compete with her ambition. Yes, the gods deserved her worship, and her daily prayer was her training. Her ultimate goal was to be found worthy. For that desire, she would have no competition.

But still her heart quickened when the gate to paradise had opened. To know that *someday* was now, that eternity was *here*. She craned her neck, eager to witness divine bliss . . . but there was no bliss revealed behind those gates, only horror.



God-Pharaoh's Faithful | Art by Bastien L. Deharme

Never had she appreciated the beauty of her city until it was taken from her. The mighty Luxa, once as blue as the summer sky, ran blood red, filled with stinking fish corpses and bubbling filth. Clouds of buzzing locusts stripped gardens and trees bare, swarming small animals and leaving only bones in their wake.

Even the gods were dying. Mighty Rhonas. Clever Kefnet. Ambitious Bontu. Beautiful Oketra. All gone, their divinity ripped away by their burgeoning mortality.

What god can be a god if they die?

Nylah's most wicked thought came to her then, unbidden. *The gods have failed their trial. They deserve their death.*

A moment's pause, and then the abyss stretched, beckoned. *We all do.*

That last thought did not horrify her. Instead, it kindled an ember deep within, a warmth that comforted, here at the end of now and the beginning of the forever promised them. Her city was destroyed, her gods dead, her people scattered. And never had she believed more completely than now.

We must be tested. Without trial, there can be no honor. Without sacrifice, there can be no glory. Without death, there can be no life. The litany of the priests had never found purchase within her before, but now she clung to each word as though it were a raft in a river flood. This was her Trial. This horror was what she must overcome so she could be found worthy.

The word thrummed in her heart. *Worthy.*

Several angels in the sky, all of whom had overseen the chaos and violence without interference, suddenly threw their heads back and spread their arms and wings, their eyes ablaze with a sickly green glow as they shouted in unison, "The Eternals come!"



Angel of the God-Pharaoh | Art by E.M. Gist

She was standing next to the entrance of the central mausoleum, the repository of the worthy dead. As the angels repeated their cry, the gates of the mausoleum opened.

A dread figure, tall as a god, cloaked in darkness and shaped in the likeness of a scarab beetle, came striding through the open gates. And behind him, in the wake of his implacable dark divinity, came an army.



Hour of Eternity | Art by Tyler Jacobson

There were thousands of them, coated in a bright, hard metallic blue. Humans and minotaurs, nagas and aven. All were imposing, though each form was only sinew and bone encased in a polished lazotep

glaze more beautiful than any jewelry. Nylah realized that despite their lack of muscle and flesh she could recognize several past champions and challengers of recent Trials. The minotaur Bakenptah, who had run his axe through a stone wall to defeat his final opponent. The mighty mage Taweret, whom many had called the most powerful wizard the Trials had seen for a decade. Everywhere she looked she saw champions she recognized and many more she didn't.

All of them wielded weapons, sharp and gleaming, and the dead champions moved with a grace and fluidity that suggested none of them had lost any of the agility or strength that had propelled them to their earlier victories.

These were the Eternals. The worthy dead. This was the destiny of those who would be champions.

Nylah's heart beat with envy. This destiny was all she had ever wanted. All she still wanted. The scarab god strode past her, taking no notice of her presence, but the army of worthy behind the god noticed her.

Their eyes glowed with golden flame and their faces were frozen in grim smiles as they raised their weapons. Nylah could see the soft dusk light shimmering along the edges of their blades. They swarmed her as she cried out in ecstasy, wanting nothing more than to become one with them forever.

"Now I believe!" she shouted to her desired brethren. Each blade sunk into her flesh with a cold kiss, a greeting from the other side of glory, a sharpness that could not be imagined, only felt. Only lived.

Now I believe, she thought with each blow. Her kin swarmed over her, stabbing, stabbing. *Now I believe*. Now was faith rewarded.

Asenue was going to lose.

It wasn't that they were better than her, though her opponents were some of the best blademasters she had ever fought, dedicated champions who had lost none of their skill in death. She was a master herself, in the prime of her ability and training.

It wasn't that there were two of them against her alone, though the odds were not in her favor. She had chosen her two-blade style precisely because of its usefulness in fighting multiple opponents, and she felt a thrill as she parried and whirled and countered, her wrists a direct extension of her mind, changing between relaxed and tense as she kept herself alive for another parry, another swing, another breath. *One more breath*.

No, she was going to lose this fight because she was human. And they were not.

Her shoulders ached. Her lungs labored. Her legs tired. Her weapons master's voice came shouting back at her, "You imbeciles think your most important muscles are in your arms, or your shoulders, or your back. It is your legs! When your legs get tired, you die!" Her legs were very, very tired.

She was going to lose. She was going to die.

Eventually. But not now. Not *right* now. *One more breath*.

Just minutes before hundreds of nightmarish creatures with blue armor and skull faces had burst through the streets of Naktamun, slaughtering all in their path. The angels had called them "Eternals." Asenue saw her peers, whether they were crop-mate or friend or barely known acquaintance, fall to the Eternals' blades.

I love you, here at the end, whether I know you or not. I love you all.

It was that love that had propelled her into combat. People died in the initial onslaught, people died as they ran screaming, people died begging for their gods. The Eternals killed them all, no touch of mercy staying their blades.

She had leapt into the fray, attracting the attention of two of the Eternals even as countless more streamed by her in their pursuit of slaughter. But these two she could stop.

Except she would not even be able to accomplish that. She would not fall to their blades. At least not easily. But while they would not kill her quickly, they were too good for her to overcome. Around her, other fighters had joined the wider battle in the streets, but she heard the sounds of their labored breathing, their clashing steel, their gurgling last cries.

No one was coming to save her.

But her rescue did not matter. Every moment she stayed alive, that was another person not dying, another person who had another moment. A moment to survive, to get somewhere safe.

There must be somewhere safe, yes? There has to be . . . she killed the thought. *One more breath.*

A few minutes ago, *an eternity ago*, panic had threatened to overwhelm her. She was strong, skilled and used to fighting for hours over the course of a day in her normal training . . . but never without stopping, never without a single moment to catch her breath, never against opponents who were faster, stronger, and did not sweat or tire or slip.

The panic grew in her chest until she had discovered her new mantra. Then her breathing evened, and the ache in her shoulders grew distant, and the fire in her lungs burned slow, and her legs continued to move and move and move by the sheer strength of her will.

One more breath.

Asenue saw one, two, three more people make it through a broken wall in front of her unscathed. She did not have time to wish them well or even to hope they would still be alive when the suns rose tomorrow. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to move. Her legs were so tired.

One more breath. One more breath. One. More. Brea —



Act of Heroism | Art by Magali Villeneuve

“Makare! Makare!” Genub frantically screamed his lover’s name into the darkening red sky. In the distance he saw the blue armored killers, their grotesque shapes a mockery of their former selves. He knew that to face them was to die, but if he did not find Makare, then he would welcome death.

They had pledged themselves to each other months before, saying the three true words that it was forbidden to say. An affront to the God-Pharaoh, the priests called it, but the lovers did not care. Nothing, not the Trials nor their crop-mates nor the God-Pharaoh himself, had mattered in the face of their love.

Later that night, in the quiet grove where they had secluded themselves, she had looked up at him, her wide brown eyes the only sight he ever wanted to see.

“I will always be with you, Genub,” she said. He didn’t know how it could be possible, how they could continue to stay together, to avoid the Trials, but at that moment, he didn’t care.

“I will always be with you, Makare.” As he said it, he became more convinced it would become the truth. It felt more true than anything else in Naktamun.

And now she was gone. After Oketra had fallen, someone shouted that there was an old temple on the outskirts of the city that would be safe. They ran as part of a large group, Genub’s heart beating fast with terror as he clutched Makare’s hand tight.

As long as we are together, he thought, and he clung to that thought desperately. If he was with her, then everything would be alright.

Then someone screamed, and the Eternals rushed their street from every side with raised swords, axes, and scythes. One leaped directly in front of Genub and Makare, a naga, smooth and sinuous, casting a spell of blue fire that disintegrated several people behind them.



Spellweaver Eternal | Art by Jason Felix

Genub couldn't remember what happened after that, only that he ran and ran, his terror leaving no room for any other thought. When next he stopped to breathe, Makare was not there.

He had failed her. He had abandoned her. "Makare!" he screamed, wildly swinging his head, desperate for a glimpse.

There! Through a desolate, broken plaza he sprinted, her brown hair and bronze-striped dress unmistakable. Even as he ran to her side, he saw the gathering crowd of Eternals flanking her, but nothing would stop him this time, even if he had to fight them all.

He skidded to a stop in front of her as she turned her head. Her eyes, the beautiful brown of her eyes, had been replaced with a cold, glowing blue. She stared at him, and there was no love in that gaze. Only then did he notice the large axe in her hand, bloody brown bits staining its blade, and only then did he notice the naga wizard behind her, whispering close into Makare's ear.

She raised her axe, and Genub knew this could not be, knew he could reach her to break through whatever spell she was under. They could still be free. They could still be together.

"Makare!" The only true thing in this world was their love for each other. "Makare!" He had to reach her, he had to break through. "Makare!"

Her swing did not slow as it came. Hers was not the only blade that punctured his flesh, but it was the first. As it fell the last thing Genub saw was the smile on his true love's face.



Threads of Disloyalty | Art by Yongjae Choi

Kawit should have given up when Oketra died.

Her god had been present in her life from her earliest memories. Her kindness, her warmth, her presence a constant pull toward being a better person. To know Oketra, to worship Oketra, to bask in her light, was a constant as true as the suns in the sky . . . until Oketra's light was snuffed out, ended by the venomous point of a scorpion's tail.

Kawit should have felt despair. Should have felt panic. But instead she only felt rage. A bright, consuming anger, all doubt and fear burnt away by its white-hot clarity.

She had knelt at Oketra's side as the lifeblood seeped out of her god, whose eyes were already a dull gray. The plaza was devoid of other life. Most had fled the threat of the Eternals, but Kawit remained, uncaring of any desire but seeing her god one last time. A growing group of anointed had gathered around the god, oiling her skin and wrapping her in cloth to prepare her for whatever destiny awaited the fallen divine.

In the midst of the dead, no one cared when Kawit picked up one of Oketra's arrows, its length making it more like a spear in her hands. While the arrow was no longer imbued directly with the god's divine light, Kawit still felt a humming energy within it, an echo of her god's presence.

She was a devoted warrior of Oketra, proud and powerful, and she would see her god avenged today.

A thunderous clacking sound grew behind her and she turned to see a minotaur Eternal charging toward her at full speed, its long-bladed axe raised high. Kawit had time only to brace with her new-found spear against the charge.



Without Weakness | Art by Alex Konstad

The minotaur crashed into the spear's point, and Kawit felt a surge of power. There was a flash of white light as the minotaur disintegrated, its blue lazotep armor crumbling to dust from the power of Oketra. She stood there panting as her anger continued to rise; it would not be satiated until every Eternal was reduced to dust.

And then she saw him.

It was the horns she saw first, the long curved shape so intimately familiar to her eyes. Those horns were everywhere in her city, and she knew there was only one being to whom they could belong.

It was the God-Pharaoh himself.



Omniscience | Art by Josh Hass

He was massive, larger than any god. A strange golden egg hovered between his serpentine horns. And he was a dragon. Her mind faltered for a moment, wondering briefly if this was an interloper, some force of evil that had taken over the God-Pharaoh. Was this impostor why her city was destroyed and the Luxa had turned to blood? Was this impostor why her god, her dear, beautiful god, was dead?

The clarity of her rage provided an answer, and it hit her with such stunning force that she knew its truth immediately.

This dragon is not an impostor. This dragon is our God-Pharaoh. This is the being we have served all our lives. Her stomach roiled, her head feverishly hot.

She screamed her challenge into the darkening heavens, raising her spear to the God-Pharaoh, *no, that title no longer*, to the *dragon*. “I will kill you!” She sprinted toward him.

Her scream had attracted the attention of a large group of neighboring Eternals, and they ran, slithered, and flew to intercept her.

Oketra, protect me. Give me strength. Kawit did not know, really, to whom she was praying, but that did not lessen her confidence that Oketra would provide.

And Oketra did. A glowing, pulsing shield formed around Kawit, a tangible expression of Oketra’s power and love. Eternals crashed into the shield and bounced off as Kawit continued untouched to the dragon.

Oketra, help me strike true. Kawit launched the spear into the air and it flew with speed and accuracy she knew she could never have achieved alone. It shone in the air as though launched directly from Oketra’s bow as it hurtled toward the side of the unsuspecting dragon’s neck.



Oketra's Avenger | Art by Anthony Palumbo

The Eternals on all sides continued to pound on the force-shield that surrounded her, but to no avail. Oketra's love protected her. She would see justice done this day.

At the last possible second, the dragon turned his head toward the spear, and the missile froze mid-air, all speed and force lost in an instant. The spear dropped uselessly to the ground below, snapping in two as it hit the rough stone.

The dragon regarded the broken spear for a moment, and then spoke, his voice thunder in a storm, "In a different world, child, in a different time . . .," here the dragon paused, sparing her a glance, "you might have been useful." There was no hate nor anger in his glance, but rather a dry bemusement. He turned and strode off, forgetting she had ever existed.

His moment of nonchalance accomplished what a hail of rage could not. She collapsed under the weight of his disregard, stunned at how much of her life he had destroyed without any emotion. It would have been kinder, she realized, to have her life torn away with angry purpose.

She knelt there nearly senseless as her shield began flickering. Flickering, and then it was gone.

The Eternals closed in, and Kawit did not have strength enough left to scream.



Merciless Eternal | Art by Mathias Kollros

Amenakhte heard footsteps, soft steps, not the hard clink of metal on stone, and thought it might be safe to say a word. In a few minutes, he would not be able to say anything at all.

“Help . . .” blood dribbled out of his mouth, and the word gurgled out with it, barely comprehensible. He thought it might be easier to just die then, but he remembered the child underneath him, the brave and smart child who even now stayed silent, careful not to alert any more of the killers.

Even as the blood poured out of his mouth, it made him realize how thirsty he was, how much a cup of water would do to heal him. *I will be fine, I just need a cup of water*, he thought.

“Help.” He said it again, clearly, audibly. It took more strength to say the word than anything else he had done that day, though he had already been strong enough for a lifetime in the last hour alone.

Someone turned him over and gasped loudly. He looked at his rescuer, but his eyesight was blurry. All he could make out was that she was human, not one of the army of Eternals that had filled the streets killing everyone they could.

“Please,” he hacked and spit, more blood coming up. “Please, save the child.”

He had been running away. They all had. The locusts, the Hekma destroyed, the deaths of the gods. It was all too much. Their world, everything they *thought* about their world, ripped away from them in the time of a day.

So they ran. And then they discovered the true horror of the Hours, the true meaning of the God-Pharaoh’s return. The Eternals were among them, numerous as the locusts, murderous as the scorpion god, and merciless as the God-Pharaoh himself must be. Their blades swung, their spells flashed, and people died.

Amenakhte was large, and he had the broad, strong shoulders and chest of a fighter. But he was not good at fighting, and he had never been brave. The Eternals killed you if you ran, and they killed you

if you stayed; Amenakhte had felt the fear taking over his heart until he saw the child wailing in the middle of street.

It wasn't his child. He knew that. He had met his child once, a few years ago, even though such chance meetings were usually ignored and certainly never acknowledged. Nevertheless, he had seen the child's broad shoulders, the thick black hair so much like his own, and he had known. *This child is mine.* And his heart swelled with pride that day, though he could not share his pride with anyone, not even the child's mother, whom he rarely saw.

The child he had seen sobbing in the streets did not have thick black hair, nor did he have broad, strong shoulders. But something had pulled at Amenakhte's heart, just as it had on the day he found his own child. The Eternals had started sweeping in from both sides of the street, their blades flashing and their metal-clad feet clacking harshly against stone.

He had leapt to the child, scooping him up to carry him away, but the Eternals were everywhere, their blades swinging down, and all that Amenakhte had time to do was put himself between the falling blades and the child, covering him to protect him against all blows.

I am your shield, child.

He had felt every thrust, every cut, but were his shoulders not broad? Was he not strong? With every stab, he thought of the child he protected, his only hope to keep him alive.

After a moment that felt like an eternity, the violence was done, and the harsh clacking moved off elsewhere. The man dared not try to move for fear of bringing the Eternals back, but after a few moments, he realized he could not move even if he wanted to. The child had stayed silent throughout without stirring. Even now he could feel no movement. *So brave. So clever. I will save you.*

And now the woman was here, and Amenakhte could give the child to the woman. And then he could die.

She didn't say anything, but she knelt down and held his hand. Her hands were so warm, so soft. They were almost as good as a drink of water. He looked up at her face, and though he could not see her well, he knew she was beautiful.

"You will . . . you will save the child?" Strangely the words were easier now than before, flowing out of him just like blood. She nodded, and Amenakhte could see even through his blurred eyes that she was crying.

Don't cry for me, he wanted to say. *Just take the child.* But his mouth refused to work.

She leaned close, whispering gently into his ear. "The child is . . . I will," she sobbed. "I will . . . save the child."

Her voice was like her hands, liquid and warm, like the first drop of golden honey licked off the comb. His vision dimmed, and he tried to drink in her face, her beautiful face, the last sliver of sun before bowing to the night, vast and dark and forever.