

Judgment

Doug Beyer & Alison Luhrs

From set *Amonkhet*



Samut has abandoned the Trials, her crop, and her old life. She has spent the last few days on the run and is desperate to stay alive long enough to face the trespasser who transformed her world. After discovering that her city is not the way it was only decades ago, she is determined to convince her oldest and dearest friend, Djeru, to believe her. When a direct confrontation doesn't convince him, Samut turns to the only god that could spare his life.

Samut had spent three days without casting a shadow. The light of the suns was a luxury a fugitive could not afford. She had dashed from hiding place to hiding place, pressing herself into the dark crevices of the city-state, out of sight of angels and the anointed dead.



Trespasser's Curse | Art by David Palumbo

Today, her shelter was a former embalming chamber. She hurried in, kicking over a table of dried-out unguents and organ vessels in her haste, and pulled the heavy stone door shut. She lit a torch in its sconce. And then she waited.

It was three days ago that viziers and the anointed dead had seized her. After her ill-advised shouts of dissent, their hands had clamped onto her arms and over her mouth and dragged her out of earshot. She had broken free of her captors at the small cost of a dislocated shoulder, fleeing into the city's dark places using all the speed she had—but how could she have been so careless? When thousands of citizens happily accepted their suffocating blanket of lies, how could she think she could sway hearts by simply yelling in the street? Well, no more. She only cared about swaying one now.

There was a scraping sound at the door. She shoved it open, squinting into the dust-dancing shafts of sunlight. A figure appeared: a guardian mummy wrapped head to toe in linen. Samut beckoned it in.

The mummy shuffled its way over the threshold, step by step. When it had made its way into the chamber, she hauled the door shut again with a crunch of sandstone on sandstone.

The mummy looked at Samut, its taut wrappings flickering in the torchlight.

Samut grinned. "So? Give me a hug already."



Labyrinth Guardian (Emblamed) | Art by Yeong-Hao Han

The mummy's shoulders sank. "This is blasphemy," it mumbled in a familiar male voice.

"But it got you here without getting either of us killed," Samut said.

"I can barely move," the mummy said, stretching its constricted shoulders. "Get me out of this."

She helped the mummy unwrap the linen bindings. The wholesome face of her friend Djeru emerged, and he shrugged the rest of the way out of the disguise. This was the one face she wanted to see. This was her one remaining ally in the world—her cropmate, her brother-in-arms, her friend.

She clasped her arms around him. "I'm glad you're alive," she whispered in his ear.

Djeru backed out of the embrace, holding Samut at arm's length. "How is it you are free to summon me here? I heard they had you on a tight leash after your show of . . . of dissent."

Samut scanned his eyes for judgment. "For my heresy, you mean."

"For defying the law of the gods," he said quietly.

"That's what I asked you here for," she said. "I'm free now, Djeru. You can be free, too."

"Free? From what? You want me to break the law as well?"

That stung. An arrest was tantamount to guilt in his eyes. Was he so ready to relinquish their friendship? "The law has been corrupted. And so have the gods."

Djeru was shaking his head. "You impugn the God-Pharaoh himself."

Samut clasped her hands together. "But he's the very lie that has corrupted the world! There were old customs before the God-Pharaoh, before these Trials. He made the world forget itself. He remade the world and remade the gods to suit his whims."

"Is that why you called me here? To spin stories at me?" He shook his hands in frustration. "I should be in training, Samut. The Trial of Zeal nears. Or have you forgotten what that means to an initiate?"

"I have not forgotten what it means to you." She put a hand on his arm and squeezed. "But I cannot call a lie the truth, and you shouldn't either."

"What are you saying?"

"Don't go to the final Trial."

"Samut."

"Don't throw yourself away. Don't offer up your death, just for—for *sport*."

"Sport? You call the most holy pinnacle of my life a *sp*—" He walked in an exasperated circle.

That was wrong of her. Painfully wrong. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I just—I have seen what the viziers don't want us to see. I have seen how our society has been—twisted. The skeleton of our world removed and replaced with something else. You think you'll be proving yourself a worthy Djeru, but you'll just be destroying Djeru."

He pointed a finger at her. "You're telling me to destroy Djeru in another way instead, by throwing away everything I've worked for to get this far. You're telling me to dishonor myself and dishonor the gods."

She was losing him. She didn't know what to say. "Would the gods want you to die? Would *Nakht* want you to die?" Samut said, and instantly she knew it was the exact wrong thing to say.

"Don't you bring his name into this," Djeru snapped. "Nakht died *unworthy*, out there in the dunes, because of our stupidity. Because of our foolish trespass. And now he roams the sands, biting the intestines out of desiccated corpses. I'm not making that mistake with my own life."

Samut wanted to shout at him—*You utter dunce! You proud and simple fool! You'd rather die than show that you were tricked by a false pharaoh!* But she tried to keep her voice even. She knew if she yelled at him, she would just be another nameless dissenter, ranting in the street—and that she would lose him to his self-destructive beliefs.

"Djeru, my friend," she said. "Nakht died to show us what it looks like when a life is cut short. To show us the ugly futility of death."

"No," Djeru said. "He died for *nothing*."

Something snapped in her. "*SO WILL YOU!*" she roared at him. Her words rang in the fire-lit chamber, reverberating off the stone walls.



Samut, Voice of Dissent | Art by Aleksi Briclot

Djeru tipped his chin up. He beat his chest with his fist with ritual solemnity. “I die to rise eternal,” he said, in the rhythm of the initiates’ chants.

Samut dropped her head, feeling suddenly heavy. She walked in a slow circle, rubbing the back of her neck, pulling at the tight coils of her hair. Every instinct in her body told her it was hopeless to try to save him from himself. Of course she couldn’t make that decision for him—the more she pressed him, the further he would back away. She had to walk away, and let him decide for himself.

Except that walking away was not her strong suit.

“Don’t go to that Trial,” she said.

He made a bitter half-laugh. “You know I had hoped you called me here to ask for *my* help?” He shook his head. “I thought you wanted me to help you get back on the path. To attest to Temmet for you. Maybe to keep you from rotting in a sarcophagus somewhere.”

“Djeru.”

“You think I’m throwing *my* life away? You might be the greatest initiate of our time. It’s a waste, Samut. You’ve chosen to be a waste.”

“I don’t care what you think of me,” she whispered. “Just don’t die.”

“Maybe the gods can teach you to believe, dissenter,” Djeru said, heading for the door. “I’ll plead to Hazoret for you.”

He pushed the door open. For a moment there was a dazzling light from outside. And then sandstone scraped against sandstone, and it was just a dim, quiet chamber again, shadows swaying with the torchlight.

She stood there for a long while, wallowing in a brume of failure. She found herself debating her own mood, entertaining the possibility that she had done enough to save her friend’s life. Maybe just having the conversation was enough. Maybe she had planted enough of a question in his heart that Djeru would resist the lies of the God-Pharaoh, renounce the Trials, and thank her for caring enough to

intervene on his behalf. Maybe he would approach her as a friend, his head bowed low in apology, and ask her forgiveness—that was possible, wasn't it?

She managed to believe that for three entire seconds.

Djeru was unwavering. He'd probably never deign to speak to her again in the precious few days before the final Trial, let alone recant. Meanwhile, the city-state still crawled with mummies and viziers who wanted her dead. If she showed her face in public again, it would be for the last time.

And yet as she replayed Djeru's words in her mind, a nagging feeling itched at her. "*I'll plead to Hazoret for you*," Djeru had said. What he intended as pity felt more like an opportunity.

She heaved the door open and ran, out from the shadows, into the glare of the two suns.



Prepare | Art by Zack Stella

Samut was already braking as she streaked across the threshold into the monument, crumpling a ceremonial rug with her feet. She spun and looked back, blades at the ready, but the squad of mummies who pursued her had stopped at the entryway. Their blank faces fixated on her, with that vague linen smile, but they did not budge. They needed explicit permission to enter the house of a god.



Hazoret's Monument | Art by Richard Wright

Samut caught her breath, sheathing her blades. A set of wide stairs led up into obscurity, lit by braziers carved with the shapes of jackals on each step. Samut couldn't see how far the staircase went—somewhere up into the highest interior of the monument. Into the head of a god.

Samut knelt and bowed low, her forehead touching the floor. "I request an audience, mighty Hazoret." And she only moved when she heard the voice.

"You may enter, initiate. "

The voice sounded from every direction, thick words heavy with archaic pronunciation. Samut stood, and saw that the mummies remained outside, waiting. Samut took a ceremonial hearth candle and lit it from one of the braziers. She balanced the candle carefully in her upturned palms and put a foot on the first step. What could she say to a god, to spare her friend's life? Was she actually prepared for this?

She climbed.

The stairs narrowed with each step, with walls of darkness closing in as she ascended. She realized that figures stood in the dark places, motionless mummies stationed throughout, their bodies gowned with fabrics and hieroglyphs of Hazoret. Samut wondered if they were the past victims of Hazoret's temper, upstarts not worthy of the paradisiacal beyond.

Samut emerged onto a dais and gasped. A thirty-foot curtain of fire rose before her, framed by a towering gilded arch. Sparks spit from of the curtain of flame and sizzled in Samut's hair. Samut's face roasted, but she was careful not to spill her hearth candle.



Trial of Zeal | Art by Svetlin Velinov

The flame curtain parted, and Samut saw, initially, feet. She looked up to see Hazoret looking down at her. A shining ring gently revolved and undulated around the jackal god's face, a halo of living gold.

The god's mouth moved, but the sound came from everywhere. **"We shall speak until your candle burns away. Would you care to sit, initiate?"**

Samut realized she was surrounded by benches, padded settees, ornate divans—all scaled to mortal dimensions and lit by sparkling tapers. Hazoret's innermost temple was arranged like a cozy traditional hearth, a place for family gatherings.

Samut cleared her throat. "Thank you, great Hazoret," she said. "But I am no initiate. Not anymore."

"Your words and your heart do not agree. Be seated."

Samut quickly sat, still holding her ceremonial candle.

The god gathered her legs under her in a comfortable sitting position, taking up the entire center of the hearth. **"Why is it that you come to me in anguish, at a time that should be joyous?"**

Samut was unnerved by how quickly the god read her soul. She had beheld the gods before, of course, but this was the first time she had ever conversed with a divinity one-on-one. "I beg forgiveness, Fervent One. I cannot feel joyous for the Trial that is to come." Samut took a trembling breath. "My friend Djeru wishes to die. At your Trial. By your hand."

"Then you should celebrate!" Hazoret said. **"Your friend has the courage to seek the highest goal. As should you."**

Samut's hands trembled as she cradled her candle. The tiny flame flickered, the wax melting into itself. Where was all her confidence and certainty from when she confronted Djeru? Where was her conviction that the gods had become deluded now that she had the opportunity to say it to a god's face? "I know that is what we are taught. That all must battle to win their place in the afterlife, as the viziers tell us."

"Their counsel is wise."

“And I—I know that Djeru would not want me to interfere in his path.” She realized she was speaking more to her candle than to the god. If she was going to say this to the God of Zeal, then she would have to say it with fervor. “But I cannot abide it. He does not know the truth of the afterlife or of the Trials.”

Hazoret’s head tilted, and not in amusement. Her eyes were cold flames of challenge. **“But you know, initiate? You know?”**

Samut bowed with shame. She opened her mouth to object, but she could not summon up the words. She was struck suddenly by how small and insolent she was, seated on a god’s divan, welcomed into a god’s house, present only by a god’s invitation. The mighty Hazoret had shown her only supreme generosity in granting her this time, and she had brought only childish, impudent complaints. Confusing, cold tears brimmed in Samut’s eyes.

The dais rumbled, as if the entire monument stirred with a low vibration. **“I could strike you down for this sacrilege,”** Hazoret said. **“You know this.”**

“Yes,” Samut whispered.

“But it is never my wish to cage a warrior’s heart. And I see that your heart yearns to fight. So fight, Initiate Samut. Fight for the truth in your heart.”

Samut beheld the pinnacle of ferocity and grace before her. She was overcome with admiration—she longed for Hazoret to be proud of her. And by terrifying corollary, she desperately feared *failing* her.

But if she did not make her request, then she would fail Djeru instead.

“I do not know the way to ask what I must ask,” she said.

The ground shook. Spikes of living gold radiated from around Hazoret’s face. **“Does a warrior hesitate? Speak!”**

Samut bowed, and she sniffed away tears. “Great Hazoret, Keeper of the Gate,” she said. “I have come to plead for Djeru’s survival. I ask that when he offers you his life, that you not take it from him.”

Hazoret sat back. The bright specks of her eyes wandered from Samut to the ceiling, and to some mental distance Samut could not perceive. After a time, the god looked down at Samut again. **“This is a serious and woeful matter. Is this what he desires?”**

“I spoke to him, but he refused me.”

“So you would alter his path, in defiance of his will? You wish to cage his heart? Would you not grant him the same favor I have granted you?”

Every part of Samut wanted to crumple in shame. She almost tossed her dwindling candle down and fled. But the thought of Djeru bleeding on the ground flashed in her mind. She saw his life trickling out of two puncture holes—one through his head and one through his heart. Her battle-brother, fulfilling his dream of dying uselessly. The thought squeezed her heart like a fist.

“He labors under a lie.”

“This initiate. Djeru. You call him a friend?”

“I do.”

“And though you see your friend’s belief, that faith that inflames his heart—you would call him mistaken?”

“I do, mighty Hazoret. But if I may . . .” Samut swallowed hard, gathering the strength to look Hazoret in the eye. “Is it possible that you are . . . also mistaken?”

Hazoret did not reply, but Samut felt the rumbling of the platform below her, and the keening of every brick in the walls around her. Shuffling sounds echoed from far down the staircase—the approaching, inexorable footfalls of summoned mummies.

Hazoret leaned in close, and suddenly the god seemed ten times larger, expanding to fill Samut’s vision. Nothing existed but the jackal-face of rippling gold, hot and crackling and immediate.

Samut withered back into her cushion. But even now, even as the fervent rage of a god enveloped her, she felt consumed by an extraordinary feeling of love—Hazoret’s love. In their closeness, she felt the warm generosity implicit in Hazoret’s invitation, the hospitality of her hearth-like temple, the thick-walled protection of her grand home. This was Hazoret’s heart. This was the Hazoret that she, perhaps, had once been. This was connection.

“Kind Hazoret,” Samut whispered. “Do you remember how we once called you? The people of this world call you Gate Keeper now, and Trials’ End—but also the Mother of Zeal. Nurturer of Hearts. We are your children, your family. You were not always a cruel god, poised with spear and fire at the gates of death. You were a god of compassion and inspiration, whose fiery heart inspired the people to their greatest achievements.”

A glimmer of light passed across Hazoret’s vast golden face, and Samut thought she saw the god momentarily withdraw by an almost imperceptible distance.

“You are zealous, yes,” Samut continued. “But I fear that fervency that made you great has been twisted to make you callous. Not a celebrant of life, but an instrument of death. Is there any of that still in you? Any tiny sliver of a memory of that time before the God-Pharaoh?”

Hazoret’s face hung in the air above her, roiling with majestic fire. Tears rolled down Samut’s cheeks and turned to steam. She could only wait for the judgment of a god.

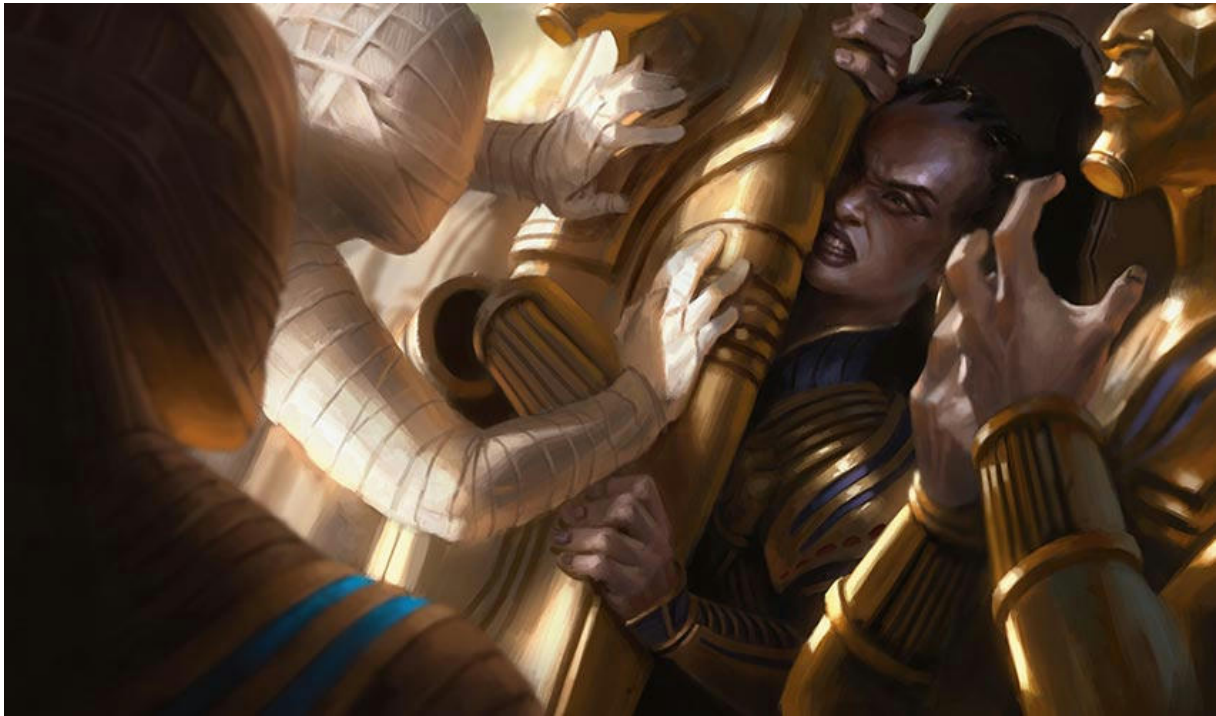
Then, Hazoret spoke, and the words were thunder.

“May the ammits eat the heart from your chest. “

Hazoret stood up to her full height, sweeping away from Samut. The god’s face was now remote and impassive, all intimacy shattered. Samut looked down to weep into her candle, but it had extinguished into a handful of puddled wax.

As servant mummies filled the temple, the god said her final words to Samut. The words crushed Samut’s heart—not because of the promise of punishment, but from the revocation of welcome.

“Anointed,” said the God of Zeal. **“Seize the dissenter. “**



Time to Reflect | Art by Daarken

Samut could feel her own breath on her face. The sarcophagus was tight, its limits only a finger length from every part of her skin. Her arms had been weaved through the sleeves, leaving her hands trapped away from her body and exposed to the dry air outside. It had been hours since she had been forced in that time, and as the first sun rose in the sky, the temperature in her prison rose in tandem.

Discomfort had given its way to thirst hours ago, and she had lost her perception of time by the time thirst gave way to desperation.

Samut initially tried to force her way out. She charged a spell of speed to ram her elbows through the walls but was met only with bruises and the straining of her own bones. She wriggled and jostled, but the prison seemed to be enchanted in such a way that one could not break out from the inside.

She refused to weep. Mostly out of determination. Partly because she couldn't spare any extra water. Entirely because she knew she was exactly where she needed to be.

She realized quickly that she was not alone. To her left and right were similar sarcophagi, and inside each one was a dissenter like herself. Their heresies varied, but each had gathered enough to know that it was their duty to inform the newcomers of what would come next.

"There are no monsters in the Trial of Zeal," one to Samut's left had said, "The monsters initiates face in the final Trial are the dissenters themselves."

"Everything they tell us is a lie." Samut shook her head, temples tapping either side of her prison.

"The initiates fight dissenters and heretics to prove their faith. They'll come for us soon so we can be next."

"I think we'll be the last," says the one to Samut's right. "The second sun is hours away from its zenith."

From down the line, "May his return come quickly!"

From either side of Samut, "Shut up!"

“The God-Pharaoh is not of this world,” Samut said. The others are hushed to listen. “I’ve seen the old temples. Our gods are true but he is not.”

The others went silent. Samut’s voice descended into a deadly serious tone.

“If we are to save our world when he returns I need to save the life of one acolyte.”

“Why one?” said the voice to the left.

“He is strong and full of conviction,” Samut replied. “If anyone could convince a god they’d been lied to, it’s him. If I can convince him, he can do anything, and we can live our lives free of the trespasser’s influence.”

Samut knew that Djeru would hate her for this. She knew he would fight and spit and probably try to kill her for ruining his death, but it was necessary. She couldn’t face this without him.

The hot day passed into frigid night, and Samut’s skin chilled when she leaned against the walls of her enclosure. Sleep was a useless hope, and her muscles cramped from holding herself still and away from the cold of the sarcophagus.

They’ll come in the morning. They’ll take her to the arena. She’ll finally convince Djeru, they’ll leave alive, and the two will fight off the trespasser that ruined their world in the first place.

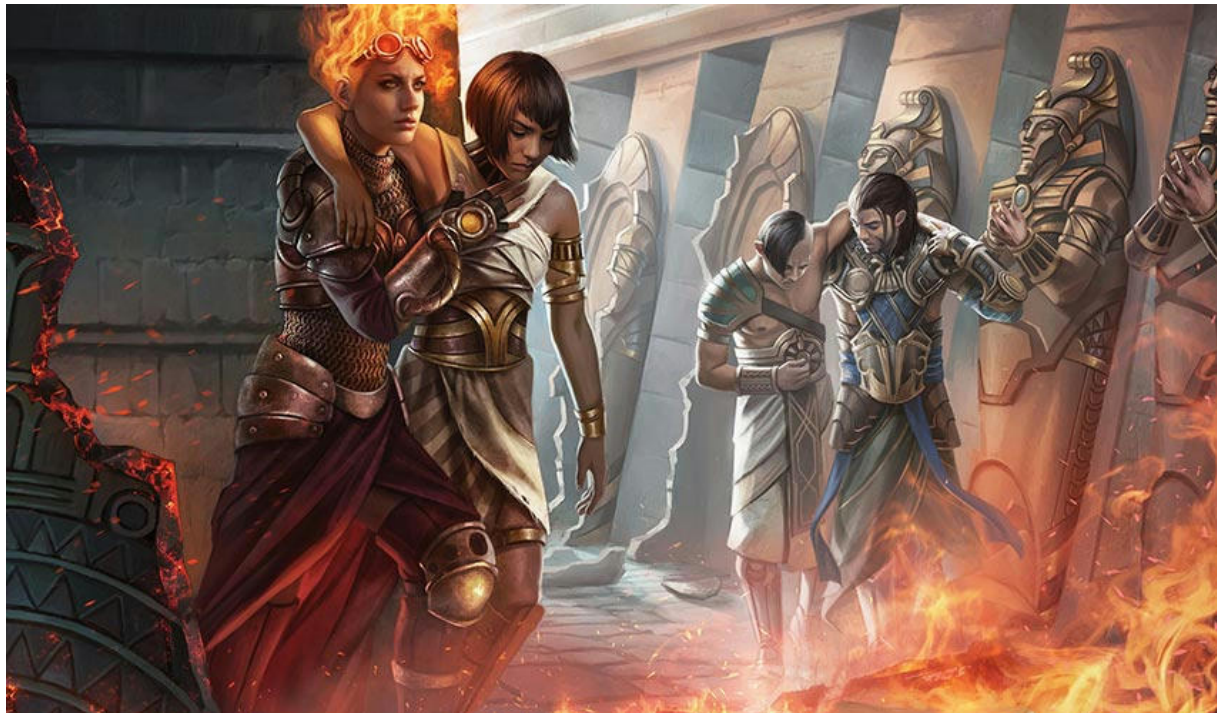
Her insomnia was interrupted by voices outside.

“When Nissa tried to track her it led us here—”

“Are those *hands*—”

“Those weren’t there before. There’s people inside, hold on—”

Searing heat and a crack of light poured in through a break in the sarcophagus. The prison fell to either side, and Samut blinked away the blur. Standing in front of her were two strangers, a red-haired woman and a tall, sturdy man.



By Force | Art by Magali Villeneuve

These were not the people who would take her to the final Trial. This was wrong, Samut thought; she wasn't supposed to be rescued!

Samut began to run, stumbling on cramped and exhausted legs. She was stopped by the one who freed her from the cage, a man who introduced himself as Gideon. He explained that they saw her days ago evading capture and came to rescue her.

Samut wanted to laugh at his arrogance. Instead, she asked why they needed *her* of all people.

The woman alongside him introduced herself as Chandra, and asked Samut to clarify what she meant days ago when she tried to warn the public about the lies of the Hours.

Putting aside confusion over how they found her in the first place, Samut told the strangers about what she had learned. About the empty tombs, about how those who died in the Trial of Zeal were taken elsewhere, about her dance and the dead generations that came before. She watched as the two strangers shared a look, nodded, and sent for help. Eventually, three other strangers came and joined. They swapped information, took guesses at the time they needed before the God-Pharaoh's return.

Samut struggled to keep up with the names as she greeted Nissa, Liliana, and Jace in turn. She joined them to help the other dissenters out of their sarcophagi as the strangers caught each other up.

Jace focused on filling in their new acquaintance. "The God-Pharaoh is a dragon from another world, Samut. I believe he came here in a moment of desperation. Otherwise, he would have made a place himself."

Nissa told the group of what she found on the walls of Naktamun. "There used to be eight gods, now there are five. I am uncertain what happened to the other three, but the surviving gods were all tampered with to suit Nicol Bolas's intentions."

"They kill each other in the Trial of Ambition," Gideon said, voice heavy with confusion. "The Trials are *intended* to churn out bodies. The ones who die in the Trial of Zeal are taken to a separate place. I haven't figured out why."

Liliana took in a deep breath.

"My third demon is here."

The conversation halted at that. Samut had no idea what the woman meant, but the others had gone silent with fury.

"And you didn't *tell us*?" Chandra seethed.

Nissa narrowed her eyes. "Did you *ever* intend to help us with Nicol Bolas or was this your real motivation?"

Gideon turned the group's attention to the man in blue. "Jace, did you know about this?"

The man shifted uncomfortably. "... It's a secondary motivation for our group. The sooner Liliana is free from her contract the sooner she can fight at full capacity—"

Nissa shook her head. "Jace, this goes against what we came here for."

Chandra cut to the point. "For someone so smart, you do an awful lot of thinking with every part of you *except your brain*, jackass—"

"Liliana, do you really expect us to drop what we came here to do and fight your battles for you?" Gideon asked looking to the woman in violet.

She tipped her chin and absent-mindedly moved her hand to her right pocket. "Yes, because you can't defeat Bolas without me!"

“Quiet!” Samut interjected. The others stared at her, fuming. She calmed her voice and looked each of the trespassers in the eye.

“I want to make one thing clear,” Samut said. “We don’t have time to argue. We have time to get to the Trial of Zeal and save the one person who can help me rally Naktamun. The God-Pharaoh isn’t here, we won’t know what he’s capable of until he arrives, and every single one of you is going to help me rescue my friend because *none of you have a plan to do anything otherwise* . Got it?”

Coyly, the other five each nodded.

“Good.”

Gideon stepped forward. “I swear to help you save the life of your friend.”

He delivers promises quickly , Samut thought. She nodded in acceptance.

And froze.

She had felt them before she saw them.

The gods.

All of them.

In a single-file line they approached, Hazoret in the lead, the others just behind. The other four must have come to see the show, to stay together now that the God-Pharaoh was nearly here.

Samut felt compelled to still and hush. The other mortals succumbed to the same spell.

“Dissidents. Your time has come ,” Hazoret said, voice as hard as steel. **“Come, and face the last initiates in the final Trial. “**

A haze overcame the group, and everything went dark.



Hazoret the Fervent (Invocation) | Art by Joseph Meehan

The dissidents awoke with cartouches of control hanging around their necks. They were standing, still as the dead, in the center of a great arena. Twin suns beamed down, and a sheen of sweat sat at the base of their necks.

Samut, Chandra, Jace, Gideon, Nissa, and Liliana had been forced to stand in a ring, each of them facing outward. At the far end of the arena was a great platform, and atop it stood Hazoret, God of Zeal, flanked on each side by the other four gods of Amonkhet.

The pantheon was difficult to look at. Meeting their gaze filled the dissident's hearts with shame. Only Samut locked eyes with the gods, the fire in her gut not anger at the deities, but at whoever it was that tainted them so. Her gods were good. They were *good*. What had been done to them was a sin beyond sins. Whoever the trespasser was would pay.

In the stands around them were the anointed, silent and still. The reverent quiet of the former initiates filled Samut with wary awe, their presence a reminder of the special future that awaited those who participated in the final Trial.

Standing beneath the platform of the gods were four initiates. Each tense with excitement, desperate for a victory.

While the other dissidents stood frozen by the stationary magic of the cartouches, Jace was launching a psychic assault on the cartouche around his own neck. The thing had spelled him still and mute, but his mind was free to fight against the thing.

Jace, I think I've got it.

The white blossoms of Nissa's voice in Jace's mind caught his attention. He moved his eyes to his left and saw Nissa's hand twitch, moving willingly against the enchantment of the cartouche.

How did you do that? Jace asked in her mind.

She gave off the suggestion of a mental shrug. *They work like leylines*, she thought. *A different mana source, but the same principle.*

She didn't have time to completely dissolve the spell. Hazoret raised her spear at the end of the arena and spoke.

Her voice rung like a bell through the arena.

"Initiates. Before you are heretics, doomed souls who denied your God-Pharaoh and your way of life. Your task in this, the final Trial, is to kill each of them."

Samut scanned each initiate ahead of her, desperately searching for Djeru. Did he go already? Was she too late?

No. There. At the end. Djeru stood with khopesh in hand, his stance practiced and unmovable. He looked accomplished and proud and smiled with a believer's grin.

Thank the gods. He was still alive, and Samut intended to keep him that way.

Gideon spotted him at the same time she did. His stomach dropped in dread. Would he have to kill Djeru, as Djeru had mercifully murdered his crop?

Djeru, on the other hand, saw Samut and felt a rush. Of course he would face his dearest friend on this, his last day in this body. This was indeed destiny.

Hazoret brought down her spear.

"The Hours are moments away. May the final Trial begin."

The god held up her hand, and Hazoret's mark of battle rage appeared over their heads.



Pursue Glory | Art by Johann Bodin

Samut had studied the effects of Hazoret's magic, of course, but experiencing it was entirely different than reading about it.

She needed to fight.

She needed to win, to appease, to curb the favor of the chosen daughter of the God-Pharaoh.

Hazoret's magic was a welcome, zealous fire in their minds and a rush of strength in their limbs. All were enchanted, all were under the same spell. Each driven to maim, kill, let go of their logic and embrace Hazoret's fervor.

Conscious thought was lost.

Only the need to battle remained.

The cartouches of control vanished from the sternums of the dissenters, and with their bodies their own once more, the group of heretics surged forward.

Samut launched herself toward Djeru alongside the frenzy of dissenters also charging. The magic twisting her body and mind told her to fight and kill. Her heart reminded her of her goal.

She had to keep Djeru alive. By any means necessary.

Jace was the first to attempt to use magic. Instinctively he raised his hand, intent on crushing the mind of the initiate running toward him. When no light came, no mana rose to meet his command, his eyes went wide in surprise. The initiate rushing him bent forward, lifted, and threw Jace onto his back and knocked the air out of his lungs.

Chandra artfully leaped over Jace's body. She embraced Hazoret's magic with ease, and though fire wouldn't come to her fists, she punched and scratched at the initiate in front of her with all her might. She laughed wildly. The release felt amazing, and as the initiate fighting her grappled and kicked, Chandra dodged and volleyed. What she had in spitfire she lacked in training, however. The initiate she was facing landed a punch to her kidney and a jab to her cheek. Chandra howled in rage and tackled

the initiate to the ground. Liliana joined Chandra in an instant, holding the other initiate down, her face contorted by Hazoret's fury while the two women did their best to fight without magic.

Nissa was the only one doing an adequate job of fighting without magic. She had taken a few punches from the third initiate facing her, but had lifted Jace from the ground and tossed him into her opponent. Hazoret's mark shone red and vibrant on the crown of her head as she screamed a Joragan battle cry at Jace and the initiate.

Gideon was as lost to the magic as the others. He was running, heaving, grunting with each stride toward Djeru at the other end of the arena.

Samut was faster, though. She made it to him first. Her eyes met Djeru's. Underneath the magic, she sensed his surprise.

Djeru took an instinctive swing at her with his khopesh, which Samut dodged with ease. In the span of a second, she shifted her weight and stood back-to-back with her friend.

His understanding was immediate and silent.

She would protect him. They would fight together.

Gideon, marked with magic and mad with battle lust, locked eyes with the two friends. He swung his fists with lack of practice and an abundance of muscle.

Djeru gripped his weapon tight, and his prayer began.

"Hazoret, Keeper of the Gate of the Afterlife and the favorite of the God-Pharaoh," Djeru cried.

He yelled his prayer as he moved, his practiced and masterful fighting style in perfect harmony with Samut's dynamic martial skills.

As Djeru worshiped aloud, Hazoret's eyes locked on him and Samut. The initiate's voice was full and firm, timed with the movement of battle, interspersed with breath and effort.

"Behold, mighty Hazoret, the zeal of your children!" Djeru yelled.

His khopesh ripped upward, cutting a sleek, shallow slice cut through Gideon's forearm—whites of Gideon's eyes stared at his arm like he'd never seen his own blood before—

"My final prayer in this physical form is not for myself. It is for the person who deserves your mercy the most!"

Samut's leg met the face of Gideon—she rode her momentum, followed through, easily took the man from full standing height to flat on the ground—

Djeru continued, panting with rage and effort. "Please, I beg of you, forgive Samut, my dearest friend! She is sharp in ways I am not, and her worth is proven by her talents!"

The friends locked brief eye contact—do you mean it? Yes, I do, of course, I do, Samut—two bodies moved in tandem, grappling fellow dissidents, a flawless synchronicity, khopesh and well-trained kicks dancing side by side—

"Forgive her for her trespasses! Forgive her for her doubts!" Djeru prayed through panting breath.

Gideon wiped away hot crimson and yelled, "You're throwing away your life! Why do you want to die?!" Djeru ignored it—elbowed Gideon's nose, landed a punch to his kidney, sliced his proud cheek —

"Behold Samut's faith in the old ways!" Djeru punctuates his prayer with a slice of his khopesh. "See how she has studied our past and made manifest our people's culture!"

Samut's feet cracked bones, and the caress of her hands blooms bruises—she knocks another dissident out cold as they try to stab Djeru with a spear—

“Please, grant Samut a glorified death.”

The two initiates wove violence into dance. Pull, thrust, dislocate shoulder, box ears—

Djeru's earnest tears ran down the creases of fury on his face. “I could not spend my forever knowing that she no longer existed. She cannot suffer Nakht's fate.”

Hazoret's spell began to wear off. Time slowed down. Color returned, senses regained, Samut stopped. Djeru was alive. How does she keep him that way?

Djeru concluded with his khopesh on the ground, a formal surrender. “Hear my prayer, Hazoret!”

“I do, Djeru. “

The battle magic dissipates.

Djeru's prayer ended.

The god Hazoret stood tall at the end of the arena.

“Come forward, Djeru and Samut. “

Around them was spatters of blood, the bodies of three initiates (head turned sideways, throat parted, thrown body discarded into the crowd). The strangers known as the Gatewatch were alive, blinking, confused, realizing they had access to their magic again.

Djeru took Samut's hands in his during the brief silence. “Samut, I choose this death.”

Samut shook her head. “I need you to help me defeat the greatest trespasser. I need you to help me, and I cannot do it if your soul is not here.”

“I will see you in paradise, my friend.”

Samut's eyes closed in defeat.

Djeru turned toward Hazoret and approached.

The arena seemed to stretch on and on, time itself stopped as he walked in silence across the dust and stone. Djeru's existence had been condensed to walking this line, to willing one foot in front of the other so he could receive his gift.

Samut couldn't wait. She couldn't stand idly by. Not after everything she'd done to convince him to stay alive.

Please approach, Samut, daughter of our past. Hazoret's voice was a warm crackling fire in Samut's mind. She followed Djeru and found herself standing alongside her friend in front of the god.

Hazoret looked down, looked through the two initiates. She spoke to Djeru first.

“You did not kill the remaining dissenters. “

Djeru swallowed. “A dissenter's death is not one to be found in the final Trial. They do not know our ways.”

Hazoret moved her head back slightly in approval.

“Will you claim your place among the eternal, Djeru? “

Tears rolled down Djeru's cheeks. A glorious death was all he ever wanted, all he ever desired. He nodded. He would have his place. His death would *mean something*.

Samut's heart sunk further with the knowledge of what she had to do. Djeru would never forgive her. How could he?

Hazoret looked to Samut.

"Your worth is only proven if your faith is true, Samut. Will you receive my gift?"

Without hesitation, she shook her head.

"The greatest trespasser is nearly here," she said, voice cracking, eyes locked with Hazoret's. "I have work to do."

Hazoret gave a small, disappointed sigh. Djeru only stared, eyes wide in shock and disappointment. He couldn't answer. He only swallowed and squeezed her shoulder. A silent farewell.

It was too much.

Samut let out a shaky breath. "I am sorry, my friend. Please forgive me, someday."

Her apology was met with a crease of confusion on Djeru's brow.

"Approach, Djeru."

Djeru stepped forward and closed his eyes in reverence. He kneeled and outstretched his arms.

Hazoret raised her spear, and Samut steeled her will.

He had to live. He *had* to live. There was no turning back. Samut wasn't losing a friend again to a meaningless death. Samut dug in her heel and loosened her stance, charging a spell of speed and timing her impending intervention as Hazoret's spear pulled back.

The god released, and Samut leaped.



Gideon's Intervention | Art by Daarken

It happened in a flash.

Samut kicked off and tackled Djeru from the side, knocking him to the ground at the same time a great *CLANG* and a burst of gold erupted behind her.

As Samut hit the ground, she realized that the noise had come from Gideon behind her. He stood between them and Hazoret's spear, silky golden magic forming a barrier between himself and death.

He keeps his word, Samut thought with the briefest of smiles.

That mirth was instantly crushed by the wide-eyed surprise of her friend, pinned beneath her to the stone floor of the arena.

Samut wanted desperately to look away. Couldn't look away. Her betrayal was manifest on the face of her best friend. Djeru shook with fury.

"How *could* you?"

"Djeru, I know this isn't what you wanted—"

"How **COULD** YOU!"

He shoved her off and swung a punch, which she dodged as easily as she would a falling feather. Tears welled up in Djeru's eyes as the gods in the arena each gave a sudden gasp.

There, above them all, the second sun was beginning to pass through the horns on the horizon, its long-awaited cycle at last at its end.

Djeru took no notice. He tried to grapple with an unwilling Samut, his heaves of agony giving way to open sobs.

The gods began to walk towards the exit of the arena, their attention focused skyward.

Only Hazoret stayed behind, oddly stunned by what had just happened. She held her spear in uncertain hands.

A distracted Gideon stared at Hazoret in fright, jaw slack and eyes wide. He looked down in confusion, then turned to Djeru.

"Djeru," he said, "she was going to k—"

"I KNOW WHAT SHE WAS GOING TO DO!" Djeru spat, his face contorted in fury. He shoved Samut to the side and launched himself at the man. Gideon's invulnerability shimmered with each blow, his face twisted in pathetic confusion beneath the soft golden light of his magic. He didn't try to block the blows, and only let Djeru continue pummeling blow after blow.

"That was my chance, and now it's GONE! IT'S GONE, YOU BASTARD!"

Gideon only shook his head in disbelief behind his golden glittering shroud of protection. Samut could see that his natural resistance only made Djeru all the more furious. She could see how he wanted to crush that barrier, break it, stab through and eviscerate, rip through the trespasser's tendons and smear his enchantment with the contents of his intestines. Samut felt pity, but not regret. She knew how angry he would be. She knew that she and this stranger had ruined her best friend's life.

Gideon held up his hands at last to stop Djeru's attack. He did not touch him but instead backed off.

"Why do you want to die?!"

"Because I want to exist!" Djeru exclaimed in a sob.

He fell to his knees and wept.

The air stilled. The only sound in the arena was that of the defeated warrior. The other trespassers watched, silent, from afar. Samut's heart sank. Of course that was his fear. After what became of Nakht, how could it be anything else?

His mourning echoed off the hundreds of anointed in the stands. The world had ceased to exist, and all that was left was his failure. The pantheon of gods behind Hazoret had left. They needed to be at the Luxa River. The Hours had almost begun.

Samut's hands went to Djeru's shoulders as he lamented.

She leaned in, and in a voice quiet and small, she whispered.

"We have so much work left to do and so many people left to help. Your training was for *that*, not for this."

Djeru couldn't answer. He could only weep.

Samut kept whispering, "We get to grow old together, Djeru. And someday, a long time far from now, our people will live long, full lives, and only then we will walk into the afterlife side by side. I'm sorry you did not get what you wanted, but I am thankful you are here." She kissed Djeru's forehead in gratitude.

He only grieved. Samut squeezed his shoulder.

"Please, Djeru, you need to get up now."

It took a moment, but he did.

He took a single, steeled look at Gideon, whose eyes darted to the ground.

You intervened, a warm voice said in Samut's mind. She looked up and met the golden gaze of Hazoret. Samut nodded.

What do you have to say for yourself?

I believe in you, Giver of Gifts, Samut prayed. I believe that you are not what you are forced to do. And that you will protect your children when we need you the most.

Hazoret stood still. Uncertain. Her ears twitched and caught the light of two suns.

"The Hours have begun, Hazoret," Samut finally said aloud.

A loud droning blast, like that of an ancient horn, echoed through the city and against the stands of the arena.

Samut, the Gatewatch, Hazoret, and the utterly crushed Djeru looked to the sky as a shadow overcame them all, like a cloud passing overhead.

The shadow cast by the second sun began to wipe a slow line of darkness across the stadium. They all stood still and watched as the line passed at the speed of a gentle walk from one side . . . to the other.

The shift in light settled and their eyes adjusted. The world was now half-dark, a grim saturation of what it was before.

"It has begun. The Hours have begun!" Hazoret stepped over Samut, Djeru, and Gideon, her eyes trained on the light glinting past either side of the structure on the horizon.

"Get up, Djeru, we need to go." Samut pulled Djeru to his feet.

Djeru wiped his wet face. "There is a chance. If the Hours have begun, the God-Pharaoh will still deliver us."

Samut shook her head and kept her mouth shut. The chill from the second sun's shadow raised her flesh.

She shivered from the cold.

Outside of the arena, they heard a crowd yelling and crying, stampeding as quickly as they could to the banks of the Luxa River. The Gate to the Afterlife lay at the end. According to the first prophecy in the Accounting of the Hours, the gate would open when the second sun entirely sat between the horns, revealing the promise of the God-Pharaoh.

“Djeru, we need to run. We need to make sure as many people survive the next few hours as possible.”

The second sun had never set, but now that it cast a shadow on the entire city, everything was half-dark. Everything was cold. Djeru had never felt *cold* before.

“Samut, we need to go to the river. The Hours begin with the opening of the Gate to the Afterlife. He is coming. The God-Pharaoh will show me mercy!” Djeru began running toward the exit of the arena, toward the mass of reverent citizens outside.

Liliana, Jace, Chandra, and Nissa bolted for the exit.

Gideon held behind.

He looked at his forearm and watched a rivulet of his own blood run down to his thumb.

Distantly, he knew he should run and keep up with the others. But he was transfixed, staring at the wound Djeru had sliced through his arm.

The blood ran thick and dark in the gloom of the single sun. It slid easily down.

Gideon’s heart beat an anxious rhythm in his chest.

Hazoret had whispered in his mind the moment he stood between her and Djeru. Her words repeated in his mind, looping over and over with the rhythm of his panicking heart.

I am neither the first nor the last immortal whom you will cross.

Cursed is the man who forgets his own past,

for I see your death, Kytheon Iora.

You are no god.

Gideon shivered at those words and watched the blood of his arm hit the stone below.

He looked to the sun passing behind the horn of the immense monument in the distance, and the indestructible man felt only a bleak and empty horror.