

Endure

Michael Yichao

From set *Hour of Devastation*

“The world crumbled beneath the heel of the mighty God-Pharaoh, and an unnamed hour dawned as the blood red sun drowned the land in crimson. And thus, the Hour of Devastation reigned, and, the God-Pharaoh completed his great plan, leaving behind ruin while darkness consumed and unmade the entirety of the city.”

Samut ran.



Blur of Blades | Art by Anna Steinbauer

Behind her, the small band of survivors followed. Djeru kept pace with the slowest of the group, guarding their backs.

Escape the city. Get to the desert.

Hazoret's command burned at the back of Samut's thoughts as they moved. She and Djeru had obeyed the god, parting ways with Hazoret and striking out toward the edges of the city. They had grown in number as they traveled, other survivors joining to fight together.

They had shrunk in number as god-fueled destruction crumbled the city around them.

Get to the desert.



Endless Sands | Art by Noah Bradley

The endless dunes and strangling sands had long been symbols of death and danger to the people of Naktamun, and a personal reminder of folly and loss for Samut. Yet now, the desert was her people's last hope for survival.

The rag-tag group approached a building just a short distance from where the Hekma had stood only hours before. Once a barracks for the viziers of Kefnet who helped maintain and repair the barrier, the building looked utterly abandoned, save for a few small clusters of locusts that clung to various surfaces. Samut gestured for the others to take shelter behind a wall. She scabbled up the rough stone, climbing to the roof for a better vantage.

Before her, the deserts of Amonkhet stretched to the horizon. Winds drove sheets of sand through the air, and the rippling dunes cast strange shadows. Samut couldn't tell if they were shifting due to the light, the wind, or because they hid some unknown horror. She knew that other ruins lay buried beyond the city, places where they could possibly hide temporarily for shelter—but beyond that, she was at a loss.

Hazoret still believed that the God-Pharaoh might come to save them from the darkness. Some in their group seemed to believe the same, still invoking the God-Pharaoh in their battle cries or whispering prayers for his return to fix what had gone wrong. But Samut knew the truth.

A series of cries rang out from below her. Samut looked down to find all the survivors pointing back toward the city. In the sky, a dark void appeared, and from its unfathomable depths, a massive golden figure appeared. For a moment, Samut's brow crinkled in confusion. Then she saw the being's golden horns.

The blood drained from Samut's face.

He has arrived.



Nicol Bolas, the Deceiver | Art by Svetlin Velinov

Some in their party cheered. Some started running back toward the heart of the city, toward the distant God-Pharaoh.

That was when the dragon raised his hands, and black fire fell from the skies.

Samut yelled above the noise, urging the survivors into the enclave behind them. She suppressed her despair as she watched a streaking blast of flames annihilate a young minotaur running back toward the group. She dashed out to scoop an aven girl into her arms, running with the child back toward shelter, pushing her to join the others. Once everyone was inside, she followed. Djeru was herding folks into the center of the room, away from windows and doorways. The shuddering sound of blasts hitting walls and other buildings reverberated through their bones, punctured only by the quiet sobs of the young.

“Why—why would the God-Pharaoh—” a naga youth, barely of age to be a disciple by Samut’s guess, stammered and stared wide-eyed at those around him.

“The God-Pharaoh is a lie.” Samut spoke loud enough for the room to hear. “He is no great redeemer. He is a trespasser, an interloper from another world.”

“That—that can’t be true. That . . . *beast* cannot be our promised God-Pharaoh.” A tall, barrel-chested man pushed his way forward. Samut recognized him as Masikah of the Ahn crop.

“Do your eyes not see, your ears not hear? Does your heart not feel? The death of our gods! The destruction of our city! This spell of hellfire, from the very claws of the God-Pharaoh himself!” Samut spoke with icy conviction, staring straight at Masikah.

A voice cried out from the crowd. “We have been betrayed! Our gods have been betrayed!” Angry shouts of agreement rippled across the assembled group.

“The dark gods are his harbingers, not his adversaries.” Samut put an arm on Masikah’s shoulder. “We must confront the truth and fight to survive.”

Samut turned and addressed the crowd, looking each survivor in the eye. “I have uncovered the erased histories of our people. I have seen the ruins and hidden places in the sands.” Samut’s words softened as she spoke. “I had hoped that I was wrong, that I was mad, that the heresies I found were not true. But all of my worst fears have come to pass.”

The survivors murmured among themselves. Some faces hardened with anger, while others turned to Samut, waiting for her next words. She opened her mouth to speak when a sharp, stabbing pain pierced her chest. Samut doubled over, sucking in breath through clenched teeth. As she looked up, she saw all the survivors clutching their chests, their faces frozen in stunned shock. One of the younger survivors vomited.

Which one had fallen?

Samut chose her words with purpose.

“Four of our gods are now dead. Yes, four,” she said, shouting above the moans and wails from the survivors. Some shook their heads, denying the truth Samut just spoke aloud. Others simply gazed off into space, stunned into silence. Samut pressed on.

“I live for the glory of my gods. I reject the lies of the false God-Pharaoh. We must stand and protect what’s ours. We must survive. We must defy the great trespasser.”

“I stand with her.”

Samut turned, surprised, her chest tight with emotion. Djeru stood from where he had been comforting a young survivor and faced the crowd. “Samut is my oldest friend. I, more than anyone, thought her words were vile heresy when she first spoke against the God-Pharaoh. But I have seen more than I needed to realize she speaks truth.”

An uneasy silence fell over the group, broken by the young naga boy.

“What do we do now?” he asked, looking around at those near him.

“What *can* we do?” wailed a voice among the crowd. Murmurs of agreement rippled through the survivors.

Another voice cut through, clear and bold. “A good question. What can we do against dark gods who slay divinity, against a dragon who rains fire from the skies?”

A few survivors stepped aside as Hapatra strode forward. Samut looked to Djeru then back to the vizier before replying. “Hazoret asked that Djeru and I protect those we could—to hide among the desert sands. To survive. We defy the trespasser by living.”

Some heads nodded in agreement.

Samut drew her twin khopeshes. “But I am going back into the city.”

She strode to the door, then turned to address the room. “I would not ask any of you to come with me. Escape and survival would be honoring the wish of our god, and would be a brave act in defiance of the trespasser.” Samut’s voice cracked as she continued speaking. “But I cannot bear the death of another god. Though Hazoret wished for us to flee, I will return because I must try to protect that which has protected me my entire life.”

Djeru drew his weapon as well. “I will go with you, sister.” He turned to address the crowd. “We, the children of the gods, have never feared death. I was glad to give my life in dedication to the glorious after. Now I am proud to give it in defense of the divine.”

Other warriors stood, drawing blades, readying staves, their faces set in grim determination.

“I will not go with you.”

Hapatra spoke, and all turned to listen. “Though my heart yearns for even the faintest chance to avenge my Rhonas’s death, I know my poisons would better serve to pave the path for the living.” She drew her dagger and held it to her chest in a salute, a small snake winding its way from her sleeves up her arm. “I am Rhonas’s broken fang, and I know where to strike to stop the undead and the monstrosities in their tracks. I will strike down all that would threaten our people as we seek refuge amongst the sands.” Hapatra stared at Samut with burning intensity. “I trust the safety of our god to your hands, Samut.”

Samut returned the gesture with her khopeshes. “Knowing our strengths and sacrificing our wishes for the welfare of others is not easy. Thank you for your bravery.”

She turned to the others and raised a blade in the air. “The rest, to me! We will find and protect our last god!”

Samut clenched her teeth. *They’re unstoppable.*



Djeru’s Renunciation | Art by Kieran Yanner

Even as Djeru smashed two of them back, a third charged forward, spear at the ready. Samut cried out as Djeru parried the jab from the lazotep-coated minotaur’s spear. She dashed in and smashed her khopeshes against the undead warrior, leaving two jagged gashes along his chest. The blow didn’t seem to affect the minotaur at all as he spun, knocking Djeru and Samut back with a powerful round-house kick.

As she scrambled to her feet, Samut noted that only four other fighters remained; the rest had fallen to the endless stream of eternalized warriors. The cruel joke of the promised Hours nagged at Samut’s thoughts. *The Hour of Eternity—when the worthy dead shall rise again to a glorious afterlife.* Samut grimaced. *If “glorious afterlife” meant slaughtering everything you once held dear.*

The minotaur conjured an angry flame that engulfed the head of its spear. Djeru shuffled closer. “I . . . I’ve never seen the undead cast spells before,” he said.

"I've never seen the corpses of our slain champions imbued with lazotep then unleashed on the city before," Samut said. "It is a day of firsts."

Djeru grinned. "Lucky us."

"If these are our past champions, then this must be *him*," Samut said. Djeru and Samut stepped back as the minotaur approached, his spear spinning in one hand behind him, creating a dizzying pattern of light. Djeru nodded. The brutal champion with a spear of flame: it could only be Neheb the Worthy, a legendary initiate skilled in magic and combat alike. He had passed the Trials when Samut and Djeru were mere children. "The greatest warrior of a generation," their trainers had told them. "Fight like Neheb," their sparring instructors had said.



Neheb, the Eternal | Art by Chris Rahn

"This is a fool's errand," Samut whispered to Djeru, adjusting her grip on her weapons.

Djeru shifted his stance, keeping an eye on Neheb. "We can take him, sister."

"To what end? We cannot hope to defeat all the returned champions of Amonkhet. We should be finding the last remaining god."

Neheb swung his spear forward, sending a wave of flame at Samut. Samut dodged out of the way, but Neheb was already charging in, spear thrusting at Djeru's chest. Djeru held his blade up to parry and the minotaur pressed forward, closing the distance and bringing a powerful fist smashing into Djeru's face, knocking him sprawling. Samut let out a roar and charged, khopeshes swiping down in an overhead strike. Neheb countered with a swift kick to her stomach. The blow knocked her back and left her gasping for air. In a blink, Neheb took advantage of his opening and charged at Djeru, spear raised to pierce the prone warrior.

A flash of light dazed all the fighters present. Samut leaped to her feet to find the interloper Gideon standing between Neheb and Djeru, the golden glow of his invulnerability stopping the minotaur's fiery spear. Around him, the other four interlopers charged forward, spells flying as they assaulted the Eternals. Neheb struck blow after blow against Gideon, but nothing pierced the golden light.

Samut seized her opportunity. She sprinted toward the Eternal minotaur and stabbed him in the back with both khopeshes, knocking him to the ground. The blades cracked through the lazotep, leaving deep gouges. She drew her weapons back and stabbed again, this time piercing the base of its neck. Neheb—or rather, the monstrosity that once had been Neheb—twitched and spasmed briefly, before finally laying inert.

So they can be destroyed, Samut thought. She looked around to see the other interlopers dispatching the remaining Eternals. The one with the pointy ears and unnerving green eyes—*Nissa*—was helping some of the injured warriors, healing cuts and wounds.

Djeru stood and clapped a hand on Gideon’s back. “That is the second time today that you have saved me. The first time, I was furious. Now, I am grateful.”

Gideon started to reply, but Jace cut him off. “We’re wasting time and energy here, Gideon. Bolas remade this place in his image. He has the advantage here. We must approach carefully. But the longer we delay, the more time we give Bolas to prepare for us.”



Strategic Planning | Art by Matt Stewart

“Agreed,” Liliana said. “I’m certain he already knows we’re here.” Samut wondered how the woman’s dress came to be soaked in blood—and how she still managed to look elegant and poised despite this.

“We bring the fight to him, then.” Gideon strode forward, but Samut caught his hand.

“I shall come with you,” she said.

Gideon hesitated. Djeru stepped in. “We will not, Samut. We will stand down.”

Samut’s temper flared. “How could you say that, Djeru? If they intend to slay the trespasser, the one responsible for *all of this* —”

“Then we will support them by getting out of their way.”

Samut fumed, but Djeru held up a hand.

“You are a far stronger fighter than I, Samut.” Djeru shook his head at Samut’s half-formed objection. “Others may speak of us as equals, but you and I know the truth. There is only one thing that I do better than you: seeing the potential of those around me.”

Samut thought back to Djeru’s leadership of their crop, his intuitive knowledge of each member’s skills and weaknesses, and fell silent.

Djeru continued. “A wise warrior once said, ‘Knowing our strengths and sacrificing our wishes for the welfare of others is not easy.’”

Samut rolled her eyes. “Don’t think flattery will win me over, brother.”

“The interlopers must strike down the God-Phara—the trespasser.” Djeru looked toward the great horns in the distance, toward the second sun perched at its zenith between them. “We must stay true to our course. Find the last god of Amonkhet, protect her, and protect the people of our city.”

Samut glared at Djeru, then sighed. She clasped his arm, and brought him close for an embrace. “I am grateful to have you with me again, Djeru.”

She looked to the interlopers, five strangers, bearing strange markings and wielding foreign powers. She did not know if she believed in them or their ability to bring the trespasser low. She looked each of them in the eye as she spoke.

“For what he did to my people, my gods, my world—slay him. Slay the great destroyer. Slay the dragon trespasser. Slay Nicol Bolas.”

Samut was not accustomed to stealth or to following.

After leaving the interlopers to plot their battle with the dragon, Samut, Djeru, and their small band had picked up a few more survivors. The roaming bands of Eternals seemed to be thinning—but only because the living denizens of the city had either died; escaped; or on extremely rare occasion, hid well enough to survive. The streets of Naktamun were strangely quiet, broken by the occasional buzz of locust wings and the shuffles and groans of roaming corpses raised by the Curse of Wandering.

Ahead of Samut, a young vizier of Hazoret led the way. Introducing himself as Haq, the vizier had told Samut and Djeru of the battle he had witnessed between Bontu and Hazoret, of Bontu’s betrayal and the God-Pharaoh’s ultimate cruelty. The vizier couldn’t have been older than fourteen, no more than a year or two into his tenure, yet he spoke with a calmness and eloquence that belied his years.

“After Bontu fell, the scarab god woke the Eternals and attacked the city,” Haq had said. “I had enough time from my vantage at Hazoret’s temple to flee, but in the ensuing bedlam, I lost track of Hazoret.”

As a vizier of Hazoret, though, his heart beat as one with his god, and he could sense her presence faintly. He was tracking her movements, trying to reach her, when a roaming band of mummies trapped him in a storehouse. He had hidden within the barrels of salted fish until Samut’s band happened by.

Now the boy led the group with Samut right behind. Samut prayed quietly that they would reach Hazoret in time, then stopped. It seemed strange to pray to the deity you were trying to save.

Haq led the survivors down a path at the foot of a massive monument, turned a corner, then froze. As the rest of the group rounded the corner, everyone gasped.

Rhonas’s body lay inert on the ground. Some of the survivors fell to their knees. Others approached slowly, hands outstretched, desperate to disprove the reality before them. But trembling fingers met solid golden scales and divine robes. The finality of his death washed over the survivors. Tears, angry

cries, and quiet embraces followed. Djeru approached the god, kneeling and placing a hand on the god's face.

Anger again bubbled in Samut's gut, and she approached the fallen body of Rhonas. She climbed up his chest, drawing gasps from some of the others, and stood. "Brothers. Sisters. We mourn. But we will endure. If you believe the God-Pharaoh tests you, charge with me to prove yourself. If you believe he betrayed us all, join with me to fight for tomorrow. We will embody the strength Rhonas taught us and gifted us, through his teachings and his Trial!"



Life Goes On | Art by Daarken

The survivors around her cried out in solidarity, faces hardening from grief to anger.

Suddenly, Djeru stood, his eyes glued to the horizon. "Samut. I think we should seek out shelter," he said.

Samut squinted where he looked. From the direction of the Gate to the Afterlife, a massive sandstorm was sweeping in. In the past, such a storm would've crashed into the Hekma, harmlessly rippling against the barrier—but with the Hekma gone, the swirling sands and howling winds approached with alarming speed, a solid wall of dust and darkness.

Samut called out to the survivors and turned to retreat the way they had come. But Haq suddenly grasped Samut's hand, pointing in front of him, straight into the storm. "Sister. Hazoret comes. She is not alone."

Samut looked at the boy, then drew her khopeshes. "Warriors. Brace yourselves. Stand ready!"

The survivors drew their weapons and pulled cloths over mouths and faces. Several ducked behind the monument wall for some shelter. Samut, Djeru, and Haq stood where they were, leaning in as the storm swept over them.

The stinging sands nipped at them through their clothes and armor. The three held their arms over their eyes, feet braced against the buffeting winds. Everything dimmed to a semi-darkness, the sand thick enough to filter out most of the twin suns' light, the roar of the wind blocking out any other sounds.

Then Samut saw it: a large shadow approaching in the gloom. The silhouette grew, sharpening into a clearer shape, and soon came the sound of massive feet running. And then Hazoret emerged from the clouds of sand, and Samut again felt her heart surge at the sight of the god.

Her excitement immediately dampened as she took in what she saw. Hazoret did not look well. She gripped her spear in one hand, while the other dangled oddly by her side. Gashes and wounds decorated her golden body, and the god's breath came labored and frequent.

"Hazoret! We've come for you!" Haq cried out above the storm. Samut watched Hazoret turn and gaze toward them, face flickering from determination to surprise.

Run.

The command echoed in Samut's head with the force of an order, and Samut staggered back several steps before seizing control of herself. Hazoret's attention had already turned back behind her, and with a jolt, Samut realized that the towering gloom she had thought was just the rest of the storm was actually a much larger shadow.

A scorpion's tail pierced through the haze, and Hazoret parried the strike, dodging to the side as the massive form of the scorpion god crashed into sight. *She's slow*, Samut noted. *Sluggish. And fighting one-handed.*

Yet even so injured, Hazoret moved with power and purpose. The scorpion god turned to grasp at her, but Hazoret disappeared in a burst of flame and sand. The scorpion god's mandibles clattered, and Samut watched it swerve and lurch back into the gloom, following Hazoret by some unknown sense.

"She's casting a spell," Haq said. Samut looked at the ground where Haq pointed and saw a small ring of fire flickering, buffeted in the wind. In the darkness, through the sands, Samut saw other little glowing points of light emerge as the sounds of titanic blows continued.

"Warriors! Fall back!" Djeru cried, backing away from the fiery circle. Samut and Haq followed suit, and the survivors ran for cover behind the monument they passed earlier.

The air crackled with energy, and an enormous pillar of flame erupted in the storm, hungry tongues of fire fed by the winds, licking through the sand. The air itself seemed to burn as the spiraling flames created a massive, undulating column of fire as tall as any of Naktamun's grandest monuments. The heat of the blaze blistered the exposed skin of the survivors and seemed to burn away the sandstorm, the twisting fiery spell consuming all in its radius.

Samut held a hand up against the heat, peering toward the flame. Silhouetted against the red-orange glow was Hazoret. She held her spear in her one good hand, pointing at the burning pyre, her arm shaking with concentration.

Moments crawled by, and Hazoret finally dropped her arm. The flame pillar persisted as the god fell to her knees, leaning against her spear to stay upright.

"She . . . she caught it in the flame trap," Haq whispered. And indeed, as the fires slowly burned out, Samut could make out the scorpion god's form standing at the center of the blaze, its carapace glowing white hot.

"It cannot still be alive," Djeru breathed.

But the scorpion god took a halting step forward, arm outstretched toward Hazoret. Then another step. And another.

And its carapace cooled from white to orange, then slowly to charred black. Still it approached, regaining momentum and purpose with each step.

Hazoret looked up and moved to stand, but stumbled, falling back to her knees.

And the scorpion god ran forward.

The flash of a tail. The sickening sound of stinger piercing flesh.



A Reckoning Approaches | Art by Yeong-Hao Han

Samut stared, stunned. Hazoret had whipped her body around, blocking the scorpion god's blow with her deadened arm. The scorpion god pulled its stinger back, and Hazoret cried out in pain. She rolled backward away from the scorpion god's second strike. Samut watched with horror as green ichor glowed and crawled up Hazoret's limb, creeping its way toward the god's body and heart.

Hazoret's spear glowed with heat.

A swing of its bladed edge.

The sizzle of flesh.

A small mist of blood evaporated in the air as the molten edge cauterized the cut.

Hazoret crouched, panting hard, blood seeping from the wound that had saved her life. Before her, her severed arm blackened, the poison consuming the flesh.

And again, the scorpion god approached.

Samut let out a primal scream and sprinted forward, terror and rage and pain and heartbreak melting into molten strength. Behind her, she was faintly aware of Haq and other mages readying spells. In front of her, the impossible height of the scorpion god loomed. She was tiny. She was inconsequential.

And she did not care.

Instinct seized Samut as she channeled magical power to her legs. She *leaped* into the air, launching herself flying over Hazoret and toward the dark god, khopeshes gripped with blades pointing downward. She smashed into the scorpion god's side, and her blades *pierced* its carapace, lodging there and giving her a temporary handhold. Surprise turned to epiphany as she realized that the molten heat from Hazoret's spell must have softened the god's impenetrable shell.

Samut laughed, a blend of battle rage and utter joy. She gave her blades a shake and a jolt, sliding *down* the god's body, gravity lending momentum to her descent. She swung her feet out and carved across the god's ribs towards his abdomen, her blades slicing through the heated carapace like an ibis cutting through a clear blue sky.

The scorpion god roared and swatted at her, an insect-like god trying to squash an insect-like human. But Samut pulled her blades loose and launched herself again, kicking off his chest, her khopeshes biting into the god's arm. She cut a thin line through his shell before the god flicked her off with a shake of his hand.

A cloud of sand softened Samut's crash landing. As she stood, slightly dazed, a minotaur mage approached, hands aglow with power, now shaping the sands into a dense mass, pummeling at the scorpion god's legs. Beside him, other mages launched bolts of fire and blasts of lightning at the god.

"Samut! Push it toward the river!" Djeru's cry carried across the distance, and Samut spotted him running with two other warriors towards a cluster of obelisks in the distance.

A genuine grin flashed across Samut's face as she realized Djeru's plan. "To me!" she cried, and the remaining survivors from their band charged forward, following her lead.

The mortals battled with the weakened god, battering it with blows and spells. An aven screeched as it was snatched out of the air, crushed in the god's grip. A warrior wielding twin axes disappeared underfoot, the god's step obliterating him where he stood. A spray of venom from the god's tail caught several mages by surprise and they collapsed in the acrid pools.



Torment of Venom | Art by Johann Bodin

But the mortals chipped away at the god, their blows battering its melted carapace. And they succeeded in pushing it back, ever closer to the field of obelisks. The scorpion god raged, lashing out at the combatants barraging it with spells, arrows, and spears. Behind it, Djeru stood at the ready with a few others, partially hidden behind a half-toppled obelisk. *So close*, Samut thought, surveying the battle. But the scorpion god managed to hold its ground just a touch too far from Djeru's waiting trap.

"We need to push it back! Just a little further!" Samut shouted.

From behind her, Samut heard a clear voice ring out.

“Dark god! For Rhonas, I will strike you down.”

She turned, and the sight took Samut’s breath away.



Gift of Strength | Art by Kieran Yanner

A lone khenra stood, hoisting Rhonas’s staff into the air, the weapon magically reforged into one. Her hands glowed with golden power, some last vestige of the god’s strength coursing through her body, and she ran forward with the staff held high overhead. Samut and the other survivors dove out of the way as the khenra passed. With a mighty roar, the khenra swung the staff at the scorpion god.

The god raised its arms to block the blow, but the force of the strike knocked it careening back. Fragments of carapace fell from its arms, shattered into pieces.

At that moment, Djeru and his team ran forward, a rope held taut between them, tripping the Scorpion God as he fell back toward the obelisks, their pointed ends suddenly a field of daggers for the enormous god.

But Samut could see the arc of the god’s fall and the angle of the obelisks would not align.

Without a word, she once again dashed forward and leaped, propelled by magical force, smashing into the falling god tipping him to the right, just the right amount, and an earth-shattering crunch echoed across the battlefield as the obelisk *pierced* the scorpion god’s chest.



Puncturing Blow | Art by Eric Deschamps

The assembled survivors let out wild cheers, but Samut simply watched the god with grim suspicion. The god twitched and clawed feebly at the obelisk protruding from its chest, but it did not cease moving. Whatever power beckoned it to stalk and kill still pulled at its broken body, still commanded its tail to lash out weakly.

“Thank you, my children. “

Hazoret limped toward the scorpion god, leaning on her staff as a cane, young Haq walking beside her. The survivors surged toward Hazoret, but she shook her head.

“You all have done more than I could have asked. More than any mortal has. But this task I must finish myself. “

Samut, Djeru, and the others stepped back as Hazoret approached the scorpion god, still struggling weakly. Hazoret looked upon the massive beast, tears glistening on her face.

“You have slain my brothers and sisters. But I know it was not by your wish or design. Rest now, brother. May my fires free you from this form and these dark shackles. “

With a jab, Hazoret pierced the scorpion god with her two-pronged spear, right where the obelisk protruded from its shell. Rippling heat emanated from her, and black smoke billowed forth from the scorpion god as it burned from the inside until its outer carapace collapsed inward, the god reduced to cinders and ash.

At last, Hazoret drew back her spear and thrust it into the ground. The god looked about until she spotted Samut, then knelt before the mortal. Samut stood, stunned. Hazoret reached out a large hand, and Samut raised her own hands, grasping Hazoret’s finger, feeling the warm and healing glow of the god before her.

In the arena, Samut, you told me that you believed that I was not what I was forced to do—that I would protect my children when you all needed me most.

Samut looked into the eyes of her god and smiled. “You have, Hazoret. And I thank you.”

Hazoret shook her head. **I could not have done so without you. You, my beloved children, protected me when I needed you the most.**

My heart is yours. Thank you, Samut the Tested. You have seen through the Trials and bested the darkness beyond.

Tears of unbridled joy trickled down Samut's face. Pride, strength, and boundless love for her god flooded her body. She knew this moment was but a small triumph in the face of overwhelming darkness, but the flickering flame of hope remained alive, salvaged from destruction and shielded from the winds of the great trespasser.

Euphoria drowned out all else around her.

And within her soul, a powerful force crackled, and *sparked*.

A rush of energy poured out across Samut's body, and she felt her muscles contract as her mind *expanded*—she was falling, falling through space, through flashing waves of aether, moving infinitely fast and not at all, plummeting through a crack in reality itself. The desert air around her was suddenly replaced with a cool breeze, and Samut found herself standing among strange grasses, the plants rippling at her feet.

Samut looked up, her eyes not quite comprehending what she saw. The sky held no suns—in fact, the world seemed covered in a strange darkness, punctuated by peculiar speckles of light that danced and twinkled like distant gems. Strange twisting patterns of color danced through the sky, and some of the glowing pinpoints seemed to shine brighter than others. Samut rubbed her eyes. If she stared long enough, they seemed to form a strange sort of pattern, a connected luminescence that almost seemed to take on an almost familiar form, like a thought lingering just outside the reach of memory, or the whispered fragments of a forgotten dream . . .



Art by James Ryman

Samut tore her eyes from the strange sky and looked around her. She could make out the black outline of some buildings in the distance, straight and rigid in their architecture. The wind continued to dance

through the grass at her feet, its whistle almost musical as it brushed across her skin, and unfamiliar scents tickled her nose.

A deep panic swelled within Samut. *This is not Naktamun. This is not Amonkhet. This is . . . some other world.*

She thought of the interlopers, of their strange spells, odd clothing, and unusual markings.

I . . . I am them. I am a walker between worlds.

She shook her head and yelled in frustration. She *needed* to be back home. *Needed* to help Hazoret, still grievously injured, help her people escape—

Samut turned to run, pulling on memory and instinct, drawing on magics still new and tenuous. As her legs churned, she felt the same strange indescribable feeling seize her. Suddenly a force wrenched her from reality, her magic intertwining with the fibers of her muscles, her body serving as medium for a spell she didn't know she could cast. She plummeted again through flashing blue and swirling colors, and as she fell she could vaguely feel other worlds—*planes*—passing her by until with a jolt, she landed on her knees in warm, familiar sand, basking again in the glow of Hazoret's presence.

Around her, the other survivors looked on in shock, having watched their champion vanish in a blur, only to reappear before anyone could react.

My child.

Hazoret's warm voice echoed in Samut's head, and she started to stand and reply—but her body slumped forward and she fell, completely drained of energy.

Hazoret caught Samut in her hand, and gently held her until two other survivors rushed forward to take her and lie her down. Djeru knelt by Samut's side, worry etching his brow.

A thunderous crash and ripple of power drew everyone's attention skyward.

The golden dragon flew above the city, lightning crackling between his claws. His gaze fell below him, and thunderous laughter boomed forth.

"I imagine the interlopers have engaged the great trespasser." Djeru sheathed his khopesh and stood.

A khenra warrior spoke up. "We should go to their aid!"

Djeru shook his head. "That is a conflict that we cannot win. We are far from our full strength."

The khenra scowled. "So we do nothing?"

"We endure."

The survivors turned to Hazoret. The god drew her spear from the ground and gazed toward Nicol Bolas.

"When the gods numbered eight, we stood against the dragon, and we fell. I do not know if these interlopers can stop him. I pray for their success."

She turned back toward the gathered survivors.

"But for now, my children, we must simply endure, persist, survive. We will march forth into the desert and seek shelter among its sands and mirages. And as long as I draw breath as a god of Amonkhet, I will protect you."

"And us, you." Djeru knelt before Hazoret and pounded his fist against his chest. One by one, the other survivors followed.

Hazoret smiled a sad smile and gazed down at Samut. Her unexpected champion, the child who saw the truth, who dared defy the gods because she loved the gods so fiercely.

And she marched forward toward the distant sands, her people trailing behind her, as the dragon trespasser descended on his unseen foes among the ruins of Naktamun.



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“ . . . But even as the great trespasser rained destruction down upon the ruins of Naktamun, Hazoret, the God-Survivor, mother and protector of the mortals of Amonkhet, shepherded her children from certain ruin. And so it was, and so it shall be, divinity and mortals marching into an unknown future.”

—Haqikah, survivor of Amonkhet