

Hour of Glory

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From set *Hour of Devastation*
21. 06. 2017

“And as the Luxa, the lifeblood of Naktamun, turned to the foul blood of the great shadow Razaketh, the Hours turned to that of Glory—the promised time when the gods themselves would prove their worth before the God-Pharaoh.”

In the beginning, there was nothing but darkness: a churning ocean of uncertainty.

Then the great God-Pharaoh awoke and rose, a shining golden sun, and shed light upon the unformed world. With the unfurling of his wings, he split sky from earth; with his first breath, he formed water and air; with a sweep of his tail, he carved mountains and crumbled stone into sand. And thus, the God-Pharaoh sifted order from chaos, and the world took shape, raw and young and new.

The God-Pharaoh then gazed upon the barren, quiet world and planted the seeds of life. And so the denizens of Amonkhet were born, birthed from the dreams of the dragon-creator. But unlike their creator, they were soft, vulnerable, frail—and mortal. And the shadows of the world, the remnants of that black ocean, seized those that died, twisting them into undeath, a threat and plague to the living.

And so the great God-Pharaoh forged the gods.

He drew upon the fabric of the world itself, weaving the mana of Amonkhet into five forms, each to embody a virtue of himself. And thus, the immortals of Amonkhet came into being. Born of the God-Pharaoh’s will and stronger than his dream-children, the gods were tasked with protecting his mortal flocks from the whims of shadow, shepherding them toward a glorious death instead.

For the God-Pharaoh knew of a realm beyond this world. A place only reachable by passing through death. And though he knew the hardships of this world were many, and shadows gripped at the edges of all that dwelled there. He knew that his children could prevail, grow, learn, and become worthy. For the afterlife was a gift too precious to be given lightly; his children needed to prove themselves deserving of its glory.

And so the God-Pharaoh gifted his children the Trials. And each god was honored with the task of teaching, training, and leading the mortals on the path to life eternal.

And once all was in place, the God-Pharaoh left Naktamun to pave the way to eternity, giving time for his children to learn, strive, and achieve their destinies before joining him in the great afterlife. He left his children in the care of his gods and set the second sun in motion to mark the time of his return.



Art by Richard Wright

All this Rhonas knew to be true.

It rang with certainty through the very fiber of his being, as interwoven a part of him as the leylines of mana that tied him to the world. It ran through the bodies of his brethren, each god-sibling tangible proof of the God-Pharaoh's benevolence and divinity. He knew his part in the God-Pharaoh's plan. Thus, for years he challenged the mortals in his care, helping the denizens of Naktamun hone their bodies and seize true strength, all in the visage of himself and his God-Pharaoh.

And so, when the second sun finally came to rest between the horns as prophesied, Rhonas rejoiced, emerging from his temple and his Trial. And he came to stand before the Gate to the Afterlife to welcome their creator, the progenitor of all things, the God-Pharaoh returned.

What he found, however, was not what he expected.

As he joined his sister Hazoret at the banks of the Luxa, Rhonas felt an uncharacteristic chill permeate his scales. Demonic magic clung heavy in the air, humid and thick, while the copper smell of blood saturated all. Rhonas gazed at the water turned red, then toward the other gods as they arrived. Oke-tra, fleet of foot, came to stand next to Hazoret. Kefnet, ever proud, floated down and landed beside Rhonas, while Bontu strode up, quiet and aloof. The five stood before the crimson shores of the Luxa, basked in the mirrored crimson light of the second sun.



Art by Christine Choi

It had been many years since all five had gathered in one place. Each god served a purpose in the God-Pharaoh's grand design, guiding mortals through their own Trials, watching over the city in their own way. Rhonas had worked the closest with Hazoret, the two striking out into the desert on occasion to hunt down any great threat that strayed too close to the city. He had not stood in the presence of the others in some time. Yet here they were now, all five standing before the gate. At their feet, many mortals bowed their heads in deference or gazed up in awe, bathed for the first time in the presence of all five divinities at once.

And still, the God-Pharaoh did not arrive.

Rhonas's tongue flicked out, sampling the air, searching for some sign—mundane or magical. The promised Hour of Revelation had come and gone, but no answers had been revealed. Whatever spell the now-absent demon had unleashed still wound through the air, its effects churning and unresolved, and Rhonas brought his staff to bear, his instincts whispering of danger.

Look. The Luxa. Hazoret's voice reverberated in his mind, and Rhonas's gaze shifted to the river. The blood, coagulating at standstill just moments ago, had resumed its flow through the gate, rushing with increasing speed as it coursed beyond. In the past, Rhonas had seen the Gate to the Afterlife crack open as part of the daily passage of worthy dead to the beyond. This, however, was the first time he had witnessed it's doors thrown wide. Yet he saw no sign of the promised paradise beyond the open portal—only the Necropolis, large and imposing, housing all the dead awaiting the God-Pharaoh's return.

Within moments, all that remained of the mighty Luxa was a few rivulets of red, coagulating droplets of blood clinging to stones at the bottom of the riverbed. The acrid bite of the demonic spell reverberated through Rhonas's very being, and he sensed old magics unraveling and unbinding. As the magical pressure in the air grew thick and almost unbearable, the blood of the river seemed to seep *into* the stone foundation of the Necropolis, running up the grooves and markings on the statues lining the sides of the building.

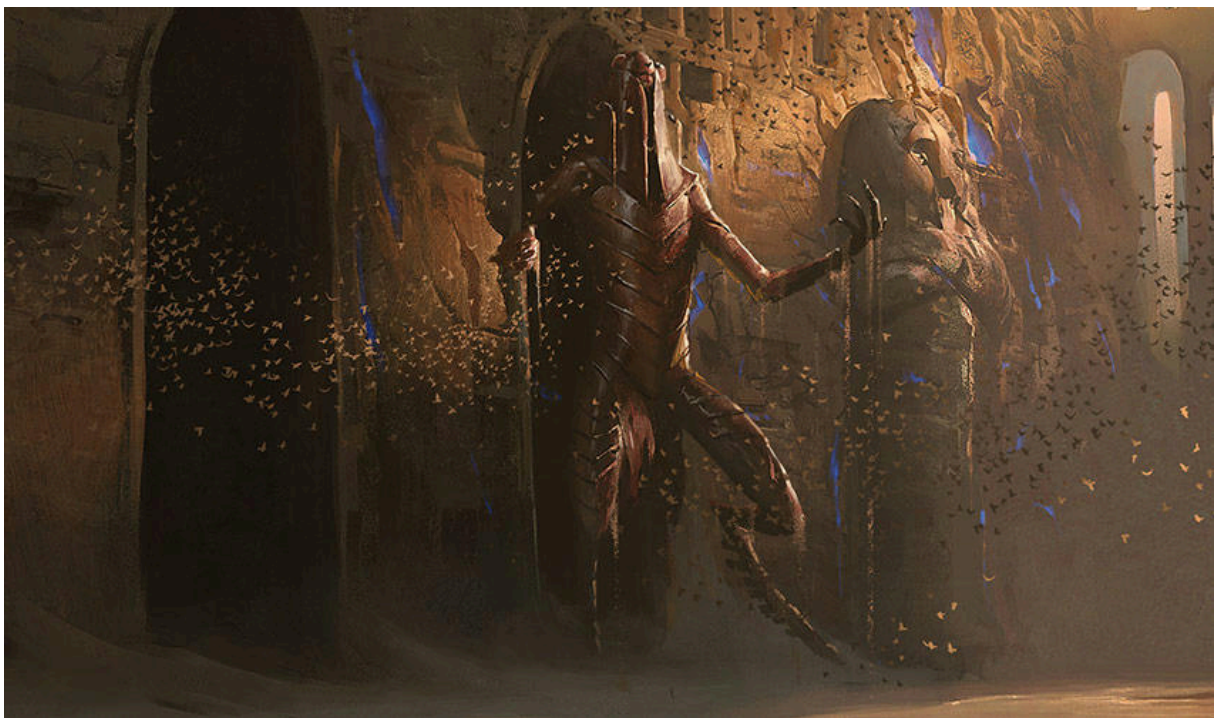
A blast of fetid air burst from the monolithic structure, and a sudden crack rang out. Rhonas watched as three of the massive statues—no, *sarcophagi*—along the side of the building cracked open, their

stone facades crumbling in a cloud of dust. A blue light flashed, and three enormous figures stepped forward from their slumber, awakened by the demon's spell.



Art by Grzegorz Rutowski

A wave of cries and shouts rippled from the mortals assembled at the gods' feet, while the gods recoiled at the sight and the *presence* of the towering figures. The three stood taller even than the gods themselves, their humanoid bodies ending with monstrous heads bearing the shapes of insects—one a scorpion; one a creature with a spindly, locust-like form; and one with the azure carapace of a scarab where its face should have been.



Art by Grzegorz Rutkowski

There was no question in Rhonas's mind: these three were immortals. Whereas the presence of his siblings glowed like a warm flame, these gods emanated shadow, a heavy weight of darkness and despair that washed over all present, mortal and god alike.



Art by Grzegorz Rutkowski

For the first time in his existence, Rhonas felt unsure. Nothing in the prophecies, nothing in his memories of the God-Pharaoh spoke of these three.

The mortals at his feet murmured, and a few let out panicked screams as the scorpion god lumbered through the gate, its massive strides sending tremors rumbling through the ground. To his right, Hazoret took a step forward, spear at the ready, but Rhonas held out his staff to stay her fervor. *Is this a foe, or a test?*

“I am Rhonas, God of Strength. Who are you, and why have you awakened during this Hour of Glory?” Rhonas’s voice boomed.

The scorpion god did not respond, but turned its insectoid head toward Rhonas. Upon closer examination, the god appeared even more grotesque than Rhonas had initially thought. Its body was a coil of sinew and muscle coated by dark exoskeleton, with hands that ended in sharp claws. Its head looked like a massive scorpion *perched* on the humanoid body, its hardened carapace gilded and adorned with blue orbs that Rhonas could only assume were its eyes.



Art by Lius Lasahido

The immortal seemed to regard Rhonas. No words came forth from its mandibles, but a low chittering noise started and grew in volume. Rhonas gripped his staff tighter as the scorpion tail arched over the god's head. A wave of panic rippled through the mortals at Rhonas's feet, and he felt a rush of their prayers and supplication.

Rhonas pointed his staff toward the scorpion god, matching the display of aggression with one of his own. **"Whether you are a harbinger of our God-Pharaoh's return or an interloper conspiring against the Hours, you shall proceed no further."**

The scorpion god took another earth-shaking step forward. Rhonas shifted his grip on his staff as his feet moved into a practiced, centered stance. Around him, his brothers and sisters stood at the ready, bodies tense, eyes on Rhonas.

Rhonas's tongue again flicked out into the air. **"You shall not defy a god of Amonkhet. We stand guard over this city and its people. If you are my Trial, then I will defeat you and prove myself worthy!"**

Without warning, the scorpion god charged toward Rhonas, its chittering spiking in volume. Sand flew as the immortal moved with surprising speed, scorpion tail tensed. It dashed into striking distance, clawed hands swiping at Rhonas.

But Rhonas was ready, sidestepping the charging god and striking at it with his staff. The metal smashed against the other god's back, a resounding strike against its carapace that would have reduced lesser beings to dust. The immortal seemed to shrug off the assault as it spun around, mandibles clacking and tail twitching in anticipation. It sprang at Rhonas again, claws raking at his eyes. Rhonas raised his staff to parry, and the scorpion god's claws clanged against the metal of his weapon. Rhonas felt his knees bend and his feet break the earth beneath him under the force of the blow.

Rhonas struggled, pushing up against the larger god. Fighting something bigger than himself was unusual, but not wholly new. The deserts hid sandwurms, monstrosities, and far more terrifying beasts, and he had occasionally tussled with a foe whose stature exceeded his own. But fighting something *stronger* than him? Than the God of Strength?

Rhonas shouted in fury and *pushed*, muscles screaming as he shoved the scorpion god back. The ground shook with each of its steps as it stumbled. Rhonas took advantage of its loss of balance, drawing mana and channeling a spell of vigor. Power coursed through his limbs and he swung at the scorpion god with all his might.

His blow caught it in the chest, and the immortal went flying across the expanse, landing with a crash just beyond the gate. Rhonas heard the mortals cheer and shout praises behind him as the scorpion god slowly clambered to its feet. Rhonas's stoic face hid from the rejoicing mortals the growing dread in his heart. *That spell never failed to end a fight before.*

The scorpion god again crossed the threshold of the gate. This time, it did not charge. Instead, it cut a sweeping path, keeping its distance but stalking and circling closer to Rhonas. The chittering never ceased, droning at a mind-numbing volume and frequency. Rhonas tried to block it out, countering with an incantation he muttered low under his breath.

This scorpion god was clearly a Trial of the Hour of Glory. It had to be. Nothing else had challenged Rhonas's strength like this before. Nothing had sustained his attacks and lived. Rhonas's eyes flickered to the two looming shapes still beyond the gate. *Perhaps those gods would test the others in different ways*. After all, the gods could not prove their worth if they were not also faced, as the mortals were, with struggles beyond what they had ever encountered before. A smile crept across his face as he continued his incantation. *Blessed be the strength and wisdom of the God-Pharaoh*, he thought. *It is an honor to prove my worth against such a formidable foe.*

Rhonas touched his staff, uttering the final words of his incantation. A sickly green glow pulsed, seeming to come from *within* the metal. It shimmered across the length of the staff, then coalesced in the bladed end of the weapon, settling into a soft viridian light.

Rhonas began to walk, a counter circle to the scorpion god's sweeping path.

"You are indeed strong," Rhonas said. **"But you shall not triumph today."**

This time, Rhonas charged in, dashing toward the scorpion god with serpentine speed. He parried a strike from the scorpion tail, then spun close and landed a blow with his elbow, catching the scorpion god in the ribs. His staff left streaking trails of green light as he swung, striking fast instead of hard, testing the strength of the scorpion god's carapace, leaving slashing cuts and scratches on the impossibly hard shell, deflecting and dodging the scorpion god's strikes.

As the two brawled, the scorpion god's movements seemed to slow. The strikes from its claws and tail became sluggish. Too late, it looked at Rhonas's staff with dawning recognition. Rhonas grinned

and bared his fangs as he drove the blade end of his staff into the immortal's shoulder, cracking the carapace just enough, the scorpion god now too slow to stop or dodge the assault. The biting glow of magical poison, venom powerful enough to slay most living things, pulsed as it seeped in through the wound, numbing and eating away at the scorpion god from the inside.

Rhonas pulled his staff back, and the scorpion god fell to its knees, still chittering weakly. The roar of the people reverberated in his ears and he felt a rush of relief and warmth from his fellow gods. Rhonas regarded the monstrosity brought low, then turned back toward his brothers and sisters and the gathered mortals. He opened his mouth to speak.



Rhonas the Indomitable | Art by Chase Stone

The words never made it past his throat.

A sudden rush of motion behind him caught Rhonas by surprise. Sharp claws dug into his arms, and he barely registered that the scorpion god had grappled him from behind before an impossible pain split through his mind.



Time halted.

Rhonas looked down, surprised to see himself standing on the banks of the Luxa. Behind him, the scorpion god loomed, a dark shape that somehow exuded and glowed darkness, claws gripping Rhonas's body.

That was when Rhonas saw the scorpion tail, arched over the god, piercing his own skull.

I . . . am slain.

The realization crept through him even as he felt the ichor of the scorpion god's sting drip down his spine, seeping into his mind and soul, severing his physical ties to his divinity and corroding the magic that connected his body to his immortality. Rhonas watched, seized by horror and fascination, as death consumed him. He felt the poison gnaw at his heart and fray the knot of leylines and magic and physical strength that resided in his core.

Yet as the poison destroyed the links anchoring him to the world, it also unbound the magical threads placed there by another force.

And Rhonas suddenly remembered the truth.

The memories began as a trickle, then flooded through him as the tangled dam of magic unraveled. And Rhonas's very spirit recoiled as the true events and nature of the God-Pharaoh revealed itself, a crushing tidal wave sweeping away everything he had believed for the past sixty years.

The great lie of the God-Pharaoh. The dragon, not a creator but a merciless destroyer. The great trespasser, slayer of mortals and corrupter of gods. The cruel inversion of the world's most sacred rite, the twisting of a glorious honor into a constant churn and murder of mortal champions. The sudden remembrance that gods were not crafted in the dragon's image; they were born of Amonkhet, originally eight in number, pillars of the plane and guardians of the living. And the great pretender corrupted it all.

Rhonas wept.

And as he wept, his tears turned from heartbreak to rage, and Rhonas spat the foul name, his dying heart filled with fury and pain.

Nicol Bolas.

As darkness crept in on the edges of his vision and he felt the last ties of his spirit to his physical form disintegrate, Rhonas looked upon the gruesome visage of the god behind him. And though his bodily eyes already filmed over with a milky white, he saw the god's true nature—the tiniest flickers of flame in its heart, surrounded by utter darkness, the original light and soul of his brother buried beneath vile corruption. This god was once one of the original eight, corrupted and repurposed to become a slayer of the very siblings he once held most dear.

“Brother,” Rhonas whispered.

Rhonas felt the scorpion's stinger retract, felt his muscles spasm and tense, felt the quickening approach of death. And his heart broke: for his three lost siblings, for the mortals who perished, for those he guided in supplication to a foul falsehood.

And the Strength of the World faded, his immortal light sputtering in the consuming shadows.

The assembled gods and mortals cried out in anguish as the scorpion tail pierced Rhonas's head. That sliver of time, but a blink and a breath, seemed to stretch across eternity, the frozen image of the barbed tail buried deep in Rhonas's skull burned into the souls of all present. Then the abomination god retracted its tail, and black ichor spilled forth as Rhonas stumbled and fell to the earth, body convulsing, then lay still.

The scorpion god, with nary a pause or even a look, turned toward the other gods and walked forward, tail arced high.

All bedlam erupted. Mortals screamed as they turned and fled. The other gods scrambled for their weapons as the scorpion god marched toward them, relentless, unstoppable.

That's when the four gods felt a *lurch* in the world, a pull on the very fabric of their beings. Behind the scorpion god, Rhonas clung to his staff, leaning on it to struggle upright, bent on his knees and bleeding from the wound in his skull. Verdant energy rippled across his body and channeled into his staff. With the last of his strength, Rhonas pulled taut the remaining leylines that wove throughout his being, warping the very air around him. An anguished final shout tore ragged from his throat.

“Death to the God-Pharaoh, foul trespasser and destroyer! “

With a guttural cry and final exertion, Rhonas launched his staff through the air, pushing the last of his power into the weapon.



Art by Winona Nelson

As Rhonas collapsed, his life extinguished, the invisible strands of leylines and mana tied to him snapped, sending ripples of force blasting out across all life in Naktamun. Mortals doubled over in shock as the god perished, and even the other gods stumbled and recoiled where they stood. They watched as Rhonas's staff, carrying the final vestiges of their brother's power, flew through the air, his final spell transforming the weapon into a living monstrous serpent, fangs bared and laced with death as it struck at the scorpion god.

The scorpion god fell to the ground, ensnared by the serpent. The god's tail swung wildly, trying to stab the snake as the two wrestled for control.

The four gods stared, stunned into stillness. Around them, the cries of fear and panic swelled as mortals continued to flee from the gate.

The cry of her children shook Oketra from her shock. She turned to her siblings, tears welling in her eyes, her voice rough and uncertain as her usual grace evaporated.

"The Hours have gone awry. We must protect the mortals. "

Her words stirred her siblings into motion. Hazoret turned toward Oketra, brows crinkled in confusion.

"Rhonas. He said . . . he blasphemed our God-Pharaoh."

Oketra nodded. She too had heard Rhonas's final words, and though they could not possibly be true, doubt nibbled at the edges of her heart even as faint fragments of thoughts flitted just at the periphery of her memory.

A growing buzz pulled her attention back beyond the gate.

The second of the insect gods had spread its arms, and a swarm of locusts poured forth from its hands. Oketra watched in horror as the dark cloud flooded into the sky and across the Hekma—and began eating through the magical barrier.



Art by Daniel Ljunggren

“What is it doing?!” Kefnet cried out.

A shiver of realization and recognition ran down Oketra’s spine as she remembered the words of prophecy. *And at that time, the God-Pharaoh will tear down the Hekma.*

Oketra spoke, her voice a muted whisper.

“The Hour of Promise has begun.”

A horrific rending sound erupted before them. The scorpion god stood from the ground, two halves of the giant snake held in each hand.

Slowly, it opened its claws and let the pieces fall to the ground. Its azure eyes stared cold and piercing at the gods, and it again resumed its ceaseless approach.

Oketra notched an arrow to her bow, mouth drawn in a steely line, her broken heart hardening with sharp resolve.

And the scorpion god stalked closer, while behind it, the other two gods crossed the threshold of the gate into the city of Naktamun.

Above them all, between the great horns in the distance, the second sun cast its red glow across the land, a ceaseless eye watching the unfolding of the Hours.