

Favor

Michael Yichao

From set *Hour of Devastation*

Three gods have fallen since the Gate to the Afterlife opened to reveal unimaginable horrors. Only Hazoret the Fervent and Bontu the Glorified remain to protect the mortals on Amonkhet. But will they be able to hold against the onslaught until the God-Pharaoh returns to protect his people?

Despair brought the god to her knees.

For the third time that day, a rushing pain washed over her, sapping her limbs of strength, corroding her heart and spirit.

Another god is dead.

Hazoret gazed toward the horizon, where swarms of locusts still blotted out the suns. Around her, the horrors of the desert rampaged through the streets, terrorizing the citizens of Naktamun.

For as long as Hazoret could remember, she and her siblings had protected their people from the nightmares of the world. Together, they pushed back the darkness, shielded the mortals from the curses of the world, and hunted the shadows that lurked just beyond the city.

But the keeper of the Hekma barrier was dead.

The golden archer, the sister whose arrows pierced those who would threaten the city, was dead.

The indomitable wanderer, strongest of her siblings and patroller of the desert, was dead.

Bontu and I are all that remain.

A myriad of prayers reverberated in the back of her mind, the deluge of mortal fears falling on her shoulders, their number and volume growing each time a god fell.

Hazoret clenched her teeth and willed herself to stand. She would not falter. Not now—not when her children needed her most. Not when all the promises of the God-Pharaoh seemed to be crumbling, and her siblings were falling one by one to a dark god.

I must protect my children. I must protect Bontu.

Hazoret closed her eyes and let go.

Let go of all control. Let go of any restraint. Hazoret let go of any shreds of doubt and uncertainty and fell forward, plunging into fervor, into action, into rage and flame and the seamless dance of her battle frenzy. Her two-pronged weapon slashed through throngs of desert mummies as she charged, a golden blur cleaving the air around her. The wayward cry of a child sent her leaping across the thoroughfare, shielding the boy from a collapsing wall and pushing him toward the arms of his fleeing cropmates. A giant hellion burst up from the ground, smashing through buildings and charging a cluster of citizens. With a word and a thought, Hazoret sent gouts of flame scorching through the air, reducing the monster to ash.



Chaos Maw | Art by Steve Argyle

Hazoret fought with the full fury of a god unleashed. Around her, mortals rallied and found renewed zeal, Hazoret's presence igniting their own passion and power. As Hazoret impaled a desert horror on her spear, a flashing whirl of blades caught her eye. A mortal wielding twin khopeshes cut through a pack of undead hyenas, moving at impossible speeds. The beasts snapped and snarled around her, but the mortal made short work of them, dodging powerful jaws, severing tendons, and cutting through limbs, immobilizing the brutes.

As the mortal plunged both of her blades into the last of the pack, Hazoret finally saw her face—Samut, the dissenter. Samut, blasphemer of the God-Pharaoh. Samut, who had asked Hazoret, "*Is this paradise?*" as the Gate to the Afterlife opened onto wastes, unleashing the waves of terror that now consumed them.

The mortal looked up from her grisly work and locked eyes with Hazoret. Beside her, the champion Djeru ran up, also gazing up at the god.

"Hazoret! What are we to do?" Samut shouted.

Hazoret looked back at the chaos spread across her beloved city.

"Protect each other, my children. Take those you can and hide among the desert sands. We must survive until the God-Pharaoh comes to right these wrongs. "

Samut shook her head. "The God-Pharaoh will not fix this—"

"We do not have time for words or doubt. " Hazoret spoke with the full force of her will. Samut and Djeru both bowed in deference to their god, silenced by her power.

Hazoret sighed and softened ever so slightly. She knelt, piercing Samut with her gaze.

"You are strong, Samut, and strong-willed. Channel that strength to protect your brethren. Amonkhet needs you. And you, Djeru, my final champion. "

The chilling roar of a sandwurm off in the distance drew Hazoret's attention. She readied her weapon and stood.

“We will obey, Hazoret. We will protect our brothers and sisters.” Djeru spoke, voice clear and unwavering. Samut however gazed at Hazoret, doubt still dancing behind her eyes.

“Who will protect *you*, Hazoret?” Samut asked.

A small smile flitted across Hazoret’s face. “**Go. Fight. I will endure.**”

A short stretch from where they stood, a massive monument crumbled as the wurms burst through its walls, chasing after viziers whose spells bounced harmlessly off their toughened hides. Hazoret didn’t wait for Samut and Djeru’s response, instead dashing toward the offending beasts, weapon and flame at ready, a battle cry already in her throat.

It is not enough.

For every mortal she saved, she knew a dozen more were lost. Her heart ached with their fear and pain. Each empty death sent a fresh twinge of guilt coursing through her. So many were mere children, too young to have ascended the Trials. The Hour of Glory was supposed to test the remaining mortals—to give them the chance to prove themselves worthy—but instead, they were left as prey, victims of the encroaching desert’s endless hunger. Every mortal death meant one more person caught in the Curse of Wandering’s cruel grasp—doomed to return as undead, hunting the very friends whom they had died fighting to protect.

Hazoret’s heart yearned for her God-Pharaoh. What had happened to delay his return? Could the three insectoid gods have sabotaged his great work of preparing the path to the Afterlife?

Hazoret shook her head. *He would not forsake us.*

Her gaze turned toward the heart of the city, where the empty throne of the God-Pharaoh stood grand and majestic—yet another reminder of the God-Pharaoh’s promised arrival.

It was covered in locusts, a black stain on the blood red skyline.

A guttural roar ravaged Hazoret’s throat as she ignited the air around her, sending a wave of fire to burn clean her God-Pharaoh’s throne. Countless locusts were disintegrated in the blast, but the smoke had barely cleared before an even larger swarm took the place of those Hazoret had destroyed.



Forbid | Art by Richard Wright

Around her, Naktamun continued to fall.

Desperation seeped into Hazoret's heart. In her head, the buzz of prayers had grown deafening, a din matched only by the buzz of the locusts.

And so the god prayed.

She prayed to the God-Pharaoh for his return. She prayed for him to fulfill the prophecy. She prayed for him to arrive and once again sift order from chaos.

As she prayed, above the throne, the sky rippled as though bent by a mirage. Then with a low rumble, the air *ruptured*. A pinprick of black nothingness, a tiny hole in the fabric of reality, hung suspended in the desert air.

The void grew, the red sky around it eroding and flaking away like burnt paper, crumbling into the void. Cracks spindled outward from the hole and crackles of blue energy flared out then burned to black, scorch marks suspended midair. More chunks of reality collapsed into the hole, accelerating into oblivion as the growing rift consumed the space above the throne, growing into a massive portal.

Golden horns appeared first, gliding out of the dark portal, gleaming and flawless. The dragon's perfect form followed, sliding out of the void, enormous and lithe, power coiled behind massive wings and sharpened claws.

The God-Pharaoh had arrived.



Behold my Grandeur | Art by Zack Stella

Hazoret raised her arms in exultation, praise dancing on her lips. He truly was as great as she remembered, his massive golden form an incarnation of perfection. In her mind, the voices crying out in desperate prayer lessened dramatically, even as a cacophonous outpour of reverence echoed from the mortals around her. The voices of Amonkhet shouted out in relief and joy.

The God-Pharaoh landed before his throne, talons clattering on the polished stone. He lowered his gaze, eyeing the swath of death and destruction that had been carved through Naktamun.

And he *smiled* .



Imminent Doom | Art by Daniel Ljunggren

Dread flooded Hazoret's body. Rhonas's dying words echoed in her mind as she watched a wave of desperate mortals rush toward the dragon, cries of relief and joy and exultation echoing in their wake. The God-Pharaoh gazed down at them, raising a clawed hand, and Hazoret felt the air crackle with energy.

A spark of violet light burst forth from between his talons, and from the sky, a deluge of black flames streaked down, consuming everything it touched.



Torment of Hailfire | Art by Grzegorz Rutkowski

The mortals' cheers turned to screams as destruction rained from the heavens.

Hazoret dashed forward, looming over the mortals closest to her, trying to block them from the destructive magic with her body. With a whirl of her spear, she conjured a shield of swirling sand and flame around her, gritting her teeth as the God-Pharaoh's spell crashed down around them.

As the mortals at her feet sobbed, Hazoret's mind raced at the turn of events.

The God-Pharaoh has arrived, but brings only destruction. The Hours tick by and the prophecies have been subverted, their fulfillment a dark and perverse twisting of their original promise.

A splitting headache seized her as she tried to think of the past, to remember the God-Pharaoh before he had left. Her shield faltered as her concentration broke, her thoughts dancing between Rhonas's final warning and Samut's questions. Both god and mortal had spoken against their God-Pharaoh, but when Hazoret tried to focus on what they had said, her head buzzed with pain. The impossibility of the God-Pharaoh being anything but just and good combated what her senses showed her.

He rains destruction upon his people, his children.

Hazoret peered up at the God-Pharaoh. His spell had finally relented, and his gaze drifted toward the gate in the distance. Hazoret looked and was surprised to find the third god—the one with the scarab head—still standing before the gate. Despite the mayhem around the god, it seemed to have stayed eerily still, an indigo statue amidst the pandemonium. The God-Pharaoh spread his wings and crouched, preparing to take flight.

“Hail, Nicol Bolas, God-Pharaoh of Amonkhet!”

The voice caught the dragon's attention and took Hazoret completely by surprise. Bontu strode forward and knelt in supplication to the God-Pharaoh. Hazoret clutched her head, trying to shake clear her thoughts. The name Bontu had uttered—*Nicol Bolas*—had sent another searing pain through Hazoret's head, and she was now certain: some magic was suppressing her memories.

“I have served faithfully in your absence, oh God-Pharaoh. “Bontu's rasping voice cut through the din. **“I have harvested only the most ambitious and powerful to be your worthy dead. I have culled dissenters from all the crops, ridding Naktamun of those who would derail your work. And I have maintained the threads you wove into the fabric of my siblings. “**Bontu bowed her head low. **“I am yours, Nicol Bolas. I live to serve. Speak, and I shall do. “**

As Bontu spoke, Hazoret's hands clutched her spear harder and harder. Finally, she could take no more.

“Sister!” she cried. **“What are you talking about?”**

Dragon and god turned to look at her, and for the first time in her existence, Hazoret felt small.

The God-Pharaoh turned his gaze back to Bontu and spoke.

“Kill your sister.”

Without hesitation, Bontu raised her hand and sent a dark blast of energy at Hazoret.

Hazoret screamed as the spell hit her full force. She felt her mind unravel, the edges of oblivion corroding her sanity, grasping and tearing at thoughts and memories alike. Inside her mind, she conjured healing fires, staunching the spread of shadows with a cauterizing mental blaze.



Oblivion | Art by Sidharth Chaturvedi

Hazoret surfaced from her mental struggle just in time to twitch out of the way of another blast of energy. She cut through the next barrage from Bontu with the fiery edge of her spear. However, the third necrotic blast clipped Hazoret's arm as her movement slowed, her mind distracted.

Bontu's first spell hadn't just assaulted Hazoret's mind—it had eaten away the blocks on her memories. And suddenly, Hazoret remembered everything.

The full weight of Bolas's deception and Bontu's betrayal crashed over her, slowing her reactions and distracting her from the fight at hand. The guilt of having brought death to her children weighed down her limbs, and the impotent rage at the dragon's cruel warping of her purpose dulled her reactions. *All by Bontu's design*, she realized. That first attack wasn't just a mental assault. It was crafted to distract Hazoret and to slow her down, for Hazoret had always been faster than her sister—fast enough to dodge her blows and spells.

Bontu had prepared for this fight.

The depth of Bontu's betrayal sent Hazoret's mind churning between fury and despair.

"Why, Bontu?" she cried.

Bontu laughed, a rasping, grating sound. To the mortals who heard, it sounded cruel and confident, but to Hazoret, she heard the desperation tinged with sadness. **"Have you forgotten who I am, sister? I am ambition incarnate. Bolas destroyed all who resisted. I chose to join with his power instead. I chose survival."**

"You chose to betray your world." Hazoret fired a jet of flame at Bontu, but Bontu *absorbed* the spell within her staff.

"This world is Bolas." Bontu pointed her staff, and the fire erupted back toward Hazoret, tinged black by Bontu's necrotic magic. **"And you are not worthy."**

Hazoret dashed backward, avoiding the dark flames, and ducked behind the remnants of a destroyed building. As she crouched, her heart hardened with resolve.

In a blink and a spray of sand, she dashed from her cover and *flashed* behind Bontu, twin-pronged spear ready and thrusting toward her sister. Her weapon seemed to pierce flesh, but then Bontu burst into tendrils of smoke. Hazoret stumbled back, coughing as she breathed in the poisonous cloud, looking about for where Bontu hid. The sands beneath her feet erupted as Bontu emerged from below, her jaws clamping down on Hazoret's arm. Hazoret cried out as her sister's crushing bite forced her to drop her spear.

Hazoret let loose a flurry of punches and kicks, but Bontu held fast as magical energy rippled across her scales, shielding her from the assault. Inspiration struck, and Hazoret ignited her arm *within* Bontu's mouth. With a cry, Bontu finally released Hazoret's mangled limb, the two gods stumbling apart.

Hazoret grabbed her spear, one arm dangling uselessly at her side. Bontu breathed heavily, her mouth and face charred from Hazoret's attack. Hazoret watched Bontu raise her staff and braced for another barrage of spells. To her surprise, Bontu's staff glowed but no assault came.

A fresh round of screams behind her erupted, and Hazoret turned to look. Her heart froze as horrors crawled from the crevices and shadows, launching themselves at and tearing into the mortals. Bontu's magic called forth the dark beasts, and they set about the work of brutally murdering anything in their path.

Hazoret again *flashed* into the fray, striking at the horrors and swinging desperately to protect her children. As her spear pierced the first horror, however, it burst into blackened tar, clinging to her weapon. The other horrors leapt at her, their shadowy forms coalescing into a binding morass, restraining her. Hazoret shouted in frustration, trying to conjure heat and flame, but the tar only hardened and tightened its hold.

"Your zealotry and compassion make you predictable, sister." Bontu's voice whispered in Hazoret's ear. She heard Bontu's staff tap against the hardened tar and gasped as the warmth and power drained out of her body. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Bontu reach a hand *into* the tar, grabbing hold and dragging Hazoret back toward the throne, back toward the dragon deceiver. Hazoret struggled weakly, but Bontu's magic drained her life force at a slow, relentless pace.

With a heave, Bontu dropped Hazoret at the feet of Nicol Bolas, then knelt again.

"I have done as you asked, my God-Pharaoh. I exist to serve."

The great dragon gazed down at the god bent in supplication. Slowly, he raised one claw—and blasted Bontu with a bolt of dark energy. The god collapsed to the ground, writhing in agony.

"Your usefulness has ended," the dragon sneered. "Serve me in death, little god."

Nicol Bolas strode forward, leaving the two dying immortals of Amonkhet behind him.

A primal yell tore out of Bontu as she crawled toward him, spasms of pain still wracking her body. Nicol Bolas turned around and watched, an expression of smug amusement on his face. Slow, halting steps accelerated to a charge as Bontu rushed toward the dragon.

A monument collapsed in the path of Bontu as a wave of undead poured forward, a mix of mummies from the deserts and denizens of Amonkhet risen by the Curse of Wandering. The god stumbled over the rubble, and the undead swarmed and attacked. Bontu swatted at the undead, but in her weakened state, what normally would be a mere nuisance to the god now managed to bring her down.

As Nicol Bolas watched Bontu disappear beneath the crush of undead, his cold, cruel laughter reverberated across the ruined city of Naktamun. With a sweep of his wings, he took to the air, flying toward the gate and the waiting scarab god.

Hazoret watched the dragon retreat, heard the undead gnaw and writhe over their prize, and felt her own hold on life slowly slipping away.

A sudden surge of power pooled before her, and Hazoret looked up just in time to see a wave of shadowy decay ripple forth from the pile of undead. Bontu burst from the heap, surfacing with gasping breath and throwing the inert bodies of monstrosities skyward, her spell slaying all things living and undead near her.



Bontu's Last Reckoning | Art by Victor Adame Minguez

Bontu met Hazoret's gaze, and the jackal god felt the tar around her soften and melt away.

And for the fourth time that day, Hazoret felt a rushing pain wash over her, piercing her gut as Bontu fell, the dragon's necrotic spell severing the final leylines that tied the god to this world.

And Hazoret alone remained, the last pillar of Amonkhet.