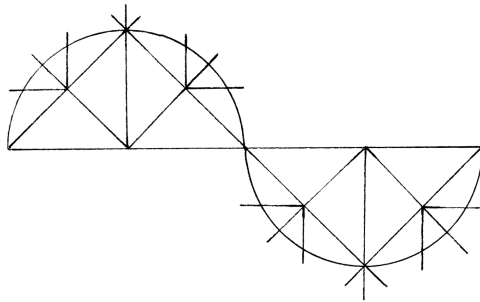


# The Books of Magra:

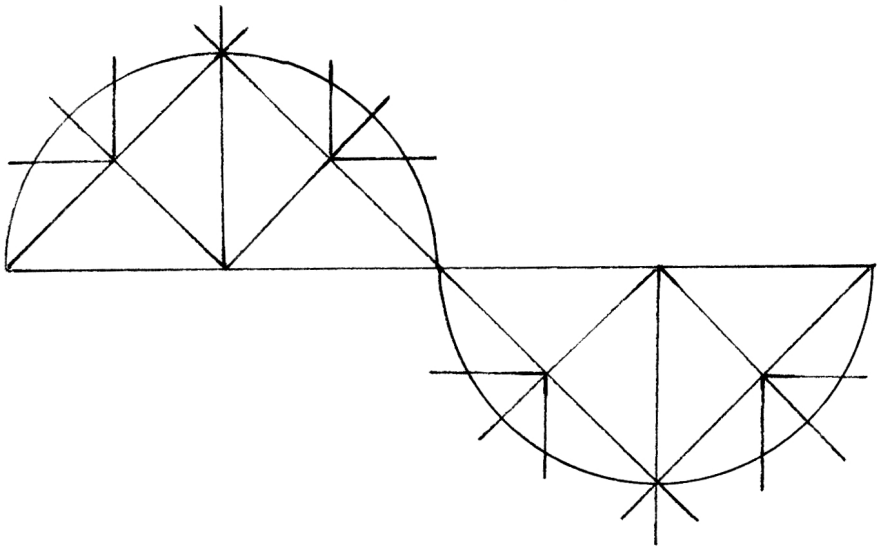
## Hax-Sus

(volume 1)



Joël Tibbits

In the Ras-Tor System...



# Part I

# 1.

The dark reverberated invisible depths.

The light scratching of paper drifted up to the roof of the tower as the boy squinted and strained to see those sounds within the dark above him. Head craned back, he watched flickers of light from the surrounding candles present themselves on the edge of that high dark; sometimes the sounds of writing would merge with the flickers of light and animate the fringes. They were suggestions of willful movement, of unknown life within the dark above.

But the candlelight never pierced the central pool of that darkness, and so the boy continued his attempts to penetrate the dark with what illumination his imagination provided. He envisioned the wood support beams, the nails and the copper shingling all arranged to form the conical roof. But he could see nothing but the darkness.

He had always marvelled at the tower's copper roof. It would glimmer in daylight and capture filaments of starlight at night. He often wondered what the interior looked like, but more than anything else, he wanted to know how it was possible to build such a structure, not only the roof, but the whole tower as well. The boy wanted to understand how you

place stones one on top of another to reach such heights, or how you form the conical roof to such a precise point with copper. Often the boy had looked at the tower from his family farmstead contemplating its creation; it was a wonder he had for all the architectural marvels found throughout the kingdom.

The boy's neck started to strain. He slowly brought his head forward; his gaze trailed through the dark and then crossed its boundary to the appearance of stones that formed the wall of the tower. Continuing down, stone after stone came into his view, each a little clearer than its predecessor, until he reached the top of the high bookshelf. From the top shelf he looked over the first book, then moving downward, followed a trail of varying spines: smooth, rough, thick, thin, worn and new.

Finally, his eyes came to rest upon the old architect writing at his desk. He had thin features, his face deeply lined by time, and yet still emitting a youthful vigour. His long hair, grey as snow clouds, was tied back with tiny braids and draped over the dark blue-grey cloak that pooled around him on the floor.

Beneath the boy and the old architect was a thick circular carpet woven with the most luxurious material and detailed with ornate symbols. The richness of the patterns in blue, gold, white and black complimented the symbols and figures with such intensity that the boy was struck with a sense of meaning emanating from the carpet. When he had first entered the modest space of the old architect's room at the top of the tower, the boy had come only to the edge of the carpet. He had dared not step into its lush vibrancy, feeling unworthy to step upon symbols that he could not understand. It was only because the old architect told the boy to come forward that he now stood in the center of the carpet.

To the boy's left a large window as high as the bookshelf. Beyond it lay the kingdom. From his position, the boy could make out scatterings of firelight, but his reflection, and that of the room on the glass, obscured

any other detail of the kingdom at night. Opposite the window, to his right, a drafting table covered with drawings that continued up along the wall. In some of the drawings, the boy recognized parts of the kingdom. But other images gave him no clue as to where they were, or in some cases, what they were. Along the circular wall hung tapestries with similar symbols woven into the carpet. A carved wooden door behind the boy and the smell of teak and tobacco complimented the air of richness and mystique.

The boy stood motionless for some time. At first he tried to maintain an unassuming presence, not daring to move, keeping his brow low and his hands tightly gripped in front of him. He did not want to interrupt the old architect. The boy watched him write, only looking at his old hands, never his face. At times, the old architect murmured as he wrote; the combination of his voice and the sounds of writing rose up to the dark ceiling.

Now as the old architect continued to write, the space above the boy became intriguing once more. Again he craned back his head as he followed those sounds up into the dark of the ceiling. Even though he felt very uncomfortable there was something tranquil in observing the ceiling and following the sounds of writing consumed by the dark above him.

“Come closer.” It was a gentle request from the old architect but it still made the boy jump. The old architect did not look at him and the boy took a deep breath and approached. He stopped one step away from the edge of the writing desk.

Standing closer to the old architect changed things for the boy. The room became larger and its features became richer: the light given off by the candles, the presence of shadows, the contrast of colours, even the aromas were more apparent. The boy stood silently as his heart beat rapidly and his mind was full of thoughts. Am I close enough? What do all these shapes mean? I am so thirsty. Will he choose me? I wish I were sitting under my tree.

The boy looked at what the old architect wrote; other than their similarity to the shapes in the tapestries on the walls and carpets, the writing made no sense to him.

“Why are you here?” The old architect said as he continued to write. The words filled the room. The boy struggled to resist the urge to watch the sound of the old architect’s voice rise up.

“I want to be your new assistant,” the boy said softly.

“Can you draw?” The old architect continued writing, his eyes down.

“Yes...and...” For a moment the only sound was of the old architect writing. And then it stopped.

“And?...” the old architect’s voice cracked and boomed upwards. He looked at the boy with a stern expression. The boy was stunned by the depth in the old architect’s eyes. He scrambled to recall what he was going to say. He wished to find a deeper and truer response, something that would impress, but his mind was tumultuous with chatter. He found his way back to his first words but they were clumsy and inaccurate.

“...and...I am responsible.” He chose his mother’s words.

The old architect tilted his head.

“Truly.” The old architect smiled. The word went through the boy and chilled him with its assertion.

“But you do not speak for yourself.” The old architect’s expression hardened and he returned to his writing.

The boy’s heart sank. Have I failed?

The sound of the old architect’s pen marking the page vividly rose and followed the sound of his words into the obscured roof. They did more than fill the tranquility of the room, they found folds and directions that saturated the air with the old architect’s presence. The boy had never witnessed such a thing before. Everything the old architect did, he passed through. He seemed to make his presence move everywhere, through



everything, without limit. The longer the boy remained in that room the more he felt the old architect all about him, and even passing through him. The boy attempted to pull away from sensing the old architect all around him, and the effort made him aware of his fatigue.

The boy had not slept in anticipation of this meeting. He had heard so many rumours of the old architect, and his sleep had been laden with the mystique by which people had spoken of him: that he was mad, a sorcerer or just quiet, but full of dark and unnatural thoughts. Some had said that he had brought to the kingdom, in his designs of buildings and engineering, what he had learned from dark magics from some far-off lands.

The old architect stopped writing and he placed his pen soundlessly into its holder. He sat with his hands lying comfortably in his lap and looked down at what he had written with an air of satisfaction. He took the page from his writing stand and placed it to the side, then looked at the boy and smiled. "Please, take my place."

The boy did not move. The old architect rose and stepped aside, gesturing with his hand.

"Please...take my place."

Still the boy did not move. He was confused by the comfort he felt. A warmth and encouragement rose from within the boy. It was somehow in harmony with the movement of the old architect's hand; an aged beauty and power accepting him. The boy looked into the old architect's deep eyes that captivated him. Even with the gentle and positive invitation the boy could not compel himself to move. It was all too overwhelming being in such a powerful place and receiving such a gracious invitation.

The old architect's smile and calm demeanour did not slip. The boy looked again to the guiding hand, and it was easier for him to move. He walked carefully. The carpet felt so regal and dense, each step felt as though he were being drawn into it. A sinking feeling filled his chest. His focus on the old architect's hand shifted to where the hand guided him, to

where the old architect had sat. As the boy moved to the desk his whole body worked to hold the maelstrom of questions and thoughts in his mind.

The boy sat gently. There was no cushion and the floor felt very hot. The writing table gleamed with dark wood and the gold inlay from the pen and ink bottle shimmered. A new white page lay in front of him. The room seemed to change in its scope as though it had grown.

The old architect hid his hands in his sleeves as he stood just behind the boy. “Have you used pen and ink before?”

“Yes, once or twice,” the boy responded.

“Pick up the pen.”

The boy looked at the old architect whose face revealed nothing. The room began to feel oppressive and the boy became more self-conscious. What if I drop it? What will he ask me to do? I am so thirsty and tired. I should not be here.

The boy picked up the pen; heavy and of royal manufacture.

“Dip it in the ink.” The old architect released a fragment of eagerness in his tone.

The boy did as he was asked. He carefully observed the pen’s tip as though he needed to navigate it through unknown obstructions or move it in an exact course against vaporous wills tucked into the folds of the air. All of this while monitoring the clamour of questions inside his head and the confusion of comfort and intimidation in his heart.

The metal of the pen nib met the rim of the ink bottle in a sharp sonic colouring that broke the silence and so broke the concentration of the boy’s movement. It startled the boy so much that he let the pen pause in the ink. With that sharp sound all the noise in his mind cleared and he followed the bright metallic tone up to the ceiling. He focused again on the pen and pulled it free when he thought it was amply coated with ink. He waited with the pen poised over the page, his concern to not to let a drop of ink

reach the white expanse consumed his mind. He could think of nothing else.

“Now, draw a line,” the old architect said.

“How long?” the boy asked looking at the page.

“You choose.”

“In which direction?”

“That is also up to you.”

The boy paused and wondered, Why does he want a line? Up, down, diagonal, which is best? Then he leaned in, careful not to make any mark other than the line the old architect had requested. Again, he dared not drop even a spot of ink on the clean page.

The pen was about to touch the paper. “Stop.” The old architect said as his hand touched the boy’s shoulder. The boy froze. “You may go.”

The old architect smiled as the boy looked up in dismay and then fixed his gaze on the page. He returned the pen to its resting place and stood up. As the boy rose, his movement synchronized with the rise of a strange sound. It was an ascending wail coming from outside the chamber.

The boy was grabbed from behind, his feet leaving the ground as fire and glass exploded into the room through the large window. The uncontrolled movement of his body and the force of the blast felt as one. At the chamber’s centre, embedded in the floor, now lay a great, black burning stone. Flames whipped and leaped off its slick surface quickly spreading throughout the room. The smell of some acrid oil had now engulfed the teak and tobacco and the boy choked at the intrusion.

The boy’s shirt tore a little at the collar as the old architect spun him around and brought him under his cloak. The boy could see nothing and reached out with all the senses left to him. A burning roar punctuated with muffled concussions penetrated the cloak. The boy felt the velocity of the sounds as though they passed through him.

The old architect carried the boy by his underarms making the cloak drape heavily against the boy's face. It was a short-lived protective comfort as the cloak whipped back, revealing the door to the chamber.

"Move!" the old architect commanded as he pressed his hand between the boy's shoulder blades, shoved the door open and pushed the boy through just as fire consumed the doorframe.

The boy stumbled onto the staircase as the old architect held his collar guiding him down the spiraling steps of the tower. The fire followed them as the room was consumed. Burning fragments fell from the great rock embedded in the chamber's floor. Another explosion above, and the boy imagined the dark ceiling collapsing on them. The lower they descended the more surreal everything seemed. The turn of the staircase aligned to the spiralling of fear that filled his mind and body.

As they neared the base of the tower, the floor opened up into a large domed area covered with burning wood and chunks of stone. Screams and shouts filled the halls radiating out from the base of the tower. The old architect moved the boy close to the wall away from the cascade of embers and then focused on the center of the floor. Why are we not leaving? What if the tower collapses?

Just then, a middle-aged woman ran up to the old architect, crying and raving unintelligibly. The boy could not make out the old architect's words to her, they were strong and deep yet too quiet for him to hear above the chaos around them. Her eyes filled with confusion and question as three young children, a girl and two boys, clung to her long skirt, trying to stay within its folds. The old architect pointed at the children and raised his voice cutting through the sounds of destruction and confusion around them. "Go, woman!"

The woman flinched and she stumbled off, breaking the children's hold on her clothing. The old architect guided the children to the boy and they all huddled together.

“They are in our charge now. Stay here!” The old architect guided them to the wall.

The old architect was about to turn when he stopped and touched the head of the girl. “My dear, there is a way through.”

Just as he turned, the boy saw a sadness in the old architect’s face before it solidified into profound focus.

As the old architect moved forward, the children drew closer and pressed against the stone wall. He turned and paused. He measured the fall of embers and flaming debris then stared at the wreckage in the center of the floor which moments earlier had been the floor of his circular room. He raised his hands as he looked up to the base of the burning black stone high above. For a moment he appeared as a statue, motionless and unaffected by everything around him. The old architect slowly lowered his head and then his arms.

He stepped forward with elegant poise and without shielding his head, walked straight towards the center of the floor. For two steps he moved into a medium crouch and then thrust his arms forward. All the debris covering the floor exploded out, pounding into the opposing wall. He turned and opened his arms to the boy and the children.

“Run to me now!” They ran with their heads down, shielding their faces from the embers and shards falling hard around them. The boy, at the rear, glanced up at the chamber that had become as an inferno. It singed his spine and sent a cold, rippling mystery into his brain. The dark of the tower’s roof had been swallowed and fed upon by fire, by voracious light.

The old architect encircled them in his cloak, the fabric cracked with the gesture. The sound of rock moving beneath them. Suddenly the boy lost his balance, then the cool dampness of stone as they descended a staircase.

- *Has-Sus* -

In the dark, footsteps and breaths echoed through invisible dimensions.