

THE CLOTH GODS OF ZHAMIIR
by Darrell Schweitzer & Jason van Hollander

* * * *

Yandi to his Nephew, Prince Lebalan, Greetings. Zhamiir City, date uncertain, in the Year of the Great Awakening

Beloved Nephew,

What an incredible place! That is the beginning of my explanation, my excuse, if you will — the reason your aged, doddering, and confessedly long-winded Uncle has completed the arduous jour-ney hence, in something resembling secrecy, without even telling you, my confidant Lebalan. Yes, it was urgent. Yes, the greatest secrecy *was* required, for the most astonishing of reasons.

I ramble, I fear.

Zhamiir! The amazing city.

When we entered Zhamiir, we were promptly festooned with reeking-sweet garlands. A thought came to me: *the perfumed corpses of the newly dead, beginning to “go.”* It was not quite a pleasant smell. Nothing in Zhamiir is quite pleasant.

Former priests welcomed us at the city gate, professional greeters now. Vendors (former acolytes, says Hesh) swarmed, hawking trinkets, fruits, baubles, chipped and tarnished icons — these latter mere curiosities, no longer holy. Sullen old women (ex-priestesses?) strutted before us in diaphanous cos-tume so we might inspect their dreary wares. And I realized that an entire class has been displaced in Zhamiir. Gone are the priests, gone the temple bell-ringers, the divine seeresses, the ineffably sacrosanct harlots. Gone, all of them, with the introduction of the god-auctions.

“Make way!” the caravan master shouted again and again. He had to raise his stick until a path was cleared. Diz-zied by the garlands, we staggered through the granite gate which is the preferred entrance to the famous city of Zhamiir — “where the gods have been subdued,” as the new expression goes.

Still the former priests swarmed about us, and my thin-lipped and disap-proving Hesh protected his Lord and Master from this beggarly rabble by shooing them away with a big froned whisk. (Doubtless he was expecting a pipe or two of *hanquill* for his efforts.) I have to laugh, even now, recalling the scene. Hesh is such a droopy, sad clown, as grave as the once-priests themselves.

Throughout our three-week journey he made the most astonishing

observa-tions:

“The desert dung-beetles,” said he, “have less shame than the slave-deities of Zhamiir. They, at least, roll in shit of their own choosing.”

And also: “The sand of the Iracassi, each speck, mocks the vanquished gods.”

At a fountain within the city, I ladled sparkling water over my brow, recalling these matchless philosophies. And through this flowing mask, I smiled at the absurdity of all around me. Gods for sale! No more do worshipers make ex-pensive sacrifices in the temples. No more collection baskets. Now gold flows *from* religious observance, not into it. A topsy-turvy world! The thought of it so amazed and pleased me I wanted to dance. The water ran over my ears like a whispery song and I looked around for Hesh, unmerry Hesh.

Soon government clerks surrounded us, thick as flies. Will the Zhamiirites sell off their rulers next? Kings, lords, bureaucrats, the lot? One can only hope.

Many documents were initialed and stamped. Money changed hands. The caravan broke up, the tongueless bear-ers and their overseer paid off, the camels led away. When it was done Hesh and I sported bronze medallions around our necks, designating us short-term visitors to Zhamiir, *tourists*.

Otherwise we were free. “What’s to stop us from going to the auctions this very night?” I asked.

Hesh returned me a troubled gaze, as always when I suggest anything. What a long face he pulled this time! “Bad luck ... to purchase a god ... so soon into the city.”

“Better check their teeth first, eh?”

“Master, this is a serious occasion.”

“I am merely optimistic, my dear Hesh. Merely that. It makes me cheer-ful. Eager.”

We proceeded. In spite of his best efforts, Hesh, poor man, could not pre-vent two guides from attaching them-selves to us. Dwarfs, they were, from somewhere in the bazaar, darting out of the tangles of booths and penned ani-mals and barrels and huge jars and jostling crowds. One moment I had merely Hesh, the next, these two with piping voices and rapid little legs. I couldn’t refrain from giggling.

“Master!” my servant hissed. “Your dignity!”

Still I laughed, at Hesh's futile duck-ings, at myself (I was fairly drunk with fatigue, and with anticipation), as well as the vagaries of nature which fashion such tiny grotesques.

"*Hanquill* dens, down this alley," the big-browed one announced. "Love may be purchased very reasonably here," intoned the other, making obscene gestures with his stumpy fingers.

"Alas," I sighed. "I am too weary."

"Of course," said the bushy one. "You are well into your years."

"I am a vigorous man!" — I thumped my chest — "Not nearly so old in my appetites as some of the younger men."

"My brother meant no insult," said the smaller dwarf. "You have come to our city for the auctions, I take it."

"Perhaps."

"Ah, a wealthy man," crooned the other, his huge forehead and the hedge-rows above his eyes making him seem all the more ridiculous.

"A collector," chirped the smaller, "a connoisseur, come all the way across the Iracassi Desert to purchase one of our poor gods."

The dwarfs looked at me eagerly, awaiting my response, but it was Hesh who spoke, slowly and deliberately, as if addressing a multitude.

"My master has come to Zhamiir to witness the end of the Age of Miracles. Perhaps he will acquire a souvenir, if it pleases him. A token of the Great Awak-ening . . . the time when men are made free from the gods."

"Takes a lot of money to buy a god, even a little one," the big-browed dwarf observed, bowing, before he produced a feather brush and started dusting my feet.

Thanking them, I threw some newly minted coins (one of which the small dwarf promptly bit), then Hesh and I managed to escape.

I paused, further along, taking deep breaths, that I might sample the exhalations of this fabled city.

The streets, Nephew, the streets! What a riot of color before our eyes, what noises, what spicy stinks! Mur-murous crowds, low-hanging banners drooping above us, shops, glass-blowers, soul-merchants, stunning women for the harem, the

beautiful, honey-colored children of Zhamiir, all swarming before us like figures on a glorious tapestry. For a time I forgot my exhaustion. Merely being in Zhamiir filled me with frenzied energy. After three weeks in the Iracassi, I can tell you, I was grateful for such a glorious vision.

It was twilight. Shadows filled the rabbit-warren streets, softening con-trasts. Sounds grew muted. Intricate lanterns swayed on posts as they were lit, one by one, by a spry old man who sang with the purity of an angel.

Here! Here mankind had triumphed over the gods!

The beauty of it moved me deeply, and I felt that mystical-mercantile stir-ring which is my gift: I felt the Tears of Imminent Fortune rolling out of my eyes.

“Can’t we just peek into one of the auctions?” I pleaded with Hesh, dabbing my eyes with my sash. He took me by the hand and led me. “Bad luck so soon. Consider all things first, Lord, then act deliberately. Your *enthusiasms* are like summer storms, swift and thunderous and soon gone.”

I obeyed him and followed. Sometimes even I forget who is the master and who the servant.

Sleep, dear Nephew, eluded me that first night. At the place where we stayed, a kind of palace for the wealthy traveler, there was much to keep me awake: sighing breezes, occasional shouts or blaring horns from the distant street, Hesh snoring in the adjoining room, flickers from torchlight dancing under the door—and voluptuous grunts that rampaged up the marble halls. This last disturbed me. Almost delirious with fatigue, I flung open the slatted door and beheld the gleaming marble corridor.

In the middle of this hallway I stood, a man of sixty years, half undressed. Then a faint shuffling advanced. A servant appeared, a boy of perhaps ten, thin and terribly frail, with hair as white as the moon.

“Who indulges in love at this hour?” I demanded, nodding in the direction of the sounds.

The boy shrugged at my question. I gazed into his face, into his almost colorless eyes. Something about him fascinated me immensely: his body was all bones and angles and blue veins. He wore only a ragged robe of the same diaphanous stuff the women had worn at the city gate. In the half light, with torches flickering behind him, he seemed somehow less than entirely real, not a solid child of flesh, but an apparition.

I wanted him very much. No, no Nephew, you mustn’t think that your old uncle has acquired a new vice. The familiar lusts are enough for me. This was merely the desire to *acquire*. The boy was a treasure. He was beautiful in his strange way,

his eyes too wide, his head too large for his shrunken body, his skin like white marble, perfectly smooth, delicately shaped.

He seemed a symbol to me, the final hieroglyph in the mystery of existence. He couldn't be merely a malnourished child. No, that was impossible.

He held a tray, on which were two red, dripping roots. At first I thought they were vegetables, at least. Then it occurred to me that they were bloody claws, torn, not severed, from a bird, probably a peacock.

He placed the tray on a stand beside me. I stared down at it for a moment. When I looked up, the boy was gone. His bare feet had been utterly soundless on the smooth, cold marble.

Revulsed, I emptied the tray into a chamber pot, then stood again alone in the empty corridor. I no longer heard the sounds of passion. There was only silence now. It affected me strangely, this silence. There is a quality, Nephew, about walking in places where men dream. As if in compensation for our dream-loss, we are granted a strange serenity.

Soothed by this very quality, I drifted down a flight of stairs and into a courtyard. There, limned by moonlight, the boy-servant was kneeling, burying something. Ah, but I hadn't meant to spy on him.

"Are you real?" the child asked me all at once.

I wasn't entirely sure. I pinched my wrist and it hurt enough for me to reply, "Yes, real enough." I stifled a yawn. "What a question. Why shouldn't I be real?"

The boy rose to his feet, carefully brushing dirt off his hands and knees, as if to remove anything which might mar his unearthly appearance. "You could be a ghost," he said.

"If the gods are sold in Zhamiir," I teased, "then surely ghosts are given away for free and are found everywhere. You should be used to ghosts by now, and able to recognize one without any hesitation."

He stared at me, utterly unaware of my attempted humor, his eyes wide, bewitching.

"Have you ever seen a ghost?"

"Alas, I have not. In my own country they are reserved for the privileged few. Have you ever seen one?"

"Not of the dead," he said softly, and if embarrassed by the admission, "but

of the living.”

I asked him to explain what ghosts were.

“Souls without bodies.”

“And what are the gods?” *This* question, Nephew, I asked in deepest earnest. My instinct was alive again. Somehow this boy knew. He was an ambassador who moved freely between life and death, my fancy told me, perhaps a native not of this world of living men, but of the other.

“The gods . . .” he began, shifting nervously. He didn’t seem to know. Were he merely a child, I would have concluded that he was simply too young, or too frightened of this strange old man who accosted him in the middle of the night, interrupting some secret doing.

To put him at ease I smiled and touched him gently on the shoulder — his flesh was cold — *cold!* — and quoted one of the old poems of Zhamiir, now forbidden: “*The gods are portions of Eternity, ensouled.*”

He stood still, gazing up at me inscrutably.

“Do you like poetry, boy?”

“I don’t know, Lord.”

Cautiously, I toed the burial mound. “What have you buried here?”

“A peacock, sir. What’s left of it.”

“Eh?”

“Promise you won’t tell?”

“I promise.”

“I was hungry, Sir. They mistreat me here.”

“It was merely that, hunger? Not some secret divination?”

For the first time, he seemed afraid of me.

“No, Sir!”

“And the claws? What were you doing with them, in the hall outside my room?”

“I had to get rid of them separately.”

“Why, of course,” I said calmly, pre-tending to understand. In truth I hadn’t the slightest idea what he was talking about. Another mystery. “What is your name, young man?”

“I am called Nimbulec.”

I was beginning to feel the weight of my body and my years. I eased myself onto a marble bench and bade the boy sit beside me. Above us in a tree, some night bird chirped softly. The boy sat, shiver-ing.

“Tell me, Nimbulec. What are the god-auctions like?”

“I only know what I hear, Sir. I’m not allowed out.”

“And what do you hear?”

“That the auctions take place in a bazaar that used to be a big temple. The gods are rolled up in carpets and the ends are tied so they can’t get out.”

The child alluded, of course, in his imperfect and beguiling way, to the ensorcelled carpets of Zhamiir, rugs which thump and crawl, gods trapped inside, but not merely bound inside the carpet, but *woven* there. That is the great secret of Zhamiir, Nephew, the means by which humanity has been liberated. The weavers of the city grew so skilled, so cunning with their threads and their dyes and their patterns, that they could create the very, the true likenesses of the gods in cloth. Thus they bound them, snatching each god out of the air when the image was made in a carpet, binding each god when the last knot was tied. There were, there still are, many, many weavers in Zhamiir. With the help of the people, with the backing of rich patrons, they wove many, many carpets, far more than there were gods. They got them all.

I had heard as much during our trek across the Iracassi. The men of Zhamiir had long been tyrannized by the gods and by their wicked priests. They rose up, a revolution led by weavers and rug-merchants.

I sat still beside the boy, thinking, for once unsure of what I was doing in this place. I had been so firm of purpose when I arrived. Now I was getting muddled.

“I should like to purchase a god, Nimbulec,” I said. “If I have enough money left over, I should like to purchase you, too, from your master. Do you have any idea what he paid for you?”

“I was a foundling,” the boy said solemnly. “A gift of fortune.”

“This is a gift,” I told Hesh later, offering him a vial of *hanquil* and a glistening glass pipe, newly purchased. “Take it,” I commanded. “You’ve earned it ten times over. But, I beg you, please don’t puff anything until we return from the auction. I need your mind at its sharpest.”

Hesh, feigning surprise, lowered his gaze and held open his wide, dusky palm. “Thank you,” he intoned, but joylessly, or else he would not have been Hesh.

We were just finishing our dinner. Servants of the house scurried in and out, deferring to Hesh and myself equally, as if we were not master and man, but two guests of similar rank. I looked around for the boy Nimbulec, but did not see him.

The day had been without purpose and without profit. I’d gone into the bazaar, but found little worth haggling over, only trifles, like the pipe and the *hanquil*. So I had returned to the baths, allowing myself to be cleansed and purged. My beard had been curled too, so perfumed with a volatile pomade that I swore I’d burst into flame if I stepped out into the sunlight.

Dear Nephew, that’s how wasted the day was. I was reduced to caring about such matters.

Night would be everything, though, the purpose of our wait, of our wasted day, of the long trek to Zhamiir. With the lowering of the sun, the stone horns of Zhamiir would cry out the triumph of the city, and of man, signaling mockery of the defeated gods. Then the auctions would begin. I waited patiently. My purse was very fat indeed.

Twilight — that superbly evocative hour — had deepened the ruddy sky. It was like blood infused with Divine light, spilled across the face of the cosmos. Thus it affected my mood as Hesh and I trotted toward the auctions.

Even my inscrutable servant’s face was given a new hue. He glowed like a man lit from within, a man afire with the stolen emanations of the gods. “The cloth gods of Zhamiir,” he muttered as he pushed and shoved our way through the noisy, gaudily-dressed crowd, into the courtyard of a half-destroyed temple, “an entire toppled pantheon, for sale.”

A trick of the light confused me: his eyes were dark-orbited pits, pinpointed each with a single, fiery speck.

I paused, a little afraid. For a moment he was not my familiar Hesh at all, but some other kind of being, gazing out through the fleshly form of my servant as one might through a gauze or veil.

Then I shrugged, dismissing the im-pression as one more strangeness of

Zhamiir.

“The gods. I curse the gods,” he kept muttering. I could not get him to explain. I think he sensed something too, that the gods were all around us, not bound in cloth at all, but in the air, in the very dust of Zhamiir.

“I curse the gods,” he said.

“Weren’t you a temple foundling?” I asked, as we made our way under a frowning, bloodlighted arch. “Didn’t the gods protect you? Didn’t they protect you?”

“My mother abandoned me to the gods, and the gods abandoned me to the riddle-priests with their detestable chants and their insatiable hunger for money. Not as honest as regular merchants either. They gave no good value for their coin.”

“Whereas, if one goes to a rug-merchant to buy, one comes away with, at the very least, a serviceable rug.”

Oblivious to my delicious irony, he clutched my sleeve as we halted in front of the desecrated fane. “Don’t be put off by the auctioneers,” he suddenly warned me. “They are priests, god-smitten men, even now. And they wear masks. While you were gone today, I asked many things of the household servants. They told me that the priests wear masks.”

“Masks?”

“Their faces have been burned off. The skin of their hands is peeled off as well. Masks of paraffin and gloves of human skin — their own — to spare the sensibilities of the bidders.”

I shuddered. I glanced around at the crowd. The people of Zhamiir seemed tense, filled with emotion waiting to burst forth. They were raucous, but this was not a happy crowd. This was no holiday, but, I felt, a ritual of unending vengeance, against the gods, against the priests, against everything vast and magical and beyond the grasp of the individual Zhamiirite.

“But why these particular mutilations?”

“These were the high priests, the true visionaries, not the petty money-grubbers you saw at the city gate yesterday. These men beheld the gods regularly — not merely the stone idols, but the true, spiritual forms — and they spoke with them. They dreamed mighty dreams and spoke prophecies. They made the people of Zhamiir afraid. Therefore the authorities decreed that they should suffer the most, disfigured, being forced to sell their own gods on the auction block. It is thought just.”

The crowd heaved forward. Hesh clung to my sleeve as we passed beneath a cracked frieze. A tiny tile fell onto my head, a perfectly blue square of porcelaine the size of my fingernail. I turned it over in my hand as if it were a coin, then slipped it in my pocket.

“What did you find, Master?”

“An omen, probably. Are signs and omens also sold in Zhamiir, along with the gods?”

“No, Master. Without the gods to direct them, the omens occur at random. They are worthless.”

“Ah.”

The courtyard opened into an inner yard, once the sanctuary of the temple and forbidden to all except the priests. Here, many things drew my attention and wonder. Headless statues turned slowly on circular bases, driven by some unseen mechanism, their stone hands waving slowly in the air, beckoning us onward. Numbered plaques dangled from posts. A huge proscenium held the bundled ‘wares,’ the very gods themselves, while god-beaters stood guard over them with their flails of gold, whose knouts were barbed with the finger-bones of the faithful.

Even here, hucksters were every-where. Bags of coins on every counter. A Tabernacle of Commerce.

The crowd jeered. They shouted and clapped hands. They blew on obscenely-shaped wooden horns. And many of them put on masks, the visages of hyenas and rats and serpents. Nearby was one with the face of a drooling idiot, but with a third eye in the middle of his forehead. He was triply cross-eyed.

I asked and Hesh explained:

“Thus they mock the priests, whose scabby faces were burnt off.”

The noise rose to a crescendo, then dropped to near silence, as some of the actual priests were herded out onto the stage. I could tell they were the disfigured ones immediately. Their masks were not clownish, but somber, almost expressionless, molded of pale white wax.

The silence did not hold, but gave way to rude shouts from the gallery behind us. Ah, the merriment and torment of this place! Black pigs, let loose from somewhere at the back of the stage, ran squealing between the priests’ legs. An elderly priest tripped and fell. His mask shattered, and he sat up. Screams from the stage and from the audience. I glimpsed a raw red oval. Then he was led away, a bag

over his head. The pigs tumbled down into the crowd. Small boys chased after them, shoving past the adults.

Lamps swung wildly on poles, agitated by the crowd. Underwear and pornographic tapestries flapped from pillars like flags. Someone threw a clown mask toward the stage, sending it whirling over the heads of the priests. Another mask followed, and another.

Then a priest raised his hands and there was *silence*. His mask was not like the others. The mouth of it was huge, grotesquely distorted, like that of a painted clown under torture. As if by magic, at a mere gesture from this one, the *tambang*s and *zootibars* were stilled, these musical instruments placed on laps as, meekly, the crowd settled to the mucid, once-glossy marble floor. You could hear the birds of evening chirruping in the trees once more.

“The foremost of all the high priests,” whispered Hesh, “once lord of this city.”

“A salute to Abannah,” the priest began, his voice very soft, but perfectly audible, like the wind. Behind the trans-lucence of his mask, charred lips writhed like worms. He made references I did not understand, to “souls sold in Tamarack,” to “the black ship of Ong-Zwarba,” and to “Mung and the sign of Mung,” and to “Bel-Hemad, on whose shoulders the birds of the air find rest.”

Many of his other words were strange too. He spoke the priest-talk, the religious dialect of the city, now preserved only in ribald jokes, and at these auctions. Hesh translated: “... the tutelary deities of the city . . . being soft gods, gods that loved their people, gods who did not allow themselves to be feared, even when they were stern and just.”

The silence of the crowd turned to anger. I sensed that these arrogant Zhamiirites were still a little abashed at what they had done, that they did not wish to be reminded of how things had been before the Great Toppling of the city’s pantheon.

Rotten vegetables flew at the doddering once-priest. His mask was broken by the impact of one of these missiles, and he staggered back, his ruined forehead bare. He crashed into the wooden racks and a single, gorgeously embroidered carpet tumbled into the stage with a thud, then wriggled slightly.

A god-beater stepped forward, his flail upraised, but the priest fell to his knees, trembling, and kissed the rolled cloth with his waxen lips. As he knelt, an assistant gingerly tied a yellow sash around the old man’s head, binding his broken mask in place, concealing his seared flesh once more.

“Start the bidding!” the crowd shouted, again and again, making it a chant.

“Start! Start! Start!”

“Look,” I whispered to Hesh. “The old priest weeps. This is a cruel thing, no matter how wicked he once was.”

“He cannot weep, Master. His tear-ducts were burned away.”

A wind arose from nowhere, whirled about the former holy of holies, choking us with dust. I felt, for an instant, a presence, as if a thousand ghosts were rushing by, turning, rushing again. I shivered.

“Lord?” a voice from my left side called. I turned, surprised. Hesh sat on my right. For just an instant, the boy Nimbulec was there. I touched him. *Cold.*

“What are you doing here?”

“I?” said Hesh. “I accompany you. To witness this spectacle, and perhaps to acquire a cast-off divinity.”

I whirled. “Not you. Him.” I turned back to where the boy had been. He was gone. The people nearby gazed intently at the stage, unperturbed.

“What is it?” said Hesh.

“Didn’t you see him?”

It was clear he had not.

The auction proceeded. First the car-pet which had fallen was auctioned off. I went to raise my hand, to bid, but Hesh tugged on my sleeve.

“It is never wise to bid on the first,” he said, but others did, and the carpet went to a huge black man clad in gold. His fair-skinned servants bore the thing away. I thought I heard the captive god whimper.

Soon I perceived that the pantheon of Zhamiir was a vast and unequal one, and that the hierarchic standing of each god is displayed by the weave and design, as well as sheer yardage. Gods with some significance are sold in bolts of brilliantly-patterned twill, the ends tied with special silver or golden cord. Lesser deities are rolled in cylinders of garish fabric, fantastically patterned. Godlets, demi-gods, demiurges, and the like are wrapped in mats, curtains, or even scarves.

But the prices brought by each divinity were not necessarily relative to the size of the carpets, or the finery. There was a pattern here, which I could not divine. Yes, a loaded word that.

For once I broke away from Hesh, and placed a bid on a carpet rolled long and thin like a snake, and pale green, with-out any exterior design. That one, per-haps—

But I was defeated.

“No, Master. It was not the correct one for you,” said Hesh.

I bid again and lost.

“Nor that. Please wait. Do not throw your money away.”

“How does anyone *know*’?”

“Perhaps by chance. Much is left to chance in a city not ruled by gods. Perhaps the gods themselves call out to their new masters. Perhaps they mani-fest themselves, like foundlings on a temple doorstep.”

Hesh, strangely, was weeping.

Around us the crowd hooted and jeered as each new carpet was brought out, stood on end, and its provenance described.

“A god of hearths and fires,” said the priest. “Good for the wife and children. Good for keeping your feet warm in the winter.” (Oh! How he visibly winced to make these witticisms! Surely a torturer had written the speech for him.)

Still more gods came onto the block, many crawling across the stage, hunch-ing like huge worms while the beaters whacked them. Strange, glittering dust rose.

“The god-dust,” Hesh told me. “The last remnant of the power of the fallen ones. See how it rises like smoke.”

Moans emanated from the carpets, like nothing else heard on the Earth, aetheric squeals, the last babblings of the helpless, senile gods of Zhamiir.

Still bids were called out. Plaques on pillars were flipped over to the next number, and the auction continued.

“When?” I whispered.

“I know not. Perhaps not this time. Perhaps never.”

For once my precious Hesh was wrong, truly wrong. The time came. I knew it. I had gazed down at my purse, then opened it, peering in at the golden royals

within. Then I looked up, and to my astonishment beheld the gaunt, pale boy Nimbulec on the stage beside the priest. He had his hand on the current offering — a plain brown carpet with no markings, bound in ordinary rope — steadying it, as if he were the priest’s assistant. No one else seemed to have noticed him. He smiled directly at me.

I leapt to my feet.

“*That one!*” I cried. “I’ll take it!”

I offered all that I had, so vehemently that no one opposed me. The priest, startled, acquiesced quickly.

The boy Nimbulec had vanished somewhere.

Still the crowd hooted and gibbered. Still the priest made his painful speeches. But I paid no more attention to the events of the evening. I sat down, contented.

“Have you done right, Master?” Hesh asked. He seemed afraid. He genuinely didn’t know.

“Patterns,” Hesh mused as we carried the thumping, wriggling carpet through the near empty streets. “Unceasing rep-etitions call forth the gods. Chanting will do it.”

“Unceasing repetition will also bind them,” I said, “as it has in our prize.”

“The subtle designs in a carpet, any carpet, even a seemingly plain one, the mirrored strands, the sidereal weft, and” — he paused for a deep breath and continued, most solemnly — “the looms, the worm-driven looms that spin for centuries in incantatory rhythms. All these things the gods confuse for devo-tion.”

“The prayers of the priests,” I said, “echoing down the great roadway of time, repeating, repeating —”

“— a thrumming which the gods sense, which draws them, which nour-ishes them —”

The center of our carpet sagged. We nearly lost our grip on it. Hesh struck it underhanded with a golden flail which had come with our purchase — “an added benefit,” the priest had said, “for one so generous” — and it straightened itself and even seemed to grow lighter.

“Ah, time,” I said. “Vibrations which *accumulate through time* and bring the gods to us, the sigils which draw them down.”

So we walked through the dark streets, our speech distracted and strange. I hardly knew what we were saying or what was meant. It was as if some others spoke through the two of us, babbling in their own secret code. But it all fit, like the revealed wisdom that comes to the drunkard or the *hanquil-addict* in his delirium, only to evaporate like a misty dream in the bright morning.

It was only as we reached our rooms that my mind cleared. I began to worry about finances. Had I overspent impulsively? Would we even have enough to pay for our rent and our passage back home? I worried about thieves too, about the long journey itself, about accidentally tearing our own aged guts from the weight of our treasure.

Exhausted, we dumped the carpet unceremoniously on the floor. Hesh fetched cool wine from the kitchen. I sat still, regarding the still form before me. Once it had been placed on the floor, the carpet did not whimper or move. It seemed merely a roll of cloth.

But I knew better. I cannot truly express, dear Nephew, how I felt just then, exhausted but trembling in my final expectation.

I have not made it clear precisely *why* I had come to Zhamiir, why I had done this thing.

I can only try to express it in words. The mere strokes of the pen are not enough. The utterances of the voice are like grains of sand flung into the air by a child trying to cover up the sky that way. Verily.

I think some folk purchase gods in Zhamiir out of sheer self-exaltation. They do it to show that they are greater than gods. How better to show one's own grandiosity than to have a former divinity of field or forest nailed to one's wall or floor? Surely a general would be pleased to furnish his tent with a god of war.

That is one reason. Another is superstitious. People think these fallen gods will bring them good fortune. But this is illogical, even as it is illogical for our own countrymen to believe, as so many do, that the tail of the *hata-hzard* is lucky — for all the good luck that particular lizard enjoyed! Similarly, if the gods had any luck to spare, they would not be in such a ridiculous state. The third reason is more intimate, more personal, more vague. It is as much a mystery as anything celebrated in the darkened temples of old. There are those who, for all they do not respect the gods, seek the divine, for themselves. What fascination, what uniquely personal glory, to hold in one's hand that which is, or was formerly, divine.

Such persons wish to draw the essence of the gods into their own souls, to gain wisdom, or power, or whatever it is the gods have to offer, to become, in a sense, gods themselves. This is done at a great price, surely, so those who purchase a god of Zhamiir with such a goal in mind take on a greater burden than any weight

of cloth. They may despise the priests, the temples, the money-grubbing of organized religion, but they are secretly as god-mad as any whose face was flayed away.

In that way I too am mad, Nephew. Because I am old, because I am near to death, I seek news from that far country into which I will soon journey. Because the gods are immortal, even the gods of Zhamiir, I hoped they could provide me with some glimpse. At the least, they could grant me something akin to wis-dom, so that my life might have its proper culmination, like a deal rightly concluded, like the particularly deft final line of a poem. I did not seek immortality for myself, but merely as-surance.

I do not think the people of Zhamiir can understand that, nor can Hesh, nor can even you, my dear Nephew. But ponder it. It is my reason.

Therefore I bought the carpet that I might lie on it, and sleep, and dream, and in my dreams the god within the weave might make himself known to me.

Therefore I waited, breathing hard. Hesh returned with the wine, and I drank. It soothed me.

“Slowly, Master. Slowly.”

I swallowed.

“Have we any money left?”

“A little, Master.”

“Good. Then I want you to make a second purchase. Now.”

“*Now* ? What can be so important that you must have it now, at this hour of the night.”

“Trust me, good Hesh. I know. Go rouse the master of the house. Then purchase the boy Nimbulec and bring him to me.”

It was my intention that Nimbulec should lie beside me on the carpet as I slept, so that whatever wisdom I might gain from the god would be passed on to him, and my explorations of the Beyond would not perish with me. I wanted to make the boy my apprentice in the understanding of Death. I felt certain that he would be naturally talented in this endeavor.

Hesh paused, as if embarrassed to speak.

“What is it?” I said.

“Master, as it happens, when I went for the wine the steward of the kitchens asked me if I had seen that very Nimbulec. It seems the child has run off.”

“Then we shall proceed without him,” I said, hiding my disappointment.

So Hesh and I cut the ropes which bound the carpet and unrolled it, slowly revealing an extremely intricate, albeit badly faded pattern in the cloth.

And something else.

Hesh was the first to cry out. Then I, too, screamed and fell to my knees, hiding my face with my hands like a priest who had lost his mask. But I looked through my fingers and saw what was there: it was Nimbulec, horribly beaten, his gauzy robe melted into his blood and torn flesh like a huge scab. For an instant yet he was still alive. He turned toward me. Our eyes met, his glassy with pain. Then his flesh fell away even as I watched, crumbling like grains trick-ling from an hourglass. His skeleton was fantastically delicate, like a trac-ery of spun glass, like a spider’s web. When it was gone too, all that re-mained was some dust, and the old, shrivelled claws of a bird.

Numbly, Hesh and I unrolled the carpet the rest of the way. In the dim light we could barely make out the overall pattern of the weave. The threads were brown and black, the lighter against the darker revealing the image of a god, who was like a bird with the face of a solemn, gaunt child who stared at us with wide, pain-filled eyes.

I understood nothing then, nothing at all, but I knew what I had to do. I dismissed Hesh for the night. He was reluctant to leave, but I bade him sleep outside my door.

Then I lay down on the dusty carpet and tried to sleep, to call the dreams of the god into my own mind. As I lay there, my fingers played idly with the shrunken bird-feet until the feet broke like old twigs.

What followed was not a dream. I am sure of it. It was a true thing, which really happened.

The child Nimbulec sat beside me where I lay. He was naked now. He sat up, out of his ruined gown, passing through it like smoke. I touched him on the knee. Still his flesh was as cold and hard as marble.

I babbled. “My boy, how would you like to come and work for me? My nephew is a rich merchant-prince. We live together in a great house, where there are many servants like yourself, a whole commu-nity of them, with children your own age. We work our servants hard, but we feed them well, and there are no beat-ings.”

“And if they are false to you, Master?” said he.

“Then, most reluctantly, we sell them.”

“As all things are sold, Master.”

“Yes, as all things are sold.”

Without another word, he rose and left the room. I sat up, startled, then hurried after him.

Somehow I knew it would be useless to call for Hesh.

I ran. Once I caught a glimpse of the boy — a flash of white in the moonlight — as he vanished among pillars. Again, as he turned a corner. Again as he flickered through a doorway, into the courtyard where he had buried the peacock.

Onward, into the city. A waxen-masked priest passed us in the street, singing a dirge, ringing a little bell. I ran, gasping in the suddenly chill night air, reminded of my own mortality. What if my very heart burst? There are physicians in Zhamiir, yes, but I had little money with which to pay them, and there is no charity in a city where the gods are auctioned off. Into the desert. The sands of the Iracassi swirled around us in a sudden storm. I lost sight of the boy. Then the storm passed. The air was clear once more. Now the silence was absolute, even the sand asleep and dreaming.

It seemed that I ran across an ocean of night, a sea of sand, as phantasmical tides surged around me, as dusty surf boiled around my ankles, withdrawing as waves were spent, drawing me on-ward, downward, out of the world of living men.

It seemed that glowing skeletons of men and beasts rose and fell slowly in the sand, swimming like fish.

Then I heard Nimbulec, far ahead, singing the priest's dirge.

I came to the top of a dune. Thousands of brilliantly colored birds rose up in my face, peacocks, pheasants, hawks, their wings thundering, like an incredible tidal wave of wildly undulating flowers, flame-colored, paradise-tinted.

Then they were gone, and Nimbulec stood before me, his hands apart, as if he had just released all those birds. I knew that he had.

I heard a voice speaking from the sky. It sounded like Hesh. *“Will we ever recover the gods, recover them truly, and bring them into the world once again?”*

Now shapes like crabs rose out of the sand, but their faces were those of men, and more than men, ancient, inscrutable, implacable.

“Nimbulec!” I shouted.

He smiled when he saw me. He looked up, at star-silvered gulfs. The sky surged like another, incomprehensible sea.

“You will not recover the gods,” he said, his voice impossibly loud, inside my mind, “because you have never truly lost them. You reasoned correctly, old man of a foreign country, when you concluded that the dust rising from the carpet was the power of the god bound therein. The gods have never departed from Zhamiir. They are in the very air, in the very dust. The people breathe them with every breath, filling their lungs with miracles.”

He walked toward me. Once more I saw that his body was fantastically delicate, his skin a pale tracery of blue veins. The light of the newly-risen, waning moon shone through him clearly, and he cast no shadow.

He took me by the hand, and, yes, his touch was very cold, of the grave.

“Come with me now, and journey into the dark land,” he said. “This is the meaning of your coming to the city. Your every act was an omen. Everything manipulated you to this end.”

“Master,” I said, very deliberately calling him that, this child whom I had once wanted half as a servant, half as a curiosity the way one might collect strangely-shaped shells. “Master, at the end, at the very end, I find that I am afraid.”

“Come,” he said. “Leave your fear behind like an old cloak.”

Naked, I ran beside him, my body young and vigorous as it has not been in thirty years. I ran, down a gray slope of ash, down, out of the world, through those gates through which the dead souls pass, down into the other land, where the souls of my ancestors rose up out of a marsh to greet me, where a black castle filled the sky and the few, strange stars were the torches flickering in its windows; down, past the great dragon that waits, down into the swirl-ing chaos, into nothingness, which is neither darkness nor light, neither thunder nor silence.

And all the wisdom I ever sought and feared came to me, and all the glory. I had reached the end of my curiosity, of my fascination.

But here is the most exquisite irony of all, dearest Nephew. I had never died. Not quite, not yet.

Shortly before dawn Hesh disobeyed my order and came into the room. I don't know what he saw exactly, but in sudden alarm he dragged me off the carpet.

I awoke later in the sickbed where I now lie. I am filled with pain. My mind is dimmed, like a lamp guttering out. In my lucid intervals, between pain and delirium, I am able to write.

I cannot describe what I saw. Not truly. All I can say is that, indeed, the gods of Zhamiir are everywhere, in the air I breathe. I exhale miracles and revelations. The vulgarity of the people here, the lewdness, the anger, the mock-ery — all these things are masks, like the waxen masks of the priests. Beneath them are the mutilated, god-burned, god-crazed folk of the city, who have magnificently, foolishly, incredibly torn down the hierarchy of the gods, spilling the divine power out of the temples where, in other lands, it is safely contained like boiling pitch in a pot. In Zhamiir men have been scalded by it, every last one of them.

Hesh enters with fresh pens and parchment.

“Write if it comforts you, Master,” he says. “I fear you may not last long. The strain of the running was too much for you.”

“The running? How do you know about that?”

“I had a dream, Master. I saw you go.”

“A dream sent by a god, a revelation?”

He will not answer that. I cannot ask him about gods and men, about the land beyond life, about the strange ocean in the desert.

I ask what has become of Nimbulec.

“That is very strange, Master. The innkeeper says that they did have a servant boy, who killed a peacock, was beaten for it, and ran away. But he was not like you described. No one has seen a child like that.”

“What happens now, Hesh?”

At the end he is like a parent to me. I seek comfort from him. I long for his firm strength.

He is deeply moved, for a long time, unable to speak.

“Master, when I found you, I listened to your heartbeat. It is weak and irregular.”

“And the gods are only drawn by a steady beat which never varies. Is that it?”

“I think so, My Lord Yandi.”

Ah, Nephew, my heart burns like a torch in my chest —