

The ancient fetish of appeasing gods by placing worldly possessions upon an altar survives in modern religions to this day. In this dark fantasy short story, an apprentice priest providing this service becomes embroiled in the timeless consequences of serving two masters.

Hunger of the Gods

“To die for a religion is easier than to live it absolutely.”

—Jorge Luis Borges

A dank chill saturated the serpentine passages beneath the temple. Darkness crept upon the single candle Khuret carried upon a silver serving tray, threatening with each solemn breath to extinguish it. Yes, the young apprentice priest could navigate the maze even blindfolded. He had learned his way as a boy, and he had since passed through twice each day. But the candle was not there to assist Khuret’s journey. It burned at the pleasure of the gods he served.

Familiar red curtains invited Khuret into the sacred cella where he shouldered his way through, careful to not set the entire damn place on fire – penance later for that thought. A multitude of lamps burned bright, and tablets of cuneiform spoke from the walls. Here in this living library, ideas defied and deified the crushing weight of stone above and all around.

Khuret stepped around a deep pit on his way to the dais. In unseen corridors below dwelled the cult of the barû, diviners more secret than the cella itself. They lived beyond the temptation of fresh air or daylight, and it was not for Khuret to stumble upon their secrets.

The young priest mounted seven wood steps to the dais. His lips fluttered in prayer. The cold, sapphire eyes of the gods staring out from carved wood and stone regarded his every move. It was with great care that he placed the tray before this gathering. He left

bread cakes, cheese, fish, figs, vegetables and beer for the divinities to consume by their very gaze. This was the miracle of Khuret's faith, offered twice daily with sweet water as well so that the gods may wash their fingers and lips when finished.

The gods began their meal. Khuret descended the dais, eyes closed and hands lifted. His spoken prayer heightened. The words bounced from the walls to become a chorus of ten priests, and then of thirty. Waves of music rose until the air was thick with the crescendo. Khuret found ecstasy, sweat rolling down his back as the sky opened in his mind. There, the living gods looked down from the sun and moon. Their eyes burned his face, and his body quivered in the tempest. Their energy nearly ripped him apart, and he ended the prayer when he could stand no more. The chorus faded rapidly, and there was stillness again.

Khuret opened his eyes. After a moment to regain himself, he returned to the dais and retrieved the food. Now blessed, he would take the divine meal to his sultan. He hoped to at least, but something had gone terribly wrong.

Khuret's gut churned as he screwed his way back to the upper level and to the Hall of Words. Amid the busy scribes he found Qi-Bran, the shangû-priest whom he served, and he waited impatiently to speak. At last, Qi-Bran turned to him, foggy eyes staring blindly from beneath bushy eyebrows. He sniffed at the food. His milky eyes widened beyond belief, and he asked Khuret why he hadn't yet served the sultan his repast.

"Master, I have gone to the altar of mastication, and look! The gods have touched with more than their eyes!"

Qi-Bran surveyed the food with the gentlest touch, like that of a masseur or a magician. The fish and vegetables were nibbled. The beer, sipped. Even the sweet water was sullied by unclean hand. Sensing these things, he said, "I will speak with the cooking staff later."

Khuret nodded unhappily. Often, burials followed such talks.

"Shall I still take the repast to the sultan?" he said.

“Of course!” Qi-Bran replied. “If the food is good enough for gods, then it is surely suitable for Uriz!”

“But it’s not real, is it?” Khuret searched for the word or phrase to mean symbolic, but the language and customs of his time made no such distinction. “The gods aren’t truly meant to eat as are you or I!”

“We are finished here,” said his master. Khuret bowed in retreat and hastily made his way to the Sun Bridge, which connected the temple to the palace in the open air. He often enjoyed looking down at the busy people of the city. He envied them, though he knew that serving both the temple and the palace left him trusted by none.

Sultan Uriz and the high priest Qi-Bran were blood brothers, but their disputes for power fueled distrust between them. Whispers and white-knuckled fists betrayed their tensions. These were not easy times, but something else troubled young Khuret. He recalled examining the meal as he always did before leaving the kitchen. It had been pristine. Whoever ate from the tray must have done so afterwards, and yet only he had come near it. Had the barû risen from their hoary depths and tampered with the meal? The thought worried him. Like all worldly men, he’d never seen the barû. At least, he didn’t think he had.

“Come!” Sultan Uriz summoned to Khuret after the guards received him. Uriz sat at a long table. He was an older man with youthful appetites. The room around him sparkled with jewels. Three young slaves, gleaming with scented oils, performed carnal acts, their bodies entangled atop a small stage. Other pleasures abounded. So much for one man, and Khuret bowed and presented the tray.

The candle still burned, much shorter now. The sultan smiled, but his smile faded at seeing the food tasted by the gods. He dismissed Khuret with an unhappy nod.

And as he parted, Khuret wondered at the many things in life he may never taste.

Whispers filled the temple that day like feathers in pillows of silk. Whenever Khuret drew near, the whispers ceased. He asked Qi-Bran the meaning of all this, and the shangû-priest answered him hastily.

“Visions! The sultan has seen visions!”

“Visions? How do you know this, Master?”

“A castle guard came to make an offering,” the high priest said.

“But what did he say?”

The priest laughed, his milk-white eyes dancing in their sockets. “Why not ask the sultan for yourself? You spend enough time at his palace!”

“I spend almost no time there,” Khuret snapped. He didn’t mean to show disrespect. But many in the temple looked down upon him for his service to the ruler of the material world. He apologized and excused himself.

“You serve two masters, Khuret!” Qi-Bran called after him. “Don’t let them tear you apart!”

“I could never,” he said, trying his best to disguise his hurt. He was not successful.

The young priest broke from his studies early to help the kitchen staff prepare that evening’s repast. He took no chances, pouring the beer himself and slicing the lamb with a silver blade quenched in holy moonlight. He assembled the tray and made certain that no devious hands came near. When all was done and the candle had been lit, he examined the tray one last time before parting for the cella.

The sleek tongue of the candle flickered as he navigated the tunnels. Anxiety consumed the young man. Something deep stirred in his soul, and he shivered while trying to keep his mind focused. Once, he turned left instead of right, and he stopped so suddenly that the tray nearly spilled over. What lay in that direction was death, a hellish

trap dreamed by ancient minds. He turned back for the correct path, knowing too well the frailty of life.

Reaching the cella, Khuret recited his prayer with only perfunctory diligence, his eyes fixed upon a new god he had not seen before. He was made of wood like many of others, but his legs were short and stumpy, his stomach as round as a woman with child. The barû had adorned him with rags rather than silk, and his eyes of coal looked out mockingly above a lascivious grin.

Khuret ended his prayer prematurely, nerves frayed as he admired this aberration. He whispered, “Why have the barû made you, little one?”

Silence. After placing the food on the table, Khuret examined the new deity more closely. Goat hair crowned the god’s head, and his teeth were those of a dog. The figure could not have been more out of place next to the glorified likes of Utu, god of the sun and mighty arbiter between heaven and earth. This fellow was hideous, yet likable for the same reasons that rogues and thieves bid attraction from young women.

Closer still.

Khuret leaned toward this new god.

A dark mist rose from the figure’s nostrils.

Khuret fell from the dais. He hit his head and the room turned black. Whispers sounded around him. In fear for his soul, Khuret curled into a ball on the clay floor. The subterranean walls became heavy, stifling his breath and pressing his lungs. The whispers of some ancient language increased as six voices distinguished themselves, moving nearer. What were they saying? What did they want? What—

“Get out.”

Khuret recovered the tray and rushed from the sacred cella for the relative safety of the sultan in his palace. As he went, he saw that the food was again half-eaten.

The sultan openly displayed his anger this time. “Another filthy meal!” he cried. Khuret might have jumped back at his rage. But for some reason, the sultan was small and unintimidating. Spiritually, of course, this sultan *was* weak. But even his earthly appetite seemed paltry now, compared to that of this new god.

“I apologize, your majesty. I do not know what happened.”

“Maybe curiosity has the better of you,” the sultan said, striking a nerve. “Maybe you decided to taste the fruit of the gods for yourself!”

“I have all I need, your majesty,” Khuret replied, struck only by his own calm. He looked with some embarrassment at the tray. There was dirt in the water bowl, and an oily film floated at the top. He almost lost himself in the patterns of colored swirls before the sultan shouted again.

“Then it is true!” said the sultan. “The gods, they have touched with fingers of flesh! This morning’s miracle has brought me visions!”

“Visions?”

Nearby, a woman rolled a peeled grape with her tongue over her lover’s thigh, and slaves of various lands drank beer and wine from one another’s mouths. Again, these delights seemed distant, even timid, beside what Khuret had seen in the eyes of the new god.

The sultan’s face turned suddenly red. He leaped and seized Khuret by the throat. He pulled him near. Bits of meat appeared sickeningly from his majesty’s teeth as he spoke.

“I have seen it!” Uriz shouted. “I might never have known of my brother’s impertinence if it weren’t for the food you bring me!”

“I have done nothing unordinary,” Khuret choked. He would have fallen over, except that Uriz’s hand held him so tight. “Qi-Bran is the temple’s most...virtuous father!”

“My visions are as valid as those of any priest!” Uriz shouted, squeezing tighter to stifle Khuret’s pleas. “He has fed his lust from my own coffers and must pay!”

Now whether the touched food had truly brought the sultan visions, if it was simply a ploy, or there was some deeper plot afoot – these details mattered little to Khuret whose life was expendable beyond his services. The problem with serving two or more masters has not changed from any age. Khuret could ingratiate himself to each, hold his tongue, reap only the mildest of benefits while wondering at the wondrous life of each. Eventually, one of them will have you by the throat.

Uriz dragged Khuret crying to the great hall doors, cast with the scenes of legendary battles, flung open by guards all too happy to get out of the angry sultan’s way! Khuret found himself dragged by the neck and into sunlight of a busy street he’d never entered before. How many times he’d dreamed of stepping foot outside? But now he was on his knees, dragged with no air in his lungs, numbness through his limbs and the sky turning black...even the sun...throbbing, fading fast....

Khuret awoke upon the ground in a cloud of dust raised by the mob gathering with the sultan at its center. Word spread as fast as flattery among the town. Soldiers dragged Qi-Bran into the street. They stood him up, mouth flapping but hands bound behind his back like any common criminal before the throngs.

“Here he is, your majesty,” a good general announced, throwing Qi-Bran to his knees when a touch would have sufficed. Some cheered but most gasped when Uriz seized his brother by his hair in one hand, receiving a sword from the general in the other.

“What is the meaning of this?” the priest protested. “How dare you—”

Still at the Sultan Uriz's feet, blood spraying from the neck of the priest dashed Khuret's face. The priest was executed, but not before his followers gathered force and pushed through the crowd aghast. Uriz joined his brother in death, stomped into the ground by a crowd rabid at the smell of blood exciting passions for more.

Townspople ran frantic through the streets. Carts were overturned, homes set ablaze. The young grabbed what they could from vendors and beat those who protested, and young women who lingered too long were pulled into alleyways by the old. In some strange and dark way, it sounded like a festival.

Khuret fled, staggering down the road.

He fixed the temple gates in his sight. Worshipers bowed to stone figures in the outer hall, but the young priest had only flight to sanctuary in his mind. Deeper within the temple, hidden behind closed doors, scribes engraved tablets with solemn taps of their hammers as they've always done. Students studied and prayed. Khuret passed them all unnoticed, descended the secret stairway to the corridors below. He twisted through them without light and through the dank silence. He shouldered beyond the red curtains and entered the relative brightness of the cella. And upon the dais, amid gods overturned, there sat a man.

Khuret bowed weakly out of habit, but this man shook the gesture away. He was old and frail. The wrinkles that defined his face ran as deep as the valleys of Nova, and his life thread had grown too thin to waste time on the frivolity of class and custom. The robe he wore was of the palest yellow, yet glowing as though to hold the sun inside.

"Khuret! Praises, you have returned."

"Who are you?" Khuret asked. "How do you know my name?"

"I come from below," the sunny old man replied, nodding faintly toward the pit and unseen corridors lurking down there. He handed Khuret a cloth and gestured for him to

wipe the splash of Qi-Bran's blood from his face. "You return to your station of your own will?"

"Yes."

"You did not defend your sultan or the shangû-priest? You did not join the frenzy of the masses from either side?"

"No," Khuret said, collapsing to his knees. "I did not. I came here."

"As is your duty," the bright man said, plump and well-fed. He picked a sliver of lamb from his teeth, and his breath smelled of beer. "I felt certain they would kill you, but no matter. A revolution is underway, and the people will soon clamor for order. Believe me, young man. Your loyalty will not be forgotten."

[Bryan Lindenberger's](#) "Hunger of the Gods" has gone through several, unpublished iterations since 1998, here reconceived in 2017.