

Sev's Sister

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 02 Oct 1998

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Robert Borski — 02 Oct 1998, 18:48

Time for me to add my speculations to the mix, since, to the best of my knowledge, no one's yet mentioned the woman I think is Sev's sister.

I believe we meet her early, in SHADOW (Chapter IX).

She's the khaibit known as Barbea and she works out of the House Azure in the Echopraxia.

Barbea, it appears, resembles what we know of Severian. She is tall, straight-nosed, has limpid eyes, and could be wearing a wig made of gold (so her hair may actually be dark).

Severian judges her to be no older than 17; Severian appears to be similarly aged.

Barbea is a pseudonym; we never learn the khaibit's real name, so it could be Severa.

"Echopraxia" suggests duplication, an echoing of the original: a twinning of sorts. Barbea also has another putative twin in "Chateleine Gracia"--or so Severian observes, even going so far as to claim the two might be the same--just wearing different makeup.

Saint Barbea is always associated with her brother Sarbelius in hagiographic literature. The bea/-belius endings suggest the ian/a ending of Severa/Severian. Both Barbea and Sarbelius were tortured before being executed.

Witches often service the torturers in at least their first sexual encounters (Master Gurloes lost his virginity this way) and according to the LEXICON URTHUS, they're somewhat wanton in their ways. The witches' patron saint is Saint Mag, short for Magdalen, the prostitute of the New Testament. So it's not that big a leap to connect Severa with prostitution. This being Severian's first sexual encounter also connects.

Severian will soon be offered the choice of whether he wishes to stay in the guild or leave. I speculate Severa/Barbea has been offered the same deal with the Witches' Guild, but has chosen to leave. Women maturing earlier than men, she may have left the Guild a year or two before Severian first encounters her, but unable to find work has opted to become a khaibit in the House Absolute, while moonlighting as a prostitute in the House Azure.

Lastly then, there's this quote from Severian himself:

"There was something in the eyes of both women [Barbea, Gracia], in the expression of their mouths, their carriage and the fluidity of their gestures, that was one. It recalled something I had seen elsewhere (I could not remember where), and earlier, yet it was new, and I felt somehow that the other thing, that which I had known earlier, was to be preferred."

The most interesting thing about the quote occurs in parentheses--"*I could not remember

when*"--which seems like a damn strange thing to say when you're always bragging about having total recall. But what if these memories predate the acquisition of a suitably developed storage system--one that's based on emotion and instinct, not acquired learning? Severian has seen his sister before for nine months prenatally, if not at their joint births; Mom, too, he must have seen at parturition. But if his brain hasn't developed enough mentally, he has no optimal storage nook for memories of either--he lacks a suitable filing system in other words and so these foundation-less memories of Mom and Sis go into a general bin, unavailable for recall by ordinary means, but still there.

Severian, seeing Severa, recognizes in her the eidetic ghost of their mother; she looks familiar, yet is new. He recalls--if inchoately--his mother and it's the emotional warmth of this (for what newborn infant does not love his mother) that leads him to prefer it.

Robert Borski

CRCulver — 03 Oct 1998, 02:06 · follows Robert Borski

Robert Borski said:

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Well, Robert, you've certainly looked into this deeply, and I think your theory is sound, but I don't like the ramifications. If Merryn is not Severian's sister, then what will happen in the Book of the Short Sun? Looks to me like we're going to see another one of Severian's notorious one night stands.

Anyway, the postitutes of the House Azure are khaibits. Are we then to assume that Severian is a khaibit too? I dunno, I think the list is going to have a lot of different opinions on this one.

Christopher R. Culver <crculver at aol.com>

<http://members.aol.com/crculver/index.html>

Mark Millman — 05 Oct 1998, 18:29 · follows CRCulver

On 2 October at 11:48 pm GMT, Robert Borski said:

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To which Christopher R. Culver, on 3 October at 2:06 am GMT, replied:

Anyway, the postitutes of the House Azure are khaibits. Are we then to assume that Severian is a khaibit too? I dunno, I think the list is going to have a lot of different

opinions on this one.

And Kieran Mullen, on 5 October at 1:25 am GMT added:

All of the women at the Echopraxie are
khaibits, duplicates of exultants.

Robert, I have to agree. Khaibits are grown, not hired. Remember, the exultant women use the khaibits' blood to keep themselves young; the implication is that they must be clones (or something similar), and that natural children won't do the trick.

Robert also said:

"There was something in the eyes of both women [Barbea, Gracia], in the expression of their mouths, their carriage and the fluidity of their gestures, that was one. It recalled something I had seen elsewhere (I could not remember where), and earlier, yet it was new, and I felt somehow that the other thing, that which I had known earlier, was to be preferred."

The most interesting thing about the quote occurs in parentheses--"I could not remember when"--which seems like a damn strange thing to say when you're always bragging about having total recall. But what if these memories predate the acquisition of a suitably developed storage system--one that's based on emotion and instinct, not acquired learning? Severian has seen his sister before for nine months pre-natally, if not at their joint births; Mom, too, he must have seen at parturition. But if his brain hasn't developed enough mentally, he has no optimal storage nook for memories of either--he lacks a suitable filing system in other words and so these foundation-less memories of Mom and Sis go into a general bin, unavailable for recall by ordinary means, but still there.

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And Kieran replied:

Why can this not be an invocation of his mother *without* meaning that she is related to her? Or merely a reference to Thecla or Thea?

Which Robert rebutted on 5 October at 5:20 am GMT, saying:

As for Kieran Mullen's contention that "Why can this not be an invocation of his mother *without* meaning that she is related to her? Or merely a reference to Thecla or Thea?" Why would

memories of his mother be triggered by someone who is a non-relative? Or Thea/Thecla? This the khaibit of Chateleine Barbea, after all, not Thea/Thecla. And how do you explain Severian's parenthetical "I don't remember where" subclause?

I'm afraid that I have to concur in doubting that this line refers to a deeply-buried memory of Severian's mother.

It could be a reference to either of the exultant women whom Severian already knows. But I think he would have been able to recall the similarity in that case. We know that Severian isn't always good at fitting together puzzle pieces; I submit that he can't place the previous experience here because he's having a context failure (you've all experienced it; you see someone you know well--but only in a single context, as from your health club--in an unexpected place, and say to yourself, "That face is very familiar, but I have no idea why it should be so"). Severian here is thinking of Valeria, who has the truly regal grace that the exultants imitate more or less well; the khaibits' aping of the exultants' imitation (which, given their high status and--as a group--decades or centuries of practice, may well be pretty good, if not exact) is what stirs the echo in Severian's mind.

I don't, however, have any suggestions for the identity of Severian's sister. I'd point out, though, that Merryn seems curiously without function in terms of plot or themes--not true of the other characters mentioned in this discussion-- and that Severian has been known to be as obtuse as you describe Merryn to be. The name may be the result of witches' having use-names and true-names; the designation "witches" implies study or use of magic, and we know that at least some magic does work on Urth, as Severian's duel with Declan demonstrates. Hiding one's true name to prevent its being used in hostile magic is a widely-distributed, very ancient magical practice.

Mark Millman