

"You are wearing a mask."

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 14 Oct 1998

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Robert Borski — 14 Oct 1998, 16:15

When Severian first meets Agilus at his rag shop, Agilus is wearing what Sev describe's as a skeleton or death's head mask. Sev, however, in the dimness of the shop (Wolfe specifically mentions the lack of light), does not realize this until he sees "a narrow black ribbon that stretched forward a finger's length from the hair above his ears.

"You are wearing a mask," he tells Agilus, and requests he remove it.

Agilus complies, but several paragraphs later, Severian says, "The ribbons that held your mask...They're still there."

But Agilus says nothing.

Later, at the Sanguinary Fields, when Severian faces his helmeted Septentrion opponent in monomachy, he makes this observation: "...in the shadow behind the cheekpiece I thought I saw a narrow band of black, and tried to recall where I had seen such a thing before." (Obviously, all that memory is a grievous burden to ratiocination.)

And then still later, after Severian leaves the arrested Agilus's cell, he notices the following immediately outside, where he's tossed an orichalk to starving Agia: "...the orichalk was gone. In its place...a design had been scratched on the filthy stones. It might have been the snarling face of Jurupari [a demon], or perhaps a map, and it was wreathed with letters I did not know."

So what are we to make of these various incidents?

Well, come with me now to SWORD, and to Chapter XX. Big Sev and little Sev are working their way down from the mountains and enter a high jungle. Here they find a fetish that Severian believes is meant to prevent the coming of the New Sun, while suspended from trees are strips of cloth etched with arcane symbols. Not much later they're accosted, and "...for a moment I thought the figures that stepped into the path were devils, huge-eyed and striped with black, white and scarlet; then I saw they were only naked men with painted bodies." Sev later describes one of these painted faces "as expressionless as a mask."

Eventually, Severian is made to fight a sorcerer's duel with Decuman, whereupon, in response to a question by little Sev about who their captors are, he opines: "I'm only guessing, but I would say this is an academy of magicians--of those cultists who practice what they believe are secret arts. They are supposed to have followers everywhere--though I choose to doubt that--and they are very cruel."

Agia and Agilus, I submit, are devotees of the academy cult. In fact, if there's a witch anywhere in Sev's family (this, provided Agia is Dorcas's granddaughter), it's Agia. In many respects she's like Circe, only instead of turning men into swine, she commands the shape-changing Hethor, who is both slug and peryon (Beuzac is the fire salamander). And when Severian is "rescued"

from the Ascian evzones that have shot down his flier, he describes the harpy-like peryon that carries him in exactly the same terms he uses to describe the Erinyes. And who is it that the Erinyes especially punish? Those who've committed crimes against their kin--which is pretty much what Severian did when he took Terminus Est to Agilius's neck.

Robert Borski