

The Contessa

The Urth list — 5 messages, 4 voices, 07 Apr 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1496>

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Robert Borski — 07 Apr 1999, 20:00

3) Who was the beautiful, weeping woman Sev saw in the loggia of the Secret House, being led away by six Praetorians? Ch. XLI, _Urth_ This was right after resurrecting the dead assassin and right before emerging behind the throne. He can't recall who she is.

She's the Contessa in Dr Talos's play, who relates seeing a mysterious figure as she was led away by guards.

Tony Ellis is quite right in stating this, but neglects to add that the Contessa's name in Eschatology and Genesis is Carina.

Change the C to K and you have Karina, a Danish variant for Katherine, so clearly (as I've argued before) the woman is linked to either Saint Katharine, patron saint of the Torturer's guild, or Catherine, Severian's mother.

Whether you think the arrested woman is literally Katharine or Catherine, I lead to the individual to decide.

Robert Borski

Tony Ellis — 13 Apr 1999, 14:51 · follows Robert Borski

SBear wrote:

And later Roy wrote:

Okay, I accept that the woman Sev sees being led away, as Tony Ellis (and mantis, in the archives) states, is in the role of the Contessa, but who was she in the "real" world, outside the play, on the last day of Urth? Both she and Sev seem to recognize each other. From where, when? If she is less than forty years old, as suggested by her desirability, then Sev couldn't have seen her on Urth, because he has been gone that long. Why was she apparently being arrested?

Maybe she's a little older than that; could she have been born at the very start of Severian's reign, for instance?

Either you two are missing the point or I am <g>. She isn't "in the role of" the Contessa, she *is* the Contessa. She's being arrested for whatever reason the Contessa was being arrested in the play (although I seem to recall she wasn't being arrested at all, but escorted). There's no suggestion that she and Severian have met before at court or anything: Severian specifically says that her face wasn't known to him.

He "recognises" her and she him because this moment has happened before - in the sub-reality of Dr Talos's play. That's why Severian sees in the Contessa's eyes the recognition that they are both in "a drama that had been played out before", or words to that

effect.

I can still remember getting to this bit the first time I read Urth of the New Sun, and the penny suddenly dropping. My jaw literally fell open.

Roy C. Lackey — 13 Apr 1999, 20:01 · follows Tony Ellis

Tony Ellis wrote:

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You're right; escorted, not arrested, is better. Remember: Nessus is already underwater, the Urth is coming to an end very quickly, and people know it. So why would anyone be wasting time bothering with this woman for any Urthly reason? How about an Ushasly (sic?) reason?

The events of the play are a parody of Urth's last day, parts of which Sev witnesses and relates. I say parody because the play only approximates what actually happens and some of the player's roles are conflated. That the woman Sev sees in the Path of Air is the play's Contessa is undoubted. But is that the only drama being reprised? BTW, some of the arguments made here were first advanced by Robert Borski. See his 4-8-99 post. mantis has argued that Catherine and Katharine are the same person.

Compare the "Contessa's" description:

"At first I could not see her eyes, which were bent toward the floor and lost in her raven-dark hair.

Then (I could not tell by what chance) she glanced up at me. Hers was a lovely face of that complexion called olive and as smoothly oval as an olive, too, with something in it that tore my heart; and though it was strange to me, I had the sensation of return once again."

With that of "Katharine" at the Feast:

"She was tall and slender, though not so tall nor so slender as Thecla, dark of complexion, dark of eye, raven of hair. Hers was such a face as I have never seen elsewhere, like a pool of pure water found in the midst of a wood."

Note the mirror imagery of the water (I believe this has been pointed out before). Could Sev be seeing his own image in her face and not realize it? He couldn't see his similarity to Ouen, though others could. He didn't recognize his own image on coins. Also, many mirrors are oval-shaped. Dark complexion, dark eyes, raven hair; from Wolfe what more can you expect? See also where Sev meets Ouen in Citadel.

And the Contessa's line from the play (spoken to Meschia):

"If my body held a part of yours--liquescent tissue locked in my loins..."

Echoes of the conception of the White Fountain? Aka New Sun, aka Severian?

Roy

Charles Dye — 14 Apr 1999, 08:15 · follows Roy C. Lackey

"Roy C. Lackey" <rclackey at stic.net> writes:

Note the mirror imagery of the water (I believe this has been pointed out before). Could Sev be seeing his own image in her face and not realize it? He couldn't see his similarity to Ouen, though others could. He didn't recognize his own image on coins.

Minor quibble here: of *course* Sev recognizes his portrait on "his" chrisos. He posed for it! I think his denial to Hadelin is a mixture of (a) dry humor, (b) an unwillingness to begin a discussion which would only make him sound insane, and (c) a deliberate echo of Graves's Claudius_the_God_.

raster at highfiber.com

Tony Ellis — 15 Apr 1999, 15:39 · follows Charles Dye

Roy wrote:

Compare the "Contessa's" description:

<snip>

...With that of "Katharine" at the Feast:

The similarities are certainly suggestive. But if Severian can give us that vivid description of Katherine, how could he say of the Contessa "her face was not known to me" if she was the same woman?

And Robert Borski wrote:

Re: Roy's identification of the Carina the Contessa as Catherine. Here, on the other hand, I think Roy's arguments are most sound and parallel my own.

Karina, after all, is Danish for Katherine--surely this is no coincidence, eh Tony Ellis?

Robert was kind enough to quote me his reference for this Carina = Catherine identification, and, ingrate that I am, I have to say I find it pretty tenuous. It goes:

Carina = Karina = variation on Karen = Danish form of Katherine

None of the Danish Name sites I found on the Web (of which there are a surprising number) made even this second-hand association.

Hmmm. Sorry guys, but I remain skeptical. :-)