

Iron men

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 23 Apr 1999

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Roy C. Lackey — 23 Apr 1999, 20:23

In URTH Sidero tells Sev how his (Sidero's) kind came to be. They started out as glorified spacesuits for the sailors, becoming, as more gadgetry and circuits were added, self-aware entities capable of independent action. They are hollow because they were originally designed to house human sailors. Because they are hollow they are lightweight. Sev calls them androids and realizes that that is what Jonas had once been (chapter VIII). When he carried Jonas from the Antechamber he was surprised at how lightweight he was and speculated that it was due to his metal parts being made of some lightweight alloy. Wrong. He was lightweight because the metal parts were hollow, and the metal parts were made of iron, if not literally at least metaphorically.

In Greek mythology Sidero was female, not male. Sidero has two separate meanings. One is "starry", the other is a prefix meaning "iron". Sidero mentions two others of his kind, Hadid and Hierro. Al Hadid, also called "Iron", is the title of the 57th Surah of the KORAN. Hierro is Spanish for "iron".

Jonas means "dove", but whether this was his original name or not is unknown. Jonas is very secretive about his past. He implies that he was a crewman of a starship that crashed, the crew then scattering. Maybe so. But his name invites comparison with his biblical namesake. Jonah disobeyed God and took ship for Tarshish. God sends a storm in punishment, unnecessary cargo is thrown overboard (Hethor knows about cargo) and Jonah too, as a scapegoat, where he is swallowed by the "whale". Thus the origin of the term "jonah" for someone who is bad luck. Jonas has a lot of bad luck. Was he banished for some "sin", either by Tzadkiel or other agent of the Increate? Jonas lost his left hand; Sidero lost his right arm and hand. This has resonances with Jonah 4:11. "... persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand ..." It took Sev a while to figure out which of Jonas's hands was the prosthetic.

Further, it is Sidero who tells Sev: "We sail in and out of Time, then back again. There is only one ship, the captain says. [Tzadkiel is the captain] All the ships we hail between the galaxies or the suns are this ship." Does this mean just what it says? Are the "Quasar", "Fortunate Cloud", and Tzadkiel's ship one and the same?

Is this all coincidence? I doubt it. The androids Sidero and Jonas have become human, whether by accident or design, in all ways that matter save the biological. Perhaps All Too Human, in the Nietzschean sense.

Roy

Matthew Malthouse — 26 Apr 1999, 11:02 · follows Roy C. Lackey

"Roy C. Lackey" wrote:

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gadgetry and circuits were added, self-aware entities capable of independent action. They are hollow because they were originally designed to house human sailors. Because they are hollow they are lightweight. Sev calls them androids and realizes that that is what Jonas had once been (chapter VIII). When he carried Jonas from the Antechamber he was surprised at how lightweight he was and speculated that it was due to his metal parts being made of some lightweight alloy. Wrong. He was lightweight because the metal parts were hollow, and the metal parts were made of iron, if not literally at least metaphorically.

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Perhaps my mind is too deep in the gutter but my first thought on reading that was maybe the symbolism of Sev entering a Sidero/Suit that had female characteristics would have been just too much.

Even as it is, Sev's use of Sidero is very much a violation.

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So we have three men of iron - is there any reference to alternative names for, or used by Jonas? I can't recall.

If one accepts that the simplest solution suffices then Jonas and Sidero can be taken to be entities of the same kind - ex-space armour. But the contrast between Sidero's strength and Jonas' weakness is marked. That weakness I'd ascribe to the failing of the human parts Jonas used to repair himself which leads me to wonder how such a repair could have been effected on a hollow body.

Um, hollow men. Is there an allegory there? Sidero's lack of empathy and Jonas' apparent surprise at a developing emotional need (Jollenta) suggest to me that constructs might be missing some vital ingredient for "humanity" (being more than just self-awareness) that Jonas was able to absorb through long exposure to and mimicry of human behaviour which Sidero, being in command, has had neither opportunity nor need to acquire.

Of the several types of beings - hierodules, Baldanders, the ape guardians of the Saltus treasure cave, Ascians: all seem to display some empathy, or at least emotion driven reaction. There does however seem to be gradation. Ascians live in a constructed society and emotive reactions are, if not suppressed then subsumed by the limitations of their constructed language. It's suggested that the ape guardians are constructed for their purpose and the emotions displayed are limited to anger, fear and adoration of the claw. The hierodules are unequivocally constructs and it seems to me that their ability to sympathise with humanity is something that they have to consciously cultivate. Siderao is perhaps the most "mechanical" of the constructed but self-aware entities that we see and for him there is almost no display of emotion except loyalty to the ship and captain which could be explained as being programmed in in the first place.

If there is a hierarchy of construction/humanity one would expect Severian and Everyman to be at the apex. Yet his obvious failings make this unlikely. Too often he does not understand others' motivations in his first travels although he does markedly better in his third pilgrimage after returning from space (counting the voyage on Tad's ship as No 2). Which brings us back to the

question of just how is Sev qualified for his task. And a subsidiary: is he changed by his Journey? Does his connection to the new sun give him insights that were denied to him before? It seems to me that this is the case.

Matthew