

Shapeshifting (was Re: (urth) Shadow Children in the Lupiverse?)

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 04 May 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3214>

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Adam Stephanides — 04 May 2002, 14:21

on 4/25/02 8:14 AM, Robert Borski at rborski at charter.net wrote:

While admitting that almost all of the evidence about the Annese having shapeshifting abilities is anecdotal, how do you explain the lack of manual dexterity that all the abos seem to possess--from the shovel test, which the French used to determine who was human and who was faking it, to Victor's poor handwriting? (The latter a notion carried over by Wolfe to his other shapeshifting race, the inhumans of Green. Or are they non-pleiomorphic too?)

[snip]

3) The Annese were able to copy the form of human hands, but not the function, much as a gifted, if perverse, plastic surgeon could sculpt tentacles from human arms or fuse the legs to forge an undine's nether parts, although in neither case, because of nonadaptive skeletal restrictions, innervation, and cerebellar pathways, is it likely such limbs could function in the same way as their true biocounterparts.

The last of these, of course, would be my explanation. But perhaps you have an alternate explanation--one more congruent with your theory that the Annese are unable to shapeshift?

But Victor's inability to use tools is not only, or even primarily, a matter of manual dexterity. As Jerry Friedman has pointed out, Victor does a number of things requiring quite a bit of dexterity. He is "a capital camp cook," "very clever with ropes," catches fish with his hands with "amazing dexterity" (iirc; I can't find the passage in the book), and makes nooses to catch small animals out of mules' hair. All these things require much more dexterity than a non-functional organ would have, and at least as much as the ability to use a rifle, lighter, or kitchen knife. In any case, his problem with the rifle seems to be one of aim rather than manual dexterity (170, Ace pb), and he is able to light a fire after Marsch's death.

The same is true of the "shovel test" at Running Blood, if this test is not indeed legendary. If the Annese had enough use of their hands to grip anything at all (and it's hard to imagine them being able to survive in human form if they didn't), they had enough dexterity to use a shovel.

I think the reason for Victor and the Annese's clumsiness with tools is psychological. The tools they can't use are the colonists' tools. Their inability to use them is in part a rejection of the colonists, and in part a self-fulfilling prophecy: they believe they can't use them, so they can't.

Later, Robert Borski wrote:

And lastly then, this bit of evidence for the shapeshifting-is-real argument. In the back of beyond Victor becomes highly upset when Dr. Marsch attempts to kill a following farmcat. Why? Is it because he simply loves cats? If so, why does he himself later attempt to kill this same cat? I contend it's because she's the shapeshifted abo girl Marsch later catches

Victor trysting with; and that he must kill her because she knows he's killed Marsch. Your theory?

Actually Marsch never "catches" Victor with the girl, or even sees the girl: the only "evidence" for the girl's existence is Marsch's suspicions, and he seems not to be completely sane on the topic.

In addition to Tony Ellis's objections to the theory that Victor killed his girlfriend, if he had really killed the cat to cover up his having killed Marsch, would he mention having killed the cat in the journal entry which has been concocted specifically to cover up Marsch's death? Granted, he's not a very good liar, but still.

Nor am I persuaded that Wolfe portrays Victor as a psychotic woman-killer, as Borski argues in the essay he cited earlier. A male chauvinist perhaps, but that's not the same thing.

I think the cat is just a cat, and Victor killed it as part of an Annese burial ritual. As to why he gets upset when Marsch tries to shoot the cat, maybe he doesn't like to see animals killed wantonly, as opposed to killing them for ritual purposes. The pre-Enlightenment Silk would undoubtedly have reproved a child he saw wantonly killing a bird, even though he sacrificed birds himself.

There is also the fact that Victor nowhere, afaik, states that the Annese could shapeshift. In his "April 26" (actually June 1) entry, he writes: "I have not killed any large animals, though once I was very tempted. But the rifle makes so much noise--and the shotgun even more--that I am certain it would frighten away those I wish to find." If Victor thought the Annese could change themselves into animals, that would be a more powerful reason for not killing large animals than the one he states.

--Adam