

The assassin

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 21 Sep 2004

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4227>

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Roy C. Lackey — 21 Sep 2004, 21:34

Pursuant to Jeffrey Lefstin's "Valeria = Urth" post of 9/4/04, a few related thoughts.

I, for one, have long wondered about the identity of the "assassin" whose body Severian stumbled over in the Secret House in Book V of the Urth Cycle. I don't recall much in the way of discussion about his identity but, considering where the episode occurs in the story -- just as Old Urth is in the throes of its death agony -- he must be important, if only symbolically.

I would suppose that the lack of speculation about his identity is due to the fact that the text tells us almost nothing about him. In fact, the only thing that seems reasonably certain is that he is male. No physical description whatsoever is given -- not features, age, dress -- nothing. Further, the few characteristics he is stated to have or supposed to have by our narrator are suspect. Those qualities are: that he was in fact an assassin, that he wielded a poisoned knife and that he was a "swordsman of renown".

Severian had entered the Secret House after emerging from his cenotaph. He had been surprised to discover that he was thought to be dead and wondered who had caused the monument to be erected. He had no way of knowing at that time that he had been gone for forty years; from his point of view he had been gone for "fewer perhaps than a hundred days all told." Unconsciously, however, as he states in the first paragraph of chapter XLII, he had entered the Secret House to "learn who it was who sat the Phoenix Throne, and to reclaim it if I could."

His unconscious moods are significant, as he had been compelled to learn a few chapters earlier. Severian had been seething with anger when he boarded the *_Alcyone_*, and sulking about Burgundofara leaving his bed for Hadelin's. Unconsciously, he had caused the big storm that threatened to wreck the ship, and which was calmed only by his conscious will. Immediately before the storm struck, as related in the third paragraph of chapter XXXIV, and as yet unaware that he was not on Urth in his own time period, Severian had been brooding over the identity of the "monarch" he had heard mentioned, "the suzerain who had replaced Father Inire", as he then believed. He intended to reclaim the throne, thinking that the New Sun would not arrive in his lifetime. A few days later he left Typhon's era for the Brook Madregot, from which he tried to find his way back to his own time, then stepped from his cenotaph. He knew by then that the "monarch" had been a thousand years before his own time, but the fact of the cenotaph meant that someone else was sitting on his throne -- and he didn't like it!

What I'm trying to say is that the identity of the dead man with the knife in the Secret House *_before_* his revivification is not only unknowable, but unimportant. He had been dead "for a year at least". We don't know what was going on on Urth a year before the deluge. As Severian reveals in the same paragraph where he relates stumbling over the man, on any given night the Secret House might harbor a "round dozen" or even a "hundred" "intrigues". The dead man's body was far from the throne room; why then should he have the knife ready in his hand if his intended target was Valeria? He may have been on some personal vendetta or involved in some

lovers' triangle. But the term "assassin" implies a target of prominence, as distinguished from a common murderer. I believe that when Severian immediately termed the dead man an assassin he unconsciously influenced the man during the process of revivification, in effect turning him into an assassin.

There is precedence for this. The anonymous dead soldier who became known as Miles was also the product of an unconscious resurrection. The unwitting resurrections of both the soldier and the assassin are also uniquely related by the presence of flies attracting Severian's attention. That anonymous soldier came to exhibit some of the essence of Jonas. I don't think I'm the first to suggest that the Jonas in Miles had been put there by Severian at the time of revivification, because Jonas had been on his mind.

After fleeing from the assassin Severian eventually made his way to the throne room, where he discovered a much older Valeria holding forth. With flooding immanent, he picked her up and sought to escape via the Secret House. Baldanders' final words were to Severian: " .. . [t]he rest do not matter. Save yourself if you can." Severian "nodded without thinking", and when he commanded the door to open the assassin entered and struck. The assassin did not seem concerned with the person of Valeria in particular, but with whoever wore the crown. There are no renowned swordsmen in the Urth Cycle. That Valeria's thin body proved to be such a poor shield is more testament to Severian's character than to the assassin's skills with a blade. Valeria died with Urth, and there was no attempt to bring her back, consciously or otherwise, even though Severian was then at the height of his god-like powers, which is why he reflected, shortly after boarding the raft, on "Valeria rotting underwater".

The sentiment he expressed a few pages later that Valeria "somewhere survived" the flood does not mean that she survived the thrust of the poisoned blade; she didn't, as the above makes clear. She lived on only in Severian's memory.

-Roy

Chris — 22 Sep 2004, 01:10 · follows Roy C. Lackey

I especially like the last two paragraphs of this post - it also tends to reinforce the association of Valeria with old Urth, in that it duplicates the "severe" necessity of the old order to perish in the creation of the new.

I do think that the assassin isn't so easily attributable to Severian's imagination as all that, though I can see the argument for it. An assassin, even far from the throne room, could have very good reasons for having a weapon drawn. The House Absolute is a dangerous place, what with white wolves roaming and such. Then again I see the Miles incident as very open to question as well.

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