

Baby Severian

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 18 Oct 2006

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Roy C. Lackey — 18 Oct 2006, 19:40

Severian seems to have been the product of natural childbirth. He said that women "big with child" were cut open and the babies removed. There was apparently some sort of prohibition against torturing obviously pregnant women, which is part of the reason Gurloes warned Severian against knocking Thecla up. Her pregnancy "might force a delay in her torment and bring disgrace on the guild."

Early on, Severian said that his earliest recollection was of "piling pebbles in the Old Yard." That isn't true, and he knew it wasn't true when he wrote it. Piling pebbles requires a certain degree of motor skills that an infant acquires only as it matures and gains strength and coordination. He later relates two memories from an earlier age. The second of those memories was triggered by the mandragora. He remembered crying his head off in a basket when he was still "not old enough to crawl". The other memory was of his mother:

"[. . .] a breast running with warm milk. It was my mother's breast then, and I could hardly contain my elation (which might have wiped the memory away) at having reached back at last to her, after so many fruitless attempts. My arms sought to clasp her, and I would, if only I could, have lifted my eyes to look into her face. My mother certainly, for the children the torturers take know no breasts. The grayness at the edge of my field of vision, then, was the metal of her cell wall. Soon she would be led away to scream in the Apparatus or gasp in Allowin's Necklace." (CLAW, chapter XXVII)

The key part of this quote is "the children the torturers take know no breasts", which seems to contradict his earlier statement about wet-nurses. But does it? Not necessarily. While "take" certainly applies to a child cut from its mother's womb, it might equally apply to any small children a woman had with her when she was handed over to the torturers. As Severian said in chapter II of SHADOW, "None of us [he and his fellow apprentices] were born among the torturers, for none are." He goes on to say:

"Since that time our numbers have been repaired solely from the children of those who fall into our hands. In our Matachin Tower, a certain bar of iron thrusts from a bulkhead at the height of a man's groin. Male children small enough to stand upright beneath it are nurtured as our own; [. . .]" This is the proof that some women came to the tower with children in tow. The sentence continues: "[a]nd when a woman big with child is sent to us we open her and if the babe draws breath engage a wet-nurse if it be a boy." Obviously, the height test would be irrelevant to a baby newly cut from its mother.

In order for all the stated conditions for conscription to the guild to be satisfied, and for the memory of nursing at his mother's breast to be true, the implication for Severian is that *he was not born in the Matachin Tower.*

The early memory of nursing in a cell suggests that he and his mother were brought to the tower when he was less than six-months old and still too young to crawl, much less pile pebbles.

So where was he born? If we are supposed to believe that Ouen's Catherine was his mother, and that Ouen's professed ignorance of her pregnancy is valid, then she was probably not 'showing' at the time she was "taken" by "the law". I don't know where she was held between the time she was "taken" and when she was sent to the torturers.

The Old Autarch opened his whorehouse about that time. His newly-imposed lack of manliness seems to have resulted in his lack of attention to his concubines, as evidenced years later by the fact that Thecla was missing from among them for a whole year without his noticing. It may be that Catherine was simply returned to wherever she had been before running away. It may be that she didn't become a real problem for the autarch (or whomever caused her to be picked up) until her pregnancy became obvious and/or she gave birth.

It would probably be an embarrassment for a eunuch to have a ceremonial concubine with child, and the child itself would be an inconvenience. Give them both, quietly, as was the case with Thecla, to the torturers.

-Roy