

The Two Coins

The Urth list — 63 messages, 11 voices, 13 Aug 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5709>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Lee Berman — 13 Aug 2010, 16:42

Ryan Dunn- I just thought that, since Tzadkiel is a hierogrammate, that androgynous or feminine could apply to him as well, combined with his ship. It would mean the coin came from somewhere else, and might have some meaning.

Ryan I have long wondered about the source of Talos' false coin. I think it gets too much attention to be meaningless. I don't think we are meant to think it comes from the Hierodules and depicts Tzadkiel for a number of reasons.

First, Tzadkiel does not really show a mixing of male and female traits. At some times he is very male and at other times very female.

Second, I think the falseness is intended to imply evil or badness in some manner. I think Tzadkiel and all from Yesod are meant to be seen as good. As Apheta says, "our gold is true gold...".

Third, the Hierodules observes the Play at the House Absolute. Baldanders' rampage did not allow for the collection of "dropsies" there. We are not privy to other performances so I must guess the false coin came from the performance at Ctesiphon's Cross.

As Hethor was present at Ctesiphon's Cross and he can generally be considered to be a bad guy, I think he is the most likely source. As to the significance of the coin and connection to Vodalus, I think I'll have to devote a new thread if I am to post my views on it.

Ryan Dunn — 13 Aug 2010, 16:58 · in reply to Lee Berman

On Aug 13, 2010, at 12:42 PM, Lee Berman wrote:

Ryan I have long wondered about the source of Talos' false coin. I think it gets too much attention to be meaningless. I don't think we are meant to think it comes from the Hierodules and depicts Tzadkiel for a number of reasons.

First, Tzadkiel does not really show a mixing of male and female traits. At some times he is very male and at other times very female.

Second, I think the falseness is intended to imply evil or badness in some manner. I think Tzadkiel and all from Yesod are meant to be seen as good. As Apheta says, "our gold is true gold...".

Third, the Hierodules observes the Play at the House Absolute. Baldanders' rampage did not allow for the collection of "dropsies" there. We are not privy to other performances so I must guess the false coin came from the performance at Ctesiphon's Cross.

As Hethor was present at Ctesiphon's Cross and he can generally be considered to be a bad guy, I think

he is the most likely source. As to the significance of the coin and connection to Vodalus, I think I'll have to devote a new thread if I am to post my views on it.

Two more curiosities. When they are interrupted by Hethor in the field while dividing the dropsies, Talos says they have been reduced to single orichalks, Dorcas offers to take them in exchange for one of her aes. She does this unexpectedly to Severian.

However, the coin in the mausoleum from Vodalus is a gold chrisos as far as Severian can tell. He tells us he knows the difference, and that he's handled aes and orichalks enough to know them well, but he only knew gold chrisos vaguely when he got his from Vodalus.

The second coin, the one Talos gives him at the end of Citadel, is clearly a match to the one in Severian's hand. It has the same smooth, greasy texture, and Severian finds this curious. I have to say that it's worth mentioning Severian's monologue about there being multiple iterations of Severian, and that time travel is no small secret to him any longer.

Regardless of whose face it is on the coin, is it possible that this is two instances of the same chrisos? If so, could Severian have been watching himself in the play that night?

...ryan

Lee Berman — 13 Aug 2010, 16:59 · follows Ryan Dunn

Roy C. Lackey- BTW, if I had to guess who had dropped a false coin at the play that night, it would be Hildegren. Somewhere, IIRC, he said that he had been keeping an eye on Sev for Vodalus, and Vodalus was shown to pass bad coins.

I agree with Roy. Hildegren is a prime suspect. Perhaps better than Hethor because he is intimately associated with Vodalus at the beginning of the story. Hethor is only tangentially associated with Vodalus and at the end of the story.

The one reason I like Hethor as a candidate better is that he has more potential for being a "big picture" stellar-level player in the game. Why would Wolfe devote so much attention with the false coin to ultimately point only to Hildegren? (unless I am underestimating the Badger's importance?)

Lee Berman — 13 Aug 2010, 17:14 · follows Lee Berman

Ryan Dunn-

the coin in the mausoleum from Vodalus is a gold chrisos as far as Severian can tell. He tells us he knows the difference, and that he's handled aes and orichalks enough to know them well, but he only knew gold chrisos vaguely when he got his from Vodalus. The second coin, the one Talos gives him at the end of Citadel, is clearly a match to the one in Severian's hand.

Ryan I think that is an excellent point. Does it suggest the false coin was not a dropsie but comes from the stack of chrisos that was provided to Dr. Talos by the Old Autarch and/or Father Inire? If so, that raises some interesting possibilities and interpretations.

To me the essential question is the symbolism. What other character is Wolfe trying to tell us is as false and "bad" as Vodalus? (perhaps simply Talos, himself? I dunno).

Lee Berman — 13 Aug 2010, 18:47 · follows Lee Berman

Jeff Wynn- What are these coins made of that feels so greasy? I was thinking polished brass, but I don't know.

Any metallurgists out there?

My guess is a lead alloy, which would have the golden color, the weight and heft of gold, but soft and greasy feeling to the touch.

Lee Berman — 13 Aug 2010, 19:54 · follows Lee Berman

Ryan- If so, could Severian have been watching himself in the play that night?

Roy- Possible, but why should he? Idle curiosity? Idol curiosity? Why would he have dropped a coin? He couldn't have been surprised at anything that happened. And if he had dropped it on purpose, why leave a counterfeit coin?

Yeah, no way. Severian is surely the real deal. Isn't he?

Anyway, I have a memory from somewhere in UotNS of a coin with Severian's scarred face on it. Maybe the assassin with the poisoned blade had it? (That's Agia in disguise of course ;-))

Is that a false memory? Well, no text here. Sorry. Have to check later.

Here is my question. Severian sees an androgyne's face on the coin. A few chapters later he meets an androgyne running the House Azure. Did Wolfe expect a first time reader to catch the connection? It becomes pretty easy on second read.

(perhaps I should amend my earlier, tongue-in-cheek suggestion and propose that Wolfe has disdain for his first-time readers. After that we are okay in his book)

Jack Smith — 13 Aug 2010, 20:06 · in reply to Lee Berman

Brass used in counterfeit coins seems to make them feel greasy. At least that's what Mark Twain says:

"I told him I had an old slick counterfeit quarter that warn't no good because the brass showed through the silver a little, and it wouldn't pass nohow, even if the brass didn't show, because it was so slick it felt greasy, and so that would tell on it every time." --Huckleberry Finn, Chapter 4

On Fri, Aug 13, 2010 at 2:47 PM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com> wrote:

Jeff Wynn- What are these coins made of that feels so greasy? I was thinking polished brass, but I don't know.

Any metallurgists out there?

My guess is a lead alloy, which would have the golden color, the weight and heft of gold, but soft and greasy feeling to the touch.

Lee Berman — 13 Aug 2010, 20:22 · follows Jack Smith

Jack Smith: Brass used in counterfeit coins seems to make them feel greasy. At least that's what Mark Twain says:

"I told him I had an old slick counterfeit quarter that warn't no good because the brass showed through the silver a little, and it wouldn't pass> nohow, even if the brass didn't show, because it was so slick it felt greasy, and so that would tell on it every time." --Huckleberry Finn, Chapter 4

Thank you Jack!! For so many years I knew I had seen the slick, greasy fake coin reference from somewhere else and you have found it. That is definitely IT. Two bits says that's where Wolfe got it from.

Tony Ellis — 14 Aug 2010, 11:14 · follows Lee Berman

Lee Berman wrote:

Anyway, I have a memory from somewhere in UotNS of a coin with Severian's scarred face on it. Maybe the assassin with the poisoned blade had it? (That's Agia in disguise of course ;-)) Is that a false memory? Well, no text here. Sorry. Have to check later.

This exchange, perhaps: chapter XXX, when Sev's in the Chowder Pot:

He examined it, bit it, and gave it back to me. "Gold all right. Looks a trifle like you, 'cept he seems to have got himself cut up. Don't suppose you noticed." "No," I said. "I never thought of it."

This is one of Idas's chrisos.

Lee Berman — 14 Aug 2010, 13:17 · follows Tony Ellis

Tony Ellis: chapter XXX, when Sev's in the Chowder Pot:

He examined it, bit it, and gave it back to me. "Gold all right. Looks a trifle like you, 'cept he seems to have got himself cut up. Don't suppose you noticed."

"No," I said. "I never thought of it."

This is one of Idas's chrisos.

Ah, yes, that's the coin with Severian's scarred face I was thinking of.

Thanks, Tony!

Lee Berman — 14 Aug 2010, 13:40 · follows Lee Berman

Gerry Quinn:

No, there was positive ID from Ouen's locket, and lots of supporting evidence. Also the narrator plays detective and finds this out with no particular reason for us to doubt it, which IMO is a literary signal that this is canon.

The hypothesis that Dorcas is Severian's grandmother has distinctive characteristics that many such hypotheses lack...

That Severian seems to be actively investigating his family tree does add a somewhat unique aspect to this puzzle. Boatman as grandfather, Ouen as father and Holy Katharine maid as mother joins in this aspect. (I must wonder why the Boatman, alone, remains unnamed).

Perhaps we were only meant to identify these four guys and no other family members. Perhaps identifying sister Severa was always meant as a red herring.

I admit I'd rather assume Wolfe is not so generous to his readers with Clupea rosea. Especially since I find plausible candidates for sister, aunt and cousins. But no way to know for sure.

Lee Berman — 14 Aug 2010, 14:13 · follows Lee Berman

Gerry Quinn- ...but there was certainly some explicit detective work on Severian's part afterwards. I don't think anything similar occurs in most cases, so I think the Dorcas thing has a particular authenticity that most such ideas

lack.

Gerry, I see you use the phrase, "most cases". Other than detective work by Severian, what other aspect of a familial clue in BotNS would convey authenticity to you? Perhaps you can give some examples of other authentic cases?

Gerry Quinn — 14 Aug 2010, 14:21 · in reply to Lee Berman

From: "Lee Berman" <severiansola at hotmail.com>

Gerry Quinn- ...but there was certainly some explicit detective work on Severian's

part afterwards. I don't think anything similar occurs in most cases, so

I

think the Dorcas thing has a particular authenticity that most such ideas lack.

Gerry, I see you use the phrase, "most cases". Other than detective work by Severian,

what other aspect of a familial clue in BotNS would convey authenticity to you? Perhaps

you can give some examples of other authentic cases?

I was referring to BotNS puzzles in general. I cannot think of any other familial clues that I give any real credence to.

- Gerry Quinn

Ryan Dunn — 14 Aug 2010, 14:39 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On Aug 14, 2010, at 10:21 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

Gerry, I see you use the phrase, "most cases". Other than detective work by Severian, what other aspect of a familial clue in BotNS would convey authenticity to you? Perhaps you can give some examples of other authentic cases?

I was referring to BotNS puzzles in general. I cannot think of any other familial clues that I give any real credence to.

- Gerry Quinn

What do you make of Little Severian?

...ryan

Adam Thornton — 14 Aug 2010, 16:24 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

On 08/14/2010 09:39 AM, Ryan Dunn wrote:

What do you make of Little Severian?

Briquettes.

Adam

Jeff Wilson — 14 Aug 2010, 17:43 · in reply to Lee Berman

Gerry Quinn:

No, there was positive ID from Ouen's locket, and lots of supporting evidence. Also the narrator plays detective and finds this out with no particular reason for us to doubt it, which IMO is a literary signal that this is canon.

The hypothesis that Dorcas is Severian's grandmother has distinctive characteristics that many such hypotheses lack...

That Severian seems to be actively investigating his family tree does add a somewhat unique aspect to this puzzle. Boatman as grandfather, Ouen as father and Holy Katharine maid as mother joins in this aspect. (I must wonder why the Boatman, alone, remains unnamed).

I don't think there is confirmation that Holy Katherine and Mom are the same person.

Lee Berman — 14 Aug 2010, 17:58 · follows Jeff Wilson

Ryan Dunn- What do you make of Little Severian?

I have a family tree which allows Little Severian to be 3rd cousin (or maybe 2nd cousin once removed? My American folk kinship rules are a bit rusty) to Severian.

It requires a couple major stretches but I can post the idea if you want.

António Pedro Marques — 14 Aug 2010, 20:58 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson wrote:

Gerry Quinn:

No, there was positive ID from Ouen's locket, and lots of supporting evidence. Also the narrator plays detective and finds this out with no particular reason for us to doubt it, which IMO is a literary signal that this is canon.

The hypothesis that Dorcas is Severian's grandmother has distinctive characteristics that many such hypotheses lack...

That Severian seems to be actively investigating his family tree does add a somewhat unique aspect to this puzzle. Boatman as grandfather, Ouen as father and Holy Katharine maid as mother joins in this aspect. (I must wonder why the Boatman, alone, remains unnamed).

I don't think there is confirmation that Holy Katherine and Mom are the same person.

I can't help feeling that the question of who is who is just not very interesting unless 'who' turns out to be someone we know for more than 2 pages. (Corollary: if his mother is just Holy Katharine's template or doesn't even enter the story at all, then...)

António Pedro Marques — 15 Aug 2010, 01:01 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

Ryan Dunn wrote:

Regardless of whose face it is on the coin, is it possible that this is two instances of the same chrisos? If so, could Severian have been watching himself in the play that night?

Is. I have trouble with different identical chrisos.

Gerry Quinn — 15 Aug 2010, 10:10 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

From: "Ryan Dunn" <ryan at liftingfaces.com>

On Aug 14, 2010, at 10:21 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

Gerry, I see you use the phrase, "most cases". Other than detective work by Severian, what other aspect of a familial clue in BotNS would convey authenticity to you? Perhaps

you can give some examples of other authentic cases?

I was referring to BotNS puzzles in general. I cannot think of any other familial clues that I give any real credence to.

What do you make of Little Severian?

Just a kid of that name? What else should we make of him? He is hardly an iteration of Severian in another existence, because he lives in Severian's Urth. His family don't have any obvious connection to Severian.. and if they were distant relatives, so what? Perhaps his name is simply an opportunity for Wolfe to point out that sometimes Severian's have sisters called Severa, although I don't think he clearly indicates anywhere that Severian has a sister.

- Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn — 15 Aug 2010, 10:13 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

From: "Jeff Wilson" <jwilson at io.com>

Gerry Quinn:

The hypothesis that Dorcas is Severian's grandmother has distinctive characteristics that many such hypotheses lack...

That Severian seems to be actively investigating his family tree does add a somewhat unique aspect to this puzzle. Boatman as grandfather, Ouen as father and Holy Katharine maid as mother joins in this aspect. (I must wonder why the Boatman, alone, remains unnamed).

I don't think there is confirmation that Holy Katherine and Mom are the same person.

It has some plausibility, I think, because of the similarity of names, and because her crime was apparently somewhat minor. Maybe she was sent to serve the torturers for a spell, rather than be excruciated by them.

- Gerry Quinn

David Stockhoff — 15 Aug 2010, 20:13 · in reply to Lee Berman

Brass is also very greasy, so lead and brass would make a good false gold, I suppose.

I recall reading in a Flashman novel of India that British troopers disdained the official cavalry weapons because they were of brass and so slippery they would "turn in the hand." They bought local instead.

Lee Berman wrote:

Jeff Wynn- What are these coins made of that feels so greasy? I was thinking polished brass, but I don't know.

Any metallurgists out there?

My guess is a lead alloy, which would have the golden color, the weight and heft of gold, but soft and greasy feeling to the touch.

Urth Mailing List

Jeff Wilson — 15 Aug 2010, 23:47 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On 8/15/2010 5:13 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

From: "Jeff Wilson" <jwilson at io.com>
Gerry Quinn:

The hypothesis that Dorcas is Severian's grandmother has distinctive characteristics that many such hypotheses lack...

That Severian seems to be actively investigating his family tree does add

a somewhat unique aspect to this puzzle. Boatman as grandfather, Ouen as father and Holy Katharine maid as mother joins in this aspect. (I must wonder why the Boatman, alone, remains unnamed).

I don't think there is confirmation that Holy Katherine and Mom are the same person.

It has some plausibility, I think, because of the similarity of names, and because her crime was apparently somewhat minor. Maybe she was sent to serve the torturers for a spell, rather than be excruciated by them.

I guess Mom Catherine might be loose somewhere, maybe even back with the Pelerines, but the Holy Katharine maid retains her maid-like appearance for at least 15-20 years. This kind of youth for a human being is unknown in the Book.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

António Pedro Marques — 16 Aug 2010, 00:35 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson wrote:

On 8/15/2010 5:13 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

From: "Jeff Wilson" <jwilson at io.com>
Gerry Quinn:

The hypothesis that Dorcas is Severian's grandmother has distinctive characteristics that many such hypotheses lack...

That Severian seems to be actively investigating his family tree does add a somewhat unique aspect to this puzzle. Boatman as grandfather, Ouen as father and Holy Katharine maid as mother joins in this aspect. (I must wonder why the Boatman, alone, remains unnamed).

I don't think there is confirmation that Holy Katherine and Mom are the same person.

It has some plausibility, I think, because of the similarity of names, and because her crime was apparently somewhat minor. Maybe she was sent to serve the torturers for a spell, rather than be excruciated by them.

I guess Mom Catherine might be loose somewhere, maybe even back with the Pelerines,

I think people go to great lengths to interpret what Severian says about births and children in Matachin tower. As far as I read it, he simply says that they deliver, nurse and keep (all as needed) the children of the women who go there. They deliver them if they are born there (they could be very young when the woman is taken there, or she could have no one else to take care of the child), they get a wet nurse if the woman cannot breastfeed, and they keep the child if the woman dies and there is no one else who can claim it. Now, he doesn't mention any of those ifs, but I think he doesn't because they're implied. I read it as him just saying what they do

[when the need to do something arises]. Why would they keep the children of women who could keep them? Why would they get a wet nurse if the mother could breastfeed the child? Why would they do a c-section if a natural birth was possible? All those questions are answerable, but the answers they could have are never so much as hinted at, and they would be the kind of thing that one expects to be mentioned ('We let no woman breastfeed / give natural birth / keep her child after she's released because [insert esoteric reason]'). So I think he's simply omitting the ifs because they should be obvious to the reader (not us but the urthian reader).

The relevance is that, in that scheme of things, barring some unknown reason, if Severian's mother had been released from the Guild then he should have gone with her. It's not hard to come up with reasons why she would be forced to leave him there / not forced to take him with her, but again, no such reasons are mentioned. It's not hard. But I'd expect something in the text to back it up, not just generic speculation. So I think Severian's mother never left the Tower, unless she managed to escape.

but the Holy Katharine maid retains her maid-like appearance for at least 15-20 years. This kind of youth for a human being is unknown in the Book.

Isn't she just a dummy?

Lee Berman — 16 Aug 2010, 01:52 · follows António Pedro Marques

James Wynn- I guess Mom Catherine might be loose somewhere, maybe even back with the Pelerines, but the Holy Katharine maid retains her maid-like appearance for at least 15-20 years. This kind of youth for a human being is unknown in the Book.

I think one of the main theories about Catherine/Holy Katharine maid and her enduring youth involve her residing in a tower (probably Valeria's) off the Atrium of Time, and time time travel explains her agelessness. The dark-haired, olive-skinned, oval-faced woman in a pale gown Severian sees on the Path of Air is probably related.

Another theory is that there are khaibits involved. Maybe a new one each year. Somehow the fictional Contessa Carina and her maids (all with beheaded saint names) might be involved. I think Roy doesn't like this one because Catherine is armiger height and the text only mentions exultant women having khaibits. But House Azure khaibits are shorter than exultants and we don't know how tall the source material for a khaibit of Catherine might have been.

My own theory sort of combines all these, with the addition of the fresh corpse that Severian sees in the grave in the very first chapter. She has dark hair and a pale gown. I take her livid face to be the result of a device well-described but otherwise not notably integrated into the plot, Allowin's Necklace.

Webster says livid can mean a few things-

1 : discolored by bruising : black-and-blue <the livid traces of the sharp scourges — Abraham Cowley>

2 : ashen, pallid <this cross, thy livid face, thy pierced hands and feet — Walt Whitman>

3 : reddish <a fan of gladiolas blushed livid under the electric letters>

FWIW, I find dark-haired, oval faced, failed Pelerine Cyriaca to be in the mix somehow. She (also?) is sentenced to strangulation for infidelity.

James Wynn — 16 Aug 2010, 02:05 · in reply to Lee Berman

On 8/15/2010 8:52 PM, Lee Berman wrote:

James Wynn- I guess Mom Catherine might be loose somewhere, maybe even back with the Pelerines, but the Holy Katharine maid retains her maid-like appearance for at least 15-20 years. This kind of youth for a human being is unknown in the Book.

This was another JW...or a cognate if Josh was right.

u+16b9

Jeff Wilson — 16 Aug 2010, 02:20 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

On 8/15/2010 7:35 PM, Ant?nio Pedro Marques wrote:

but the Holy Katharine maid retains her maid-like appearance for at least 15-20 years. This kind of youth for a human being is unknown in the Book.

Isn't she just a dummy?

In SHADOW XI, Severian details how he has helped haul out and stow away the props each year, and is familiar with their true nature: the snakes and flowers on the wheel are paper, the blade of execution is wood and tinsel. But he does not know who she is or where she comes from, so she's not just another prop.

She could be a salvaged animatronic or full robot in partial disrepair (she seems to have minimal mobility and vocabulary). But she also seems to resemble Severian's mother.

Ew... could it be some kind of "House of Wax" scenario?

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

Jeff Wilson — 16 Aug 2010, 02:25 · in reply to James Wynn

On 8/15/2010 9:05 PM, James Wynn wrote:

On 8/15/2010 8:52 PM, Lee Berman wrote:

James Wynn- I guess Mom Catherine might be loose somewhere, maybe even back with the Pelerines, but the Holy Katharine maid retains her maid-like appearance for at least 15-20 years. This kind of youth for a human being is unknown in the Book.

This was another JW...or a cognate if Josh was right.

I wrote that, rather than James; he should not have to take the blame.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

Lee Berman — 16 Aug 2010, 03:59 · follows Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson- the blade of execution is wood and tinsel.

Yes a thin wooden batten with lightweight tinsel.

Yet when Severian first takes up the sword, "It was very heavy".

When he lifted the sword, "I feared it would overbalance me".

Using all his available strength, he sends the "false" blade down. For an instant it seemed to meet resistance then thudded into the block, which fell into two. The maid's head, all bloodied, tumbled forward..

I used to think it was just Severian being drunk. Now...

Well, there are certainly some theatrics going on. I just can't be sure which audience is being fooled. Would the guild really use fake blood from a wax head as their most sacred chrism?

Jeff Wilson — 16 Aug 2010, 04:39 · in reply to Lee Berman

On 8/15/2010 10:59 PM, Lee Berman wrote:

Jeff Wilson- the blade of execution is wood and tinsel.

Yes a thin wooden batten with lightweight tinsel.

Yet when Severian first takes up the sword, "It was very heavy".

When he lifted the sword, "I feared it would overbalance me".

Using all his available strength, he sends the "false" blade down.
For an instant it seemed to meet resistance then thudded into the block, which fell into two. The maid's head, all bloodied, tumbled forward..

I used to think it was just Severian being drunk. Now...

Well, there are certainly some theatrics going on. I just can't be sure which audience is being fooled. Would the guild really use fake blood from a wax head as their most sacred chrism?

There's no indication or reason that the *blood* is fake. It might be animal blood if no recently dispatched clients or willing donors were available at the time.

Severian can't have been completely fooled into really beheading a person because he's supposed to turn the blade aside to *avoid* striking the maid, and he's not drunk because the feasting comes after. But the importance of the day is not to be underestimated in its effect on human perception; as I recall from my wedding day, that little ring was heavy like a barbell and slick as an eel.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

Jack Smith — 16 Aug 2010, 06:34 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

And the maid comes back to life after the ritual beheading. If she was really beheaded, she would really have to be resurrected too. I don't think the text indicates real resurrection in this instance.

On Mon, Aug 16, 2010 at 12:39 AM, Jeff Wilson <jwilson at io.com> wrote:

On 8/15/2010 10:59 PM, Lee Berman wrote:

Jeff Wilson- the blade of execution is wood and tinsel.

Yes a thin wooden batten with lightweight tinsel.

Yet when Severian first takes up the sword, "It was very heavy".

When he lifted the sword, "I feared it would overbalance me".

Using all his available strength, he sends the "false" blade down.
For an instant it seemed to meet resistance then thudded into the block, which fell into two. The maid's head, all bloodied, tumbled forward..

I used to think it was just Severian being drunk. Now...

Well, there are certainly some theatrics going on. I just can't be sure which audience is being fooled. Would the guild really use fake blood from a wax head as their most sacred chrism?

There's no indication or reason that the *blood* is fake. It might be animal blood if no recently dispatched clients or willing donors were available at the time.

Severian can't have been completely fooled into really beheading a person because he's supposed to turn the blade aside to *avoid* striking the maid, and he's not drunk because the feasting comes after. But the importance of the day is not to be underestimated in its effect on human perception; as I recall from my wedding day, that little ring was heavy like a barbell and slick as an eel.

--

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

António Pedro Marques — 16 Aug 2010, 11:10 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson wrote (16-08-2010 03:25):

On 8/15/2010 9:05 PM, James Wynn wrote:

On 8/15/2010 8:52 PM, Lee Berman wrote:

James Wynn- I guess Mom Catherine might be loose somewhere, maybe even back with the Pelerines, but the Holy Katharine maid retains her maid-like appearance for at least 15-20 years. This kind of youth for a human being is unknown in the Book.

This was another JW...or a cognate if Josh was right.

I wrote that, rather than James; he should not have to take the blame.

If only we could get other people to tuse sensible quoting, such confusion would not occur.

I can't understand what the difficulty is.

Lee Berman — 16 Aug 2010, 13:41 · follows António Pedro Marques

Jeff Wilson: Severian can't have been completely fooled into really beheading a person because he's supposed to turn the blade aside to *avoid* striking the maid, and he's not drunk because the feasting comes after. But the importance of

the day is not to be underestimated in its effect on human perception; as I recall from my wedding day, that little ring was heavy like a barbell and slick as an eel.

I think what Severian was supposed to do is not quite confirmed as happening during his ascension ceremony. Everything is a bit wobbly and thus suspicious. It may well be that Wolfe is only hoping to show that Severian is as apprehensive in becoming a torturer as Jeff was to becoming married. (I will not pursue that line of thought any further ;-). But perhaps there is more to it. I find it possible.

Jack Smith- And the maid comes back to life after the ritual beheading. If she was really beheaded, she would really have to be resurrected too. I don't think the text indicates real resurrection in this instance.

Jack this is not my theory, at least in origin. I think maybe it was Dave Tallman's from a few years back. But if I understand it correctly there is no resurrection here. A new khaibit maid derived from Catherine/Contessa Carina is sacrificed each year. Perhaps Solange, then Lybe, then Kyneburga....

It has some ring of truth to me. As mentioned before I think the use of fake blood as a chrism for such an important event rings false. Jeff's suggestion of bottled blood or animal blood is more realistic than dyed water, but still fake.

If the animal guys go so far as to take a bear-sow as a bride to ascend in their guild is it so much more unbelievable that the torturers perform a real beheading for theirs? Sure both rituals could be purely fake and symbolic. But why choose the boring answer when an outrageous and shocking answer will serve as well? This is SF and F is it not? We have half-human half-animals and khaibits in the text. Why not use all themes to full capacity?

This is a true story.

When I was about 14 I was playing centerfield on a baseball diamond which bordered a ravine. A lot of tall trees were arching over the field, shading me. In the middle of the game, everyone on both teams suddenly stopped, and started shouting and pointing to a spot over my head. I looked up and could see only branches and leaves. Then I heard a loud roar and what sounded like a gush of flames. I was stunned into confusion as, despite my best efforts to suppress it, the thought came to my head.... "...dragon?" I ran to the infield with mixed curiosity and mild fear, and saw that hovering just above the trees was a very low-flying hot air balloon.

Would it have been different if I had been a character in a Wolfe book? When faced with the choice of a hot air balloon tent or magical flying cathedral in science fiction, is it the same as the real world? Must we always think the prosaic answer is more likely? If one purpose of SF is to stun and amaze us I think the opposite is true.

António Pedro Marques — 16 Aug 2010, 13:58 · in reply to Lee Berman

Lee Berman wrote (16-08-2010 14:41):

If the animal guys go so far as to take a bear-sow as a bride to ascend in their guild is it so much more unbelievable that the torturers perform a real beheading for theirs? Sure both rituals could be purely fake and symbolic. But why choose the boring answer when an outrageous and shocking answer will serve as well? This is SF and F is it not? We have half-human half-animals and khaibits in the text. Why not use all themes to full capacity?

It's unnecessary cruelty to an innocent human being. Not the kind of thing that makes sense for me coming from the Guild.

Must we always think the prosaic answer is more likely?

Not at all.

Ryan Dunn — 16 Aug 2010, 14:16 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

On Aug 16, 2010, at 9:58 AM, Ant?nio Pedro Marques <entonio at gmail.com> wrote:

If the animal guys go so far as to take a bear-sow as a bride to ascend in their guild is it so much more unbelievable that the torturers perform a real beheading for theirs? Sure both rituals could be purely fake and symbolic. But why choose the boring answer when an outrageous and shocking answer will serve as well? This is SF and F is it not? We have half-human half-animals and khaibits in the text. Why not use all themes to full capacity?

It's unnecessary cruelty to an innocent human being. Not the kind of thing that makes sense for me coming from the Guild.

The torturers are described as Seekers for Truth and Penitence. I don't see bloodlust or psychopathy as parts of their guild.

They know the cost of holding their station. They are outcasts in their own Citadel. Spit on in the slums, feared and hated in the towers.

That they continue their practice at all is a signifier of honor to it's import and not the maniacal musings of brutes who would behead an innocent woman in order to elevate one of their own. That's my view anyhow.

...ryan

António Pedro Marques — 16 Aug 2010, 14:21 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson wrote (16-08-2010 03:20):

On 8/15/2010 7:35 PM, Ant?nio Pedro Marques wrote:

but the Holy Katharine maid retains her maid-like appearance for at least 15-20 years. This kind of youth for a human being is unknown in the Book.

Isn't she just a dummy?

In SHADOW XI, Severian details how he has helped haul out and stow away the props each year, and is familiar with their true nature: the snakes and flowers on the wheel are paper, the blade of execution is wood and tinsel. But he does not know who she is or where she comes from, so she's not just another prop.

She could be a salvaged animatronic or full robot in partial disrepair (she seems to have minimal mobility and vocabulary).

I can even picture Hammerstone telling people to do some similar trick on him, just for the kicks.

But she also seems to resemble Severian's mother.

In that she's not blonde... we know so little of Severian's mother. Heck, my current next-desk coworker resembles 3 or 4 other girls I've seen somewhere.

My impression regarding Wolfe's 'puzzles' is the following: everything may well have significance, but if some line on inquiry doesn't yield broadly convincing results in a relatively short time, then it's probably a dead-end.

Lee Berman — 16 Aug 2010, 15:08 · follows António Pedro Marques

Antonio Marques- It's unnecessary cruelty to an innocent human being. Not the kind of thing that makes sense for me coming from the Guild.

Ryan Dunn- The torturers are described as Seekers for Truth and Penitence... That they continue their practice at all is a signifier of honor to it's import and not the maniacal musings of brutes who would behead an innocent woman in order to elevate one of their own.

The admiration both of you share for the guild as it existed at the beginning of the story is not shared by Severian. Earlier he parrots the justifications and rote reasons for the necessity of his guild but by the end has decided to reform it.

Do not be deceived by the teachings of Master Gurloes, Jack Bauer and Dick Cheney. Torture IS unnecessary and cruel and so is the guild which beheads Holy Katharine each year. (sorry no more politics, I swear ;-))

Ryan, I'm not so sure that guild would agree with your definition of "an innocent woman". First, it would appear that Catherine (as Severian's mother) is not innocent or she wouldn't have been given to the torturers.

Second, the implication is that khaibits are being sacrificed each year. Khaibits are clones. How expendable are they considered in the Commonwealth? Every cell in your body is a clone of the other. Yet we are willing to sacrifice the lives of millions of our clones in male masturbation, providing blood samples, amputation and other activities which benefit the greater source material.

If you were the unfaithful exultant Contessa Catherine and offered a 15-20 year reprieve from torture in exchange for providing yearly khaibit donations for ceremonial sacrifice, would you do it?

Whether khaibits could be raised to willingly sacrifice themselves for the greater good of their mistress is hardly a question worth asking, given our human history full of willing human sacrifices to the gods, Jonestown, samurai, Heaven's Gate, and Pat Tillmans willing to give up their lives for honor, glory and the greater good.

(sorry, my oath once again broken)

Ryan Dunn — 16 Aug 2010, 15:26 · in reply to Lee Berman

On Aug 16, 2010, at 11:08 AM, Lee Berman wrote:

Do not be deceived by the teachings of Master Gurloes, Jack Bauer and Dick Cheney. Torture IS unnecessary and cruel and so is the guild which beheads Holy Katharine each year.

(sorry no more politics, I swear ;-))

- The torturers exist under the Autarch's rule. They obey faithfully. You know, the Autarch whose every breath blows tides against the sea in the form of perfect waves. That one. Also, whether torture is or isn't necessary, and whether it is or isn't cruel, is best left to people with more expertise on the matter than I.

Ryan, I'm not so sure that guild would agree with your definition of "an innocent woman". First, it would appear that Catherine (as Severian's mother) is not innocent or she wouldn't have been given to the torturers.

- So every apprentice ever elevated has to behead Severian's mom? Or are they beheading a puppet? Or an ageless woman in costume with a detachable head which is not real?

Second, the implication is that khaibits are being sacrificed each year. Khaibits are clones. How expendable are they considered in the Commonwealth? Every cell in your body is a clone of the other.

Yet we are willing to sacrifice the lives of millions of our clones in male masturbation, providing blood samples, amputation and other activities which benefit the greater source material.

- Severian seems to imply it is the SAME young woman every time, doesn't he?

"What became of the maid I do not know," Severian says. "She disappeared as she has each Katharine's Day I can remember. I have not seen her again." Wouldn't he recognize if it were a different person every time? Would he really be confounded about where she goes?

I don't buy for one second that a real human is sacrificed during the elevation of an apprentice. "She took the wax head from Master Gurloes and pretended to replace it on her shoulders, slipping it by some sleight into the fuligin cloth, then standing before us radiant and whole. I knelt before her, and the others withdrew."

So someone dies, but then someone else in a similar shape gets up and pretends to put on the head of the one who was just killed? Not buying it.

The lochage indeed said that if a pauper jumped from a bridge every time we breathed, it wouldn't matter, because the Commonwealth breeds and breaks men faster than we respire. But there is a code of honor of how things are done at Matachin Tower, and I find no evidence of murder without cause anywhere. Now, if Severian told us they bring up a client from the oubliette and give them the off in a sacrificial ritual sanctioned by the Autarch, then okay, but he doesn't say that.

If you were the unfaithful exultant Contessa Catherine and offered a 15-20 year reprieve from torture in exchange for providing yearly khaibit donations for ceremonial sacrifice, would you do it?

- I don't know. But I don't think it's relevant to the text that I read, wherein paper roses and a fake broken wheel precede Severian tripping an "ingenius mechanism" which elevates a "wax head smeared with blood" while the maid "draped her own with a fuligin cloth."

Whether khaibits could be raised to willingly sacrifice themselves for the greater good of their mistress

is hardly a question worth asking, given our human history full of willing human sacrifices to the gods,

Jonestown, samurai, Heaven's Gate, and Pat Tillmans willing to give up their lives for honor, glory and the greater good.

- Again, I think it's unfounded conjecture.

...ryan

Jeff Wilson — 16 Aug 2010, 17:26 · in reply to Lee Berman

On 8/16/2010 8:41 AM, Lee Berman wrote:

I think what Severian was supposed to do is not quite confirmed as happening during his ascension ceremony. Everything is a bit wobbly and thus suspicious. It may well be that Wolfe is only hoping to show that Severian is as apprehensive in becoming a torturer as Jeff was to becoming married. (I will not pursue that line of thought any further ;-). But perhaps there is more to it. I find it possible.

Heh. It wasn't that I was apprehensive, I wanted very badly to be married. But I was extremely anxious about getting through the day and earnestly praying, "Please don't let me screw up the ceremony."

Would it have been different if I had been a character in a Wolfe book? When faced with the choice of a hot air balloon tent or magical flying cathedral in science fiction, is it the same as the real world? Must we always think the prosaic answer is more likely? If one purpose of SF is to stun and amaze us I think the opposite is true.

Well, "science fiction" in particular is supposed to appeal to the authority of science to suspend disbelief. In this way, unscientific things are less believable than in the real world, because fiction is supposed to make sense.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

Lee Berman — 16 Aug 2010, 17:55 · follows Jeff Wilson

Ryan Dunn- - So every apprentice ever elevated has to behead Severian's mom?

Or are they beheading a puppet? Or an ageless woman in costume with a detachable head which is not real?

No, as I understand the theory, they are khaibits.

I don't buy for one second that a real human is sacrificed during the elevation of an apprentice. So someone dies, but then someone else in a similar shape gets up and pretends to put on the head of the one who was just killed? Not buying it.

Heh, heh, no sale? Can't blame you. The whole thing is pure speculation, piling guess- work upon guesswork. But I thought everything in here was for free. More like a trash heap. Up to each person to sort through the trash and decide what is treasure.

The lochage indeed said that if a pauper jumped from a bridge every time we breathed, it wouldn't matter, because the Commonwealth breeds and breaks men faster than we respire.

I agree, it doesn't sound like a society very respectful of human life to me.

I don't think it's relevant to the text that I read, wherein paper roses and a fake broken wheel precede Severian tripping an "ingenius mechanism" which elevates a "wax head smeared with blood" while the maid "draped her own with a fuligin cloth."

Well, the wheel and Maxentius and beheading is surely relevant to St. Catherine of Alexandria. She got the torturer treatment for refusing to deny her faith and *refusing a royal wedding*. How that relates to the maid who plays the part and who may have run off from an order of monials and met a guy named Ouen is, perhaps, a relevant question.

But the question here is, why does a fake sword described as constructed of especially light-weight materials feel very heavy to Severian and almost knock him over as he lifts it? If the fake sword had been described as "solid mahogany, painted silver" or something like that, the question wouldn't be asked.

One explanation is that it isn't a fake sword. Another is Jeff's, that Severian is very apprehensive about becoming a torturer and the weight is a metaphor for the responsibility he is about to accept. Perhaps there are other explanations. I'd like to hear them. What harm does it do to present them? Each person can decide which works best for them.

Jeff Wilson — 16 Aug 2010, 18:04 · in reply to Lee Berman

On 8/16/2010 10:08 AM, Lee Berman wrote:

The admiration both of you share for the guild as it existed at the beginning of the story is not shared by Severian. Earlier he parrots the justifications and rote reasons for the necessity of his guild but by the end has decided to reform it.

Do not be deceived by the teachings of Master Gurloes, Jack Bauer and Dick Cheney. Torture IS unnecessary and cruel and so is the guild which beheads Holy Katharine each year.

I agree it is un-necessary, but that's part of the evils of statecraft I mentioned some time ago. There are many false positives involved, but intelligence gathered under duress has been effective when these could be eliminated with fairly small opportunity costs, and in the case of Algiers, both sides affirmed it.

Ryan, I'm not so sure that guild would agree with your definition of "an innocent woman". First, it would appear that Catherine (as Severian's mother) is not innocent or she wouldn't have been given to the torturers.

You can't reasonably expect a series of somatic clones to fortuitously commit a willful, uncoerced criminal act each year in turn.

Second, the implication is that khaibits are being sacrificed each year. Khaibits are clones. How expendable are they considered in the Commonwealth? Every cell in your body is a clone of the other.

Yet we are willing to sacrifice the lives of millions of our clones in male masturbation, providing blood samples, amputation and other activities which benefit the greater source material.

Those sperm are produced continuously and die contiguously whether they leave the body or not.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

Lee Berman — 16 Aug 2010, 18:17 · follows Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson: Well, "science fiction" in particular is supposed to appeal to the authority of science to suspend disbelief. In this way, unscientific things are less believable than in the real world, because fiction is supposed to make sense.

I certainly agree with that. A good general truism. Not so applicable to this issue, though it would be if there was a chance Severian was, at the moment, transported to an identical planet with a larger, more dense core.

This is a social question. A sword which is supposed to be very light feels very heavy. The question is, who, if anyone, is being tricked? Perhaps Severian, the younger apprentices and us readers. Or perhaps nobody. Who can authoritatively say?

A hero of the torturer guild was able to successfully fool and please an entire audience at an execution, even though half of them wanted it to turn out one way and half wanted the other. Severian gives his clients a false cant so that they won't really know when the death stroke is coming. Tricking the audience and tricking the client is an honored art among the torturers. Who does the tinsel sword trick?

(p.s thanks for the clarification on your wedding nervousness Jeff. Consider my posts on the subject to be suitably amended :-))

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 16 Aug 2010, 18:32 · in reply to Lee Berman

Well, I see the fact that the maid springs up, picks up the head, and walks off with it...

..._and that nobody in the Guild appears to be surprised by this_...

...as militating against the idea that someone was actually beheaded. One could suppose that Severian resurrected his own maid, but not that resurrection has been going on for all these years.

So even if someone had pranked Sev and substituted a true sword for a false one, perhaps thinking to get him to kill his own mother, those people would have been quite startled at the resurrection.

Nobody is surprised by a resurrection. Ergo, no resurrection takes place.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Ryan Dunn — 16 Aug 2010, 18:47 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Aug 16, 2010, at 2:32 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

Well, I see the fact that the maid springs up, picks up the head, and walks off with it...

..._and that nobody in the Guild appears to be surprised by this_...

...as militating against the idea that someone was actually beheaded. One could suppose that Severian resurrected his own maid, but not that resurrection has been going on for all these years.

So even if someone had pranked Sev and substituted a true sword for a false one, perhaps thinking to get him to kill his own mother, those people would have been quite startled at the resurrection.

Nobody is surprised by a resurrection. Ergo, no resurrection takes place.

You're the best. Simply.

...ryan

Lee Berman — 16 Aug 2010, 18:48 · follows Ryan Dunn

Jeff Wilson: You can't reasonably expect a series of somatic clones to fortuitously commit a willful, uncoerced criminal act each year in turn.

Why not? With conditioning, people die in self-sacrificial manner every day in our world and they do it for mere religious or patriotic reasons and are often labeled criminals by their enemies. Would you die to save the life of your closest family member? Only identical twins know what it is like to have a family member as close as a clone.

Moreover if a Catherine khaibit was trained from birth that her most holy duty and purpose in life was to perform as Holy Katharine for the torturers at age 30. I could see it happening. Would she really be so jealous of the other khaibits who were forced to spend their lives working in a whorehouse and getting their blood sucked out?

Still, I can imagine one of the khaibits getting pissed off and running away. Why was that dark-haired, oval faced, pale-gowned woman being escorted by guards on the Path of Air? Why was the dark-haired corpse in a pale gown dead? It would involve time travel.....

I am interested in any other theories explaining the Path of Air. I have not heard any so far.

Those sperm are produced continuously and die contiguously whether they leave the body or not.

Heh, heh, sure. Same with blood cells. Same with amputated arm cells. Methinks you might be arguing for the sake of argument or to distract attention from that damn heavy sword.

I liked your wedding argument though.

Lee Berman — 16 Aug 2010, 18:56 · follows Lee Berman

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes- Nobody is surprised by a resurrection. Ergo, no resurrection takes place.

Who has suggested there was a resurrection? Not me, anyway. The only people I can see who are proposing a resurrection are those who are trying to argue against it.

What is the term ...hay something....

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 16 Aug 2010, 18:57 · in reply to Lee Berman

On Mon, Aug 16, 2010 at 11:56 AM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com> wrote:

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes- Nobody is surprised by a resurrection. Ergo, no resurrection takes place.

Who has suggested there was a resurrection? Not me, anyway. The only people I can see who are proposing a resurrection are those who are trying to argue against it.

What is the term ...hay something....

I think you're missing the point. If there's no resurrection, nobody dies.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Ryan Dunn — 16 Aug 2010, 19:07 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Aug 16, 2010, at 2:57 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes- Nobody is surprised by a resurrection. Ergo, no resurrection takes place.

Who has suggested there was a resurrection? Not me, anyway. The only people I can see who are proposing a resurrection are those who are trying to argue against it.

What is the term ...hay something....

I think you're missing the point. If there's no resurrection, nobody dies.

Lee, this is the passage which implies part of the ritual is that Holy Katharine is resurrected and then "knight's thee" torturer...

"She took the wax head from Master Gurloes and pretended to replace it on her shoulders, slipping it by some sleight into the fuligin cloth, then standing before us radiant and whole. I knelt before her, and the others withdrew.

She raised the sword with which I had so lately struck off her head; the blade was bloody now from some contact with the wax. "You are of the torturers," she said."

He lops off her head with a false blade (which met resistance for a moment on the wax head upon impact), and then she gets up, headless, to put the wax head back on her shoulders. Then she dubs Severian "of the torturers" and the elevation is complete.

Do you not see the resurrection there? If she gets up from the dead and puts the head back on, then she didn't really die, did she?

...ryan

James Wynn — 16 Aug 2010, 19:13 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

/"She took the wax head from Master Gurloes and pretended to replace it on her shoulders, slipping it by some sleight into the fuligin cloth, then standing before us radiant and whole. I knelt before her, and the others withdrew./

/

She raised the sword with which I had so lately struck off her head; the blade was bloody now from some contact with the wax. "You are of the torturers," she said."/

Alice Cooper used to have himself beheaded during his shows at the turn of the 70s decade. It's an old illusion.

This scene parallels the both the story of the Green Knight and the Islamic beheading of Ishmael.

I can't look it up now, but someone said the sword was made of mahogany. That's not an especially light material.

u+16b9

Ryan Dunn — 16 Aug 2010, 19:15 · in reply to Lee Berman

On Aug 16, 2010, at 1:55 PM, Lee Berman wrote:

But the question here is, why does a fake sword described as constructed of especially light-weight materials feel very heavy to Severian and almost knock him over as he lifts it? If the fake sword had been decribed as "solid mahogany, painted silver" or something like that, the question wouldn't be asked.

About that sword. Here is what I have found relating to it...

"The sword - though it seemed a true headsman's blade from a pace or two away - was no more than a wooden batten provided with an old hilt and brightened with tinsel."

"'Behead her,' demanded Maxentius, and I took up the sword. It was very heavy."

"I lifted the sword. I remember that for a moment I feared it would overbalance me."

"With such strength as I was capable of, I sent the false blade down. For an instant it seemed to me that it met resistance; then it thudded into the block, which fell into two."

So, it's a piece of wood with an old hilt and some decorum to make it brighter. The "old hilt" can be heavy, and who's to say the large piece of wood can't be heavy either?

This text (and it was all of the text I could find about it) does not imply to me, in any way, that it was a real blade. If it turns out it WAS a real blade, then we may as well not believe anything Severian tells us at all.

...ryan

Ryan Dunn — 16 Aug 2010, 19:25 · in reply to James Wynn

On Aug 16, 2010, at 3:13 PM, James Wynn wrote:

I can't look it up now, but someone said the sword was made of mahogany. That's not an especially light material.

There is no mention of mahogany in any of the five volumes of BotNS. I have provided (as best as I can tell) all of the citations relating to the false sword in the post before this one.

...ryan

Lee Berman — 16 Aug 2010, 19:51 · follows Ryan Dunn

Sigh, yes, thank you for getting the basic idea of Dave Tallman's theory, Ryan. I was about to give up trying amidst all the misunderstandings. Perhaps that would have been the best course of action anyway.

That's the idea. A sword that is twice described as made from light materials (batten and tinsel) is later described as very heavy. Yes, the old hilt could be heavy but if Severian is knocked off balance by lifting it, a heavy blade seems a more likely culprit. The physics of that should be clear.

The suggestion Dave (I think it was him) made is that the maid was a khaibit, she was really beheaded but a trick allowed another, identical khaibit to take her place, thus allowing real blood to be used as the chrism, thus requiring Severian to observe his mother (in clone form) being killed over and over all his life, and eventually having him kill her himself. I don't know what the purpose of that might be. Perhaps a literary contrast to him resurrecting his grandmother.

The appeal to it is found in Dr. Talos' play. We have a (presumably) exultant Contessa named Carina (a form of Catherine) who has three maids, all with saint names of women who were beheaded. Anything which adds meaning to that confusing play is interesting to me.

I also find the theory interesting because it can be tied to my perception that the woman Severian sees on the Path of Air (Contessa's Road of Air) is related to the woman in the grave from the first few pages of the story and Catherine.

Ryan Dunn- If it turns out it WAS a real blade, then we may as well not believe anything Severian tells us at all.

That is an interesting statement. Many think that Severian is an unreliable narrator who makes numerous mistakes and even lies in the text. Rather refreshing to see some one considers Severian totally reliable. I truly like the guy and think he deserves a little more support and understanding than he gets in here.

p.s. my post said "IF the false sword was said to be made of mahogany then we wouldn't need to question it being heavy." But a batten is a thin, light piece of wood, by definition.

Ryan Dunn — 16 Aug 2010, 19:58 · in reply to Lee Berman

On Aug 16, 2010, at 3:51 PM, Lee Berman wrote:

Sigh, yes, thank you for getting the basic idea of Dave Tallman's theory, Ryan. I was about to give up trying amidst all the misunderstandings. Perhaps that would have been the best course of action anyway.

Ha!

That's the idea. A sword that is twice described as made from light materials (batten and tinsel) is later described as very heavy. Yes, the old hilt could be heavy but if Severian is knocked off balance by lifting it, a heavy blade seems a more likely culprit. The physics of that should be clear.

- Or Severian was tipsy himself, and the hilt was indeed heavy.

The suggestion Dave (I think it was him) made is that the maid was a khaibit, she was really beheaded but a trick allowed another, identical khaibit to take her place, thus allowing real blood to be used as the chrism, thus requiring Severian to observe his mother (in clone form) being killed over and over all his life, and eventually having him kill her himself. I don't know what the purpose of that might be. Perhaps a literary contrast to him resurrecting his grandmother.

- So two khaibits, one of them killed behind closed doors to provide blood for the event? Why not pig's blood? what would the difference be to the viewer? The difference to the guild is immense, use the blood of the animal slayed for the feast, or kill some prostitute who the torturers never see for theatrics?

The appeal to it is found in Dr. Talos' play. We have a (presumably) exultant Contessa named Carina (a form of Catherine) who has three maids, all with saint names of women who were beheaded. Anything which adds meaning to that confusing play is interesting to me.

- Sure, behead a thousand Katharines, but does Severian believe the beheaded Saint just gets up of her own accord? Severian seems to be under the impression that he knows the mechanics of the stagecraft at hand, and plays along as best as he can. That includes the fake beheading.

I also find the theory interesting because it can be tied to my perception that the woman Severian sees on the Path of Air (Contessa's Road of Air) is related to the woman in the grave from the first few pages of the story and Catherine.

- I'm prone to wild theories (See "Agia as Robot") but this seems to be retrofitting a theory, and bending a lot of the rules of narration in order to achieve some sense of resolution in doing so.

- The Feast of Holy Katharine does not involve a woman dying, and until some better evidence comes along proving otherwise, I refuse to believe it.

REFUSE! I say.

:)

...ryan

James Wynn — 16 Aug 2010, 20:29 · in reply to Lee Berman

Ryan Dunn- If it turns out it WAS a real blade, then we may as well not believe anything Severian tells us at all.

Lee - That is an interesting statement. Many think that Severian is an unreliable narrator who makes numerous mistakes and even lies in the text.

On page 2 of *Shadow of the Torturer*, Severian makes an error of fact regarding whether Drotte or Roche said the men were carrying pikes. There is no doubt that Severian makes mistakes in recall.

u+16b9

Ryan Dunn — 16 Aug 2010, 20:56 · in reply to James Wynn

On Aug 16, 2010, at 4:29 PM, James Wynn wrote:
Ryan Dunn- If it turns out it WAS a real blade, then we may as well not believe anything Severian tells us at all.

Lee - That is an interesting statement. Many think that Severian is an unreliable narrator who makes numerous mistakes and even lies in the text.

On page 2 of *Shadow of the Torturer*, Severian makes an error of fact regarding whether Drotte or Roche said the men were carrying pikes. There is no doubt that Severian makes mistakes in recall.

Of course he is an unreliable narrator, is that in question?

I still don't think anyone is beheaded during the Feast of Holy Katharine, regardless.

...ryan

Lee Berman — 17 Aug 2010, 00:38 · follows Ryan Dunn

Ryan Dunn- Besides calling the blade batten with an old hilt, where does he go to "pains to describe the blade of the sword as light"?

Tinsel is, by definition, lightweight just like a batten. If Wolfe wanted to depict a heavy blade he'd have described it as silver painted mahogany or blunted shiny steel.

The batten could be double sided with beads inside to shift the balance the way Terminus Est does. The tip of the blade could be of a heavy lead then covered with tinsel decoration.

I asked if you could say why the sword made of lightweight materials feels very heavy without resorting to "ifs" and "could be's" and other hypotheticals. You can't. No shame to you, Nobody could do it. You like to speculate that Severian has lied and it is made of lead not wood. I find it more interesting to speculate that it is a real sword that cuts. But both are equally speculations.

(Terminus Est is filled with liquid mercury, btw, which is even denser than steel)

I'm not sure what I'm defending anymore.

Why is it even a fight? And who/what was attacked?

If those last two questions could be answered by all, I think a lot of problems on this board would be solved. But, c'est la vie.

Lee Berman — 17 Aug 2010, 12:23 · follows Lee Berman

Dave Tallman- Here is another quote from that section, ambiguous but possibly significant, "I knew even as I watched her that her head was only concealed in the cloth; but it seemed there was nothing there. I felt dizzy and tired.">

He had seen the illusion many times, and this time much closer. Yet this time "it seemed there was nothing there." He also felt dizzy and tired, perhaps because healing power was going out from him.

The head seeming to not be there is very good evidence for your theory Dave. The dizzy/tiredness a bit less compelling regarding resurrection but still good.

I like the idea of a khaibit being sacrificed every year because it explains why she never seemed to age. It was a new clone every year. Why use a new clone if Holy Katharine didn't really die each year? Agelessness to maintain the illusion? If maintaining the illusion was important why allow the apprentices to see the sword and the rest was fake?

A khaibit truly sacrificed each year also allows the crism to be real blood instead of pig blood or whatever cheap substitute for a client's fresh blood might be used. This seems appropriate to me.

I see two purposes for the guild to pretending their Holy Katharine ceremony is a sham when it actually is a real beheading.

1. It sends a message to the apprentice that they are truly elevated. They have been fooled all their lives to think they will be play-acting but when they are actually on stage they find a real sword in their hands, a real client beneath them and real blood on their forehead. (Severian isn't always the brightest bulb though...)

2. It hammers home the message that, while Torturers are really performing bloody acts, they are still directors and actors and must be in total control of the stage, the client, other functionaries and the audience to control how things are perceived.

The legendary guild hero who fooled the both sides of an antagonistic audience reinforces this idea of constant stagecraft. As does Master Gurloe's status as a complicated intelligent man who must create the illusion of being simple and brutal. Also Severian's behavior and thoughts when he is performing on stage later in the story.

Perhaps all this is a metaphor for BotNS itself. A superficial story about a torturer who becomes king ends up being full of illusion, trickery and deceit, disguising multiple hidden layers of depth and meaning.

Dave, I think it was your observation that all THREE maids, Solange, Lybe and Kyneburga were beheaded saints which first led me to my consideration that Catherine is sacrificed every year. I still think your idea about the resurrection and the real beheading as a one-time Conciliator test is a good one. The underlying purposes inherent in our theories are quite different.

I will guess that Ryan prefers the Tallman interpretation to mine. I think his objection to my theory is that, "hey! the torturers are good guys! Palaemon, Drotte, Roche, Eata- all cool dudes. They would not participate in something as horrible as human sacrifice for the sake of ritual". The Tallman theory allows even the one real beheading of Catherine to not be so bad as she is brought back to life as expected.

I am much more willing to accept that the Torturers were fully capable of performing unnecessary barbaric acts. Supposedly, "Torturers Obey!". Yet at every turn they are tricking the government, falsifying paperwork, staging torture and beheadings to appear a certain way, covering up the misdeeds of their guild members etc.

This does not mean I fully disagree with Ryan. Severian, Drotte, Eata etc. ARE cool guys. But Gene Wolfe was in the army during a war. I suspect he came to realize that brotherhood, loyalty, patriotism, honor, codes and secrecy can be used to get good men to do terrible, unnecessary things. This applies to the Spanish Inquisition, Nazi Germany and Al Qaeda as much as the US Army and Abu Graib. I think I understand why Wolfe has Severian reform the guild.

Lee Berman — 17 Aug 2010, 14:33 · follows Lee Berman

Dave T- Sev saw his mother on the Path of Air, about to be sent back to the past so he can be born.

Jeff Wilson- My counter-theory is simpler and avoids most time-meddling:

This counter-theory (pasted in full below) bothers me for a few reasons.

1. Why would it be desirable to avoid most "time-meddling"? We do have time- travel in the story. Why is it to be avoided?

2. Severian seeing his mother's face everywhere is explained psychologically. Orphan trauma. But in 5HoC we are shown that seeing one's own face everywhere is the product of cloning. We do have cloning in this story. As I find common threads tying all Wolfe books together, I think cloning might be the first theory to consider in explaining a repeated face, not the mental condition theory.

3. It does not explain why this is called the Path of Air. Nor why a such a small blip in Severian's mind is so important that it should end up being expressed in Dr. Talos' play, 60 years earlier.

In the real world, I think Occam's Razor can and should cut out explanations which involve time travel, clones, dragons, etc. Not so in SF & F. They are on at least equal footing with more prosaic explanations.

For example, Wizard Of Oz, the book, does not invoke a dream. It is a great SF & F story, especially for its time.

Wizard of Oz, the movie, is one of the greatest movies of all time. But it isn't SF & F. It is about the internal conflicts of a creative girl stuck in a drab life on a farm in Kansas. (okay, it could be Fantasy if there is some doubt at the end that Oz was only a dream. I don't think there is)

Is BotNS SF & F? I would hate to think Severian drowned in the Gyll and all that passes afterward is a dying fantasy. After all, the story ends with him crawling out the water into the light, onto a dreamy beach where he is revered as a god. Is "dying dream" a good interpretation? No time travel, space travel or clones required.

(I do have an alternate theory which addresses these concerns but no time to write it, currently)

Jeff Wilson:

- 1) Owen confirms that he had Catherine, who was dark and taken by the law for running off from "an order of monials."
- 2) She is flogged for being a runaway slave of the Pelerines, then condemned to the torturers to be fatally excruciated for some greater crime, like the attempted theft of a certain relic.
- 3) She is discovered to be pregnant and given a stay of execution to

allow the Pelerines to claim the child as compensation.

4) The Pelerines have gone too far to be located, and Catherine is executed but not before her appearance has been imprinted on Severian's subconscious.

5) From then on, Severian's attention and sometimes fascination is drawn to dark-haired, oval-faced, dark complected women. This includes the woman at the Path of Air, whoever the Holy Katharine maid is, the dead woman in the necropolis (her lividity and morbidity give the appearance of dark skin in the dark), and numerous others.

6) The woman at the Path of Air is being taken to repeat her story of having seen the long-lost Severian on the grounds. She reacts to his presence from fear born of incomprehension; is he following/haunting her?

Lee Berman — 17 Aug 2010, 16:02 · follows Lee Berman

Ryan- I guess if you're trying to make it fit your theory, then sure those could be clues (albeit vague at best).

I think it best to be mindful that we have no reality here. Just words on a page from an acknowledged unreliable narrator. As someone recently suggested, when a discussion degenerates to "Is!"/"Isn't!", it is probably time to, in the words of Officer Barbrady, "move along, move along, people. Nothing to see here".

Jeff Wilson — 17 Aug 2010, 17:58 · in reply to Lee Berman

On 8/17/2010 9:33 AM, Lee Berman wrote:

Dave T- Sev saw his mother on the Path of Air, about to be sent back to the past so he can be born.

Jeff Wilson- My counter-theory is simpler and avoids most time-meddling:

This counter-theory (pasted in full below) bothers me for a few reasons.

1. Why would it be desirable to avoid most "time-meddling"? We do have time-travel in the story. Why is it to be avoided?

Minimal hypothesis, plus we have it that Severian was discovered *by* time travelers already on the path to the throne, so he presumably had an origin without their direct intervention. Other changes might subsequently undo that, requiring further measures to bring him back, but his parents seem to be already in place and motivated to do what comes naturally. It also avoids making the masters lying bastards like that shameless Ben Kenobi.

Oh, I forgot #7) The mental fatigue and nested dreaming Severian experiences on the occasion of his journeymanhood is a side effect of the aquastor-projecting machinery being tuned in to his mind; it is that night that Palaemon makes his first posthumous appearance when the Yesodis finally get a good signal and the haziness clears up.

2. Severian seeing his mother's face everywhere is explained psychologically. Orphan trauma. But in 5HoC we are shown that seeing one's own face everywhere is the product of cloning. We do have cloning in this story. As I find common threads tying all Wolfe books together, I think cloning might be the first theory to consider in explaining a repeated face, not the mental condition theory.

I'm not ruling out the possibility that Catherine is a clone, in fact being a fugitive khaibit who pretends to be a destitute optimate to sell herself to the Pelerines is fairly plausible.

3. It does not explain why this is called the Path of Air. Nor why a such a small blip in Severian's mind is so important that it should end up being expressed in

Dr. Talos' play, 60 years earlier.

A loggia is similar to a breezeway, and it's not much of a stretch for a path of wind to become a path of air, especially if it is surrounded by baffled and baffling architecture that prevents a direct wind, but still lets people get some air. As for the blip, could you be more specific?

In the real world, I think Occam's Razor can and should cut out explanations which involve time travel, clones, dragons, etc. Not so in SF& F. They are on at least equal footing with more prosaic explanations.

SF is supposed to appeal to the authority of science for the suspension of disbelief.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

Jeff Wilson — 17 Aug 2010, 18:22 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

On 8/17/2010 12:58 PM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

Oh, I forgot #7) The mental fatigue and nested dreaming Severian experiences on the occasion of his journeymanhood is a side effect of the aquastor-projecting machinery being tuned in to his mind; it is that night that Palaemon makes his first posthumous appearance when the Yesodis finally get a good signal and the haziness clears up.

Sorry, I meant Malrubius. The resemblance of the other name to "Palaeontology" always makes me think of him as being the oldest and deadeast.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

Lee Berman — 17 Aug 2010, 19:30 · follows Jeff Wilson

Thanks for the thoughtful response Jeff. I'll try to make my rejoinder brief.

Jeff Wilson- Minimal hypothesis

My argument is that in this book, time travel is not a maximized hypothesis It is as valid as proposing light as an explanation for illumination or gravity for why things fall.

It also avoids making the masters lying bastards like that shameless Ben Kenobi.

Hah! Glad somebody agrees. "Luke, Darth Vader killed your father". "well, from a certain point of view..." George Lucas is the real liar though, pretending the whole series was in his head when he made the first movie. Unfortunately I do not find any of the masters of BotNS to be any more truthful, Tzadkiel included.

A loggia is similar to a breezeway, and it's not much of a stretch for a path of wind to become a path of air, especially if it is surrounded by baffled and baffling architecture that prevents a direct wind, but still lets people get some air. As for the blip, could you be more specific?

Well the Path of Air is, ostensibly, in the House Absolute, making it completely underground. Not a good place for a breezeway, yet it is a bit breezy. Convoluted architecture could be invoked, I suppose. But my theory guesses that The Path of Air is not entirely within the House Absolute. The other side opens to a quite breezy place. More on that later.

By blip I just mean that you suggest the woman on the Path of Air is not any relation to

Severian's mother she just looks like her. Thus she has no importance to the story as a blip of false recognition in Severian's mind. I don't see why Canog or whoever would exaggerate this into something which becomes the Contessa Carina in Dr. Talos' play. My theory considers her important.

Jeff Wilson — 18 Aug 2010, 06:20 · in reply to Lee Berman

On 8/17/2010 2:30 PM, Lee Berman wrote:

Thanks for the thoughtful response Jeff. I'll try to make my rejoinder brief.

Jeff Wilson- Minimal hypothesis

My argument is that in this book, time travel is not a maximized hypothesis
It is as valid as proposing light as an explanation for illumination or
gravity for why things fall.

Light and gravity are common and cheaper than dirt on Urth, while time travel requires a huge undertaking on the part of creatures whose sublime resources are nevertheless spread quite thin: each would require a trip to Yesod to consult with Tzadkiel the judge, who must split his time between several galaxy-islands. The five slots in the mausoleum hints subtextually that there are only so many interventions available.

It also avoids making the masters lying bastards like that shameless Ben Kenobi.

Hah! Glad somebody agrees. "Luke, Darth Vader killed your father". "well, from a certain point of view..." George Lucas is the real liar though, pretending the whole series was in his head when he made the first movie. Unfortunately I do not find any of the masters of BotNS to be any more truthful, Tzadkiel included.

But it's a gratuitous lie. For example, the "dark father" could have faked the death of Anakin Skywalker, actually killed Darth Vader and taken his identity as part of some nefarious plot. Likewise, if it is so important that the blood be real and fresh, the masters can instead use a prop sword with one that has just enough edge to draw blood, then let Severian draw blood from the maid's neck without cutting too deeply. This is the sort of thing that khaibit-whores are expected to have done to them on occasion. "If you strike her or use a grip, they'll charge more."

They could even import the transubstantiation meme and use wine, or even grape juice.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >