

The Secret: Equine Overkill

The Whorl list — 7 messages, 3 voices, 23 Apr 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1396>

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David Lebling — 23 Apr 2001, 14:44

Another idea on the Secret.

If all of the inhumani who have human blood were taken on astral trips by Horn/Silk or someone with equal astral travel abilities, and _left there_ as both Jahlee and Juganu wanted, they would cease to be a danger, even if they weren't killed where they slept.

Certainly the Neighbors also had the ability to do this.

Still doesn't make "a weapon too heavy to wield." That's the sticking point for me on all these ideas.

Dave Lebling
aka vizcacha

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Michael Straight — 23 Apr 2001, 15:38 · follows David Lebling

On Mon, 23 Apr 2001, David Lebling wrote:

Still doesn't make "a weapon too heavy to wield." That's the sticking point for me on all these ideas.

I am still unable to read "a weapon too heavy to wield" as anything but "a weapon fraught with (moral?) danger to the wielder." Or maybe "a weapon you can't control (that will destroy more than you wish?)."

Because if it literally means "a weapon humans and Neighbors don't have the power to use," then I don't see why Horn would even think of the Secret as a weapon. It would just be an interesting but academic fact about the inhumani.

Inhumani would die if you could teleport them into the corona of a star, but unless I think the colonists might be able to do that, I wouldn't call that fact a weapon.

Given Silk|Horn's (and, I think, Wolfe's) concerns about the moral health of the colonies on Blue, I think the Secret is something the colonists could do, but that would corrupt them morally (which is why I think it has something to do with taking advantage of the inhumani's desire to be human). The Neighbors were able to do it, but declined and left the Blue/Green system entirely rather than become a race that could do such a thing to the inhumani (or perhaps they started to do it--making the inhumani their slaves in the process--then left when they realized how bad it was).

-Rostrum

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Adam Stephanides — 24 Apr 2001, 09:39 · follows Michael Straight

on 4/23/01 2:38 PM, Michael Straight at straight at email.unc.edu wrote:
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Because if it literally means "a weapon humans and Neighbors don't have the power to use," then I don't see why Horn would even think of the Secret as a weapon.

Because although Horn doesn't think it can be used, the inhumis do. Kind of like Reagan and Star Wars; in a sense it was a weapon, although most scientists believe that it couldn't work, because the Soviet leadership believed that it could work and altered their behavior accordingly. (If you disagree with this example, substitute something else.)

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This is a possible reading of the passage on p. 125 of IGJ--that when Horn says the colonists can't wield it, he means they shouldn't, and when he says the Neighbors couldn't, he means they wouldn't--but imo an unnatural one. In particular, the sentence "If they [the Neighbors] could not wield it, there is little hope that we human beings can." is very strained if read in this sense.

Also, I don't recall any indication elsewhere that the Neighbors ever had moral scruples regarding their treatment of the inhumis.

--Adam

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Michael Straight — 24 Apr 2001, 11:51 · follows Adam Stephanides

On Tue, 24 Apr 2001, Adam Stephanides wrote:
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So you're imagining Krait dying in Horn's arms and whispering, "The one thing we fear, the one weapon that would destroy us, is if humans ever develop skins so thick we cannot suck their blood[1]. Then we would return to mindless beasts." And Horn rolling his eyes, and thinking, "Well, it won't be hard to keep that 'weapon' a secret, why would I even be tempted to tell anyone something so practically useless?"

I find that hard to reconcile with the way Horn frets about the secret. His conversation with his Gaonese concubine sounds like he really thinks there's a possibility the inhumis could be harmed

by what he knows.

[1] Sort of an exaggeration here, although I think it's much more likely the colonists could genetically engineer thick skin for themselves than it is that they could all live by the Golden Rule.

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Horn seems to respect and look up to the Neighbors. I took the sentence you quote to mean that Horn had higher regard for the goodness of the Neighbors than for his fellow humans, and thus if the secret was too morally dangerous for the Neighbors to use, then it's definitely too dangerous for humans.

-Rostrum

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Adam Stephanides — 24 Apr 2001, 19:57 · follows Michael Straight

on 4/24/01 10:51 AM, Michael Straight at straight at email.unc.edu wrote:
His conversation with his Gaonese concubine sounds like he really thinks there's a possibility the inhumis could be harmed by what he knows.

There is a passage which seems to suggest this:

Evensong whispered, "You know their secret. You could destroy them."
"Yes. I couldn't kill them here and now, if that's what you mean; but I know how they might be returned to the mere vermin that they once were" (OBW [hb], 372).

But the context is that Horn and Evensong are being pursued by the inhumis. Given Horn's other statements on the topic, most probably Horn means only that he knows the theoretical means by which the inhumis could be "devolved," and this is why the inhumis want to kill him (regardless of whether or not he himself believes this means practical).

[1] Sort of an exaggeration here, although I think it's much more likely the colonists could genetically engineer thick skin for themselves than it is that they could all live by the Golden Rule.

And just three pages later, Horn says "If only we cared about each other sufficiently. If only all of us loved all the others enough, they would go back to that [being unintelligent animals]." Do you seriously maintain that Horn is talking about two different things in these two passages? That he knows two separate ways to devolve the inhumis, one morally corrupting and the other requiring a too-great moral elevation?

There is another passage in IGJ which contradicts your view. When Horn is talking to Hide, he tells him that Krait "told me something in confidence that they [the inhumis] believe might harm them greatly if it became widely known. I would probably violate my oath if I agreed; but I doubt that it--" (351) Though Wolfe lets Oreb interrupt here, Horn says explicitly that he would violate his oath if he thought that publicizing the Secret would harm the inhumis--not that he would violate it if publicizing the Secret would harm the inhumis without corrupting the colonists.

In any case, your argument that because Horn calls the Secret a weapon, he must think it is

usable, misreads the text. What Horn says is "It is a great secret, truly. If you will, it is a great and terrible weapon. That is how the inhumis see it, and I will not call them wrong. But it is a weapon too heavy for our hands." (IGJ, 125) In other words, he's saying not that the Secret is a weapon, but that if it's a weapon, it's one too heavy to be used.

--Adam

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Michael Straight — 24 Apr 2001, 22:57 · follows Adam Stephanides

On Tue, 24 Apr 2001, Adam Stephanides wrote:

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That doesn't seem like it would merit a flat, "Yes." I'd expect more of a, "well, in theory, if I could get everyone else to cooperate, we could destroy them." But when she says "You could destroy them," Horn answers, Yes."

And just three pages later, Horn says "If only we cared about each other sufficiently. If only all of us loved all the others enough, they would go back to that [being unintelligent animals]." Do you seriously maintain that Horn is talking about two different things in these two passages? That he knows two separate ways to devolve the inhumis, one morally corrupting and the other requiring a too-great moral elevation?

But two sentences later, Horn explicitly denies that this is the Secret! You may answer that the Secret is the details of the inhumis lifecycle and how caring for each other would prevent inhumis from having intelligent offspring, but if that's all there is, then Horn's broken his oath. If I promise not to tell anyone that flipping this switch will kill you because it turns off your respirator, and then tell people who want to kill you that flipping the switch will kill you, I can hardly protest that I've kept your secret because I didn't mention the respirator.

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This, I admit, is the best proof-text for your case. I don't see how it can fit into my theory.

In any case, your argument that because Horn calls the Secret a weapon, he must think it is usable, misreads the text. What Horn says is "It is a great secret, truly. If you will, it is a great and terrible weapon. That is how the inhumis see it, and I will not call them wrong. But it is a weapon too heavy for our hands." (IGJ, 125) In other words, he's saying not that the Secret is a weapon, but that if it's a weapon, it's one too heavy to be used.

When I read this passage, particularly the words "great and terrible weapon," I think "atom bomb" or "Sauron's ring." A terrible weapon is one with the potential to do much more harm than I intend, or that tempts me not to care about the harm that I do, not a weapon that I probably can't use at all.

The colonists learning to love and care for each other would be an amazing, wonderful thing; it would so transform society that any effect it would have on the inhum problem would seem like a minor side-effect. I can't fathom Horn (or Wolfe) thinking of it as a means to some other end, much less as a weapon. It's like trying to develop automobiles because horseshoes are so expensive (even that analogy is far too weak).

-Rostrum

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Adam Stephanides — 25 Apr 2001, 22:26 · follows Michael Straight

on 4/24/01 9:57 PM, Michael Straight at straight at email.unc.edu wrote:
On Tue, 24 Apr 2001, Adam Stephanides wrote:

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But the context is that Horn and Evensong are being pursued by the inhum. Given Horn's other statements on the topic, most probably Horn means only that he knows the theoretical means by which the inhum could be "devolved," and this is why the inhum want to kill him (regardless of whether or not he himself believes this means practical).

That doesn't seem like it would merit a flat, "Yes." I'd expect more of a, "well, in theory, if I could get everyone else to cooperate, we could destroy them." But when she says "You could destroy them," Horn answers, "Yes."

I think that under the circumstances, with Horn believing himself under imminent threat of death, he might not be so precise. But I'll grant that this is the passage which is the most problematic for my reading.

And just three pages later, Horn says "If only we cared about each other sufficiently. If only all of us loved all the others enough, they would go back to that [being unintelligent animals]." Do you seriously maintain that Horn is talking about two different things in these two passages? That he knows two separate ways to devolve the inhum, one morally corrupting and the other requiring a too-great moral elevation?

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but if that's all there is, then Horn's broken his oath. If I promise not to tell anyone that flipping this switch will kill you because it turns off your respirator, and then tell people who want to kill you that flipping the switch will kill you, I can hardly protest that I've kept your secret because I didn't mention the respirator.

Horn has a legalistic attitude towards his oath: he hints broadly at the Secret, both in his conversation with Hide and in his manuscript. And the respirator analogy doesn't apply: Horn doesn't believe the secret can be used by the colonists, and in any case Horn saying "if you love each other enough you will destroy the inhumani, but I can't tell you why" would be unlikely to persuade anybody to change their behavior.

The colonists learning to love and care for each other would be an amazing, wonderful thing; it would so transform society that any effect it would have on the inhumani problem would seem like a minor side-effect. I can't fathom Horn (or Wolfe) thinking of it as a means to some other end, much less as a weapon. It's like trying to develop automobiles because horseshoes are so expensive (even that analogy is far too weak).

To repeat my earlier statement, it is the inhumani, not Horn, who think of the Secret as a weapon; Horn just passes along their view. Horn never tries to tell people "love one another so that you can destroy the inhumani." In his conversation with Evensong, it is Evensong who brings up the Secret and its use against the inhumani; elsewhere, when he talks about applying the Secret against the inhumani, it's always in the context of explaining how he can control the inhumani through fear of the Secret, or why the inhumani want to kill him.

And, going back to my earlier post on the Secret, "loving each other" and "solving the inhumani problem" aren't opposed to each other as concepts. Essentially, the inhumani are the dark side of humanity; so eliminating this dark side and eliminating the inhumani threat are symbolically the same thing.

--Adam

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