

Birds of the Master (Valerian) Study Guide

Birds of the Master (Valerian) by Pierre Christin

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Contents

Birds of the Master (Valerian) Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Pages 1-10.....	4
Pages 11-20.....	7
Pages 21-30.....	10
Pages 31-38.....	13
Pages 39-48.....	16
Characters.....	19
Symbols and Symbolism.....	21
Settings.....	22
Themes and Motifs.....	23
Styles.....	25
Quotes.....	27

Plot Summary

Note: The following version of the book was used in creating this study guide: Mezieres, J.C.; Christin, P.; Tranle, E. *Valerian and Laureline: Birds of the Master*; Cinebook, Canterbury, Kent, 2013. Kindle AZW file.

As the graphic novel opens, Valerian and Laureline have crashed on a mysterious planet. They see a literal graveyard of crashed spaceships in the area and are struggling to figure out exactly what happened. Some people in a boat pick them up, but immediately begin ordering them about. They talk about the Master and their desire to work in order to please him. The people are all very skinny, and it soon becomes obvious that they are near starvation. They work hard, gathering food for the Master, but are given very little to sustain their own lives.

Each time someone objects to any part of the situation, the Birds of Madness arrive. They arrive in a huge flock and the people are afraid of them. The Birds focus on any person who is out of line with the Master's plan. Those bitten by the Birds are considered insane and are thrown into a pit. After a short time, they become compliant.

Laureline wants only to get away from the work details, fix their spaceship, and leave the planet. A young man named Sul catches their attention with his determination to kill the Master. When Sul attacks and is thrown into the pit, Valerian convinces Laureline that they have to rescue him. They wind up with a group of people fleeing the pit, and travel to the Master's inner sanctuary – an area where none of the others dare to follow.

They find the lines that feed the Master, and discover that the Master is a large, jelly-like creature. Valerian is the first to attack. Within seconds, he falls to his knees, overcome by images of his worst fears. Laureline picks up the weapon, but comes to a similar fate. Sul is next, followed by other members of the group. Valerian and Laureline realize that they need to work as a group to overcome the Master's power. When they do, they are triumphant.

With the exception of Valerian, Laureline, and Sul, everyone decides to remain on the planet, but agree to organize themselves in a way that is fair with no Master to make demands. Valerian and Laureline get their spaceship underway and plan to take Sul home after a stop to check out the damages to their ship. They agree that the situation was resolved successfully, except for the concern that the Master is still alive and out in the universe somewhere. As the novel comes to a close, Valerian's spaceship is leaving the planet with the Master securely attached to the top of the ship.



Pages 1-10

Summary

As the graphic novel opens, Valerian and Laureline are on a raft in a rough body of water, later identified as a lake. From their conversation, the reader learns that Valerian was driving their spaceship when it crashed. He says he saw something just before the crash, and claims that he lost consciousness for a moment. Laureline says that moment resulted in their current situation. Laureline notices that there are a lot of crashed spaceships alongside their own. Valerian supposes that all the ships that have been reported missing must have wound up here. Valerian also predicts that they were all lured to the planet, as Valerian was. Laureline says that gives some credence to Valerian's claim that he lost consciousness. Most of the ships are damaged far more than Valerian's spaceship. They consider trying to get a closer look, but the current is strong and they are soon dragged over a waterfall.

Soon, Valerian and Laureline are both unconscious, and they land in the water on a patch of algae. Later, two grappling hooks drop into the water and pull up large batches of the algae, along with Valerian and Laureline. They are hoisted over the side of a large sailing ship, and the hooks drop the entire load – including the two humans – onto the deck. There are many alien beings staring at them. One orders someone to wake Valerian and Laureline. Another points out that “the Master is already much displeased” (7). Just then, someone in the ship's crow's nest yells that “they” are here (7).

A large flock of birds fill the sky above the ship. Someone – or everyone – yells that “The Birds of Madness are coming” (8). One of the aliens says the Master apparently led Valerian and Laureline to the planet so they could join the workers. He demands that they begin to work. Valerian realizes that he saw the Birds of Madness just before he crashed the spaceship. One of the aliens interrupts the conversation, demanding that they get to work. They continue to gather algae as the Birds continue to fill the sky.

Valerian is working beside a human. He tries to talk to the man, but the human refuses, saying they have to work. Eventually, one of the aliens says it is time to return to port. He points out that the Birds are leaving, which means they have gathered enough to satisfy the Master. As they help propel the ship, Valerian and Laureline discuss the situation. One young alien boy, who introduces himself as Sul, is furious. He says the workers do not have enough food while they work hard for the Master. Sul continues to talk about his anger at the situation, saying it is even worse in the village. He refers to the Master as “bastard,” but one of the aliens tells him to stop talking (10). The alien says Sul will bring down the Master's anger on them all.

They arrive back at the village to find that other parties have already returned. The aliens on the ship and those on the dock briefly discuss the day's harvest. One says they will soon be ready to leave.



Analysis

The planet that is the main setting for the novel is never named, and is simply referred to as the planet throughout this study guide.

The aliens who force Valerian and Laureline to work, and who work alongside them, are all very skinny. They look as if they are being starved, which the reader will discover is true. Initially, there seem to be a few aliens in charge of the work, and the reader may expect to learn that they are somehow connected to the Master or are some sort of officials. In actuality, there is no sort of hierarchy at all. The aliens are all equally impotent and have no authority. The Birds of Madness and the threat of retaliation keep the aliens working and prompt some of them to take on the role of leader.

This novel depends more heavily on graphics than some. In the opening scene, Laureline and Valerian wind up being washed down a waterfall and they sink, unconscious, until they are picked up by the grappling hooks that are gathering algae. The narrator describes the scenes to a degree, but the reader has to evaluate what is happening based on the graphics. This dependence on graphics is appropriate for the genre. Most readers who enjoy graphic novels will be accustomed to taking time to evaluate the images, even when there is nothing to read.

The relationship between Valerian and Laureline has changed somewhat over the course of the previous novels in this series, and they seem to have settled into a routine at this point. Unlike some previous novels, their relationship does not undergo any significant changes in this novel. Laureline does continue to be vocal in her expectation that Valerian will make mistakes. That attitude is seen in the opening page when she is clearly skeptical that Valerian experienced some unnatural event that caused him to crash.

Discussion Question 1

What has been revealed about the planet at this point? Does it seem that the setting is important to the action?

Discussion Question 2

Describe what has been revealed about Valerian, Laureline, and their relationship. Keep the list and add to it as other details come to light.

Discussion Question 3

How do the aliens react when the Birds of Madness appear in the sky? What do they say about the Birds?



Vocabulary

presence, instant, sluggish, eddy, displeased, fury, grappler, vessel, threat, satisfied
opinion, foodstuffs



Pages 11-20

Summary

One of the aliens insists that Valerian and Laureline change clothes, saying they “must be humble to serve the master” (11). Valerian is horrified at the ragged clothes they are forced to wear. Sul says he is from Manadul, which is in the Cygnus Constellation. The workers make specific preparations and then set sail again. Four panels on page 12 show the landscape as they travel toward their destination. The images show plants, swamps, and narrow waterways before arriving at a port. They pick up heavy loads and begin walking. Valerian asks how long they continue to work like this. Sul says they work until the Master has enough food, then they have time for a rest before starting the process again.

Valerian asks Sul why he does not seem afraid of the Master. Sul says he is afraid, but his hunger has overridden his fear. The people from Valerian's group continue to walk, carrying their harvests. They see the Birds flying over one of the villages. Another group joins them, this group carrying fruits, as Sul guesses the Master was displeased, which is why he sent the Birds. They soon see a man in a stock and chain, ranting about laziness. Sul points at the man as another person the Master “drove insane” with the Birds (13). When Valerian asks who the Master is, Sul laughs and then says no one knows who he is. Sul says some people were born into this life and others have been here so long that they no longer remember or miss their previous lives.

Valerian and the others are carrying heavy loads. When a woman collapses, Laureline wants to help but Sul says the rule is to keep walking “or die” (14). One of the aliens shouts for someone to pick up the items the woman was carrying, but then orders everyone else to keep walking.

Soon, another group joins them. These people have animals. Another group joins in with these people carrying beverages with wonderful odors. They travel for hours before reaching a huge valley “covered by storm clouds and regularly shaken by blasts of thunder” (15). Sul says the Master lives at the end of this valley, though no one has ever gone that far.

The city stinks and everyone is busy working. Some are craftsmen and others are painting on the walls. They reach the center where there are lots of people working at creating the Master's food. Laureline complains when she knows they still have not finished creating the meal. An alien shouts that the Birds of Madness have returned again, demanding that everyone return to work. Valerian is ordered to help butcher animals, including the smoglof while Laureline works with others who are processing fruit and algae. Finally, someone shouts that it is time to serve the meal.

Sul seems excited, and urges Laureline near to see the Klaar, or feast. The elaborate meal is carried to a specific place. The workers can only watch. Sul says it is



“disgusting” that all this food is presented to the Master while the workers are starving (18). Laureline agrees. Sul makes his anger apparent, but Laureline urges him to be quiet. The Birds continue to fill the sky as a warning. When an alien man rushes to grab some of the food, the Birds attack. Sul is furious as the birds flock on the alien, and he rushes forward. The Birds then attack him. Laureline begins to pull her weapon, but Valerian warns that they cannot help.

Analysis

The second panel on page 11 shows Valerian, Laureline, and Sul as Valerian and Laureline are preparing to put on the “humble clothes” they have to wear (11). All three characters have a line in that frame, so they seem to have equal importance. Laureline is on the left side of the frame and Sul is on the right, with Valerian in the center. Laureline and Sul are depicted in full color but Valerian is shown in a dull greenish blue and black. A few frames later, Valerian and Sul are both depicted in a dull, solid color, setting them apart from Laureline. The distinction may be to make the reader realize some of the words are whispered. Valerian's comment in the first of these two frames is that the people seem unable to think about anything other than work. In the second of these frames, Sul warns Valerian that he saw the weapons Valerian is carrying, and urges him to keep them hidden. Typically, an artist might make the speech bubbles different to make it clear that the words are whispered, but in this case the artist seems to use the dull colors to make that clear.

The fact that no one has seen the Master is significant. Some readers may expect that to mean that the Master is a tiny thing who is not frightening, but that is not the case. It seems strange that no one is allowed near, but that isolation is necessary for Valerian and Laureline to defeat him. However, that prompts questions about another scene. There are craftsmen and artists at work in the city, but everything is supposed to be for the Master and the Master is never physically in the city. The reason for the artists' work is never explained.

It is also significant that all the food is given to the Master in an elaborate feast through what amounts to a pipe. Valerian and Laureline will learn more about this when they go into the Master's inner sanctuary.

The Birds are seen mainly at a distance until the Master's feast is being served. At that point, one alien rushes forward and then Sul rushes to that man's aid. There are several panels showing those actions, and the Birds are depicted more clearly. They barely resemble birds except for their wings. They have large, monstrous bodies with huge mouths and fangs. Their claws are not typical bird claws, but resemble dinosaur legs.

Discussion Question 1

What happens when the woman collapses on the way to the Master's city?



Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the Birds? What happens to the workers when they see the Birds?

Discussion Question 3

What is the Klaar? Why is it painful for the workers to see this display?

Vocabulary

result, frocks, constellation, flotilla, fjord, caravan, scrumptious, rebellious, envoys, wafting, craftsmen, districts, nauseated, cloying, prodigious, basin, translucent, aromatic



Pages 21-30

Summary

Laureline and Valerian watch as the people stare, fascinated that someone got attacked by the Birds. Valerian says it seems they are watching something with entertainment value. As the Birds leave, Sul continues to say he is “not afraid” (21). The other man who was attacked continues to walk around, saying he is a bird. An alien who is obviously some sort of leader announces that the Master has eaten his fill and the workers can now have what is left. Some children walk into the crowd with the leftovers and almost everyone digs in, eating ravenously. Sul continues to vow to kill the Master as it begins to rain.

The group announces they will throw Sul and the man pretending to be a bird into a pit, saying that is where all the crazy people are put. Valerian and Laureline argue, trying to keep Sul, but some of the others hit Valerian and Laureline, leaving them face down in the mud. After everyone is gone, Valerian manages to get up and then helps Laureline up. They go in the direction Sul was carried, but the others have already thrown Sul and the other man into the pit.

There are other people in the pit. Two alien men are discussing their theories. One argues that the Master “only exists because ... we admit his existence” (24). The other says the Master “exists ... because the production system is skewed to his advantage” (24). Laureline and Valerian are listening, and decide that the two make sense. There are also two women in the pit, dressed in elaborate costumes. From their conversation, it is clear they were on a pleasure cruise and ended up here. One says they are planning to submit a petition to object to the situation. Another alien man says he is conserving his energy because that is the way to be happy. Another is drilling, and says he was a prospector on his home planet, and that he is going to continue prospecting for the Master.

Laureline admits that some of those in the pit may not make sense, but she believes they cannot leave any of them in the pit. Just then, Sul sees them and calls out. He yells for them to get him out, which attracts the attention of all the other aliens who then prepare to attack Laureline and Valerian. Valerian tries to talk to them, but they are not willing to listen. Someone throws a rock that knocks Laureline unconscious. Valerian pulls out his weapon and shoots some supports, which block the path between them and the angry aliens. Valerian carries Laureline and runs away. He uses a mechanical device to heal Laureline's head wound. When she regains consciousness, Laureline is furious. She says the workers want to do what the Master wants, and she wants to go back to their spaceship. Valerian convinces her that they need to rescue Sul.

They wait until the others are all asleep then drop wood into the pit to make a ladder. Sul says he knew Valerian would help fight the Master. Laureline tries to say they are leaving the planet, but the conversation goes on. Two of the men continue to argue, with



one saying that people obey out of a sense of conformity while the other says the Birds inject a venom that makes the people docile.

Analysis

The language of the people who have been attacked by the Birds changes dramatically. Each develops stutters and hesitations in their speech, and interjects random sounds that range from “brrrr” to “bllbl” (30). There are lots of these random sounds and it may take the reader a few pages to realize that this is a symptom of being attacked by the Birds.

The two aliens in the pit who are discussing the situation make some important points. They are arguing about whether the Master is ruling only because people have a mob mentality and each follows just because others follow. The question of why people obey the Master is one of the novel's themes.

Pages 26 and 27 depend more on graphics than words. Page 26 has five panels. One of those is oversized and shows Valerian shooting the supports to block the path so the others cannot get to him. One is more than half page wide but is short, and it shows a shadowed outline of Valerian and Laureline. Valerian is carrying her and she is obviously unconscious. The first panel of page 27 is a larger version of that same image, and includes some background scenery. The next four panels are smaller and show Valerian placing Laureline on the ground, opening the healing device, and then applying it to her bloody forehead. The final panel of the page shows Laureline sitting some distance from Valerian with her head tucked into her arms, apparently crying or at least feeling upset. To further the tone of the tense moments, the artist depends on reds and oranges as the main colors.

The author uses sarcasm several times throughout the novel. This literary tool is not always effective in print, but the author generally manages to convey the sarcasm, especially with the help of the graphic elements. An example of this is seen when Valerian heals Laureline's forehead. He asks if she is alright and she responds that she is getting “better and better” (27). She then becomes angry, pointing out all the hardships she has faced since arriving on the planet. One of the hardships she lists is that she has been forced to wear the ragged clothes. These clothes are symbolic of the hardships, and it is noteworthy that she lists them along with drowning and being forced to work.

Discussion Question 1

Why do the Birds attack Sul?



Discussion Question 2

What happens to cause Laureline to be unconscious briefly, and what is her attitude when she regains consciousness?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the other aliens in the pit. How many are there? How old are they?

Vocabulary

deserved, martyrs, meager, existence, idealism, skewed, potential, villainous, endeavor, flourish, forbidden



Pages 31-38

Summary

While Valerian and Laureline are talking with some of the aliens, Sul climbs out of the pit and begins yelling for the others. He says he is going to “thrash the Master” in a loud voice (31). Valerian tries to make him stop yelling as the others begin to climb out of the pit. The two women are thrilled with a new adventure; the man who wants to conserve his energy does not want to go; the man who thinks he is a bird plans to fly; the prospector questions the need for a new place to dig; and another says they should not go. Once they are all out of the pit, Laureline says she thought they were headed for their ship. Sul continues to be overly loud. Valerian hesitates but Laureline points out that the others are coming just as they appear, carrying torches and shouting.

Sul has found a wagon of sorts, already hitched to some oxen-like creatures. He is driving as Valerian and the rest of the group jump on board and the other aliens begin to chase them. One of the women aliens asks the other if they have their “wardrobes,” and the second assures her that they do (32). The alien who believes he can fly is running ahead of the wagon. One alien points out that he cannot actually fly, though another says he might be able to if he has a sufficient level of belief.

The aliens who are pursuing are even more upset when they realize Sul is driving the wagon in the direction the Klaar travels to reach the Master. Sul tells Valerian that the others will not follow them into a forbidden region. They travel alongside crude chutes where the food is poured down to the Master. The pursuit stops abruptly at the edge of the “Master’s private domain” and Sul says no one has gone past this point since the “paths of the Klaar were built” (33).

Sul says they are going to follow the path of the Klaar to bring an end to the Master. Laureline finally agrees that it is the only possibility at this point. Valerian calls that their “duty,” which prompts a discussion from the others about whether duty is a social force or a “subjective notion” (34). The two women decide they should change their clothes and that they should provide Laureline with something decent to wear. Soon, Laureline is dressed in a skimpy outfit that makes her smile. Just as she rejoins Valerian at the front of the wagon, the Birds arrive. They quickly attack. Several of the aliens decide they should shield Valerian and Laureline, the only two who have not already been bitten by the Birds. Valerian and Laureline also use their weapons but the Birds bite them anyway.

They see the place where they believe they will find the Master. The lazy man and the prospector begin arguing about how to please the Master. The others say those two were bitten first, meaning they have been exposed longer and are farther along in their transformation. Sul points out that they have now all been bitten and they agree that they have to hurry in order to kill the Master before they begin to conform.



Analysis

The artist builds suspense when the aliens discover that the people from the pit are escaping through use of color and the way he portrays the aliens. The color is dull except for the brilliant orange and red of the torches they are carrying. The aliens themselves and the small amount of scenery around them are shown in a muddy, dull color. The aliens are also depicted as frightening, furious beings, intent on stopping Valerian's group from escaping. The image builds a level of suspense that the author could not achieve with only the dialogue.

Laureline is seen naked from the rear as the two alien women provide her with some clean clothes. An interesting question is why Laureline is still wearing the ragged clothes she was forced to don early in the novel. She and Valerian apparently had their spacesuits on under those ragged clothes the entire time, so it is not clear why they did not simply take them off as soon as they were out of the control of the other workers. As she is changing, Laureline is seen from the rear and side, but the swell of one breast is clearly visible. One of the alien women is facing her at that moment. The woman, who has three breasts, is holding up a bikini top of sorts, but Laureline appears in the next panel wearing a different outfit. The women were travelers when they crashed onto the planet, but the author does not try to explain how they managed to have their wardrobes with them when they left the pit.

As soon as Valerian and Laureline have been bitten, they begin talking with the strange noises and words inserted into their dialogue. This is when the reader fully understands that the sounds are a symptom of the Bird bites, and not some aspect of the alien language.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the ragged clothes Laureline is wearing?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the attitudes of the various aliens who join Valerian's group.

Discussion Question 3

Describe the importance of graphic elements in this kind of novel. Remember to discuss color and placement.

Vocabulary

cellular, thrash, domain, chariot, objectively, expression, social, subjective, notion, unkempt, brackish, static, illusions



Pages 39-48

Summary

Page 39 shows the scenery as they enter the Master's place. The bottom half of the page is a single panel that shows a cave with a series of chutes that would empty food into a huge, jelly-like creature that is the Master. Each of the aliens has a different idea of what to do, with the women urging a firm but polite protest. Laureline suggests they destroy the Klaar chutes so the creature will starve. Valerian begins firing, saying that someone else should pick up the fight if he fails.

Page 41 is a full-page panel filled with oranges and reds at the top, fading into blues and grays at the bottom. Valerian destroys the first of the chutes and then falls down. He is overcome by images of "unbearable nightmares" (41). The Master's words appear to Valerian, forcing him to relive the cruel choices of his ancestors. The Master says Valerian owes "love and respect" for the Master's "order and kindness" (41).

Laureline picks up where Valerian left off. The Master threatens all sorts of punishment against Laureline and she imagines them as she collapses. Sul is the next to pick up the attack, followed by each of the other aliens. They can smell the wonderful food from the Klaar, which is torture because they are all hungry. They all see different images, all terrifying.

Soon, Laureline revives herself. She reminds herself that the images are not real and becomes determined to overcome them. She reaches out to Valerian and calls out to the others, demanding that they listen to her instead of the Master. She says that they have failed in their attack because they each acted as a single unit, but predicts they will win if they attack as a group. Valerian sees the logic and begins to urge the others to join. When they are all standing side-by-side, Valerian commands them to look at the Master. As soon as they are a united front, the Master begins to shake, then leaves, flying upward through an opening at the top of his cave and disappearing. The images disappear for each member of the group as soon as the Master is gone and their speech returns to normal.

They begin to cheer, celebrating the fact that the Master is no longer in control. They rush to eat from the food still in the chutes. One of the women suggests that they remain in the Master's domain, and others pick up on the idea. Sul says they can rebuild the chutes, indicating he would allow the others to continue to feed him as they had the Master. Laureline urges Valerian to talk to them, knowing he has the power to persuade them if he uses it correctly. Valerian points out how wrong they are, reminding them of the cruel lives the workers live to provide this food. They quickly agree and the group sets out to tell the workers that the Master is gone.

Later, many people help Valerian and Laureline get their spaceship launched. Valerian and Laureline plan to make repairs on the systems that are not working, then take Sul to



his home planet. Sul is the only one who opts to leave, and the others decide to remain on the planet. They discuss the horrors the Master created and that the people who chose to remain on the planet will have to build a working community without a dictator in charge. Valerian says he is concerned that they did not kill the Master, meaning he is “somewhere out there” (48). Laureline agrees, knowing the Master will be setting off to some new place. They continue to talk as they prepare to get underway, with the Master clinging to the top of their spaceship.

Analysis

On page 41, Valerian shoots the chutes that carry food to the Master, which prompts the Master's wrath. A single panel covers the entire page. The Master's words appear in bright red that resemble a large puddle of blood. There are some drops of color around this puddle that could be blood droplets. There are also two long shafts of red that radiate from the puddle. One goes to the left and upward, and the other goes to the left and downward. Each of these seems to penetrate Valerian's head. When considering those images as well, the red puddle is meant to represent the Master's words.

The panel includes an array of images with Valerian appearing twice: once near the top with a weapon in his hand and again at the bottom, lying on the ground in apparent pain. The Master talks about the depths of cruelty that can be attributed to the human race. One of the smaller images inside the panel shows an airplane dropping bombs. Another shows soldiers armed with weapons. Another shows a slave in chains. These images are meant to convey the cruelty that humans have exacted on each other over time, and the Master may be using these images to try to show Valerian that the Master is no worse than the humans.

Page 42 shows Laureline attacking the Master. Whereas Valerian's images were mainly shown in red, Laureline's are mainly blue. The Master threatens Laureline with physical pain, telling her how he plans to torture her. The images on that page include a huge machine picking up Laureline in grappling claws. It seems possible that this was a mistake on the Master's part. While he shows Valerian all the past cruelty that humans have done to each other, he threatens Laureline with personal pain. She is accustomed to dangerous situations, which may be why she is able to get past the threat more quickly, leading the others to defeat the Master.

The images of the other aliens as they attack the Master are less distinct than the images of Laureline's and Valerian's attacks. That shows the author's focus on those two main characters, but the fact that the artist does show the other attacks makes it clear that each one does make an attempt and that the Master faces down each.

The final image of the novel is striking and surprising, and is another example of the important use of imagery. Valerian and Laureline discuss the fact that having the Master roaming around the universe is a frightening thought, that he will certainly find another civilization to control, and that they hope he will end up somewhere “less populated” (48). As they prepare to make a jump through space, the scene pans out to show the



entire spaceship from an outside view. There is a huge, jelly-like creature attached to the top of the spaceship, which is apparently the Master. This is an open-ended conclusion, but readers will not find the Master in the next novel of the series and his fate is not revealed.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the battle between Valerian's group and the Master.

Discussion Question 2

What is the first response of the aliens after they vanquish the Master? What does Valerian say to make them realize what they are doing?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the artist include the final image of the Master clinging to the top of Valerian's spaceship?

Vocabulary

Impregnable, descent, process, mediocrity, massive, fraud, overwhelmed, temerity, refuge, desolation, nectar, harmony, resounding, dominion, communal



Characters

Valerian

Valerian is an agent of the Spacio-Temporal Agency, and is one of the heroes of Birds of the Master. He is a strong man, depicted as a handsome hero. Valerian has some faults, but is ultimately a positive character. As the novel opens, Valerian has crashed their spaceship. He does not know what happened to cause him to crash and it is ultimately proven that the Master was responsible. But Laureline is angry, knowing that he sometimes makes mistakes that put them in dangerous situations.

Valerian wants to do what is right, but sometimes he has trouble finding that balance. For example, Laureline wants to return to their spaceship, make the repairs, and leave the planet. Valerian feels that they need to try to rescue the young alien named Sul. He does not have to make the decision because Laureline comes around to accept that they should try to save Sul.

Laureline

Laureline is an agent of the Spacio-Temporal Agency, and is Valerian's partner. She is depicted as a sexy, beautiful woman. She is somewhat vain, as seen in her attitude when she is forced to wear ragged clothes.

Laureline hates their situation and wants only to get off the planet, but she ultimately accepts that she and Valerian have a duty to help the oppressed people of the planet. Though she initially tries to argue Valerian into leaving the planet without taking any action, she eventually agrees that they need to take some positive steps to defeat the Master. Laureline is the one who realizes that the Master wins against each one of them separately, but that they will be strong if they all band together.

Sul

Sul is a young alien boy who is among those forced to work on the planet. He is determined to kill the Master, and continues to try to fight even when others are acting on their fears and submit to the Master. Sul is the only one of the planet's inhabitants to decide to leave the planet when Valerian and Laureline leave.

The Master

The Master is a large, jelly-like alien that controls others with his mind, forcing them to choose to work for him. Anyone who argues with the work or the demands is set upon by the Birds of Madness that apparently do the Master's bidding. The Master rules by fear but also depends on a group mentality to control the people. Laureline, Valerian,



Sul, and the group of aliens only manage to defeat the Master when they band together. As the novel comes to a close, the Master is attached to the top of Valerian's spaceship, apparently looking for a new place to call home.

The Aliens in the Pit

There is a group of unnamed aliens who are in the pit when Valerian and Laureline try to rescue Sul. The members of this group join in the fight against the Master, and are briefly caught up in the possibility of becoming rulers themselves. They seem to be several different races and have differing ideas and opinions, but they join together in the final battle against the Master.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Birds of Madness

These “birds” are symbolic of the Master's rule. They are not birds, but they have wings and fly. They look like monsters of some kind, and they flock to anyone or any group that is not performing as the Master wants. The Birds are also what caused Valerian's ship to crash.

The Klaar

The Klaar is the elaborate feast the workers prepare for the Master, and it is symbolic of his control over them. The workers are forced to stand by while the Klaar is served, then are allowed to eat whatever the Master does not want, which is a very small amount compared to what the Master consumes.

The Crash

Valerian is piloting their spaceship when they crash, and that crash symbolizes Laureline's belief that Valerian is capable of making a mistake on that scale. She is skeptical that something caused him to crash until they see all the other crashed spaceships.

The Ragged Clothes

The ragged clothes Valerian and Laureline are forced to wear are symbolic of the hardships she faces on the planet. They also represent Laureline's vanity. She falls in the lake and is dragged up with a bunch of algae, forced to work through horrible conditions, and knocked unconscious by a rock, but being forced to wear the ragged clothes is, in her mind, as horrible as any of those other situations.

The Workers

The workers are all the aliens who prepare food for the Master and do all the work, all with the Master's demands in mind. They are symbolic of the Master's control, which is partly because of a mob mentality that prompts people to fear the Master's power.

Settings

The Planet

This is where Valerian and Laureline crash, putting them in contact with the aliens who force them to work for the master. The images in this graphic novel show swamps, fjords, lakes, mountains, and desolate areas. There is an area where the Master resides, which is off limits to everyone else. The planet is not named and is referred to only as the planet throughout the guide.

The Pit

This is where Sul and others are thrown after they have been attacked by the Birds of Madness. The pit is literally a large hole in the ground. Anyone placed in the pit is thrown in with no regard for their safety or landing. Valerian and Laureline manage to help the group out of the pit as they are trying to rescue Sul.

The Master's Domain

This is an area of the planet where no one is allowed to go. Valerian, Laureline, Sul, and the others from the pit go there in an effort to defeat the Master and put an end to his tyranny. The area is desolate and it takes the group a long time to reach it from the pit. The Master seems to reside in a cave of sorts, and there are chutes that provide the Master with his food.



Themes and Motifs

The Master's Control

The Master's control is the catalyst behind all the action in the book, ranging from crashing spaceships in order to expand the workforce to forcing people to starve themselves while providing food for the Master. The Birds of Madness are part of the Master's control, but fear and a mob mentality also contribute to this control.

The Master never leaves his domain, but the Birds of Madness enforce his rule over the people. The Birds are frightening from the moment of their appearance. The workers are afraid that the Birds will attack, and that fear is one element of the Master's control. Once the Birds bite, the victims spend a period of time in a madness of sorts, but then become docile and accept that they have no purpose other than to work for the Master. That venom is another aspect of the Master's control.

When Valerian and Laureline first arrive at the pit, they hear two aliens discussing the situation. One of their theories is that a mob mentality is in place. In other words, some people have been subjected to the Birds or other forms of force, but other people are simply willing to go along with the group because that is the easiest course.

Another aspect of this theme is seen in the reaction of the group that helps Valerian and Laureline defeat the Master. Their first impulse is to remain in the Master's domain, letting the workers continue to provide them with food. That impulse is evidence that they believe the Master's control will continue, even though the Master is gone.

The Power of Fear

Fear is a powerful motivator and the Master depends on fear to rule, mainly through the use of the Birds of Madness but also through his ability to force horrible images onto those who defy him. That fear prompts people to continue to work even when they are starving, and also keeps Valerian and Laureline from defeating the Master.

The Birds of Madness are symbolic of the Master's control, which is a related theme in this novel. The people are afraid of the Birds, and the mere sight of the flock makes people rush to try to keep the Master satisfied. When Sul speaks out against the Master, another alien tells him to stop talking before they are all punished. The alien shows a high level of fear, which makes most people unwilling to fight against the injustice and the hunger. In an interesting turn, Sul says his hunger has become more powerful than his fear, which is why Sul is willing to fight against the Master.

When Valerian and Laureline attack the Master in his domain, the Master shows each of them some horrifying images. He shows Valerian the cruel actions that humans have taken against each other through the years. The visions are so powerful that Valerian falls to his knees in pain and fear. When Laureline picks up the attack, the Master



shows her how he plans to kill her. Those images are fantasy, but are designed to make Laureline too afraid to act. The Master plants similar images in the minds of each of the other members of the group, all aimed at using fear to control them. Laureline is the first to realize that they can fight the Master best by creating a united front against him. The Master is not able to stand against that unity, knowing he cannot instill fear in all of them when they know the others are fighting with them.

Fighting Injustice

Valerian and Laureline are agents for the Spacio-Temporal Agency, and they are always dedicated to doing what is right, including fighting injustice. In this episode of the series, the two heroes are forced onto the planet and find themselves in a situation of injustice, though they had not set out with the intention of fighting this being known only as the Master.

Both Valerian and Laureline are angry when they are forced to work for hours without any real explanation, but they are willing to bide their time during the early scenes of the novel. They try to find information, but they do not openly fight against anyone because they do not really know what they are fighting. However, they are soon standing up for individual people who are treated poorly. When a woman falls during the long walk to the Master's city, Valerian and Laureline instinctively want to help her. They do not know this woman, and their desire to help is borne strictly from their sense of right.

When Sul and another alien man are attacked by the Birds of Madness, Laureline wants to rush in to help. Her desire to protect two innocent people overrides her own caution, but Valerian stops her, realizing they face unreasonable odds. However, when the mob grabs Sul and the other alien with the intention of taking them to the pit, Valerian and Laureline step in, trying to stop them from taking Sul and the other man. The mob beats Valerian and Laureline to the ground, but the two heroes continue to look for a way to rescue Sul.

After Laureline is hit by a rock that knocks her unconscious, she becomes overwrought and insists that she just wants to return to their spaceship with the hope of leaving the planet. When the situation gets out of hand and they are being chased into the Master's domain, Laureline says they might as well try to defeat the Master. Valerian remarks on Laureline's decision, calling it an ingrained sense of duty, which is the key factor in most of their decisions.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is presented in third person from a limited perspective that is typically focused on Valerian and Laureline. During the brief scene when the two heroes are separated, the perspective alternates between the two. The limited perspective means the reader learns things only as Valerian and Laureline learn them. There is talk about the Master from the early pages of the novel, but Valerian and Laureline do not know who or what the Master is until they join a group of dissenters who go into the Master's sanctuary. The reader only sees the Master through the eyes of Valerian and Laureline, as they discover the Master's power. The limited perspective is appropriate for the story and allows the author to create the element of surprise and suspense.

One important change from the perspective is seen in the final panel of the novel. Valerian, Laureline, and Sul are aboard the spaceship and are leaving the planet. They discuss their victory over the Master, but agree that they are worried because they did not kill him, meaning he is still "out there somewhere" (48). The reader has a full view of the spaceship that Valerian, Laureline, and Sul do not have, because they are inside the vessel. The reader can see that the Master is actually on top of the spaceship, apparently attached and using the ship as transport to his next home planet.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in English, but has been translated from the original French, and some of the words reflect the traditional English spellings rather than the American English spellings. For example, Laureline and Valerian arrive at the "centre of the city" (16). There are only a few examples of this kind of spelling, and most readers will understand the meanings, sometimes without even noticing the alternative spelling.

The novel is divided between narrative, dialogue, and graphics. The reader has to evaluate all aspects of the language in order to fully understand the storyline. A major example of this is seen in the final panel of the novel, when Valerian is worried because the Master is not dead, meaning he can find some other planet to rule. None of the three characters involved at that point say anything more about the Master, but the reader can see that the Master is attached to the spaceship, apparently using the ship to transport him to his next home planet.

The language in the novel is a mixture of normal English and imaginary words and phrases. Those who have been bitten by the Birds of Madness begin to hesitate in their speech and to insert nonsense words and sounds. There are also imaginary terms throughout the novel, such as the Klaar (feast), and the smooглоf, which is an animal Valerian has to help butcher. Some of these terms are explained through words and some through graphics.

Structure

The storyline is presented in graphic novel form, though the size, shape, and arrangement of the panels varies from one page to another. An example of this is seen on page 18. Rather than having three or four horizontal rows of panels, the artist presents a total of five panels on this page. The first panel is roughly square and appears at the top left of the page. An arrow indicates that the reader is to look down for the next panel of the action. This panel is narrow and tall, taking up the rest of the left side of the page. The remaining three panels are read from top to bottom on the right side of the page. The first two are horizontal rectangles, and the third takes up almost half of the right side of the page. This type of nontraditional sizes, placement, and direction is seen several times throughout the novel.

The novel is fairly brief – a total of 45 pages of graphics. The artist depends on colors to create tone and promote specific ideas, such as the deep reds seen in the pages showing the battle between Valerian's group and the Master. The color is meant to signify danger, and the artist is successful in conveying that tone.



Quotes

Silence! It's a miracle the Master's wrath hasn't struck your rebellious hide – and us with it!”

-- Unnamed Alien (chapter 1 paragraph Frame five)

Importance: The alien seems to have some level of authority over the workers and he is angry that Sul, Valerian, and Laureline are talking. Sul is openly defiant of the Master, which is why this alien is afraid. That fear is one of the novel's themes.

Do as you're told! The Master's law punishes the rebellious and the lazy.”

-- Unnamed Alien (chapter 1 paragraph Frame six)

Importance: This is one instance in which the workers talk about punishment. The Master rules with fear and anyone who is not working as hard as possible for the Master is considered rebellious and lazy.

It's disgusting, all this chow! To think that all we'll get afterwards is a shot at the leftovers.”

-- Sul (chapter 1 paragraph Frame five)

Importance: Sul, Valerian, and Laureline are watching the Klaar being taken to the chutes that takes the food to the Master. They have worked hard, along with all the other workers, to provide the food, but most are facing starvation.

I maintain that the Master only exists because ... eurg ... we admit his existence.”

-- Unnamed Alien in the pit (chapter 1 paragraph Frame two)

Importance: This alien and another man are arguing about the Master's existence. The other says that the Master only exists “because the food production is skewed to his advantage” (24). They have rather lofty ideas but they both put their lives on the line to help fight the Master when Laureline and Valerian attack.

We'd damned well better ... because I have no intention ... slup ... of spending the rest of my youth slaving away for the Master!

-- Laureline (chapter 1 paragraph Frame five)

Importance: Laureline and Valerian have been bitten by the birds and the group agrees that they have to hurry to fight the Master before the venom makes them entirely docile and willing to do the Master's work. The sound “slup” interjected into the sentence is evidence that Laureline is suffering from the effects of the venom.

Do you not know that it is fitting the master be worshipped until death? Your flesh should be torn away, your bones broken, your head crushed, your whole body smashed to pieces as punishment for your temerity!”

-- The Master (chapter 1 paragraph Frame one)



Importance: The Master has already forced Valerian to his knees in fear and pain, and is not attacking Laureline. He focuses on showing her how he plans to kill her, which is designed to make her afraid. That fear is one of the novel's themes.

Hey, how about we rebuild the Klaar inflows and settle down here. Wouldn't that be awesome?

-- Sul (chapter 1 paragraph Frame four)

Importance: The group has defeated the Master and is eating from the Klaar, and they quickly admit that the power goes to their heads. Valerian steps in, reminding them of the intolerable situation the workers face to put that food into the chutes, and the group drops the idea.