

I, Haruspex

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The morning of that January day was icy cold with bright but slanting sunlight, the blue sky lending an electric radiance to the hoar frost that lay sharply on the grass and shrubs of the Abbey grounds. Earlier I had taken a brief walk across the Long Lawn, but the pre-dawn chill had driven me indoors again after a few minutes. Now I waited in the draughty main entrance hall of the Abbey, behind the closed double doors, listening for the sound of tyres on the gravel drive outside.

The car sent by the solicitor arrived punctually, only a few seconds after the clock in the stairwell had finished chiming nine o'clock. I snatched the doors open as soon as I heard the car come to a halt. The frozen air swirled in and around me.

The simple formality began.

The chauffeur climbed out of the driver's seat, lowering his head to one side to avoid dislodging his cap, then straightened his full-buttoned jacket with a jerking motion at the hem. He stood erect. Without looking in my direction he walked smartly to the rear compartment of the car, and held the door open. He stared into the distance. Miss Wilkins stepped down: a brief vision of silken stockings, a tight black skirt, glossy shoes, mousquetaire gloves, a discreet hat with a wide brim and a veil. She was clutching the small, box-shaped parcel I was expecting.

As she climbed the double flight of steps towards the main door the chauffeur followed. He stood protectively behind her as she confronted me. As usual she did not look directly at me but held out the package for me to take. She was looking down at the steps, a parody of demureness. Intoxicating waves of her civet-based perfume drifted across to me, and I could not suppress a relishing sniff.

I took the package from her, and also the release form that required my signature, but now I had the parcel in my hands I was no longer in any hurry. I shook the package beside my ear, listening to the satisfying, provocative sound of the hard little pellets rattling around inside. All that potential locked within! I stared directly at Miss Wilkins, challenging her to look back at me, but her expression remained frightened and evasive. She could not leave without my signature on the release, so naturally I made her wait. I like to see fear in another person's face, and in spite of her seeming composure, and her deliberate avoidance of my gaze, Miss Wilkins could hide her apprehension no better than she could conceal her youthful allure. She was trembling, a hint of convulsive movement that induced a terrible bodily craving in me. As usual, she had gone to manifest efforts to make herself unattractive to me. The jacket and skirt of her suit, made of heavy, businesslike serge, and of forbidding stiffness, for me only served to emphasize the hint of feminine ripeness that lay beneath. The delay I was causing interested me, the fear in the young woman stimulated me, and her scents were all but irresistible.

I said softly, "Will you enter my house, Miss Wilkins?"

Beneath the veil, her steadfast gaze at the ground was briefly interrupted; I saw her long lashes flicker.

"I dare not," she said, in a whisper.

"Then—"

The moment was interrupted by the chauffeur, who shifted his weight in an impatient, threatening manner.

"Please just sign the receipt, Mr Owsley," he said.

I did not mind him intervening, although I resented the sense of intimidation. He had his job to do; I expected only that he should do it civilly. I gave the young woman an appreciative smile for bringing me my pellets, hoping to excite another response, perhaps even a glimpse of her eyes, but during the many brief visits she had made in the last few

months she had never once looked straight at me. I fussed with my pen, making it seem that it was unexpectedly dry of ink, but I must have tried this once before in the past. Miss Wilkins had another pen at the ready, concealed in her gloved hand, and she moved deftly to provide me with it. I took it from her, contriving to brush my fingers against the soft fabric covering the palm of her hand, but once I had the thing in my hand there were no more excuses for delay. I signed the receipt for the package, and Miss Wilkins seized it from me with a fearful sweep of her hand.

There was a momentary unavoidable collision of her fingers with mine, but she turned back to the steps and at once hurried down them to the car. The chauffeur strode beside her. Her last scents briefly swirled around me, and I darted my face through them, sniffing them up: not everything of the flesh she exuded was concealed by the bottled perfume.

I went to the parapet to watch her, again admiring her silk-clad legs as she climbed elegantly into the rear compartment of the limousine. Although blinds obscured most of the windows, I could make out her head and shoulders as she settled back into the seat. I could not fail to notice the shudder that convulsed her when the chauffeur closed the door on her. He hurried to his cab, climbed stiffly inside, and started the engine at once. Neither of them glanced back at me or the Abbey. Miss Wilkins lowered her face, brought a folded white handkerchief to her eyes, held it there.

The silver-grey Bentley Providence swung around the ornamental sundial, then accelerated down the drive towards the gates. Gravel flew behind it. I could hear the sound of the tyres long after the car had passed behind St Matrey's Stump and out of my sight.

Aware of the importance to me of the day, Mrs Scragg had arrived at work early that morning and was already in the kitchen, waiting for me to bring the pellets to her. What she did not know was that I had mystical evaluations of the pellets to perform first.

I hurried as quietly as I could to the conservatory at the far end of the East Wing and locked the connecting door behind me. I glanced in all directions from the windows to make sure I was unobserved.

Across the Long Lawn, in the hollow beyond the trees, morning mist hung in evil shroud above the Beckon Slough. I stared across at it for a moment, trying to detect any sign of movement from within the cover of thick trees. It was a windless day and the mist was persisting well into the morning, the sunlight as yet too weak to disperse it. I shivered, knowing that I would soon have to venture that way.

I was in the cooler part of the conservatory, the one that faced down towards the Slough. In the normal course tropical plants could be expected to thrive in a glass enclosure on the south face of any house in this part of England, but here on the Beckon Slough side the air was inexplicably chilly and condensation usually clung to the panes. No specimens from the equatorial rain forests would grow in the mysterious dankness, so here were kept the pots of common ivy, the thick-leaved ficus, the fatsia japonica in its huge cauldron. Even hardy plants like these had to struggle to maintain life.

I squatted on the floor beneath the fatsia, first checking the most basic of facts, that no error had been made and that the package was appropriately addressed to me: *Mr James Owsley, Beckon Abbey, Beckonfield, Suffolk*. Of course it was correct; who else would receive such a package? But like everyone else I had my fantasies.

Inside, as I rocked the parcel to and fro, I could feel the loose movement of the pellets, their deadly weights knocking about in their separate protective compartments. The medical staff at the Trust had for some reason sealed up today's consignment more securely than usual, itself an intriguing augury. I was forced to tear at the stiff brown sealing tape, accidentally bending back the nail of my middle finger as I did so. Sucking at it to try to assuage the pain I got the lid open and shot a glance inside to be certain as quickly as possible that everything was in order and as I required.

A faint chemical smell, with its hint of preservatives masking the truer stench, drifted promisingly around my nostrils. Beneath it, the darker, headier fragrance of putrid

organics. The muscles of my throat tightened in a gagging reflex, and I felt the familiar conflict of terror against rapture, both hinting at different kinds of oblivion.

The sixteen compartments on the top layer, four by four, each contained a pellet, brown-red or grey-pink, the exact shade indicating to me from which part of the source it had been removed. Every pellet had undergone primary compression by the Trust staff, bringing it down to the approximate size of a large horse-chestnut, but their methods had not yet become systematized or a matter of routine and the results were uneven in shape and size. I knew that the compression was one of the means by which the staff tried to distance themselves from their work, but I cared only about the vital essence. Each pellet was the result of individual sacrifice and surgical endeavour.

Satisfied already with the contents of the package, I pushed my fingers down the sides of the box and with immense care lifted away the top layer. I placed it gingerly aside on the stone-flagged conservatory floor. Underneath was the carton's second level, also arranged four by four, and here the pellets were less well formed than the ones on the top, closer in shape to their clinical origins. Rapture and terror again took hold of me. I touched one of the pellets at random and found it bewitchingly hard and resilient to my touch, as if it had been allowed to dehydrate. I picked it up and pressed it gently beneath my nostril, inhaling its subtle fragrance. The hardening process had made the release of its essence more reluctant, but even so I could sense the death of the person who had grown the pellet for me. I knew that this pellet had struggled for months in the silent but unceasing contest of decay, and as a consequence it was empowered with the ineluctable life-rage of the dying.

I returned the pellet to its tiny compartment, then lifted aside the second layer. Two more layers were below, also arranged in sixteen square compartments. All of them were filled. For once the Trust had sent me not only quality and diversity, but quantity too. Sixty-four pellets were more than enough to get me through the week that lay ahead. A new and surprising sense of optimism surged through me.

I wondered: could this be the time I had been waiting for, perhaps? If I regulated my appetites, partook steadily of the pellets, varied my intake, started with the most powerful to make up for the unsatisfactory week I had recently endured, then gradually moderated my intake so that I used only the grey slices of tissue until I had the pit under control, then took the rest in a rush, dosing myself until insensate on the most potent of the reddish ones...?

Could the nightmare reach its hitherto unimaginable end?

This sudden rush of optimism came because I knew my strength was starting to decline. I could not continue to struggle alone much longer.

Many aspects of my life were a source of consternation to me. My father, who as a young man had been employed as a sin eater in the six parishes in the vicinity of the Abbey, often spoke of his wish for me to follow his way, while warning me of the attendant dangers. As he saw me growing up with a greater haruspical power than his own I knew he realized that I was overtaking him. The conflict of parental hope against fear helped destroy him, and in his last years he slumped into hopelessness and melancholy. In the final twelvemonth of his life his madness took hold completely and he taunted me with grotesque descriptions of what befell those who perceived the powers of entrails in their efforts to control past and future. That I was already one such was a fact he could never entirely accept. He had had his own arcane methods; I had mine. It was the duty and curse of the male line of our family to stand on the brink of the abyss and repel the incursion from hell. When he perforce abandoned the struggle, I took his place. I remain in that role, following my ancestors, until someone else replaces me. There is no alternative, no end to the struggle.

I was brought out of my reverie by a staccato rapping sound on the glazed door that led back into the house. Mrs Scragg was standing beyond it, her hand raised, the bulging signet ring she had used to rap on the glass glinting in the daylight. I moved my chest and

arms around to shield what I had been doing and quickly returned the trays of pellets to their carton.

I stood up and unlocked the door.

"Mr Owsley, I must speak to—"

"I have obtained some more supplies, as expected," I said, walking through and closing the conservatory door behind me. I proffered the parcel of pellets to her. "You know what to do with them. The rest may be kept in the cold store until later."

"Mr Owsley. James..."

"Yes?"

"Whatever you instruct, of course," she said. She glanced at the parcel in her hands, and I heard a deep intake of breath. "I am ready for that. Also, should you—"

Our eyes met and her unspoken meaning was clear. The arrival of the packages from the Trust often had a disturbing effect on us both, and sometimes, unpredictably to outsiders had they been there to see it, but memorably for us both, alone together in the house, violent sexual coupling would follow in the minutes after I received the pellets. Our physical encounters were so spontaneous that they often occurred wherever we happened to be: once against a bookcase in my library, another time on the snooker table in the Great Hall, actually beneath the eye of the hagnoscope hidden there.

We rarely alluded explicitly to the darker side of our relationship, so this morning's invitation from her was a novelty. Normally, we played the roles of master and servant, she with an undercurrent of resentment I was never quite sure was genuine or assumed, I with a lofty disdain that sometimes I truly felt, sometimes I put on for her benefit or mine. It was my place to make the first move, but today I was full of haruspical hope, not bodily lust.

"No, Patricia," I said as gently and quietly as I could. "Not today."

Anger briefly flared in her eyes; I knew she hated sexual rejection. But I was feeling calm and positive, excited by the realization of what the new pellets would mean for my destiny.

"Then allow me to cook for you...sir."

"If you would."

"Do you have a preference today?"

"A ragout," I said, having already considered the various choices. "Do you have a suitable recipe?"

"Mr Owsley," she said. "Don't you recall the stew I cooked for you last week?"

"I do," I said, for it had been a memorable experience. "I do not wish you to try that recipe again."

"It was not the method but the ingredients."

"But it is the ingredients I must consume," I said. "No matter what your damned method might be, I require the pellets to be appetizingly prepared." She walked away from me with bad grace.

At times like this I cared little for her feelings, because I knew she was being well remunerated under the terms of the Trust. The mortgage on her house had been repaid in full to the loan corporation and invalid John Scragg, her husband whose health had been ruined during his service in the Great War, was more comfortable than he could ever once have dreamed of. I was the greatest good fortune to the family Scragg. In this light the additional pleasures I took with her were a small price for her to pay. None the less, she continued to resent me. My father once told me that he and my mother had also had problems with servants, until they found the remedy.

With the domestic arrangements taken care of for the remainder of the day—indeed, for the rest of the week—I was determined that my optimistic mood should not be broken. I felt that if I could not confront the mystery of the Beckon Slough on a morning like today, then I might never in any conscience be able to again. I found my warmest coat, and left directly.

The day was bright, icy and shimmering with the promise of deeper winter weather to

come. The frosted grass crunched enticingly under my shoes as I strode down the slope of the Long Lawn. I knew I was counting on the buoyancy of a passing mood to bear me through the dread of what lay ahead. As I passed from the blue-white, winter-sunlit slopes of frosted grass close to the house, and went along the cinder track that led into the dark wood, the cooler fears of my mystical calling returned. My pace slowed.

Soon the first tendrils of mist were reaching out above my head. Around my ankles eddies of whiteness dashed like slinking fish. The temperature had dropped ten or fifteen degrees since I had left the house. Above, in the gaunt branches of the trees, rooks cawed their melancholy warnings.

The slope was steeper now and where the path lay in permanent shadow the frozen soil was slippery and treacherous. Brambles grew thickly on each side, the dormant shoots lying across the path, their buds and thorns already worn away in several places by my frequent passing.

The Beckon Slough was ahead.

I smelt it before I could see it, a dull stench drifting out with the mist, a dim reminder of the pellets' own putrid reek. Then I could see it, the dark stretch of mud and water, overgrown with reeds and rushes, and the mosses and fungi that surrounded it.

Life clung torpidly and uselessly to the shifting impermanence of the bog. Saplings grew further back around the edge of the marsh, although even here the ground was too sodden to hold the weight of full-grown trees. The young shoots never grew to more than twelve or fifteen feet before they tipped horribly into the muck below. Roots and branches protruded muddily all around the periphery of the consuming quagmire, along with the sheets of broken ice, slanting up at crazy angles, broken by the sheer weight of the intrusion from above, the machine that had descended so catastrophically into the vegetating depths. It remained in place, an enigma that fate had selected me to unravel.

About a third of the way across the Slough were the remains of the crashing German aircraft. Now it rested, frozen in time. It was painted in mottled shades of dark brown and green, and it had made its first shattering impact. It had been immobilized as it rebounded, rising in plumes of icy spray from the frozen muck. The plane's back had broken, but because the process of disintegration was still taking place it remained recognizable. A few seconds into the future the plane would inevitably become a heap of twisted, burning wreckage amongst the trees, but because it had been immobilized in some fantastic way it was for the moment apparently whole.

The wing closer to me had broken where it entered the fuselage. It and its engine would soon cartwheel dangerously into the trees as the terrible stresses of the crash continued. The propeller of this engine was already broken: it had two blades instead of three, the missing one apparently trapped somewhere in the mud, but the spindle was still rotating with sufficient speed that the remaining two blades were throwing a spray of mud in a soaring vane through the mist above.

The other wing was out of sight, below the surface, its presence evinced by a swollen bulge of water, about to break out in an explosion of filthy spray.

The perspex panes of the cockpit cover were starred where machine-gun bullets had left their trail across the upper fuselage. Mud had already sprayed across what was left of the canopy. Inside, horribly and inexplicably, crouched the figure of the man who waved to me.

He waved again now.

I stared, I raised one hand. I raised another. Uncertainty froze me. What would a wave from me mean? What would it imply?

I briefly averted my gaze and lowered my arms, embarrassed by my weakness of will. When I looked back the man inside the aircraft waved again, pointing up at the perspex canopy with his other hand.

I had been visiting the scene of this frozen crash for several weeks and by careful measurement and reckoning had worked out roughly where the plane's final resting place

was likely to be. Every day the tableau I saw had moved forward a few more instants of time, heading for its final surcease. Throughout the gradual process the man remained in the cockpit, signalling to me. His face was distorted, but whether it was with pain, or anger, or fear, or all three, I could not tell. All I knew was that he was imploring me to help him in some way.

But how? And who was he? For some reason he was standing in the cramped cockpit, not in one of the two seats where the pilot and another crewman would normally be positioned. I knew he was not one of them, because I could also see their bodies, strapped into the seats, their heads slumped forward.

The tail of the aircraft was intact, painted dark green with paler speckles, and bearing a geometrical device that already had such profound terror and significance that I could only stare at it in awe. It was the sign of the swastika, the broken four-legged cross, once a symbol of prosperity and creativity, Celtic, Buddhist, Hindu, revered by ancient peoples of all kinds, but recently suborned by the vile National Socialists in Germany and made a token of suppression, brutality and tyranny.

It was an aircraft of the German Air Force, the *Luftwaffe*, the Air Weapon, that was crashing here. It was rising out of Beckon Slough, immobilized by my attention to it. Somehow, my interest in it held it here. Soon, if I were to release it, presumably by inattention, the plane would conclude its dying fall: the broken wing would cartwheel into the woods, the fuselage would complete its rebounding lurch into the air before sinking finally beneath the filthy mud, and the spilling aviation spirit would explode in a deadly ball of white flame, detonating the hidden load of bombs that were carried aboard.

But not yet. I had its mysteries to fathom first.

They were focused on the presence of the man who watched me from the damaged cockpit, signalling desperately to me. But how could I reach him? Did he expect me to walk across the wreckage, in hazard to myself, to free him? There was a violent dynamic in the plane: to try to enter it might embroil me in its destructive end. The only logical way for me to scramble across to the cockpit would be along the unbroken wing, but this, as I have said, was half-submerged in the frozen slime.

I felt no urgency to respond to the man's pleas. Anyway, there was a larger mystery.

Five weeks earlier I had spotted what I thought must be a serial number stencilled on the side of the plane's fin, beneath the swastika. I had since spent many hours in my library, and in correspondence with other scholars and investigators, some of them abroad, and had established beyond doubt that such a plane with such a registration number did not exist! Indeed, the Heinkel company, whose serial number sequence it turned out to be, was at present several hundred units short of such a number.

Moreover, it was self-evidently a warplane, apparently shot down while flying over Britain, and therefore in itself a riddle. No state of war existed. Peace remained in this year 1937, fragile and tentative, but peace none the less.

The inexplicable German warplane was moving through time in diverse directions. Forward, at fractional speed, into its own oblivion, throwing up the sludge of the marsh in a fountain of vile spray, killing the occupants, detonating the store of bombs it carried in its bay and felling a giant swathe of Beckon Wood as it did so.

But it had also moved *back* through time, perplexingly, impossibly. Europe was at peace, Chancellor Hitler's armies of workers, thugs and soldiers were not as yet on the march, the boot of the tyrant was still at rest within the borders of the old Reich. The Nazi cry was for *lebensraum*, living space for the German race, and a deadly spreading of the nationalist poison through Europe must inevitably follow. Total war against Germany might indeed lie somewhere ahead, as the politicians warned, inevitably, devastatingly. As yet, though, in the quiet time in which I lived, Britain and Germany and much of Europe, clung to peace, brittle but miraculously persisting.

Out of that future, floating back to its own destructive destiny in the wood that grew in the grounds of my family's house, came this German bomber, victim of a machine-gun

attack. By British defenders? How could I possibly tell? But it had fallen into my terrible domain, and consequently I had inadvertently sealed it in my present, slowing the plunge into its own final future.

I was a man of certainties: good and bad, order and chaos, liberty and death. These were my concerns. I cared not for enigmas, even though this one could exert a deadly fascination over me.

I could feel the haruspical strength in me waning and knew I must hurry back to the house for Patricia Scragg's meal. In recent days a demon in me had sometimes urged me to delay while I regarded the German bomber. As the essential power of the pellets faded—my last meal had been eaten more than twelve hours before—so my ability to halt or reverse time failed in me. I knew that if I were simply to stand here at the fringe of Beckon Slough for the rest of the afternoon I would likely see the final destructive moments of the aircraft enacted before my eyes. The prospect of such a spectacle was an undeniable temptation.

I had other masters, though.

I turned and walked back through the trees towards the house. At the point where the track curved to the right, taking me out of sight of the plane, I turned to look back. The man in the cockpit was waving frantically at me, apparently urging me not to leave. I pondered his plight again for a few moments—nothing ever occurred in my life without mystical significance—but continued on towards the house.

Mrs Scragg's cooking was sufficient, but only just. Today she had soaked the pellets in a dark brown gravy, rather lumpy for my taste but otherwise acceptable. She was employed to provide me with food that gave nourishment, not pleasure. When I had prepared myself in the Great Hall she brought me the dish under its silver chafing lid, placed it before my seat at the long table and then hovered expectantly.

"Will there be anything else, Mr Owsley?"

"Not, I think, at present."

"A little later, perhaps?"

Her gaze was steady, determined. I said, "I don't know, Patricia. I have to work. If you could stay late this evening, maybe when I have finished...?"

Again, I knew I was hurtfully rejecting an overt offer, but now she had laid the pellets before me I was single-minded, as she must have known.

"Whatever pleases you, sir."

She left. I followed her to the double doors, trying to seem courteous, and closed them behind her.

I listened for the sound of her steps receding along the uncarpeted corridor, then I locked the doors and bolted them top and bottom. I gave them a forceful testing shake to be certain they were securely closed against her or anyone else who tried to interrupt what I was about to do. I put in place my secret anti-tamper seals, then returned to the dish waiting for me at the table.

I quickly removed the chafing cover and seasoned the food with several vigorous shakes of the pepper pot, and three long scoops with the knife into the mustard jar. With one last glance behind me to make certain I was not being observed I picked up the plate, dropped a knife and fork into my breast pocket, and went to the raised dais at the gallery end of the Hall. I worked the mechanism of the concealed door in the panelling of the wall and passed through into the hagioscope that lay behind. I took up my position.

From here I was afforded a double view: the cell was a squint, to use the term that the original masons themselves would have employed. On one side of me, through a slit cunningly contrived in the stone wall and the wooden panelling was a narrow, restricted view back into the Great Hall I had left moments before. It was only through this narrow aperture that the dim ambient light inside the hagioscope arose. On the other side, through a much larger gap, a mere turn of the head away, was a glimpse into hell.

There was no light down there, in the great abyss lying beneath the Abbey. I could see

nothing in the impenetrable black, nor was I intended to see. Whatever inhabited that sunken void required no light to give itself life. It, they, existed in a dark of such profundity that all human feeling or emotion was extinguished too. However, my presence in the hagnoscope enabled me, Janus-like, to sit at the gateway between past and present, guarding the way. Behind me, the present world; before me, the denizens of an ancient past and a deplorable future. I was suspended in time, like the dying aircraft that even now was arrested in the mire of Beckon Slough.

I was still cradling the plate of cooked meat. I knew that it was cooling quickly. Difficult to eat even when hot and freshly served, the pellets were nauseating if they were allowed to cool down. I retrieved the knife and fork from my pocket and began to eat the ragout as quickly as possible.

With Mrs Scragg's artful culinary techniques, and the more brutal coverings of spices I had latterly applied, the food was just about edible. Even so, it required an inhuman will to be able to put the pellets in my mouth. Instinctively, for there were still vestiges of the human in me, I looked first for the smaller pieces, the ones most likely to have had their fibres cooked down into masticable form, or the ones which would yield easiest to the knife, or the ones which I could see had received the greatest share of the pepper. While I chewed steadily through the stuff, feeling the sense of evil power growing in me, I tried to distract myself with childish mnemonics—old nursery rhymes, playground chants—in a vain attempt to postpone the imminent confrontation, distract myself not only from the knowledge of what I was putting into my mouth, but also from the growing malignity that took shape whenever I ate.

I could unerringly sense the fiends of the nether world, rousing themselves for our fray, in the same way as I had to relish the rubbery gristle of the pellets and the vile flavours of death that were released with their juices.

Even so, I could take comfort from the consequence of the grotesque meal. I had the transcendent knowledge that time was being reversed by my actions, that evil was being repulsed and that the lurkers of the pit were being held back. On the colossal scale of the vasty death-universe, the delay was breathtakingly short, but enough, enough, all I could do. I alone, haruspex against evil.

Continuing life was my reward; life denied would be my punishment.

As I worked the meat between my jaws I began to sense action and reaction below. I heard discarnate screams, the fury of the frustrated malignity of evil embodied, of the dashing of whatever hopes such monstrous skulkers could entertain, as their slow attempts to claw their way up and out of the pit towards the surface of the world were suddenly thwarted. Most of the meal would be used up pushing them back down to the level at which I had left them the day before, but with this new potency I believed there would be enough energy to force larger reversals on them. I chewed steadily, drawing every iota of flavour from the pellets, returning the beings whence they had come. Every time I swallowed I felt the peristaltic thrust of my oesophagus, forcing down the meat. My mind's eye glimpsed in fitful bursts the outlines of their noisome forms as they surrendered to the release of the death-force I was sucking from the pellets.

Their calling threats, echoing hoarsely around the slime-caked walls of the pit, gave aural shape to their forms!

They were low, flat, many-legged beings, each forelimb and hindlimb jointed at horrible double knees, like immense arthropods. Their limbs extruded to small claws, with which they flailed at the rubbery walls, trying to gain purchase. Each one of the beings was more than two yards in length, far too large for reason! I shuddered to perceive them! Their heads, sunk low towards the part that could only be the abdomen, were wreathed in cilia, flailing as the angry brows swung from side to side. They had deep mandibles, their maws perpetually slack-jawed and drooling, emitting their beastly howls of anger, vengeance and threat. And the rattling! How they clattered! Some large part of their arthropodic bodies was chitinous, perhaps a loosely connected cuticle or carapace, so

that each thrusting step produced a loud, ghastly clicking as they moved their ill-formed frames. It was the cacophony of sticks, of staves flailed against each other, of bones breaking in a yard.

And their relentless, ineluctable climbing would bring them, if not halted or at least given pause, into the world of men, women and children. I and only I stood before these denizens of the pit, barring their way, reversing their quest for escape.

Into this, my long-suffered private world of struggle with stasis, had come by some freakish chance a modern-day intrusion. It was itself as baffling as the creeping horrors I was doomed to obstruct. Somehow, from a militarized future that was conceivable only to a few, had appeared a German warplane. This, shot down and crashing into the Beckon Slough, had become frozen by the same distortions of time that I, haruspical mystic, used to repel the underworld invaders. What was the link?

Because I could never see the dwellers of the world beneath me, inevitably I often wondered whether my loathsome toil might be the product of delusion. Only I, aberrant haruspex from an ancient family of mystics, scholars, clairvoyants, contemplatives, could deal with the threat they presented, but equally it was only my family who had divined their presence.

The crashing German warplane was the first evidence of third-party recognition, incomprehensible though it might be. The plane must have come to Beckon Abbey either because I was in it, or because the pit was to be found beneath it. Now, whether or not this was the intention, it was held frozen in time not unlike the way the repugnant dwellers of the pit were halted.

Furthermore, I knew, as I chewed stoically on the pellets, that not only were the malignant beasts being forced back into their abyss, so the warplane too would at this moment be inching back in time, plotting a reversal of its catastrophic arrival. First it would sink briefly but necessarily into the mud, where its broken components would start to reassemble, then there would come an abrupt and cataclysmic reverse lifting out of the mud, and it would begin the long backwards tracing of its crash from the sky.

Seven days before, while cheerlessly consuming the pellets of last week's inferior consignment, I had found entirely by chance a uniquely potent example. In devouring it I recognized that the disturbing potency within was having a powerful effect on the arthropodous horrors inside the pit. The moment the eating ritual had been completed I rushed down to the Slough to see for myself. I found I had managed to reverse the bomber's path so far that the doomed machine was actually hovering briefly in the air above the mire, returning for an inert instant to its role as a dweller of the skies. Both of its propellers were intact at this moment before final impact (and to my perception slowly turning), but from the nacelle of the engine on my side was streaming some kind of transparent liquid, presumably the fuel, and behind that a searing whiteness of flame, and flowing behind that was a long trail of black smoke. This traced the aircraft's final path: an almost straight line backwards and up at an angle of some forty-five degrees to the horizontal, past the treetops, into the blue sky, into the unseen flying formation of its fellow bombers, and, for all I knew, back thence into the heart of the German nation.

It was this action of mine that had alerted the man in the cockpit. He had been invisible to me until that day, presumably crouching or lying on the floor, but in some amazing way he had become aware of my actions. Ever since then, his signalling for help had been distraught and constant.

As the days passed, and I eked out my supply of pellets, the Heinkel had gradually returned to its inexorable collision with the bog, while the man within gestured towards me with increasing consternation. Soon the plane had reached the position in which I had seen it this morning, not more than a second or two from its final destruction.

For the first time I had a kind of yardstick to judge my progress. It had seemed to me until today that if I allowed the aircraft to continue on into oblivion the other struggle too would end, but in that case with the catastrophic escape of the horrors into the world. This

was the true significance to me of the new consignment of pellets.

I was saving the largest, juiciest, most deadly pellet to last. Earlier in the meal, as I began eating, I had sensuously stroked the cutting edge of my knife across it and nothing of its sinewy texture had succumbed. It was tough, perfectly shaped! A streak of gristle, unreduced by Mrs Scragg's cooking, ran through it from side to side. When I finally took the pellet into my mouth, whole, as it had been found, it was the gristle that produced the tensile strength. It stayed stubbornly in my mouth, distending and bulging while I chewed, but retaining its overall shape. Juices in it were nevertheless released, and as I worked horribly at my task I could taste their exotic menace as they flowed over my tongue.

The final pellet at last produced a reaction from one of my enemies lurking in the dark. In my mind, a dread familiar voice:

"Owsley, Owsley, abandon this work and surrender to the pit!"

"Leave me!" I cried aloud.

"You can never prevail," came the mentally perceived tones of my accuser. "Flesh is weak, life is short, we are forever! Tighten your gut muscles, Owsley!"

"I shall not!"

"Do you not feel the nausea creeping within you? Do you not taste the fleshly residues of what you have consumed? Are they not churning within you, indigestible, disgusting, sickening, wrenching your gut into coils of vomitory? Puke up the cancers, Owsley! Vomit them up!"

I lurched back from the gap that led to hell. I could hardly breathe and nausea had me in its grip. If I stayed where I was I would doubtless spew up everything I had eaten, as often before I had found myself doing. But if I did eject the half-digested tumours all my work would be undone. This my hellish interlocutor knew full well. He came for me on most days, but always when my haruspical work was being most effective. If I were to vomit up the epitheliomata of the meal I would lose almost everything I had just achieved.

So I retreated. The only way I could ignore the terrible voice was to leave the hagnoscope, and this I did.

Once I had regained the comparative normality of the Great Hall, it was not difficult to regain control over the feelings of nausea. After I had taken several deep breaths I made sure that the concealed door had closed firmly behind me, and also that no one had entered the Great Hall while I had been in the hagnoscope. I lit a candle and hurried to the main door to check the locks, then examined my secretly placed seals, a disturbance to which would reveal if someone had tried to force their way in. Of course, only Mrs Scragg was generally with me at the house, and she could probably be trusted, but the way time was dilated by my struggles inside the hagnoscope meant I had to be sure. Hours of subjective time could pass imperceptibly, because my own sense of it was as distorted by the ingestion of the cancers as was that of the devilish creatures I was repulsing.

Now it had become night and the Hall was in darkness. I remembered my half-promise of an assignation with Patricia Scragg when I had completed my work, but there was no sign of her. She normally left the Abbey halfway through the afternoon, and today would probably not be prepared to face what might be a third rejection.

Thoughts of her were distracting me. The important matter was that the pit was secure again, or reasonably so, and would remain in that condition until the next day at least. If the new intestinal epithelial pellets were as powerful as I suspected, it was even possible that another visit to the squint might not be necessary until the day after.

I moved swiftly around the Great Hall, lighting more candles, pulling the blinds across the tall windows, blocking out the night, the glimpse of the moon and the stars, but most of all the white ground-mist that moved in across the valley at this time of the year, to lie like a winding-sheet across the grounds of the Abbey.

After I had checked once more that the door to the hagnoscope was sealed, I went through the gloomy corridors to the domestic wing of the house, returning my platter, glass and cutlery to the scullery. Of Mrs Scragg there was still no sign. I left everything by the

sink, then ascended to my apartment on the second floor. I stripped off all my clothes (as usual at this time of day they were sodden with old sweat and the seams scuffed uncomfortably against my flesh), and immersed myself in a bath of hot water.

When I went into my chamber afterwards, Patricia Scragg was there. She had lit my paraffin lamps and was waiting by the side of my bed, naked but for the sheet she held against her body. I glared at her, resenting her persistence, but even so unable to deny the animal lusts she aroused in me. She lowered the sheet so that I might gaze at her body. I relished the sight of her tired face, her pale heavy thighs, her dimpled elbows and knees, the girdle of fat about her waist, her large drooping breasts, the pasture of black curling bristle at the junction of her legs where soon I would gladly graze. I placed my hands on her shoulders, then ran my tongue down her face and body, pausing to nuzzle on her heavy breasts with their tiny but tempting lumps of hard fibre buried deep within. I pushed her down on the bed and quickly serviced her, thrusting with greedy passion at her ample body.

I was exhausted afterwards, but my need to study was constant, so leaving Patricia Scragg to make her own way out of the house I pulled on my reading gown. With tremendous weariness of tread I went up to the next floor to the library. Here I took down several volumes of psychology: on the meaning of revenge, of fear, of repulsion. I glanced through them drowsily in the inadequate lamplight for half an hour. My books were the sole comfort of my life, but so drained was I by the encounter in the hagnoscope, and by satisfying Patricia Scragg's agitated sexual needs, that I found it impossible to concentrate.

Later I returned to my chamber and slept.

In the morning I discovered a singular fact: part of one of the pellets from the day before had been packed between two of my lower back teeth and was still firmly in place. Neither pushing at it with my tongue nor scraping with a fingernail could dislodge it. When I had dressed I took a match, broke off the head to make a tiny jagged spear, and tried to pick out the compacted meat with that. Again, no success, but I did finally manage to shift it far enough to release some of the juices that by some marvel it still contained. They trickled across my taste buds.

Twelve minutes flashed by in a subjective moment! I checked the lapse of time, then returned the watch to my waistcoat pocket, still only half-believing that the act of consuming necrotic flesh should have such a potent effect on my mind. No matter how frequently the time distortion occurred it invariably astonished me.

I realized I was entering a familiar state of mind, in which starkest gloom jostled with boundless optimism. I therefore decided to measure the effect of the pellets I had eaten the previous day. Since it had obtruded itself into my life, the German bomber had come to signify a kind of yardstick of temporal motion. Its advances and reverses were a guide to the progress of the main conflict. Now that I had realized this connection it made no sense to subject myself needlessly to the torments of the pit. I could gain the reassurance I sought with much less risk to my sanity.

It was raining when I left the house and the crisp frosts of the previous few days were no more. The sloping sward of the Long Lawn was already sodden in its lower reaches. I was glad to reach the cinder path that led into the trees.

The Slough, when I came to it, lay undisturbed, the surface calm and untrammelled, apart from the constant patterns of overlapping circles made by the rain on the few stretches of clear water. Above the muddy water, a precious few inches above it, lay the plummeting body of the doomed warplane. At once my spirits lifted! The latent power of the pellets now in my possession was beyond doubt.

In the latest manifestation, the aircraft was more or less physically intact, not counting the visible damage the machine-gun rounds had caused to the cockpit cover and engine cowling. Both wings were attached, and although the spilling fuel, the blazing fire and the black smoke streamed back from the engine, it was possible to see it as still a fighting

plane, not a broken wreck.

The tip of the wing closer to me—the one that I knew within a second or two of real time would break off catastrophically as the plane ploughed into the mud—was only two or three inches from the solid ground on which I stood.

A single session in the hagnoscope, and this! One meal of the new pellets! Fifty or sixty more such pieces still to come!

Was it at last the final stage of the bitter struggle against the chaos of the pit?

Then, immediately banishing the heady optimism, a voice said in my mind, “Get me out of here!”

It was the same voice as that familiar, loathsome cry from the heart of the pit. My first thought: *It cannot be!* Had the monster found a way to track me beyond the hagnoscope, away from the house, to here?

It came again, more urgently, “I am about to perish! I implore you! The canopy is jammed! Can’t you do something?”

I realized that it was the helmeted figure who stood in the cockpit. His face was pressed desperately against the perspex panes of the cockpit cover and both of his arms were reaching up, struggling to release the catches that held it in place. His movements were frenzied, panicky.

“I can’t help you!” I shouted at him.

“Yes you can! Find something with which to release me. I beg you! Save me from this!”

“What are you?” I cried. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“I am an emissary from the future.”

I am strong with mysticism, not with physical or muscular development. The predicament of the man on the aircraft wrenched at me, but it was not in my power to assist him. He wanted me to wrestle with the jammed cockpit cover? Or to try to cut my way through the metal side of the fuselage? I regarded him across the short distance that separated us. He was locked in a time and destiny of his own, an alien intruder, subject to the will of a universe fundamentally different from mine.

His voice came at me repeatedly, a sane but desperate plea for help. Wondering what if anything I could do, I stood there regarding him, playing at the soreness of my gum with the tip of my tongue, fretting at the piece of pellet that had become lodged in my teeth the day before. It seemed to have worked a little more loose since waking this morning, and when I sucked at it I distinctly felt it shift. Still watching the man in the aircraft I picked at the fragment of meat with the nail of my ring finger, and in a moment it was out. The familiar essence lifted like gas against my taste sensors.

The plane moved back.

“You are who I am seeking!” the voice cried in my mind. “You are Owsley!”

“I am.”

I recoiled with shock from the discovery that he knew my name!

“And you are haruspical!” he called.

“I am.”

Now he stood erect, abandoning his panicky efforts to release the cockpit cover. His demeanour was strangely calm. “You must release me if you can. You doubtless know why.”

“I believe I do,” I said, responding to the composure that had come over him and which was also now surrounding me. “But there are questions—”

“None matters!”

“How did you—?”

“Owsley, be silent!” His mood had abruptly changed again. “Release me from this aircraft! Then perhaps we might have reasons to converse.”

Disliking the authoritative tone, yet even so respecting it, I turned away from him and followed the long path back in the direction of the Abbey. I looked around me as I walked,

hoping to spot something hard and heavy and made of metal. Nothing offered itself as suitable. When I entered the house I noticed at once from the clock in the stairwell that more time had fled while the pellet juices flowed in my mouth. It was already past noon and as I went along the ground floor corridors I glimpsed Mrs Scragg pacing impatiently in the short passage outside the kitchen. Fortunately, she happened to have her back towards me at that moment, so I was able to pass unseen beyond her.

In the utility room, after a search, I found a long steel spanner or wrench, I knew not which, apparently left behind by a workman at some time in the past. I assumed it would be sufficient for the task of breaking through the thick perspex, but my skills, as I say, are not those of the physical body. As I carried the heavy implement back down the lawns towards Beckon Wood I felt self-conscious with it and knew that it hung at an unnatural angle in my grasp. The weather was still cold and unpleasant: it was raining persistently and the damp twigs on the drooping branches of the trees brushed against my face and hair. As I followed the bend in the path and again saw Beckon Slough, I raised the spanner in my hand. Holding it before me I strode across the muddy ground to the site of the wreck.

The man remained standing within the cockpit, calm and poised, awaiting my return. I went to where the tip of the wing hovered a few inches above the muddy ground.

"While you were gone," the man said, in my mind, "I was trying to establish how best to force the canopy."

"Don't you know already?" I said, facing him.

"Why should I?"

"You are a member of the Air Force, are you not? The German *Luftwaffe*?"

My mind seemed to laugh mockingly. "I, an aviator? I have never before been inside such a thing. I am a man of learning and of the spirit, as you."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Tomas Bauer. You, I know, are James Owsley." Amazement stirred again in me, but at once the man added, "Of course, you are the one I have travelled to find."

Since the death of my father I had known that I was upholding a tradition, one that I had to honour, and one which eventually I should have to pass on to another. I had expected, though, that such release would not come for many years or decades. Tomas Bauer's words, and the mystical circumstances of his arrival, informed me that the moment had come. Waves of relief, excitement and a distinct tremor of fear passed through me.

However, the immediate problem remained of what to do to release Tomas Bauer from the aircraft. I was still holding the spanner aloft, but the feeling of foolish physical ineptitude was still paralysing me.

I heard in my mind, "James Owsley, you must do as I direct. No more words!"

I tried to assent, but it was as if a sponge flooded with chloroform had been pressed irresistibly over my mind, making it insensible. I felt myself propelled forward, raising my right foot like an automaton to step on the very tip of the wing itself. It took my weight, without dipping. I stepped forward and walked across the curved upper surface of the wing towards the bullet-riven cockpit. When I reached the curved housing of the engine I had to scramble over the hot metal case, carefully not placing any part of my body in the dangerous stream of escaping fuel. The propeller, still turning slowly a few inches away from me as I passed, set up a torrent of forced air behind it, neither to my perception moving nor turbulent but somehow compressed by the rotation of the airscrew.

Then I was against the side of the cockpit cover itself, looking in at the man who had taken control of my mind. Tomas had removed his leather helmet and I could see his features clearly. He was a young man, tall and ruggedly built, with a shock of blond hair and a sturdily jutting jaw. He stared at me with an intent frown, exercising his mental will against mine.

There was a part of the transparent canopy where two panels of it overlaid each other, apparently the place where the two halves joined after the front part had been slid forward and locked in position. Tomas directed me towards it. I slipped the edge of the spanner against what crack I could see, then heaved at it with all my might, trying to use it as a lever.

When the thick perspex did not shift I felt my arms swing backwards, raising the spanner above my head. I brought it down with a tremendous blow, one far more heavy than anything I would have believed myself capable before now. The cockpit cover shattered at once, a large star-shaped hole appearing in the flattened top. Three more blows forced an irregular aperture large enough for a man to escape through.

I reached down and held Tomas's arms as he found footholds in the cramped cockpit and pushed himself up and through to freedom. As he clambered around I could not help looking down and past him, to where I could see the bodies of the two German aviators. The one in the left-hand seat had clearly suffered a direct hit from a bullet, because a large part of his helmet and skull had been broken away. He was slumped against his dashboard of instruments. I could see a bulge of blood rising through the gap in his head and knew it soon to be a fountaining gout to join the soak of blood that already covered his flying suit. From this evidence of a pumping heart I realized that the pilot must be, in a way, still alive. The other aviator, who outwardly appeared uninjured, although my view of him was restricted, also was leaning forward with his face against the instruments. His body was broken in some horrible way I shrank from trying to imagine. I had to assume he was dead or unconscious, even though there were no apparent wounds on him.

While I was regarding this disagreeable sight with a sense of increasing horror, Tomas had climbed swiftly out of the cockpit and was standing on the wing beside me. He tugged at my arm, swinging me round.

"We leave," he said peremptorily. These were the first words he had so far uttered while I had a clear sight of his face. As I hastened to follow him, down the wing and through the turbulent stream of compressed air behind the propeller, I realized that the words I was hearing in my mind were not the same as those forming in his mouth. The words did not move with his lips.

As I thought about this, he instantly replied, "I speak in German. You will hear, I believe, English. It is the same for me, in reverse. It is best, I think."

He jumped down from the wing. After a few uncertain steps on the muddy bank of the Slough he strode off along the cinder pathway. His long black coat swung in the air behind him. Now he was freed from the aircraft he was walking with easy, powerful grace, like an athlete. From his gait I would not have credited that he was haruspical: others of my calling that I had met were, like me, small in stature, bookish, introspective, timid in all matters that required strenuous activity. Tomas had implied that he was no better equipped to contend with problems of the physical world—otherwise, surely, he could have escaped from that plane without my help?—but even so nature had apparently blessed him with a strong and agile body.

When we reached the part of the path where I normally struck up the Long Lawn towards the house, Tomas Bauer came to a halt. He turned towards me as I caught up with him. The dark shape of the Abbey, squatting on the brow of Beckon Hill, loomed up behind him. He extended a hand of friendship towards me.

"I thank you James Owsley," he said, and now that I was only a few inches away from him I found distracting the dissonance there was between the words I heard and the movements of his lips. "To you I owe my life."

"Why were you on the aircraft?" I said. "It makes no sense to me. Where was the aircraft going and who sent it? How was it shot down? How did you contrive it to crash on my property? What—?"

He held up the palms of his hands to silence me.

"Nor does it make sense to me," he said. "I was in Germany, you are in England. The

war was running its course and I could find no other way to reach England—”

“To which war do you refer?”

“The war between our two countries, of course.”

“There is no war,” I said. “True, there are portents, but the German Chancellor would not be so insane—”

“He is mad enough,” said Tomas. “You can be sure of that. In my time his madness has led to a war that is engulfing most of Europe. It is irrelevant to the greater struggle, the one in which you and I engage, but there is no avoiding it for practical matters. I was effectively trapped in my homeland, while my true work was here. The German army is poised to invade England—”

“But this is fantasy!” I cried.

“To you it might seem so. But I speak of what is a grim reality of the time in which I live. Four, maybe five years from this moment. Madness? Yes it is! Engines of war are turning, but they are not such deadly machineries as the ones you and I face. We confront a larger madness, a virulent incursion whose terrors would dwarf in significance a mere military conquest by one nation of another. You reside above the pit of hell and its denizens seek release. The portents have been written in texts since the dawn, of time. I have studied many such texts and so, I know, have you. Our task is beyond history! War, pestilence, genocide, famine...these are trivial concerns, compared with what we confront! I had no alternative: I had to escape to England to be with you. After much doubt I came to the conclusion that the only way was to travel with one of the planes that was flying to bomb your English towns. I knew there would be risks, but in my desperation I saw no alternative.”

“You raise more questions than you answer,” I said.

“And I have told you they are of no account. I am here; that is sufficient. Are we at last to unite and engage together in our struggle against the creatures of the pit?”

“In my life there is no other concern,” I said.

“Nor in mine. So we must address ourselves to it.”

He turned from me and strode purposefully up the lawn towards the Abbey. Once again I found myself following in his wake. His manner was decisive, arrogant, imperious. He behaved as if I had been merely caretaking the house until the moment of his arrival. As I trotted behind him, already furious with myself for allowing him to dominate me, flashing memories of the years I had endured alone were shining in my mind, almost dazzling me. Was Tomas Bauer somehow projecting them at me?

No matter the source: I could not ignore them. I remembered the first time my father took me into the squint, so that I might experience the raw evil of the pit's emanations and truly learn what it would mean to follow him there. He thrust my face against the opening so that I had to stare down into the merciless darkness, and while he held me with his knee against the small of my back he began an endless braying sermon. His leg moved up and down against me, his yelling voice becoming a terrifying stridulation. It was a new and stunning insight into my father. When I managed to free myself and struggle round to face him in the confined space of the hagnoscope, he was looming over me, lit from all sides by the candles that guttered from every crevice in the rock walls. He bellowed his ranting, maniacal entreaties into the pit, swaying horribly from side to side, a Bible held aloft in one hand, a glistening golden crucifix in the other.

I also could not forget the physical aftereffect that the first experience had on me: the long hours that followed while I retched disconsolately into the pewter bowl beside my bed, a purging that was a making-ready of my body for the fray that on some dark level it must have known would be coming. Then there were those few precious weeks when my father allowed me to work alongside him, and when I, in my naïvete, had believed he was encouraging me and that we would work together for years to come.

I did not realize straight away that his sudden interest in me was only a preliminary to a greater event: his resolution suddenly collapsed and he subsided into insanity. The

disintegration of his will happened, so it seemed, overnight. Another glimpse of memory: a terrible confrontation with him in the Great Hall, when in the boiling rage of his madness he beset me with what he interpreted as my sacrilegious mystical leanings and physically threw at me the entrails on which I had been preparing the day's labours in the pit, challenging me to consume them while he watched. Impossible, of course. He desperately wanted me to follow him, but my calling stood like a barrier between us, blocking his sight of me.

After this confrontation, a hiatus. There was my father gibbering quietly and in solitude while nurses worked in relays to minister to his needs, while I stood alone at the gate of the pit, attempting for the first time to thwart the malignant ones below in the only way I knew, and not doing too well. My father's death came as a release for me. Mostly at first it was a release from the guilt that I felt about our relationship, but in more practical terms his death freed the financial fruits of the estate. These were now mine to enjoy. Before his decline, while he yet retained ambitions for me, my father had had the foresight to endow a family Trust to finance an independent pathology research laboratory in a London clinic. This act not only revealed to me that in his last months he had come to terms with what I might be capable of, but also ensured that our family's material wealth, otherwise so ineffectual against the denizens of the sunken world, could be applied to the production of a steady supply of scientifically reliable epitheliomata.

The first consignment of cancerous bowel growths and malignant intestinal tumours had arrived at Beckon Abbey within three weeks of my father's burial. Thereafter they were delivered at a rate of approximately one package every ten days. The supply was erratic, both in haruspical suitability and in time of delivery, but in recent weeks both matters had greatly improved.

All this was mine. My life, my sacrifice, my commitment and dedication. My father, his father, the generations of the family before us; we had all stood at the dreadful portal and resisted the earthly incursion of the Old Ones.

Now Tomas Bauer had entered our private hell. He arrived in a bizarre warping of time and space, stepping out of some unimaginable future, then arrogantly removed my sense of primacy. I watched him as he walked ahead of me. His able body took him in swift strides up the Long Lawn to the house, while I, the overweight and physically frail product of a lifetime of poring over books and of consuming protein-rich foods, was soon a considerable distance behind him and in a great deal of discomfort. I never ran or exercised, rarely took my body to its limits. My energies had to be conserved for my work. My only physical activity was the hasty, frenzied, irregular satisfaction of Patricia Scragg's sexual needs.

Tomas reached the door on this garden side of the house and passed within as if he had been accustomed to going in and out of my house for all his life. I was so far behind him that by the time I stumbled up to the door, winded and dishevelled, he had been inside for two or three minutes. I allowed the door to slam closed behind me. I leaned against the jamb, coughing helplessly while I tried unsuccessfully to steady my breathing. I looked feebly into the vestibule that opened out in this part of the building. Sweat was streaming down my temples and into my collar and every inhalation was a painful labour. I could feel my heart pounding like a fist within my chest cavity, beating to be released.

Tomas Bauer had already ascended the flight of steps that led to the upper hallway, from which, after passing along a wide corridor where most of my family's art treasures were displayed, he would eventually gain access to the Great Hall and the terrors within. He was standing on the top step of the flight and Patricia Scragg was with him. I could not hear his voice, but she was nodding compliantly. She heard my arrival and glanced down the stairs towards me. As our eyes briefly met I heard Tomas's mentally projected voice:

“—from now, if you please, Herr Owsley is no longer—”

The weirdly disembodied voice faded again as she turned away, like a lighthouse beam sweeping by. I heard her say, in English, “Very well, sir. I understand.”

I called up to her, "What is it you understand, Mrs Scragg?"

She made no answer, but the newcomer inclined his head more closely to hers, speaking softly and urgently. As he did so she turned again to look down the steps in my direction, a look of conspiratorial attention on her face. Although the lids of her eyes were suggestively half closed, the fact that she again turned towards me accidentally opened up his words through her consciousness.

He was saying, "—tonight it will change, for I have ransacked his mind and I know what he is to you, but now you are mine, if you come to me when I will, I shall take you as mine, for you are the ravishing prize I have sought in return for the sacrifice I make in this quest, but you will be rewarded with such pleasures as you cannot easily imagine, for I have the power—"

And on, glibly and pressingly, suggestions and innuendos and flattering promises. I heard them all until the moment when at last she looked away from me and the torrent of intimations was silenced.

I was recovering my wind at last and I began to mount the stairs.

"Patricia," I called. "What is he saying to you?"

She glanced at me again (his oleaginous insinuations had temporarily ceased), and she said, "Mr Owsley, I must ask you not to approach!"

"I am still the master of the house, Patricia," I said. "I want you to accord our visitor every courtesy, but you will continue to take instructions only from me."

She spoke, but I knew at once that the words were not hers. She was mouthing them on behalf of Tomas Bauer. Her voice had taken on a deeper timbre than usual.

She said (Tomas said), "You have failed to stem the tide of evil that flows beneath this mound. Your efforts have been insufficient to the task. I shall assume responsibility. You may assist me if you wish, but I should prefer you to stay away. This is no longer a matter for your family, but concerns the world. It is my mission to seal the pit forever."

"You don't know how!" I shouted. "You have no experience!"

He stared directly at me.

"No experience? What then is this?" With both of his strong hands he ripped at the front of his tunic, pulling it open. The buttons on his shirt followed, and his broad, hairless chest was revealed. A misshapen, reddened mound disfigured the area around his left aureole and a grotesquely enlarged nipple drooped horribly. Brown traces of a stain from some bodily discharge lay on the pale skin beneath. "You, haruspex, have consumed many such tumours. But this one, I say, is upon me and within me and it is consuming me. What better way is there to know evil than to have it upon you? And you say I know nothing!"

I was, in truth, stunned by his revelation. Tears were welling in his eyes and his head was shaking uncontrollably, as if with a nervous tic. His chest rose and fell with his suddenly stertorous breathing. I knew beyond question that he was not deceiving me. His bared chest made him vulnerable, piteous, the red carcinomatous flare marking his flesh like the petals of a burgeoning flower. He was a man who already stood on the brink of his own hellish pit.

"Tomas," I said after a long silence. "Would we not be better co-operating?"

"I think not. I am here to take your place, Owsley."

I detected, though, a softening of tone, a decrease in his arrogance.

"But surely—" I indicated his infected chest. "How long can you survive?"

"Long enough. Or do you propose to eat my entrails too?"

I was shocked again, this time by the candour of his reply. It did mean, as he had claimed, that in addition to placing words in my mind he could listen back to what I was thinking. I had been unable to suppress my inner excitement when I saw the rich potential of the tumour he had revealed on his breast. Doubtless he had sensed that too.

"Eventually, I should have to," I admitted. "You must know that, Tomas. You are haruspical too."

"Not as you."

"You eat human flesh!"

Mrs Scragg gasped and turned away from us both. Tomas grabbed her arm, and spun her around.

"To your work, woman! Never mind what methods we use. I am hungry! I have not eaten in days."

She looked imploringly at me. "Mr Owsley, is this right?"

"Do as he instructs, Patricia."

"You concede my mastery, then?" cried Tomas, looking directly at me. Triumph charged his eyes.

"Mrs Scragg, prepare the next meal," I said. "You may use the usual ingredients. Places should be laid for two. We shall dine in the Great Hall."

I noticed she hesitated for a second or two longer. I recalled our usual conversations at this point when we discussed the way in which she was to prepare the pellets, but I nodded noncommittally at her and she left. Tonight of all nights I was prepared to let her cook in whatever way she felt best.

Feeling that a new understanding had been reached with Tomas Bauer, and even that some sympathy might be possible between us, I climbed the remainder of the steps to join him. He had lost interest in me, though, and was already striding away. Maddened again by his disdainful behaviour, first seemingly vulnerable, then almost without warning as overbearing as ever, I at first made to follow him but immediately decided against it.

Instead, I went downstairs, walked through to the kitchen to speak quietly to Patricia Scragg, then went to my library. I closed and locked the door, and with a dread feeling that Tomas Bauer would inevitably know what I was doing took out the final volume of my father's irreplaceable set of haruspical grimoires, written in Latin.

The task of translation, started by his own grandfather and as yet only partly accomplished, was familiar and necessary, but also unfinishable. I sought only distraction. The abstruseness of the text never did help me concentrate at the best of times and on this evening my mind was racing with feelings of anxiety and conflict. I knew Tomas Bauer was somewhere in the Abbey, prowling around, investigating every corner of the old building. At odd moments I could detect his thoughts, and they came at me in distracting bursts of non-sequitur. Fear was coursing through me: it was almost as if one of the monsters below had at last broken out of the pit and invaded this continuum of reality. Tomas's intrusion was of that magnitude. Nothing was going to be the same again.

Unless he died. I could not rid myself of the memory of his horribly inflamed chest, the cancer bursting through the flesh and skin. It was surely a terminal ailment? If so, how long would it be before he became too ill to function?

Was his inexplicable arrival from 'the future' connected somehow with his illness? From what was he really trying to escape when he travelled to England? Did he have one final destiny to fulfil? Was it involved with my haruspical mysticism, so that, in effect, it was not he himself who was taking control but the cancer he bore?

Mrs Scragg came hesitantly to the door of the library, calling my name. I laid aside the precious tome with a sense of finality and eased open the door. The candle flames bent to the side of their wicks in the sudden draught from the corridor, and wax ran in floods down the guttered stems.

"The meal is ready, Mr Owsley," she said. "Do you still want me to serve it in the Great Hall?"

"Yes, I do. I shall have to unlock the door for you."

"Sir, that's what concerns me. Our visitor has already found a way inside."

"He is in the hall *alone*?"

"I could do nothing about it. I knew you would be angry."

"Very well, Patricia. I am not angry with you. Is the food ready to be eaten?"

"As I said."

“And you have prepared two portions?” She nodded, and I regarded her thoughtfully. “If the meal is still in the kitchen, let me come with you so that I might inspect it—”

A voice came: “If you are thinking of tampering, Owsley...”

Mrs Scragg and I both started with surprise. I know not what was in her thoughts, but to me it was further proof that the end of my era as custodian must almost be upon me. Tomas Bauer had invaded everything and I could not function like that. The feelings that welled up in me were a confusion of relief, dismay and anger.

When we reached the kitchen Mrs Scragg took up the large japanned tray bearing the dishes and we both set off towards the Great Hall. I scurried before her to push open and hold each of the doors along the corridors. When we reached the entrance to the Hall I saw that the reinforced locks had been burst asunder by main force. I immediately saw Tomas within, standing in an aggressive manner with his arms folded and his legs braced, staring at the place from where the hagnoscope viewed the room.

I said quietly to Mrs Scragg, “As soon as you have left the Hall, I want you to collect your personal belongings and depart the house. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mr Owsley.”

“I suggest you do it as soon as possible. Do not delay for anything.”

“When should I return?”

I was about to reply that Tomas Bauer would surely let her know, when his supplanting voice burst into my mind.

“I’ll call her when and if I’m ready! Bring the food!”

“Let me take the tray,” I said to Mrs Scragg. “You should leave at once.”

Her gaze briefly met mine. I had never before seen such a frank, unguarded look from her.

“I shouldn’t say it, sir, but the best of good fortune to you.”

“Fortune is not what I want, Patricia, but I thank you for that. I need strength, and the resolve to stand up to this man.”

Tomas Bauer was moving towards us, so I turned decisively away from her and walked into the main part of the Hall. Tomas indicated with his hand that I should carry the tray to the long oaken table, then he stepped close beside me as I walked nervously across the polished boards of the floor. I set down the tray and lifted away the chafing covers. I saw at once that Patricia had done us proud, and prepared all the most powerful of the pellets. She had cooked them by the simplest of means, boiling them up with a selection of garden vegetables into a stew which would be appetizing were it not for the main ingredient.

Tomas Bauer said in my mind, “In spite of what you think, I am here to salute you, James Owsley. In your country, honour is for many people a matter of pride, and to others self-sacrifice is a privilege. Although I have come to replace you, it is not out of contempt. How may I best show my esteem?”

“Why can we not work together?” I said. “This talk of replacing me is inappropriate. You have come at a moment when I am certain the course of the battle is about to turn. Look at what lies before us.” I gently waved the palm of my hand above the protein-rich stew that Patricia Scragg had cooked for us. “To work beside me would be the greatest honour you could pay me.”

“That would not be possible,” Tomas said, and I sensed a trace of sadness in his tone. “Your way is not the right way. You have to depart.”

“Can I not even show you of what I am capable?” I said. “Let us take our meal into the hagnoscope and partake of it together. Then you will realize how the fiends’ movements inside the pit will not only be reversed, but placed so far back that a final sealing of the pit might conceivably be possible, and soon.”

Tomas replaced the chafing lids on the plates.

“Let us indeed visit the hagnoscope,” he said. “But not for what you propose. I must inspect the pit for myself, try to comprehend it. I have to set about planning my defence

against whatever it contains.”

Once again I found my own ideas and wishes swept aside by his imperious manner. He thrust one of the covered plates into my hands, then took the other and walked steadfastly towards the entrance to the squint. I followed, my heart already beating faster in anticipation of confronting again what I knew was beyond its narrow confines.

It turned out that although Tomas clearly knew of the existence of the hagnoscope, and indeed its approximate position in the wall, he had not worked out how to gain entrance to it. He made me show him how to operate the concealed mechanism, then tried it for himself once or twice. With the main panel set to one side he glanced briefly into the space beyond, before stepping aside to allow me to enter first. I already knew that there was only enough comfortable space for one person at a time, so as Tomas squeezed in behind me I was already pressing myself against the cold stone wall at the back. The aperture that opened to the pit was at my shoulder and I could hear once again the familiar and disgusting movements of the beasts below. Inexplicably, they seemed much closer than ever before. I had spent too much time, too much energy, releasing this man from the crashing plane. How I regretted that!

“Sir, I request you to eat,” Tomas said in my mind.

I raised my arms awkwardly, trying to manoeuvre the plate around to a position in which I could take away the chafing cover again, but to do so meant I had to pass it directly in front of Tomas Bauer’s face. To my amazement he jerked his forehead sharply forward, banging the plate in my hand, making it spin away in the confined space. The pellets, my precious and powerful tumours, burst out wetly in their gravy and spilled messily down my clothes and on the dark floor.

I smelt Tomas’s breath, so close was his face to mine. In the wan light that seeped in from the Hall I could see his face, maniacally grinning.

“You will never have to taste your beloved pellets again, Owsley. Your purpose is more personal.” He was still holding his own plate and as he forced his body round in the cramped space he was able to place the dish on the narrow stone shelf I had myself been trying to reach. “I shall come to those later, if they remain necessary. First, you must eat, sir, and do so until you are replete!”

“You have spilled my plate!” I cried.

“And deliberately!”

To my horror, Tomas once again ripped open the fastenings of his shirt and exposed his diseased chest to me. It was only six inches away from my face. The efflorescence of his cancerous breast gleamed in the dim light from the Hall. I madly glimpsed chasing patterns of conflict: life against death, blood pumping through diseased cells, grisly malignant tendrils reaching out like pollen-laden anthers to impregnate the as-yet normal flesh that surrounded the deathly bloom.

Neither of us moved, while I regarded this object of allure and repulsion. A thrill of anticipation was pouring through me like liquid fire.

Tomas raised both his hands and put them behind my head, a gesture that was partly a restraint, partly a caress. When he spoke next his words had a tender quality that until this moment I had never heard from him.

“I shall if you wish hold you, James. You may take what you will from what you see.”

“I have never divined with flesh that is still alive,” I said softly, and in awe of what he was offering me.

“Then do so now.”

Whether he drew my head forward with his hands or I moved of my own volition is something I shall never know, but next my teeth had sunk into the soft flesh of his swollen breast. His strong hands supported my head, while his fingers sensually stroked my hair. I used my tongue to explore the texture of the tumour, sensing its preternatural heat, its tenacious grip on its host, the way it spread like an unfolding corolla. Soon I had found its heart, the pistil, where lay the passive organs of love and reproduction, and final decay

and death.

As Tomas Bauer's hands tightened on the back of my head I lunged forward, my jaw opened wide, my tongue guiding, my teeth easily piercing the thin wasted skin that still managed somehow to contain the tumour. I bit into the heart of the cancer. Tomas gasped with pain or passion, and I, sublimely, felt myself release wetly and sweetly. With the access of intoxicating pleasure, came the clarity of perception of the little death: Tomas had brought me to this!

His talk of working alone, without me, had never been true! My role was to release him from death. The thrill of the realization urged me on to abandonment: I buried my face ever deeper into his chest as the ecstasy coursed through me. The blackness of the malignancy surged forward to take me, seeming to open up around my eyes like a long dark cylinder, rotating, drawing me through the all-enveloping abyss of night.

I, haruspex, had entered the darkest entrail of all.

Time went past. Minutes, hours, days, years; none held meaning any longer. I had moved to a plane where the mere counting of time was irrelevant. I knew only the gushing flood of death, pumping out around my face, a warm nectar, blinding me, drawing me down, drowning me.

I could no longer see. I was in terminal darkness and I was leaning on, resting on, a slope that was nearly vertical. It was warm and fleshly, coated in slime, lacking anywhere I could obtain a good hold. I felt the terror of what might lie below me and yearned to climb away from it.

A vertical undulation rippled down the slope, shifting me out and back over the abyss below. Panic flooded through me. I was starting to slide, so I held on, paralysed by the abject terror of what would happen to me if my grip weakened. My hands had become claws, their long tines sinking ineffectually into the slimy membrane to which I clung. Oblivion was below. I reached forward and up, trying to gain purchase on the greasy slope. One of my claws felt as if it had found a firmer place, and, thus encouraged, I shifted my weight below, my doubly articulated legs stretching and pushing.

I clicked. I moved.

Another peristaltic undulation came heaving down. This time I was dislodged! I fell, my limbs waving in terror, my unwieldy body curling instinctively into a defensive hump. Only by great good fortune did one of my claws make fleeting contact with the membranous wall. I slashed in the claws and held on with all my strength, and as my body thrashed and collapsed against the scummy gradient I heard others of my kind clicking and clattering with their fright as they too struggled to hold on.

Their panicky sounds swelled around me, muted by the slime around us, but echoing brightly off our chitinous carapaces. The being closest to me, clinging on not far above in the darkness, turned a grotesquely swollen head towards me. Its two rear legs were raised, their horrid inverted knees braced against each other. With a violent spasm the legs rubbed together, setting off a shrieking stridulation.

Around us, the other arthropods took up the rasping chorus, the endless braying sermon; I too felt my rear legs twitching unstopably against each other. My father, my ancestors, my damned destiny!

By the time the next peristaltic convulsion rolled down towards us I was ready for it, and rode the attack without losing any more ground. The stridulations changed pitch as the slimy wall rippled against us. I shuffled my legs, croaking and belching with the effort, determined never again to fall.

Soon, I started to climb. Beside me, above me, below, the other damned beings climbed too. Ahead was a glimmer of light, a suggestion of final release from the pit, an invitation to life. I knew only the urge to escape and climbed grimly on.

With the next surge of peristalsis a torrent of vile fluids washed down from above, a raging flood of slime and acidic liquid. I held on, while others fell. A violent contraction shook the wall and a great eructation of gases roared past me, carrying with it a fine

spray of much of the slime. Again, others around me were dislodged. In my mind I heard their dying fall as at last they entered the abyss.

I resumed my climb, following my father.