

Cumaean's divinations

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 15 Oct 1998

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Dan Parmenter — 15 Oct 1998, 14:30

From: "Robert Borski" <rborski at coredcs.com>

When Severian as a very young boy runs his first errand to the Witches Tower, he tells us "I was ushered into the presence of an old woman who sat in the only chair I had yet seen there, staring through a glass tabletop at what appeared to be an artificial landscape inhabited by hairless, crippled animals."

But what might these hairless, crippled animals be?

At one point we somewhat jokingly discussed the idea that this was a Pac-Man game (or another video game).

Of course, Severian at this age may not fully appreciate what he's seeing, but it does seem the Cumaeon may be attempting some sort of clairvoyance, looking at something a good deal away in time or space.

I tend to favor the view of the Witches as intelligence gatherers. It's not difficult to imagine that they'd have various surveillance devices available to them.

If there were only one hairless, crippled animal, I'd suggest it was the bottled mandragora Severian finds in the long-abandoned autarch's quarters in the Citadel. But there's more than one.

Don't you think he'd have said "crippled men"?

On the other hand, what I find interesting is how many people are soon claiming they know Severian once he's become Autarch. Rudeskind, oddly enough of all people, is the first to point this out, observing, in a long, long series of examples, "Been a while now since I met a woman didn't kiss you and sew up a hole in your pants...You're every boy that's ever been here, and I've heard stories put on you that belong to men that was old when I was just a boy, and I've heard about things I did myself, seventy years ago."

I think of this as one of the most straightforwardly stated things in the book. This is simply a statement that something akin to the "folk process" is happening: every little anecdote about mischievous boys (and others) is now associated with Severian. But there's a literal twist as well, since Severian now contains hundreds (thousands?) of other personalities, he is in a sense a true "everyman" and this passage reflects that. He literally and figuratively embodies his people.

Remember also that Rudesind's "role" is to teach Severian that there were others before him, in all possible senses. Other torturers, other autarchs, other writers, etc.

D