

The tyrant works at his desk now. It is on the first floor of the Vulcan Palace, constructed specifically for him. His work is atypical. He is not content to write papers with instructions and large scrolls with orders. At his desk. On the first floor of the Vulcan palace. It was constructed, specifically, for him.

At his command, his office is located in the very center of the structure. It is enclosed. It is shielded from the sun. It is safe. It was made specifically for him.

The Vulcan Palace has four entrances and four exists, one at each side. They are large enough to drive tanks through, though the thought of it happening is laughable. The palace is three stories tall. The windows are fine, with red curtains, gold laced buttresses, wooden furniture and walls of solid black obsidian rock.

The ebon glass heart of the Vulcan Palace is as black as the snow of the earth is white. That is the way it was made. Specifically. For him.

He occupies his office now as a farce. To the other Vulcan Lords, the staff of the Palace and his own secretary, he is recording his instructions for the day. Which nobles are to be examined for Papal sympathies, the tax rates for various services, appointments for offices in Third Sicily and other nonsense that doesn't matter even a little bit. More than once he simply writes down names he has imagined for posts and sends them to his secretary. None have returned for further specification. Or even to ask the Tyrant, 'Who is this man you've appointed?'

Too much of that was how the last three of his personal secretaries found themselves unemployed. He would have appointed a janarae priestess long ago but their talents were much better used elsewhere.

Two minutes putting nonsense to paper is all the cover he requires.

He stands, then straightens his uniform. Then strokes his enormous gray mustache. He removes his shoes and places his bare feet on the primal glass floor. When the palace was made for him, many rooms were left untiled. Humans walk directly on the smooth obsidian glass finer than any pavement. 'What a great testament to the power of the ones beneath the earth and their power to shape even the unyielding ebon!' he thinks. 'What great power I still have to unlock' is his final thought before he closes his eyes. He plunges his mind into his spirit. Then, he reaches deep into himself and feels the sorcerous might that the THINGS have placed inside of him. He finds it quicker every time. He taps into this power in himself and grips it into the form of perception. Shaped like a great tangle of vines, formed of nothing but his own sense of touch, he pushes them like weeds into the obsidian walls of his fortress, and from there into the warm earth.

He exhales. Finally, he knows physical comfort again.

His troubled mind works to alleviate his largest worry first. He turns his perception to Stromboli Volcano, the road to Sicilia Terza. His alien senses connect all the paved roads of his realm in a few hundred miles of the volcano. Their footfalls begin as very slightly prickles on the edges of his perception, but as he grows more attuned he feels the color of their movement take shape in his mind. Before he fully comprehends, he has a large, very detailed map of his realm formed in his head, composed of the echos of mere footfalls. He has the feeling of every terrestrial impact of every single foot and vehicle that touches the ground in his realm. The most TOTAL TYRANT mankind has ever suffered is this man, the Tyrant of Italy, Francesco the First.

He has no human experience to compare his 'earth perception' to. If he were forced

to provide more detail about the power, then after he obliterates anyone daring to assert that he should be forced to do anything, then he might describe his aforesaid perception to the charred remains of the foolish one:

"They're like vines. I just spread them out and color them, the very definition of simplicity. Except, I don't actually see it. It's a bit like the light of your eyes shortly after you close them. Except it stays." Then, feeling rather childish, the Tyrant would find an excuse to throw someone into a volcano so he could take himself seriously again.

Good, he senses no unusual mass movements of armed troops on the roads. No large gatherings of men near the old Papal sites. No assemblies in protest. No blockage on the blood vein of his economic body. He only has an instant of concern for some odd movements in southern Italy before he remembers that it is harvest time and peasants are moving about the fields in absurd numbers. Garibaldi is hiding his partisans somewhere in the north, but how is he hiding them? There is no way he could know of the Tyrant's power to detect footfalls, so how does he disguise the movements of his guerillas? He scans the distant woods and foothills around the site of the last guerilla attack, and again, detects nothing unusual. He gives up the search before long and moves toward his next concern.

The Tyrant slowly decreases the size of his 'vines.' As his perceptions grow geographically smaller, they grow exponentially more perceptive. The movements of his own armies moving about the surface of Italy are in sync with normal projections. He is secretly pleased that no military officer will require replacement today. His allies inside Stromboli volcano continue to ensure safe traffic through the subterranean tunnels and he perceives their true forms, laughing to himself. He thinks, "Simon and Andrew were mere fishers of men, now look how I cast my net to catch gods!" His chuckle is quiet.

The sudden, heavy knock on his office door sharpens his concentration.

"Wait." He says. The tendrils of consciousness are currently floating about the region of Stromboli Volcano once again. He takes a last 'look' at the 'gods' of the earth before retracting the tendrils of his inhuman perception. Dutifully, his shoes are returned to his feet. The monster finds his cheeks are wet and wipes the moisture away with a red handkerchief.

"Enter." Says the tyrant.

So enter he does. It is Janesco Uberti, the abomination's secretary. He is middle-aged, hair as black as the floors and a mind as sharp as a thrusting dirk. When Signore Uberti was first notified of his appointment as secretary, he thought of how to use his new appointment to make money for himself. Might he spy for the British? The Germans? The secrets of the inner workings of the most powerful Vulcan Lord in Italy would fetch a high price.

About the third hour of his employ in the Vulcan Palace was how long it took for him to realize he could never spy against Francesco the First.

Signore Uberti had many talents. Many more faults.

He was NOT foolish.

He had felt the temperature of the water about the Vulcan Palace and found it scalding under the forge-hot steel grip of its master. Janesco Uberti had the honor of being the personal secretary to the first Vulcan Lord and high commander-in-chief of the armies of Italy. He had held the position for two years, breaking the record for longest-serving secretary to Francesco the First by about eight times

the tenure of any previous appointee. He had not lasted this long by being a fool. He lasted this long by being a slave, and he KNEW it.

"Your lordship, there's a matter in the north entrance lobby." He says.

"Hmm."

"A man smuggled a pistol into the lobby and has the receptionist held hostage." Janesco says.

"Mhmm. Why hasn't the guard shot him?"

"It is the husband of your late...lately employed secretary. Misses Salazarie. He wants to know where his wife is." he says. "He wants to be shown where she is." His eyes do not leave the tyrant's face.

"Ah. I understand. You're with me." And the dog attaches himself to the elbow of his master. They move into the corridor, where's its just as quiet as the office. A key that is not merely metal locks the office and is swiftly returned under the shirt of the Tyrant of Italy. A janarae passes the pair in the hall, but why should they converse? That woman knows her role in the priesthood and the palace staff know to never get in their way. Janesco Uberti moves for her, saying nothing to each other despite the intense eye contact they make. The pair walk some distance to the northern staircase and now the tyrant can hear the yells. Some man screaming in desperation, demanding something. The response is a chorus of deep voices telling someone to drop the gun and release the hostage. Those are likely the guard, thinks the tyrant. He stops on the bottom landing and the tyrant is pleased that he has accurately envisioned the situation. A young man is holding a small pistol to the back of the receptionist's head just being the desk, which he is using as cover. About eight guards have responded with machine guns and are yelling in tandem for the man to release his hostage. Those eight machine guns would reduce the desk to toothpicks in less than two seconds. It was such a fine desk. 'What a waste that would be,' thinks the tyrant. The guard were correct not to obliterate this man. I don't think I'll have them punished. The scene is accented by frightened onlookers, members of the staff, other rabble running their rabbling mouths in surprise. How exhausting. The tumult is surveyed by Francesco for only a moment before it aggravates him. "SILENCE!" All parties, even the hostage and scared onlookers, turn to see the tyrant intone:

"Mister Salazarie. You've been very rude to my staff."

"Your excellency!" says Mr. Salazarie, "Thank God!" Nobody notices the tyrant's small facial twitch.

"Your excellency, I knew if only I could speak with you than this matter might be resolved urgently. You know my wife, your former secretary, yes? She is missing, sire. She was leaving her new work and only got to the second street over before she went missing. I have been trying to get a missive to you for months, sire. Your clerks have misled me and impeded my search. I am sorry it came to this, sire, but I urgently needed you to see the corruption of your staff. Someone is kidnapping people, even women and children. It has been happening for a while now." The hostage-taker trembles with emotion. "I know you are an honorable man, from the days of your father before you. Please," and Mr. Salazarie holds up a briefcase with the hand that is not holding his pistol to the back of the clerk's head. "This is the culmination of my investigation. Please, sire. Examine it yourself. For your people, for justice. I know there must be some evil conspiracy at work inside of your walls. I'm sure of it! But please, sire. I only want to help the nation, and you!"

The thing looks at Mr. Salazarie. Something remains inside of this being, something human. It twitches in his heart.

"You speak quite well. It was also quite right of you to bring my father, my honor and our nation into your plea to me. Everyone, lower your weapons. Including you, Mr. Salazarie. Now is the time for talking. Lower your guns, you guards."

As the ruler speaks, so his will is done, slowly at first, and then the situation seems well and disarmed. Tense, but the guns are pointing at the floor. "You," Says the tyrant, and points to one of the guards from the group. "Go and retrieve Mr. Salazarie's pistol. Do not resist this soldier, sir, he is only doing his job. I will not have you armed about my person."

"Of course, your excellency." Says the two former adversaries, together, and the pistol is retrieved without incident. Francesco turns to the guards, "Do not harm this man. Have him searched for weapons, and *only* searched, then escort him to my office. Janesco, ensure this is done and then bring my carriage to the north gate." The guards search the intruder and the tyrant moves back to his office. In the hallway on the second floor, he grabs one of the passing janarae by the arm. Garbed in only a dress, the janarae chuckles like a distant addict, then she says.

"So early, my lord?"

"Come with me."

"Yes, sire." is her reply.

By the time the guards have escorted Salazarie to Francesco's office, the hostage-taker is smiling, actually jovial that his desperate plan has worked. Finally, the lord will listen! There is much information to cover and a number of the lord's appointees that have been corrupted. It will surely shake even an unshakable man like Francesco the First. Salazarie is deposited upon the lord's doorstep and the guards maintain a watchful conduct of him. The door-knock of this man is answered by a calm, "Enter."

So Salazarie does. His confusion is momentary. "Who is this, your excellency?" and he points to the Janarae priestess.

"She is a priestess of the Janarae. Do not let her simple garb fool you, I have been entrusting her with a number of missives that have raised my concern of corruption within my government. She shares your concerns and has been conducting her own investigation. Please, though her religion is strange to you, but let her appoint this oil to your forehead. It will not hurt you and this, along with my assurance, is the only way she will trust you." Francesco says something to the priestess in a language that Salazarie doesn't know. She waits for the confused man to nod his consent before approaching and merely runs her moist thumb horizontally along his forehead. It is warm, thick and colored like olive oil. The unknown pomace smells wonderful and the woman is exceedingly beautiful, and Salazarie finds himself growing a little enchanted with his whole situation. Francesco begins, "Bring your evidence to my table and lay it there. Before we examine it, I would tell you something you do not know. Your stunt in the lobby was most unprecedented. That you had been stifled in applying your concern to the proper channels, there may have been some warrant to your actions. Nobody was hurt in the end. I do not fault you. You need not fear prosecution by my human courts."

"Thank you, your excellency."

"I have many agents about the nation. Many who are loyal to me and who would die to serve Italy and what we stand for. Some are right under your nose. They are proud

and loyal, I love each of them their sacrifice to keep this nation safe both here and abroad, from enemies like our papist friends in Austria. Would you serve our cause? My cause?"

"May they die for opposing greater Italy, your excellency."

"Your wife is such an agent" Salazarie's shock is total, "I should like to appoint you to a similarly important task."

"Yes, your excellency!"

"Go and open that closet to your left."

"What?" Salazarie looks to a small, seemingly innocuous closet on the side of the office. It is a tasteful African ebonywood sliding door, barely perceptible against the obsidian walls.

"Do it so I may tell you of my plans for you."

Salazarie slowly rises and meets the stares of his two witnesses. He slides to the closet. With a final turn of his head, finding the four eyes boring into him, he opens the closet door.

The fool.

Heat fills the office instantly, like the coming of the annihilation of Vesuvius in the mind of a prophet. Thirty feet below the foolish one is a great chasm of fire and lava. Molten earth torn assunder and cast into a great canyon, how had a mere ebonwood door hidden such an inhuman thing? The screams are the worst part, unidentifiable and echoing eternally beyond the pale of human comprehension. What Salazarie cannot hear is the laughter interspersed, the THINGS crawling within this chasm pleased beyond mortality with the suffering being inflicted mere feet from this terrified ignorant. How long did Salazarie stare into this horrible pit? How much damage did his mind take in the moments of exposure to this unholy terror of earth and fire and writhing and pure evil? The first coherent thought that entered the mind of terrified Salazarie was, "Oh, God. Let them stop moving. Let them die!" He barely felt the grip of that priestess behind him, barely noticed how his strength failed against her inhuman grip, the very veins of her ligaments glowing with an unholy red star. This same light shown from the tyrant's eyes as he said, "Yes, Salazarie. You will serve our nation well. As did your wife, who is there among the masses. Look closer, peasant. You may yet find her! There, look! Do you see the large beings flowing among the thrashing of these unwholesome men and women? Look at them. I SAID LOOK AT THEM!" And the grip of the tyrant finds poor Salazarie's chin, forcing his eyes into the painful, tear-inducing heat. "THEY are the true masters of this nation. I am the honorable one they have selected to be their herald into this world. They need you more than I do. If you served them with all your blood, you would serve this nation in ways you will never understand. DON'T TURN AWAY AGAIN! Yes, Salazarie. Your efforts will turn this world into another great star. Turning and burning forever into the void of the cosmos. Together we will strip this planet of the fungus that grows upon it and give it a much brighter future. At that, I turn you over to your new masters." The priestess silences the screaming man with a knife and then releases him. The sound of his descent is cut short as she closes the door.

The exhausted panting of the two in the room are not merely from exhaustion. Through eyes half-lidded she says, "You serve the masters well, my lord."

"So shall you. Come here, witch."

"Yes, sire." is her grinning reply. Nothing is heard by the guards posted just outside. After a while Francesco leaves his office. He locks his door with the key that is not entirely metal. He meets Janesco at the north gate and together the two of them travel to Francesco's favorite restaurant just a few streets over. He has worked up quite an appetite. Patting the briefcase, he strains to think how much new *actual* work Janesco has to do now. Going over who is loyal and who is not. Oh well, it thinks. Janesco's job was made for him and he will do it well. As the tyrant loses sight of the Vulcan Palace, his thoughts venture inward, and all perception of irony is lost on the creature. Reflection is a human foible.