

The screams and moans of the wounded and dying mixed with the clashing of steel and the stomping of horses through the streets to create an almost musical cacophony of violence that drifted through the open window of the mayor's office. The mayor was beyond caring about the din from the streets below, lying dead as he was in a heap beside his desk, but the sounds were glorious to the man who stood looking out the window at the vicious carnage below him. He smiled at a particularly grisly execution taking place almost directly in front of the window, his black heart almost skipping a beat at the sight of the foolish insurrectionist being decapitated by one of his capable soldiers – his “pacifiers” as he had named them. Shivering with delight, he glanced over his shoulder at the mangled corpse of the former mayor, his smile widening as the body slid down a little further in the pool of blood beneath it.

Lucius Vahn was a powerful man in this part of the realm, a fact he thoroughly reveled in and worked to cultivate. Being a governor appointed by the Council of Five was not enough, though many in his same position elsewhere found this to be a high enough honor on its own. While all those under his rule knew who he was, granting him fear and respect accordingly, this was not nearly sufficient for him. He wanted the fear to increase into abject terror; the respect to be tempered by dread of what would happen should they dare to defy his edicts. It had taken years to build his reputation, but it had proven to be well worth it.

He had begun by building his armies into the most feared in the entire realm. His agents had visited every tavern, every prison, and every other place of ill repute he could think of to search out those men who thrived on violence and pain. These fearsome individuals had become his officers and were encouraged to find other men of like minds to serve under them. The only detrimental side effect had been that promotions in his army had changed from a reward to those who performed admirably to a do or die method. If a man wanted to lead, he simply killed his superior and then eliminated all competition to his new found authority. Lucius was disturbed by this at first, until he realized that because of this new method of moving up the chain of command, those who were weak or hesitated were eliminated and no longer able to make a critical mistake at the wrong time. Only the strong survived; this was a philosophy he could not only accept, but one he himself lived by.

There was no fear that these power-hungry men would challenge him directly. He had defied the will of the Council in doing it, but he had assembled his elite troops as well. They were all capable war mages, feared because of what they could do as well as for what they had been born with. The Council itself ruled through the fear of magic and those who could utilize its secrets. Nothing else was good enough for Lucius. His elite – the Pacifiers – were formed the same way the Council built their army. He had been forced to work in secret to build the numbers of this special force, but it had been well worth the trouble. By the time the Council learned of his plans, it would be too late for

them to do much of anything to stop him. For that matter, he had no reason to believe they knew anything about it – nothing had ever been mentioned in his audiences with them over the entire ten years of his rule. He was certain that if they knew, they could have cared less. They respected effective tactics, and were probably more content that he kept order in his lands than how he accomplished this feat.

It was the Pacifiers who were called on first to put down insurrections like the one that had arisen in this nowhere village on the outskirts of his lands. Usually their mere appearance was enough to quell the most ardent opposition to his laws. In fact, he was slightly impressed at how the villagers here had continued to fight, even as their neighbors were cut down by unseen attacks. This village had bravery within it, even if it would only grant them death in the execution of it. He found it tragic that they elected to use this bravery in a foolish gesture of rebellion than in service to him. These men were nobodies, but had a chance to become men of honor and renown. Instead they gave their lives in a battle that would never have a chance of success.

The sound of a door opening brought Lucius out of his thoughts and back into the things happening around him. He looked over to see his assistant entering the room, followed by a young woman wearing a dress so tight and so transparent that it left very little to the imagination. A smile crossed his lips as he remembered how the girl, Tosha, came to be in his company. He had overseen the end of another fledgling uprising almost two months past, one where the men were nowhere near as brave or organized as those here. They had fallen almost as soon as the Pacifiers had entered the village. The mayor and his wife had met Lucius when he arrived and begun to apologize profusely for allowing this to happen. They offered their only daughter as a payment of reparations to him for the inconvenience of having to come and correct their errors. Tosha had only reached the age where she could be properly called a woman the month prior, which was the only reason Lucius had accepted their offer. It had not spared their lives, though. He smiled as he remembered the looks on their faces as two of his personal bodyguards had flicked hands forward, causing the hearts of the mayor and his wife to stop suddenly before exploding in their chests. The shocked expressions as they fell to the ground were magnificent.

Further brightened by these memories, Lucius crossed the room to her, running a finger gently down her cheek, amused at the wince she tried in vain to hide. His assistant opened his mouth to speak before a raised finger stopped him.

“Soon, my dear,” Lucius whispered to the girl. “This pitiful rebellion will be fully put to rest. In a few hours, those responsible will be dead and you and I will spend some time celebrating the end of this tragedy and the restoration of peace to those who follow the law.”

He watched her face begin to pale before turning to his assistant. “While I appreciate you bringing her to me to join in witnessing the end of this mess, I have to ask what is so important that you would interrupt me at this time.”

The man swallowed hard before bowing his head in respect. “Your Excellency, the Council wishes a report on the status of this event.”

Lucius sighed. He should have known that the only thing this petulant boy feared more than incurring the wrath of his master was incurring the wrath of the Council of Five. He was not yet old enough to realize that although they could control magic, they were only human as well. Unless they were physically present, there was precious little they could do to punish someone for their perceived transgressions. Lucius himself knew this, and therefore held no such unreasonable fears about the situation. In truth, he looked forward to the day he could amass his forces to a degree that he could eliminate the Council and rule the entire realm the way it should be – with magic relegated to nothing more than a tool instead of a mark of who should lead and who should follow. Not that he would ever dream of saying such a thing aloud before he was ready to move against them. No sense taking unnecessary chances.

“Calm down, boy,” he said after a moment. “It took time for them to send a messenger, and it will take time for a messenger to return to them. They have no way of knowing how long either will take, so I will send the message when I am good and ready – not a moment before.”

The boy looked more frightened than ever. “But, Excellency....”

“Not a moment before I am ready.” Lucius cut him off, holding up a finger. “You worry too much.”

A sharp gasp drew his attention back to Tosha. She was not one to show discomfort of any kind, so the fact that she now had boded ill. Perhaps she had been pushed beyond the levels of her endurance. Perhaps she was dying. If so, Lucius would have to give her time to recover before he could celebrate with her. He had no intention of allowing her to escape him through the veil of death just yet. Once his eyes settled on her face, however, his heart leapt and his blood ran cold.

Her face was red, as though she had spent too much time out in the sun. As he watched, he could see small tendrils of smoke beginning to rise from her mouth when it opened to expel another pain-filled gasp. Her hands went to her stomach, and in that moment Lucius was certain there was more going on than he had anticipated. Every inch of her skin that he could see was the same deep red as her face, as though she had been standing unclothed next to a fire for much too long. This time there was no mistaking the

smoke that erupted from her mouth as she opened it, trying to release a scream that just would not come.

As Lucius watched, Tosha's skin began to grow a deeper red before finally beginning to blacken in places. Her eyes locked with his a split second before they began to boil in their sockets, white fluid evaporating before it even had a chance to run down her cheeks. Her body shivered as though in the throes of passion before blood began to hemorrhage from every orifice. Smoke rose from the blood as well as the gaping wounds that continued to form before she finally collapsed to the ground. Lucius never had a chance to know if she was dead when she fell or if she lived, but in any event it was over only a few long moments later. The horrid stench of burning hair and cooking flesh filled the room as her body roasted itself from the inside out. After what felt like an eternity, her remains crumbled to ash, continuing to smolder on the floor. A massive scorch mark was revealed beneath her as the wind blew the ashes around.

The sound of his young assistant being violently sick drew Lucius's attention to the doorway again. The boy was doubled over, whatever it once had been that he had eaten for lunch on the ground at his feet. He gasped for air as his head snapped up, his eyes briefly meeting Lucius's own before he pitched forward to the ground. The sound of his neck breaking was overly loud in the sudden silence of the room.

Lucius was stunned. He dropped to his knees, his mind struggling to come up with a rational explanation for what he had just borne witness to. There was only one explanation that made any sense, but it was hard to believe all the same. The Mayor must have had a wizard for an advisor. Highly illegal to be sure, but it must have been. Why the man had not made any appearance during the battle of the past few hours was unknown, but that had to be the case. If he had killed the other two, it was only a matter of time before he was a victim to this man as well. After all, they were nothings and he was the Governor of the land – a man appointed by the Council of Five personally.

The sound of footsteps coming up the hall brought his panic to a new level. He closed his eyes tightly, certain that the end awaiting him would be more painful than anything he could imagine. This wizard would take his time for the things he had done to the people of this village. He began to savor each breath as the footsteps came closer and finally stopped in front of him, certain that each sweet intake of air was going to be his last.

“Do get up, Governor Vahn,” a deep voice above him intoned. “As much as I enjoy watching you grovel before me, we have matters to discuss.”

Lucius looked up in shock. The voice was one he recognized well. He never expected to hear it here, not now, but he did know it. He scrambled to a standing position and bowed deeply to the man.

“Counselor Mondieu,” he said, reverence and anxiety flowing from his lips in a rush. “What a pleasant surprise to see you here. Had I known you were coming I would have arranged for an escort into the city....”

“Stop trying to flatter me, Vahn,” the man said, striding into the room. He kicked the body of the governor’s late assistant out of the way as he passed to stand and look out the window. A breeze came through the open shutters, blowing Mondieu’s long hair into disarray. He made an irritated sound and the breeze cut off suddenly, the dark strands falling back into the exact place it was before the wind disturbed it. After briefly observing the chaos in the streets below, the man turned back to Vahn, his pale blue eyes cutting into the other man like a knife. “I would very much enjoy hearing your report on this incident.”

Vahn struggled to regain his composure and forced himself back to his feet. Mondieu had a reputation as the most brutal of all the council members, a reputation that Vahn had witnessed being well-earned. The man had come here to eliminate the problem that Vahn’s predecessor had become to the council. Vahn had been appointed the night before the man was dealt with, and the nightmares started not long after. It was doubtful he would ever forget what Mondieu had done when the former governor had charged him. The memory of an unholy green light drifted across his vision as he realized the council’s deadliest member was standing in front of him waiting for a report with rapidly decreasing patience.

“My Lord,” he began, thanking the Creator that he managed to keep the nervousness from his voice. “This uprising began nearly a month ago, as best as my intelligence agents can determine. They were given written notice to cease and desist even as I was en route with my Pacifiers. We entered the city a two nights ago and began putting down the rebellion. As we speak, the final members of the leadership are being apprehended.”

“Apprehended and not executed, correct?” Mondieu asked, raising one eyebrow slightly. Vahn swallowed hard.

“Those were my orders,” he lied. “I only hope my soldiers do not become too enthused at the chase and finish them before I get a chance to question them.”

Mondieu’s smile made Vahn take an involuntary step backwards. “I’ll be more than happy to take care of the interrogations for you, Governor. After all, you have more important matters of state to attend to, I’m certain.”

The Governor paled. He knew that most of the leaders of this insurrection had been killed already, and he had actually ordered his men to leave no one alive to spread this poison to other villages. He first hoped that he could blame the deaths on his men’s

enthusiasm, but it was now evident that Mondieu already knew what was transpiring below and was trying to catch him in a lie. That could prove to be decidedly unhealthy for him.

“I shall send word to them as soon as we are finished here that they are to bring all prisoners to you for questioning, my Lord,” Vahn replied, furiously thinking of how to get word to his men before they killed everyone they came across.

“No need,” Mondieu answered; his smile widening. “The message has been delivered. Why don’t you tell me your theories on why there have been so many of these troublesome rebellions in your lands as of late?”

Vahn felt his knees begin to weaken as his mind began to spin. The sudden change of subject was disorienting; he found himself at an utter loss for words.

“I have no theories, my lord,” he stammered. “I haven’t really given it much thought.”

“The Council and I have,” Mondieu said. He cocked his head to the side and regarded Vahn questioningly. “Would it surprise you to learn that we have a theory?”

“Nothing the Council does would surprise me, my lord,” Vahn responded without hesitation. The fact that it was not an intelligent thing to question or doubt the Council of Five was instilled in everyone who followed them until it was sheet instinct. “You are all-knowing and all-powerful.”

Mondieu snorted in irritation. “You learned the rote well, but do you believe what you say or is it just paying lip service to what we expect?”

This was not going the way Vahn imagined it would. “I believe, my lord. Why would I doubt your power and knowledge?”

The other man gestured to the window and the fighting outside, his face dropping all pretense of cordiality. Anger shone in his eyes and fury laced his words with a dark edge.

“So you fully intended to flaunt your army of war mages in our face, knowingly demonstrating your utter lack of regard for the fact that having them as your private enforcers violates our laws on control over those who can touch the True Power?”

Vahn was convinced his heart had stopped. They knew. They knew *everything*. His life was over; Mondieu had merely to blink and he would be dead. After all, everything the man had said about flaunting his armies in the Council’s collective face was the completely true. He knew quite well that his army was illegal but had continued to recruit and train them regardless. Nothing he could say at this moment would change

the fact that he was caught and the evidence before this member of the Council damned him. His only hope – if he had any hope at all – was to be honest and throw himself on the mercy of the man before him; whether or not the man was capable of showing mercy was another fear, but even the most frayed thread to cling to was better than no thread at all. He dropped to one knee and bowed his head without pause.

“My lord, forgive me,” he said, his voice filled with a sincerity he was honestly feeling for the first time in a very long time. “I have failed you and my life is forfeit. In my pride I have considered myself as capable a leader as the Council and have disobeyed your edicts by creating an army of forbidden mages. I have made a mistake and ask for mercy. There is no excuse for my actions; I can only acknowledge my mistake and learn not to repeat it. My life is yours; do as you wish with me.”

His breath quickened as he waited, wondering if he would feel the strike that sent him across the veil into the lands of the dead. After several moments of terrified patience, he opened his eyes and looked up into Mondieu’s considering face. The other man watched him for several minutes, his back military straight and his hands clasped behind his back, his long robe of office drifting slightly in the breeze from the open window. He finally nodded and lifted his hand, indicating for Vahn to rise.

“Fear is a most proficient teacher, Governor,” the man said as he turned back to the window. “It would do you well to remember that. You are important to us, Vahn, that is why your assistant and your whore paid for your insolence instead of you. Consider them your only warning; we will grant you no other.

“Your lands are in rebellion for a very simple reason, Governor. You are too harsh. You rule through force rather than the threat of force. That’s to be expected; after all, you are a weak and pathetic man trying to command a force of mages. That is why the law exists that no one save the Council may form, train, or command an army of other mages. We are the five most powerful mages in existence. Those armies pale in comparison to us and you pale in comparison to them. Why should they respect you when they can kill you at their whim? You have warped their minds to believe you as anything other than a speck of dung beneath their notice.

“You also lack the knowledge of how to utilize these forces with efficiency. You allow them free reign when assaulting one of these rebellious villages rather than assigning them a specific task to accomplish before using your mundane soldiers to subdue any who continue to resist.

“This problem can be easily remedied, however. I will give your ‘Pacifiers’ their orders to report to Vallegale for training and incorporation into the Council’s grand army. Those who cannot be properly trained will be removed. Perhaps some of them may be able to serve in our experimentation group, but most will probably be killed. I will make

certain they know who is to blame for their harsh treatment as well, so it would be wise for you not to cross them in any way after they begin their training.

“You will learn to function with your mundane army, just like the other Governors; Governors who have not demonstrated such a lack of control over their lands as you have. These rebellions should begin to quiet down. If they do not, you will receive no other opportunities to correct the failure; we will do it ourselves.”

Mondieu turned to look at Vahn again, his face stern and unyielding. “Take my words to heart, Governor. If you fail to do so, you will pay the price. This audience is finished.”

Vahn was racing down the stairs before he even had a chance to realize that he was moving. He lived, and that was all that mattered for the moment. His army had been severely crippled and he was now going to be detested by the very men he had hoped to use against the Council, but for now that was a small price to pay for his continuing good health. He was relieved, but as he mounted his horse and began racing back to his estates anger began to set in as well. He was a Governor, one of the supreme authorities in this land, and now he was running away like a beaten pup with its tail between its legs. Mondieu had not only threatened to take away his authority, he had humiliated him as well.

He was well outside the city as the anger overwhelmed him. It might take him a small eternity, but he would find a way to make the Council pay for crossing him. No matter what it took, they would pay.