

Chapter one

Deep beneath the surface, beyond the winding staircase, and through to the end of the narrow passageway swathed in shadows, lay the meeting place. The figure descending the staircase knew its every turn and crevice. Its gaze swept unflinchingly over the grotesque, leering visages of stone ghouls that leapt from sudden curves and clefts in the walls— images rumoured to have been endowed with dark magic in ages past. Phantoms crafted to reflect the heart's deepest fears rose from the statues and swirled around the figure as black shadows. The figure glided through them like a blade through mist and the shadows fled before it.

The hour was late. No doubt the meeting was already in progress. Though the Master was terrifying, the figure did not dread his wrath. A face of iron and a nerve of steel left no room for fear, even of their creator.

Two oaken doors barred the entrance to the inner room where the meeting was taking place. Though time had left its mark upon the splintering wood, the ancient inscriptions remained as legible as the day they were embossed. The figure did not pause to admire the unique craftsmanship as it once might have, but threw open the doors, its cloak billowing out behind it as it strode into the circular room.

The light of the torches guarding either side of the doorway was first to greet the figure. Flickering, the glow gathered in the dome of the ceiling, playing with the shadows nestled in the wall's archaic mouldings. A stone pentagram was raised on the floor directly beneath the dome, an ancient monument that once served as an altar for rituals of the original council of Gaiztoak. Dark stains marred the cracked surface of the pentagram, remnants of even darker days.

Thankfully, the present purpose for it was much less brutal.

At each tip of the star sat a figure in a high-backed chair and draped in a heavy mantle. Every head was bowed, each face hidden in the folds of a large hood. Four of the five were mortals, useful pawns to the fifth figure, who presided over the meeting.

He was their Master, and they feared him.

“Bellator.” His voice was light, but the newcomer could sense the rage beneath his calm.

The figure fell to one knee. “Master.”

“You are late.”

“I apologize, Master. It won’t happen again.”

The Master did not acknowledge the apology, nor did he accept it.

“Begin your patrol.”

Bellator rose and commenced pacing the perimeter of the room. The task was pointless. There had never been a whisper of trouble during any of these meetings, and Bellator doubted there would be any today. The fools around the altar wouldn’t dare raise a hand against the Master. Bellator was merely a tool he used to further intimidate his players.

“Continue, Avia,” the Master said.

Of course, this was not the man’s name. The Master addressed each mortal as the country they represented. Two rulers, an ambassador, and a governor were present this evening, each of which – however insignificant their rank – held major sway over assets the Master had use of.

The man called Avia cleared his throat as a guise for composing himself. “P-production from the mines has been c-cancelled, my lord— for the time being. It was the queen’s order. The holidays are upon us, c-celebrating the festival of *Dragoi Magni*, and—”

The Master raised a hand and Avia was silenced.

“See to it personally that the supply is tripled next month in recompense,” he ordered. “Valamette?”

Bellator frowned. It was unusual for the Master to pass over a chance to make an example of Avia for such a failure. Clearly, there was something else pressing on his mind.

“My Master, *our* holidays are not until wintertime,” Valamette boasted. “We’ll be certain to supply you with twice the gold and lumber that you require.”

Bellator’s fists clenched. Across the table, Avia’s shoulders sank, and to the Master’s right, Zandelba let out a low growl. Valamette’s smug attitude gained him nothing but disdain from his peers.

“Lavylli?” The Master’s voice was impatient.

The figure to his left, who had no doubt remained silent and attentive since the meeting began, spoke abruptly in a strong, plummy accent. “The tunnels are underway, my lord, but we are making swift progress. Regarding the payment of precious gems, it has been sent. You will have what you need to stamp out all resistance when the time arises.”

“That time is already upon us,” the Master stated, rising to his feet. “Many nights now, my gaze has been turned to the stars. The constellations Heroi and Retsu are aligning for the first time in two and a half millennia. Prophecies connote these coming years as the last of mankind. This is the opportunity I have been waiting for. I must not fail!”

His eyes glowed with the passion his words expressed, and murmurs of agreement echoed through the room.

“Our toils have been rewarding and our preparation has been long,” the Master went on. “Yet we must not deceive ourselves into thinking that our position is secure.”

The murmurs fell to silence. The Master had never spoken so freely of such things before. The most this council had ever discussed were the brief updates concerning the progress of each respective country and its assets.

There was the occasional new order from The Master, but such a thing was rare, and was always followed by a long, tedious discussion concerning the politics of the task, and thus was never interesting.

“It has been predicted that there is one who has the potential to stand in my way; one who may have the power to end my supreme rule before it has begun.”

“My lord, who could possess the power to rival you?” Valamette asked, bewildered.

The Master lifted his gaze to glare at Valamette from beneath the shadow of his hood. “You of all people should know.”

Understanding dawned on Valamette. He nodded slowly. Bellator glimpsed the other figures, looking to find a shred of understanding among them. But they too turned to look at Valamette, hoping to glean what they could from his bearing.

“The boy, my lord?” he asked.

“Yes,” the Master replied. “The boy.”

Bellator was intrigued. When had a boy ever entered their conversation?

“But my lord, how could *he* be a problem? Didn’t we do away with him as an infant? How is it possible that he still draws breath?”

“Does it matter how?” the Master snapped. “What matters is that he lives and that he will pose a threat if we aren’t careful to hone his abilities to our favour.”

“I can do it.” Valamette took a breath. “I can kill him, if you wish it. I will not fail you.”

“No!” The Master’s fist slammed on the altar. “If I wanted him dead, I would have let him die! I wouldn’t have kept him safe all this time.”

Valamette recoiled. When he dared to speak again, his voice came as a whisper. “You kept him safe?”

The Master raised his chin. “I will have his allegiance.”

“Forgive me, Master,” Zandelba interjected eagerly, “but won’t you allow *me* to capture this boy? I’m the best man for such a task.”

“Fool,” Bellator scoffed so suddenly that all around the altar started. “If His Majesty refused Valamette, do you really think he would accept you?”

“I suppose you assume he’ll elect you for the task?” Zandelba retorted.

Bellator’s voice turned to steel. “Your head would be at the end of my sword if my master elected to give the order.”

The Master’s eyes blazed crimson from beneath his hood. “Be still, Bellator!”

“My lord,” Bellator said, stepping forward, “just give the word, and this boy will be at your feet by morning.”

“As much as I appreciate your enthusiasm, your request is denied. This boy is unknowingly under the protection of the Council of Buentoak. Their skill in the art of magic is unparalleled by all present but myself.” The Master slowly lowered back into his chair. “No, *I* must be the one to retrieve him.”

Exclamations of alarm were stifled around the room, and Bellator stepped back, confused.

“You, my Master?”

“Yes, me.”

Zandelba cleared his throat, choosing his words carefully. “Do you think it wise, my lord, to venture so far from your sanctuary? If you were to encounter any difficulties—”

“Ha!” the Master scoffed. “Do you think me so weak that I cannot hold my own in the world of mortals? Or perhaps you believe I have only survived this long because of your cautionary tales?”

“My only concern is for your well-being, my master,” Zandelba muttered, ducking his head.

Valamette fidgeted uncomfortably. “My lord, once you have the boy... what will be done to him?”

The Master considered the man before him. When he spoke, his voice was determinedly cold. “Whatever it takes to persuade him of where his loyalties should lie.”

“And if he isn’t persuaded?”

Bellator sensed the smile that almost imperceptibly altered the Master’s features. “One way or another, he will be.”