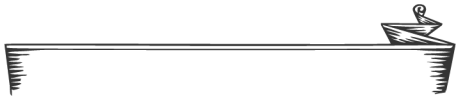

Chapter One

Idanox had never been a man who found himself easily disturbed. Still, while listening to the mage Srenpe lay out everything he would need for the task at hand, he had felt the slightest touch of a chill run down the length of his spine. The outcast mage had been evasive over the past few weeks about what exactly his allegedly brilliant plan entailed. The more information his men reported to him on Srenpe's activities and demands, the more Idanox began to fear he should have demanded more details before paying the mage half of his fee up front. It had come as a surprise when Srenpe had come to the Hoyt leader the night before and informed him he would soon be ready to put his plans into motion. Per the mage's earlier estimates, Idanox had expected it to be another week or two before the project was prepared to execute.

Second thoughts had crept into Idanox's mind ever since forging a partnership with this dark mage. Each time, he had forced such doubts into the back of his mind, telling himself the ends would justify the means. The fact of the matter was that he needed the young Rawl wielder disposed of, and he had no better options available. His own men had proven incapable, and the mage had the type of nasty reputation Idanox felt would be helpful. He had led the Hoyt to the verge of total victory before the boy's interference. It could not be allowed to continue. However, there was no denying that Srenpe was a dangerous man, and an alliance with him could prove to be equally dangerous. He was already planning contingencies, methods

of breaking the partnership in a less than ceremonial manner if necessary. It would've been unwise to enter an alliance with such an unpredictable man without a means in place of ending it violently if needed.

But there was no point in dwelling on his doubts now. The partnership had been forged despite Idanox's various misgivings, and mulling over his qualms about it did him no good. His only option now was to hope it would produce the results he desperately needed. Winter would begin to break in a matter of weeks, and he needed the Rawl wielder dead and gone as soon as possible. He had already lost far more men than he could afford. Allowing the boy to continue running around the province and disrupting his plans at every turn was out of the question. For the time being, an alliance with Srenpe was the lesser of two evils.

One of his lieutenants had entered the room he had been using as an office since his arrival in Kolsvard in late autumn. Idanox guessed his purpose before the man could open his mouth. Srenpe was ready to begin whatever it was he was going to do. His men had spent the last three days preparing everything Srenpe had requested of them. None of them had been able to relay to their leader what the mage's plans entailed. Each had been trusted with a few specific tasks and given no explanations. All they had been able to relay was that Srenpe insisted every detail be prepared precisely as he requested. Whatever the mage was planning, he wanted it to be a surprise for everyone else.

The chill in his spine intensified, a chill which had nothing to do with the bitterly cold Thornatan winter night. To what madness had he committed himself with this mage? Telling himself for what felt like the thousandth time that this was a necessity, he rose to his feet, wrapping his black cloak around his shoulders. There was no reason to delay; the sooner he got this over with, the sooner he could be rid of the Rawl wielder and Srenpe. If the Hoyt did not re-

turn to their planned business soon, another year would pass before he could seize control of the province. The brutal climate of the far northern province proved to be a hindrance as often as a boon. He followed his lieutenant down the corridor into the large wide-open room Srenpe had requested for his work.

"Good evening, Idanox. What a lovely evening, is it not? Are you ready to begin?" Srenpe said as soon as he stepped through the door.

The Hoyt leader looked around, hoping to glean some idea of what the mage was planning. To his surprise, he found the vast room relatively empty. When Srenpe had requested a large room for his work, Idanox had expected to find a much more elaborate arrangement. Srenpe had requested so many items in preparation that he had expected to find the room full of various materials and odd contraptions. As usual, Srenpe was dressed all in robes of crimson, and his staff was lying on a table at his side. There was an odd assortment of herbs and powders that he had requested along with it. Idanox noted that the most unusual of his requests had not been brought into the chamber yet.

I hope for your sake you are not wasting my time, mage.

"I am ready, but do you plan on explaining this grand scheme of yours first, Srenpe?" Idanox asked, making a concerted effort not to let any hint of a tremble creep into his voice. In every encounter, he had worked carefully to display an image of utmost confidence to Srenpe. This dark mage was not a man who Idanox wanted to sense weakness at any time.

"Of course I will explain, my dear friend. But it would be for the best if I begin and then explain as I go. Things will be so much easier to understand if I do. There is not much point in me standing here and giving you a long-winded explanation now. You will find this is a matter you will understand much better with a visual aid," Srenpe replied, a sly smile twisting across his face.

Resisting the urge to remind the mage of the fact they were not friends in any sense of the word, Idanox contented himself with giving a curt nod. Srenpe turned to the Hoyt men Idanox had assigned to work for him and began murmuring instructions, careful to keep his face averted from Idanox.

Secretive to the last, Idanox thought to himself, irritated once more by the mage's deceptive nature. The assistants were moving to a door at the far end of the chamber. They returned within moments, along with the most curious of Srenpe's requests.

The Thornatan soldier was shackled at the wrists and ankles, shuffling awkwardly along the floor of the long dark room until he was directly in front of the mage. The Hoyt men he had tasked with this job had done well; he perfectly fit the request. He was quite a large man, well over six feet tall and muscular. Srenpe had stressed to no end the need for the man to be as large as possible, again offering no explanation.

As he stepped into the light at the center of the chamber, only the soldier's eyes showed the slightest hint of uncertainty; the rest of his face remaining defiant in the face of his captors. Idanox had to admire his ability to conceal his fear. The man must've realized this night would not have a happy ending for him.

"Welcome, my friend. Thank you for joining us here tonight. My name is Srenpe. May I ask yours?" Srenpe greeted the soldier as though he were welcoming an old friend into his home for supper.

"Kill me and be done with it, Hoyt scum. There is no need to waste your time with these benign pleasantries." The soldier's voice was hollow and empty, as though he was already resigned to his fate. There was not a quiver in his tone despite his impending doom. Once again, Idanox could not help but admire the man's courage in the face of certain death.

"Oh no, my dear man, I'm afraid you are terribly mistaken. It's quite understandable, of course, considering the circumstances of

your arrival here. Please, rest assured, I am no Hoyt. I am a mage in service to the Order of Mages. I merely asked for the assistance of the Hoyt in bringing you here. I have absolutely no intention of killing you. I apologize profusely if that is the impression you have been operating under this evening. You have my word." Srenpe's smile was quite disarming, and his voice sounded as though he were trying to soothe a nervous kitten. Idanox shifted uneasily, disturbed by how Srenpe was able to make himself appear so kind and feeble. Was there already some sort of magic at work in the mage's words?

"My name is Quentin," the soldier replied, his stance softening ever so slightly. Idanox's respect for the soldier fell somewhat. What type of fool would buy Srenpe's act, no matter how convincing? No doubt, the man wanted to cling to any shred of hope he could find. Desperation had never been an excuse for ignorance in Idanox's mind.

"It's my pleasure to meet you, Quentin. I have brought you here because I am hoping you will agree to help me with an experiment I wish to conduct. I am a professor for the Order of Mages, you see, and I travel across the Empire seeking answers to the great questions of life. I have come to this place to study the various herbs growing in this region. Thornata is a remarkable place, with a climate the like of which cannot be found elsewhere in the Empire," the mage explained, gesturing toward the assortment of herbs and powders on the table, the reassuring smile never leaving his face. "The pine forests surrounding this city, in particular, are an ideal environment for certain herbs I have been studying."

"I know nothing about herbs. What help can I possibly be?" Quentin was obviously skeptical.

That makes two of us, Idanox thought to himself, growing more impatient with Srenpe's little game by the second.

"You have not eaten today, have you, Quentin? I can only assume my Hoyt helpers have not been particularly hospitable to you. Once

again, I must apologize most profusely. If there were gentler helpers available to me in this city, I would have requested their assistance. Sometimes we need to have partnerships with those we deem unsavory in the name of the greater good. I have their assurance they will set you free once you have assisted me."

Idanox scowled at this statement; he had made no such assurance.

"It is fortunate for you that I am studying the effects of one herb in particular. I believe when mixed with water, this herb can relieve the pangs of hunger! Such an incredible discovery if true, is it not? Can you imagine the implications such a discovery would wield? We could put an end to poor children dying of starvation in the streets!"

Idanox was growing impatient with this spectacle. He could not possibly care any less if this soldier's belly was empty, and he would not be releasing him, no matter what promises Srenpe was making. He was beginning to suspect this mage was making a fool of him, and if he was correct, Srenpe would also not be leaving this room alive. Still, he had gone along with this farce so far. What harm could come from letting the mage finish his asinine little game? If Srenpe wanted to continue to dig his grave deeper, that was his business.

"That would be quite impressive, Professor Srenpe. But I'm afraid I still don't understand why you needed to kidnap me for this experiment," Quentin said.

"A fair question, my good man. As I'm sure you realize, Quentin, these outlaws you find yourself surrounded with have taken their share of losses lately," Srenpe said, enraging the Hoyt leader even further. "As such, it is hard for them to feed all of their men, so they asked me to find a solution. We have a business partnership, you see. They protect me while I am in the wild doing my studies, and I do what I can to assist them with feeding and healing their fighters. The sacrifices we make in the name of the greater good can be rather unpleasant at times, as I'm sure you understand. However,

they are quite stubborn, and none of them wish to be my test subjects. They have no such qualms about experimenting on you. I'm sure you would expect nothing less from such men. As I said, it is a partnership born out of need. I bear no more love for the Hoyt than you do."

"I have your word I will be allowed to leave if I help you with this experiment?" the soldier asked.

"You have my word, Quentin. These men have given me theirs as well, and they have never disappointed me, at least not when it comes to keeping a promise."

Idanox could not help but begrudgingly admire the mage's acting skills. Whatever else he may be, Srenpe was a master manipulator, a trait the Hoyt leader admired. Idanox could see shades of himself in the mage's lies, though he was far superior at the art of deception.

"Very well then. Let's get on with it."

"Wonderful! Thank you, my friend! You are making a real difference today, and if this works as I think it will, we could end hunger and starvation across the Empire! Men, women, and children in poverty will owe you a debt forevermore, Quentin!" Srenpe cried out, flourishing his arms dramatically for effect. "If I have it my way, there will be an Imperial holiday named in your honor!"

Beaming ear to ear, Srenpe turned back to the tables and began crushing herbs and powders together. He was taking great care that the soldier could not see any of what he was doing as he poured the mixture into a vial of water and began to shake the ingredients together. Within moments he had produced a dark green liquid, which he spun with great enthusiasm to display to the captive soldier.

"That did not take long at all, did it, Quentin? Such a simple formula. Imagine the possibilities! Please drink up, my friend. I am sure you are famished," Srenpe urged, beaming as widely as ever.

Quentin took the vile in his shackled hands, holding it close to his face to examine it. The green liquid did not look particularly

appealing to the increasingly impatient Idanox, but the hungry soldier seemed hopeful. His eyes darted from the mage's encouraging smile to the vial before he finally moved it to his lips and began to drink. Once he had finished, he returned the flask to the still-beaming Srenpe.

"How are you feeling, Quentin? Can you feel the hunger fading away? Please describe everything you are experiencing after drinking the concoction; no detail is too small for my research," the mage said eagerly.

"I think so, but it's a strange feeling. It feels like a warmth spreading through my entire body. I can feel it everywhere—in my fingers, in my toes. It does not feel normal, though it doesn't hurt," Quentin replied, an uncertain look on his face.

"Excellent. That is precisely what I was hoping to hear! Such things do take some getting used to after all," Srenpe exclaimed.

Furious, Idanox stepped forward, ready to signal his men to put an end to both of these fools for having the audacity to waste his time. But without warning, Srenpe snatched his staff from the table and thrust it toward the captive Quentin. A loud crack emitted from the staff as though a lightning bolt had struck the inside of the building. The sound froze Idanox in his tracks. A brilliant purple light began to emanate from the staff, completely enveloping the soldier, whose face had lost all illusion of composure. The horrified screaming began, though it would prove to be short-lived as the soldier started to change.

His size was the first change. His large frame expanded, growing even taller and broader. The horrific grinding sound his bones made as they stretched and expanded was one Idanox suspected he would never forget. Quentin was larger than an ogre by the time the growing stopped, yet the changes to his body had only just begun. His facial features, already contorted in an expression of sheer agony, began to twist further, becoming beast-like, as though a human had

been crossed with a wild bear. His nose stretched from his face like a snout, and though it was hard to be sure in the blinding purple light, Idanox thought his teeth were becoming sharper.

Srenpe's spell was having an impact on the man's skin as well; it was hardening like a rock, and soon the color began to change. As the purple light began to dissipate, Idanox moved in for a closer look at the man's face. Had he not witnessed what had happened, he would not have believed the creature standing before him had been a human moments earlier.

The monstrous creature stood remarkably still. Its only movement was the occasional blink of feral eyes that no longer showed any trace of the man who had stood in its place moments before. They were no longer the eyes of a human but those of a feral predator. Srenpe was conducting an exam of his own, circling the beast, taking in every inch of its features. He would occasionally touch it or prod at it with his staff while muttering to himself. When he seemed satisfied, he turned back to Idanox, beaming.

"Magnificent creature, isn't it, Idanox? I think this will serve your needs quite well. Don't you agree?" Srenpe said, turning toward Idanox at last.

"Is he still alive? Can he hear us?" Idanox asked, observing the creature, his emotions a mix of awe and disgust. He took a tentative step closer, taking care to stay out of reach of the enormous monster.

"Valid questions. The answer to both is yes, however, not in the sense you are thinking. The man known as Quentin is no more. I could not restore him even if I wanted to, though I do not see what value there would be in doing so. His mind has effectively been removed, replaced with pure, savage instinct. However, his body is still here and quite improved, ready to serve you," Srenpe explained.

"It can follow commands?"

"Beast, break your shackles!" Srenpe snapped at the creature.

Without hesitation, the beast flung its arms wide, effortlessly snapping the iron shackles that had held its hands in place. The chains around its ankles met the same fate a moment later. Srenpe had moved away and was now returning with two large battle-axes, yet another of the requests he had made for his preparation. The axes were massive; any ordinary man would need both hands to wield one effectively, yet this beast took one in each hand as though each weighed no more than a pigeon egg.

"It will follow any order you give. It does not feel pain. It does not feel fear. It will not question any command you issue, for it is incapable of reason or regret. Once given a task, it will complete it at all costs. If you order it to kill the boy and the pet ogre tries to interfere, the pet ogre will die as well. Much more effective than an ordinary man with nuisances such as emotions and logic to hold him back. Watch this. Beast, cut off your left hand."

Without the slightest moment of hesitation, the beast raised the axe in its right hand and brought it down swiftly. Idanox jumped slightly at the deafening sound of its left hand and the battle-axe in it clattering to the floor in the otherwise silent room. To his amazement, almost immediately, a new hand began to form where the old had been severed seconds earlier. He guessed the appendage would fully regrow within minutes. Idanox scrutinized the beast's face. It was challenging to discern emotion on such an inhuman visage, yet he could not detect the faintest trace of pain.

"Amazing, isn't it, Idanox? Please go and fetch the men who have encountered the boy," Srenpe asked of the men Idanox had assigned to assist him.

It took about ten minutes for the men to return, by which time the severed hand had fully regrown and retrieved the fallen battle-axe from the floor. Along with the men Srenpe has dispatched, there were four additional Hoyt fighters. The four newcomers made their way toward Srenpe and Idanox, yet their eyes were entirely occupied

by the massive beast at their side. Once again, the deceptively charming smile darted across Srenpe's face.

"Welcome, gentlemen! I see you have noticed our large friend here. Please, allow me to explain. This magnificent creature is going to hunt down that troublesome Rawl wielder who has caused you so much grief. The last thing it needs is a scent, and it is my understanding that the four of you have encountered this boy," Srenpe said.

"Yes, that's right. We were the only survivors on the Moyie River after the first encounter. We were lucky enough to be close to shore when he destroyed our boats. All of our companions were washed away by the tidal wave," replied one of the men, finally tearing his eyes away from the great beast.

"It is fortunate that you have experienced his power firsthand; it will help our friend here get a better scent. Could you please hold still and allow him to pick up the scent? It should not take him long at all. The Rawl is a rather unusual and distinctive power after all. You do not need to do anything," Srenpe said, still smiling reassuringly.

The men shared darting glances between themselves and in the direction of Idanox before reluctantly nodding their consent. Srenpe muttered something to the beast, and it began to circle the four men like a wolf might its wounded prey. After two rotations, it came to a halt and waited for further instruction.

"Excellent. Our friend seems to have the scent. I need one more favor if you would be so kind as to oblige me. Gentlemen, could you draw your weapons, please?" Srenpe asked. They did so hesitantly, exchanging uncertain glances. "In thanks for your faithful service, you get the honor of being the first test of our new friend's abilities. Good luck to you!" Srenpe crowed before turning to the beast and pointing at the four unfortunate Hoyt warriors. "Kill them."

The first man never had a chance; one of the massive axes crushed his collarbone before he could process what was happening. The second had a split second longer, ducking as the second axe came

racing for him, but he wasn't quick enough. The axe caught him in the head rather than the chest. The blows struck the men with such force that their bodies were barely recognizable as they crumpled to the floor in bloody heaps.

The last two men moved away from the beast defensively, one wielding a sword, the other a spear. They had wisely moved apart, obviously hoping this would keep the creature from attacking them both at once. The beast chose to go for the man with the spear first. The man thrust in self-defense and struck the creature in the gut. For a moment, he appeared to think he might survive. The triumphant expression flashing across his face betrayed the fact that he thought the blow might drop the mighty beast. But the monster kept coming, walking straight through the spear, driving it deeper into its own body as it pursued its victim. As the axe came down on the unfortunate man's head, his last remaining companion thought to take advantage of the distraction. He charged from behind and swung his sword with all his might at the great beast's leg.

The blow cut deep, yet the beast's thick skin kept it from penetrating too deeply. Such a powerful swing would have taken a normal man's limb clean off, yet here was this poor soul desperately attempting to wrench his sword free from the beast's rocklike skin. He was unable to free the blade before the beast swung one of its axes one last time, snuffing the man's life out with devastating power and precision. It had taken the creature a matter of seconds to dispose of all four men. Idanox could do nothing but look on in disgust.

"What do you think, Idanox? Quite effective in action, isn't he? I think he will do the job nicely." Srenpe was bursting with joy.

"I don't recall giving you permission to slaughter my men!" Idanox snapped back, seething in rage.

"I am sorry about that, but I thought a live example would be the best possible way to show you this incredible potential. I did not think you would agree to my experiment if I'd asked you in advance.

As I said, visual aids are sometimes required. If I have upset you, my friend, I can leave," Srenpe replied, shooting Idanox the same innocent smile he had used with Quentin and the Hoyt fighters.

"Do you honestly think I will let you walk out of here after what you just did?" Idanox hissed, his nails digging into his palms as he clenched his fists. Several of his men moved in closer behind him, their hands reaching for their weapons.

"Do you honestly believe you can stop me?"

A deathly quiet fell over the room, and Idanox was forced to come to terms with a harsh reality. He did not like one bit what this mage had just done to his men. He could feel the eyes of his remaining men on him, expecting justice for this outrage. Yet there was nothing he could do, not after what he had witnessed this creature do. The beast could kill every single one of them where they stood if they tried to raise a hand against its master. No, it was best to let the mage stay, and the sooner the beast was dispatched on its hunt, the better.

"I understand your reasoning, Srenpe," Idanox replied, calming his tone, the diplomat in him going to work. "I simply wish you had given me a warning first. You have done incredible work, and I do not doubt this creature is exactly what we need. Even a Rawl wielder will be unable to stand against such a magnificent creation."

"No harm done, Idanox. No harm done at all," Srenpe replied, the same sneering smile still present. Idanox could not wait for the day he could wipe that smile off the mage's smug, arrogant face.

"Find the Rawl wielder and kill him at all costs. If anybody tries to stop you, kill them too. Bring the head back to Idanox here. I'm sure he will want confirmation," Srenpe instructed his beast. "Do not worry, Idanox. It will find you no matter where you go. It will not stop until it has achieved its directive."

The beast began walking at once, straight across the cavernous room and out the door. Idanox watched it go with a sense of appre-

hension. At the same time, he was also assured the boy would be dead soon. After the demonstration he had just witnessed, no other outcome was imaginable to him. By all accounts, the boy was formidable, but he could not possibly stand a chance against such a foe. Happy though he would be to see the end of the Rawl wielder, he still felt a building sense of foreboding in the back of his mind. What sort of monstrosity had he unleashed upon the world?