

## Chapter One – The Sorceress Attacks the School

In the ancient kingdom of Perth, by the Sea, there lived a sorceress on a lonely mountaintop. She was not well-known among the land, and preferred it that way; keeping to herself up in the high, rocky crags of the mountain passes. Since childhood she had whittled away her days alone, practicing spells and learning magic. For she had found that people were fickle, taxing creatures. Never in her hundreds of years had she met an interesting one.

Her name was Estrella and she spent her days in quiet ambiguity, save for the animal companions and occasional Fae people that frequented her isolated home. Aside from those her life was influenced solely by her books, of which she had collected many in her long lifetime.

The land of Perth was a divided kingdom, a New and Old order of worlds resting in an uneasy tension. Estrella, and the mountains that housed her, were a part of the Old Kingdom, a fact that filled her with pride. The ancient aspects of the nation of Perth were in her blood and in her heart, yet the human inhabitants who had swollen in numbers over the last few hundred years had set her on edge. These days she was even more confined to her mountain home, unwilling to meet the hateful creatures who resided mainly on the plains and meadows below.

One place especially worked at her nerves. In the valley below her mountain peak, there was river meandering its lazy course through the meadow. In that meadow existed a walled training academy, modest in size, but full of powerful human warriors, that sat in stillness and secrecy along the riverbank.

For over a year now, Estrella had been spying on them out here so close to the mountains,, trying to determine their plans to the land of the Fae. Her heart forebade that their intent was ill-purposed, but she still had not discovered the entirety of their plans, or even many of them. Her attempt to stick her nose beyond the pages of her books was going very poorly.

Still, she disliked the look and feel of them all. Their presence at the edge of her mountain was a constant threat and she could not have peace until she was well rid of them.

Therefore, she had resolved that fine, spring morning to make her way down the mountainside to do away with the school once and for all. She'd been practicing powerful spells and sorceries to wreak destruction and havoc on the little training academy and felt she was finally ready to do away with them for good.

It was a lovely morning, she considered, for war-mongering. Though if things went as she'd planned, it wouldn't be much of a war in truth. By her estimates, this particular academy

housed a measly hundred recruits, strictly humanoid, which meant none of them could challenge her in sorcery. It was rarer than a blue moon in summer to find a human who could wield magic. However, they were powerful and skilled warriors, in training to take on such beings as herself. That much she had learned from her spying. They were cultivating secret tricks to beat her spells, which she'd witnessed a few times while watching from the treeline. Though prepared to adjust her attack accordingly, she still harbored a strangely out-of-place feeling. One of fear and uncertainty.

Estrella forced herself to laugh. What nonsense. She was the most powerful being this side of the blue mountains, aside from the Wizard himself. She had been his apprentice after all. What harm could a bunch of upstart human warriors do to her? Besides, if rumors could be believed, there was only one person down there who had the skill to stop her, and he was the one she was truly coming for.

The walk down the mountain took up the better part of the morning, but she didn't care. She enjoyed the view and the sights she got to see, it helped soothe her oddly anxious mind, and kept her from overthinking her attack plans.

The mountain lands were beautiful and lush this time of year. It was the beginning of summer and the days were long and warm and lazy. The birds chirped happily and the woodland creatures ran hither and tither through the woods, though as she neared the bottom of the mountain, the woodsy sights and noises faded slowly, until there was nothing. She hated coming down off the mountain for this reason.

The training academy was an ugly tower with an iron fence wrapped around it like a prison, sitting about half a mile away from the mountain's base. There was no grass, the yard was dirt and full of vicious-looking war equipment. Estrella could not understand how anyone could exist in such a dismal, dreary place.

She crept towards the academy, hiding behind trees and bushes and rocks. Success required stealth and secrecy. If they spotted her before she could make the first strike all would likely be lost. She knew many spells, but the Wizard had always refused to teach her the shield-spell, which left her very defenseless.

As she neared the metal fence, she crept into the shadows of a mighty old oak tree and scurried up the side of it as quickly as she could. She had spent many an afternoon observing the training of the soldiers from the vantage point of the middle branches.

Hidden in the thick canopy of green leaves, she had a clear view of about two dozen young men, each wielding various swords, spears, shields and maces against each other, their Commander barking angrily at them from the cool shade of the tower wall.

She found the display pitiful and silly, then again, a human's only defense was such weapons, they could not weave a spell or perform any sorceries to save themselves. All that they achieved was through blood, sweat and tears. Their successes and failures rested solely on the physical power of their bodies and minds. She wondered what that would be like...

"Harder! Harder!" the Commander shouted, his husky voice ringing clearly across the courtyard. The warriors picked up their pace visibly in response and Estrella found herself vaguely impressed by the stamina they displayed in the heat of the day. By then it was afternoon and the sun was high and hot.

"And stop!" the command came none too soon for the wearied soldiers. They dropped their weapons immediately and removed their protective helms. Estrella recognized many of their faces and could even put names to a handful of them, the special ones that the Commander called on most often. He seemed to have an elite group amongst his already elite force, three of which were sparring with these warriors.

Among those powerful soldiers, one in particular stood out. His name, Estrella had learned, was Jalen, and he had been training since boyhood, left by his mother when he was still young. He had been a soldier of the Academy longer than any of them and was likely the best fighter, though Estrella knew too little of human warfare to say for sure. He was standing closest to her, and his brown hair was plastered to his brown face, soaked in sweat. She watched him smile and exchange words with his much younger sparring partner before turning to face the Commander, who'd stepped forward from the shadow of the tower.

"Men, the date of our attack is closing in," he announced. "Perth will soon be rid of the vermin Fae creatures who dwell in the Forest lands. Then the kingdom will be forever safe from their dangerous magic.

"You have trained hard for many years to complete this mission, and you have all done well, each one of you has proven to me time and time again your commitment to our cause. You have given your very lives to this, and for that, I commend you. Be ready, our time is coming soon. Dismissed."

His speech caused the crowd to disperse and Estrella watched darkly as they all headed back to the tower. Anger burned hot in her blood and her fists clenched and unclenched reflexively. The dull-witted humans believed they could kill them, all the Fae people of the Old Kingdom. The idea was completely ridiculous and if she hadn't been so angry, she might have laughed.

As it was, she found herself leaping down from the boughs of the oak tree, landing in a crouch in the soft meadow grass. With their backs turned, none of the warriors had seen her. Extending an arm towards the Academy's fence, she tore it in two and ripped it apart. The

metal screeched as it shattered into a million pieces and flew like shrapnel at the tower's base.

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While the Sorceress was planning and plotting her assault, there was one soldier in the Academy who had been enjoying a relatively quiet and easy morning at his training. The sun was out and warm, the sky clear and blue, and the opponent he'd been paired with far too easy to beat. It was a lazy day.

This warrior's name was Jalen and he had spent the last fifteen years of his life under the command of the Academy, dedicated to training to become a great soldier. Or so he had pretended all these years. In truth he was there for no other reason than passing away his days since his mother had left him behind.

Underneath his heavy armor, he was sweating profusely and he could feel his curly, damp hair sticking uncomfortably to his face and neck. He enjoyed the physical strain and strategy of fighting, but this was little more than exercising and his sparring partner left much to be desired.

"Harder! Harder!" Their Commander was yelling at them again, not an unusual occurrence. Jalen was used to his hard, brusque tone and temperament, he'd grown up with it. His partner, a boy named Jayce, who was about eight years his junior, obeyed the Commander's orders, swinging harder, but failing to keep his strokes at the same speed and fluidity, making him an easy enough target. Jalen simply defended the blows and attempted none of his own, not wanting to overwhelm the youngster. Though he didn't usually mind, that day he did feel a slight bit of irritation being paired with one of the beginners yet again.

Despite being among the circle of eldest and best fighters, Jalen was still treated like one of the green boys. It was the Commander, who held a special grudge against him. They did not see eye-to-eye on many topics and Jalen was not a particularly quiet and submissive subordinate. He had no qualms about sharing his opinions, loudly and brashly when needed. That had earned him a bad place on the Commander's radar and had branded him a troublemaker and irritant. The previous commander, a man named Eroh, had been a much kinder man, still firm and demanding, as he ought to be, but kind as well, considerate and wise.

He had retired ten years prior, leaving his second-in-command to captain their small but mighty host. No one knew why he had retired, he'd barely been in his fifties then, still in the prime of his life, an incredibly capable man. He had left suddenly and bitterly and no one had been able to explain or understand why. Nor had he been seen again.

Jalen missed him often, for he had been more than a commander to him. He'd taken him in when he'd had nowhere else to go, mentored him, listened to him, protected him and raised him like a son. Then one day, he had left. It had been one of the hardest days of Jalen's life.

"And stop!" the Commander's voice echoed through the yard and Jalen was jarred from his thoughts. He realized suddenly, feeling horrible, that he had thrown back a few blows, and Jayce was wincing from the sting of them, rubbing his sore left arm.

"Sorry, Jayce," he apologized sheepishly. "I was distracted, I didn't mean to hit you so hard."

"S'okay, Jalen," the boy replied, sounding none the worse for wear, and rather pleased with himself. "I can show the other boys the bruise I got from you today, they'll all be jealous that the Commander thought I was good enough to fight you!"

Jalen laughed. "You do have a pretty good arm there for someone your age. Good thing I hit the left one."

Jayce yanked his helm off, nodding enthusiastically as Jalen patted him on the back, removing his own helmet and turning to face the Commander, who had emerged from the shade of the tower.

"Men, the date of our attack is closing in," he announced, and Jalen felt the hand on Jayce's back tighten into a fist. "Perth will soon be rid of the vermin Fae creatures who dwell in the Forest lands. Then the kingdom will be forever safe from their dangerous magic."

A murmur of assent rippled through the crowd of soldiers, including young Jayce. Jalen however, remained silent and tight-lipped, a bitter feeling creeping up in the back of his throat.

"You have trained hard for many years to complete this mission, and you have all done well, each one of you has proven to me time and time again your commitment to our cause. You have given your very lives to this, and for that, I commend you. Be ready, our time is coming soon. Dismissed."

The crowd of men and boys began to disperse, most heading back towards the tower for their lunch meal. Jalen had been quite hungry, at least until hearing the Commander's speech. Now he was mostly angry. The original purpose of the Academy had never been for the murder of the Fae people, it was never Commander Eroh's mission to annihilate the Old Kingdom. But over the past ten years, under the command of their new leader, Commander Han, that was what it had become. That was the main source of conflict between Han and Jalen, who vehemently disagreed with the political scheming that Han had laid down. He

claimed that they were the king's orders, and that only made Jalen more angry. Yet he could do nothing about it, he was tied to the Academy for life, and only death could break his vows.

As he followed the crowd back to the tower, he thought he caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning his head, he scanned the meadow around and saw nothing. Shrugging it off, he continued on his way, reaching up to wipe the sweat from his forehead, when a terrible screeching noise suddenly erupted from behind.

His fellow soldiers let out sounds of surprise and turned. Jalen did the same. To all their dismay and horror, the metal fences that enclosed the training area had been ripped apart and torn out of the ground, broken into a million razor-like pieces. There was a figure standing beneath the boughs of the old oak tree, dressed all in black, with arms raised.

It was a Fae woman, Jalen realized quickly. And she was attacking the Academy.

It seemed he was the only one with the presence of mind to turn and flee when the shrapnel came flying.

"Run!" he shouted, fleeing for the shelter of the tower as the screams of his comrades went up around the courtyard.

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The sight of the soldiers scattering every which way in terror brought Estrella a bitter sort of pleasure. Most of them managed to escape the flying metal shards, but she heard the screams of a few who were hit and watched them sink to the ground in pain. She approached the courtyard, unafraid, and confident in her ability to destroy. The tower was next on her hit list. She reached for it, the currents of her magic cupping its tall, round structure, and then pulled it apart, brick by brick.

It began to crumble and fall, bits and pieces landing on the terrified soldiers in the yard. Many of them were still scurrying about in a panic, however, Estrella had not failed to notice those who had gathered themselves and prepared an assault. Several archers appeared from the windows of the hall and began firing, but she easily blocked their arrows, letting them glance aside and fall harmless to the dirt as she continued to unmake the ugly tower which had stood sentry in the valley for so many years.

The arrows continued to rain down and she heard shouts of command ringing through the chaos, but she barely registered them in her mind, keeping her focus on the tower. If she could pull it all the way down she was certain to take out a large number of them, as well as frighten the rest into submission and discourage any future assaults on her people.

A troop of foot-soldiers was marching towards her but she paid them little heed at the time. Once they got within range she could easily take them down with hardly a flick of her wrist. This was easy, so very easy. The Wizard had warned her against taking on such an ominous force with questionable result. In fact, if Estrella was being honest with herself, he had flat out denied her permission to attack. But as their efforts to engage with and destroy the Fae people grew greater by the day, she had declined to sit back and watch any longer. The Wizard was away now, it was summer and he spent his summers on his island, so he wouldn't learn of what she'd done for another few months. By then the world wouldn't even remember this Academy, it would be nothing but ruins and rubble.

Yet, for a moment, a flicker of doubt lingered in the back of her mind, distracting her from the task at hand. The Wizard's approval meant much to her, he'd devoted many hundreds of years to raising her and teaching her his magic. And here she was, betraying the trust he'd bestowed in her...

As she considered this, she heard a footfall behind her, turning just in time to avoid the silver blade of one of the soldiers being buried in her back. Instead, it scraped itself down her shoulder and her arm. Shocked by this, she screamed in pain, how could that be? No mortal blade could pierce her skin. She was protected by her spells, this couldn't be happening.

Glancing down at the injured arm, she saw the tear in her favorite black cloak and the blood running down her flesh. Her magic ceased as her concentration was ripped away and she wheeled on her attacker, eyes flashing in anger.

"You!" she snapped fiercely when she saw who it was. The special warrior, the older one who had been training for years. The one she had come to kill. Jalen.

He was sweaty, and bloody as well, her shower of metal shards had seemed to slice his cheek. The blade he held in his hand was raised defensively, and blood, her blood, dripped from its edge. It was a beautiful weapon, and all-too familiar to Estrella.

"Give up, witch," he growled. "You know you can't fight this. This is one of your people's magic blades."

"Where did you get that?" she hissed, feeling her fingers itching for magic. She tried to knock the knife from his hand, but he held on tight, refusing to give up the one thing that could destroy her.

"My mother gave me this," he said, voice hard. "She told me what it was too, and how it can be used. If you don't back down, I'll kill you, although I don't want to."

Estrella laughed at him. "You? Kill me? Don't be ridiculous."

“I will,” Jalen insisted, holding the knife threateningly aloft. “Don’t make me have to.”

“I can’t make you do anything,” she answered tersely, using one hand to block the volley of arrows that were released anew from the tower. “I’m here to destroy this place, and as many of you as possible.”

“It’s my sworn duty to stop you.”

“Go ahead then,” she returned. “If you can.”

She reached back for the tower and heaved with all her might, pulling it apart and sending rocks flying this way and that. The screams of soldiers hit her ears, but they were drowned out by the great crash of the rubble.

Enraged, Jalen lunged at her, his arms encircling her waist, a fact which greatly surprised Estrella, how could he touch her? She was supposed to be guarded from the mortals...

She flipped herself over midair, throwing him beneath her and onto the ground, however, she did not think that he would still have a grip on her after hitting the dirt. With a great heave he tossed her towards the tower where she landed just inside the courtyard perimeters, or what would have been had the fence still been standing.

Estrella felt suddenly odd, almost dizzy, but it wasn’t in her head, it was deep in her body, she trembled a little when she got back to her feet to meet Jalen, who was striding towards her, knife still in hand.

This time, she was prepared to block his advances, she raised her fingers and...

...Nothing. Nothing happened. Jalen smirked a little and she looked at him, horrified. The strange feeling of vertigo flared up inside her and she felt very weak and empty.

“What did you do to me?” she shrieked, looking at her powerless hands. He shrugged innocently, but she could read his face as clear as a book. They’d laid some sort of spell on this place, not strong enough to affect her magic from the outside, but strong enough to affect her from within.

“Let me go,” she whispered, more frightened than she was willing to let on. She had to get past him and back out. But he had that accursed knife and she had nothing but ordinary mortal skills to rely on. She had always been a fast runner, but she was willing to bet he knew how to throw that knife...



“I can’t do that,” he answered, sounding almost sorry for her. “You’ll have to answer for this.”

He approached her slowly, the knife in his hand. She took a step back, and then panicked. Giving into her primal instincts, she took off.

She was fast, but he was too, his free hand shot out and wrapped tight around her forearm, yanking her just close enough to bury the knife into the meat of her thigh.

Howling in pain as adrenaline filled her blood, she ripped away from his grasp, knocking herself down in the process. She was up again in a flash, and in a few steps, had exited the Academy perimeter. Jalen took after her as she limped furiously towards the forest, blood gushing from her wound, but just as he reached for her shoulder, she erupted in a cloud of smoke. And disappeared.

Jalen was left behind, coughing and covering his mouth, the Academy lying in ruins at his back.