



One: You Are a Weapon

Sacet

‘I will never understand why you saved her,’ my grandfather said from behind the tent wall. ‘Stop pretending she’s your flesh and blood. She’s one of *them*. Sooner or later, she’ll snap and hurt your son.’

I crept over the hot sand, careful not to make any noise. I placed my hands on the matted animal-skin wall and leaned closer to hear them talking about me. My family’s shadows were visible through the tarp as vague and blurry silhouettes.

Dad gave a gruff sigh. ‘I’m sick of having this conversation.’

‘Aberym, Sacet is a part of our family now,’ my mother chimed in. ‘And we will protect her.’

Would I get in trouble if they knew I was listening in? No, I had a right to know.

‘I’m not asking to kill her, Enni,’ my grandfather replied. ‘But she shouldn’t be here with our people.’

I gasped, then held my breath as his outline moved closer to the wall I was hiding behind. I knew he hated me, but not that much.

‘That’s not for you to decide,’ my father replied.

My grandfather sighed and I saw his silhouette lower, perhaps to sit. ‘Today I spied on her. She used her powers again to make a portal

from here all the way to the lake without seeing it. Now, imagine if she had training...'

'She's ten cycles old!' my mother blurted, before adjusting back to a whisper. 'She won't be a part of this war anymore.'

That's right, you tell him! I fought the urge to agree out loud.

'We're not putting a gun in our daughter's hands,' my father added.

'You won't have to,' my grandfather said, standing again and pacing. 'Think about it. She could unite our scattered people with these portals. Our armies could teleport all over the world and strike back against the Dominions.'

'I *need* to test how far these portals can go. Maybe there is no limit? Let me take her to the other settlements. We could make a link between our people... for trade at first. And on the way I'll train her to defend herself.'

Mum approached, now face to face with him. 'No.'

My grandfather scoffed. 'Come now, you've babied this weapon long enough. Son? Please see reason.'

I put my hand over my mouth to stifle a cry. I'm just a *weapon* to him? There was an extended silence. I could hear my own heart beating.

'You're getting too old for this,' Dad finally replied. 'You can't fight like you used to. We'll go with you. All of us together, as a family. And only to help *unite* our people.'

Footsteps thudded on the rocky pathway leading up to our tent. I ducked down even lower by the side wall. Another shadow, smaller than the others, ran inside.

'Arleigh?' Mum said. 'What's the matter?'

I could hear my friend panting, unable to speak.

'Where's Eno?' Mum persisted. 'I thought you were taking care of him?'

'I... I can't find him,' she managed between gasps. 'We were playing... and...'

'The river,' my father said, cutting Arleigh short. 'Did you check there?'

The silhouettes rushed out together.

'Where did you last see him?' I heard my mother say as they ran to the village's centre.

I clambered up from my hiding spot by the tent's side and watched them run down the path. Dad, Arleigh, and my grandfather made for the river, while Mum ducked into the other tents to alert the villagers.

Where had my little brother gotten to? If it were me on toddler-duty, he'd be bugging me to climb the cliffs with him again. He wanted to see the wastelands for himself. Maybe that's where he went?

I sprinted down the path towards the east side of the village. As I passed the tents, I received several disparaging stares from the villagers. They must have thought I was up to something, as usual.

Finally clear of the village, I began scaling the winding cliff path as fast as I was able. After scrambling over numerous dirt chunks and boulders, I paused along the cliff ledge to catch my breath.

I turned and peered back down into the canyon. There was a sheer drop below. The settlement, nestled between the canyon's wall and the winding river, was now abuzz with villagers fanning out and searching for Eno. Many headed along the riverbank in both directions.

Would they have shown this much concern for me? Probably not. I clenched my fists.

There was a fresh set of tracks in the sand alongside mine on the winding path, belonging to someone much smaller. Eno. The tracks led to an offshoot of the canyon, the dry chasm. Of course, the one place my parents told me to never go.

I should probably tell someone. I opened my mouth, about to call out to the people below. Wait, if I found him first, maybe the villagers would finally treat me better? Maybe my grandfather would stop hating me? *I* should be the one to bring him back.

I turned my back to the settlement and followed the footprints. The ledge grew narrower and forked into numerous, crumbly paths. The footprints were lost along the rocky ground. He couldn't have climbed out of the canyon yet, surely?

I chose the higher path, keeping as close to the cliff as I could. It wasn't long before I heard the faintest of whimpers coming from below.

'Eno?' I called. I got on my knees and slid closer to the edge to peer over the side, down into the deep chasm. 'Where are you?'

'Sassy!' I heard him call up.

There he was, sitting with his back to the rocks on a lower layer that jutted out from the cliff. There was nowhere for him to go, other than down. Tears had swelled around his blue eyes. His clothes and his

normally blonde hair were covered in dirt, no doubt from falling and attempting to climb back up.

‘Sassa, I want Mummy,’ he pleaded. ‘I want Mummy!’

‘Don’t move!’ I shouted, my voice echoing through the chasm. ‘I’m coming to get you, okay?’

I was determined to be the one to rescue him. I’d prove how grown up I was, how trustworthy. I stood, backed away from the ledge, closed my eyes and began to twirl my fingers. Picturing both Eno’s ledge and my own position in my mind, I strained until all of my muscles went stiff.

Something was off. I had made three portals today, the most I’d ever made. My limbs felt heavy, and sweat beaded on my forehead as I kept straining, but nothing came from my effort. It was no use.

‘Sassa!’

‘Hold on!’ I got back down on my knees and positioned myself on the ledge directly over him as he began to bawl. ‘Mummy’s on her way, alright? She’s coming.’

Eno wasn’t that far down, I could reach him. I threw out my hand. ‘Eno, grab me. Big sis can pull you up.’

He refused to budge, instead continuing to moan, which echoed off the canyon walls.

‘Come on, reach Sassy’s hand,’ I said, but it didn’t motivate him.

A harsh, screeching noise sounded from farther down the chasm. Eno stopped bawling and we both went silent. We knew what it was.

‘Eno... take my hand,’ I murmured. ‘Stand up and reach.’

A new kind of fear had taken my brother. He stood up, eyes wide and tear-filled, and mouth agape but silent.

Scuttling insectoid legs hammered below. The echo made it impossible to know how many of them there were. But then I saw one. The necrolisk rose from the depths of the chasm, the behemoth scaling the wall, as if it were flat ground.

‘Eno?’ I called, my eyes fixed upon the creature. I felt a brush against my fingertips and looked down to see Eno reaching out. I latched onto his sweaty, dirt-encrusted hand and yanked him up. I grabbed him with both arms and ran towards the village.

The necrolisk reached the ledge and launched itself onto the path, blocking our only way back. Its carapace was covered in spikes and glistening crimson scales. Its sharp head, more teeth than anything else,

snapped about and located us. The six legs danced up and down as the creature turned to face us. It raised its gigantic claws high into the air.

I had never seen a live necrolisk up close before. It was far larger than any man from our village. My blood was ice.

It opened its jaws and roared again, pounding my eardrums. My legs refused to move. More scuttling could be heard by the chasm to our side. The creature lowered its head and slowly closed in, as if relishing the kill.

My shaking legs gave way, and I fell with Eno back into the sand. Eno squealed and hid his face into my robes. I kicked at the sand to push us back, but the monster was already looming over us. One of its pincers opened and hovered around my head, preparing to snap shut. The inside was filled with razor-sharp barbs.

There was an explosion and a shower of green blood engulfed us. Eno flew out of my grasp to the side. After clearing the blood from my eyes, I shot back up again. The necrolisk's body was headless, unmoving and slumped against the cliff wall.

On the other side of the chasm, on the highest ledge of the cliffs, our parents stood with their rifles aimed at the fallen monster.

'Sacet, take Eno and get back to the village!' Mum shouted. The canyon repeated her commands over and over.

The scuttling grew louder, and Eno and I saw at least ten more necrolisks ascending the other side of the chasm, right towards Mum and Dad. They noticed them too, and backed away from the ledge.

'Go!' Dad shouted, gesturing back to safety.

They both climbed up and out of the canyon, then ran into the desert wastes and out of sight. Their pursuers reached the canyon's precipice and followed.

Eno was sitting to my side, shaking and not taking his eye off the monster's corpse in front of us. He flicked his hands towards the creature as if he were trying to push it away.

'No! Get away!' he screamed, sobbing as he did so. 'Stop it! Get away!'

As if listening to him, the carcass slowly dangled over the ledge, then slid off, tumbling back down into the chasm's depths.

I still couldn't move. My robes were mottled in the monster's green blood.

A horde of other villagers, many holding weapons, clambered up the rocks towards us. I recognised the white beard of our grandfather leading them. A shrill scream in the distance broke my stupor.

‘Mumma?’ Eno cried, rising and scanning the other side of the canyon. ‘Mummy? Mummy!’

The villagers stopped in their tracks and scanned the other side of the chasm. The gunfire had ceased. Aside from Eno’s cries, the canyon went silent.

‘Azua!’ our grandfather called out, his words echoing along the rocks. ‘Azua, are you okay?’ He waited for a moment before directing the others. ‘Go!’

The villagers hurriedly changed direction, heading down the canyon path to find a way up the other side.

Our grandfather turned back to us and continued the climb. When he reached us he leant down and picked up a now bawling Eno. With Eno tucked in his arms, he looked down at me for a moment and turned back to the path, leaving me to sit alone.



That night, Eno was lying on his pelt-covered bed, not moving, and not as excitable as usual. I crashed onto my own bed and bashed my pillow.

‘Thank you for your father’s offer, but we’re not going with you,’ my grandfather said to our visitor at the tent’s entrance. ‘Tell him we wish the rest of you luck, but we have our own plan.’

Arleigh stood at the parted doorway, confused. ‘Well, can I at least say goodbye to Eno... to Sacet?’

My grandfather shook his head. ‘We’ll say our goodbyes when we part ways in the morning.’

Arleigh hesitated, but nodded, and gave a half-wave to Eno and I.

My grandfather closed the cloth door and stared at the ground. He took a seat on Eno’s trunk. ‘Why, Sacet? Why did you have to take Eno up there?’

I clambered to the end of my bed and stared at him pleadingly. ‘I didn’t! I was the one who found him.’

He sneered and shook his head. ‘Why do you keep lying to me?’

I smacked the bed. ‘I’m not! Why won’t you believe me?’

He sighed. The wind howled, rippling the edges of the tent.

I wiped away a tear. ‘Why do we have to leave?’

‘The village is packing up. We can’t stay this close to necrolisks.’

‘But why can’t we stay with the others?’ I shot back. ‘It’s safer together.’

‘I want Mummy and Daddy to come, too,’ Eno cried out, breaking his silence. He shot up from his bed and punched his sheets, mimicking me.

Our grandfather closed his eyes and then tried his best to compose himself before looking back at Eno. ‘Your mum and dad have gone far away.’

‘Don’t lie to him,’ I said. ‘You are the king of lies.’

He stood up from the trunk. ‘Sacet, you can’t talk to me that way. I’m your grandfather.’

‘No, you’re not!’ I yelled back, throwing myself face-first into my pillow behind me. Tears formed in my eyes and dampened the fabric upon my cheek.

He went quiet. ‘What do you remember? Where you came from? What you are?’

‘Everything,’ I muffled through my pillow.

I could hear Eno get out of his bed and amble over to me. He prodded me in the side. ‘Hey, Sassy? Where’s Mummy?’

I sat up, tears now flowing freely, and brought Eno onto my bed to hug him. ‘They’re dead, Eno. They’re dead and they’re never coming back.’ I bawled and held Eno tight.

The toddler wore a far more baffled look than before. ‘Ne – ver?’

I shook my head, flinging tears about. ‘I heard what you said today. Why did you say those things? I would never hurt Eno! I love him.’

He raised an eyebrow and smirked. ‘That was just... you must have misheard.’

‘No more lies!’ I shouted back. ‘You think I’m a weapon.’

‘Yeah!’ Eno agreed, although not sure to what. ‘Bring Mummy back!’

Our grandfather leant over and picked up Eno, then sat back down on the trunk with my brother on his knee. He gave a warm smile, as if defeated. ‘You’re absolutely right, Sacet. The truth is you *are* a weapon. I will train you to be the deadliest warrior this world has ever seen.’

He lowered his head closer to me. ‘But there is one lie I want you to keep and never forget.’ He gestured down at his grandson. ‘You are his big sister. He is your brother. And we are a family.’



Two: A Bitter Wind

Six cycles later
Bound for the ruins of Teersau

I smashed my closed fists down onto Eno's high guard like a hammer. His incorrect blocking technique started to give way. Every time I hit, he shifted back in the sand closer to the river.

I was too strong for him. My sixteen cycles compared to his ten made a big difference to our sparring; while he had hardly any muscle-tone, I was the strongest I had ever been.

'Keep that guard up, Eno!' Aberym shouted with a cracked voice. 'Fight back, come on!'

Eno's grandfather stood farther up the riverbank, getting angrier at my success and his grandson's lack of progress. He never tried to inspire confidence in me, only his *real* grandchild.

Eno lowered his arms and groaned in pain, so I backed away.

I mirrored his stance and raised my arms as if sparring an invisible opponent. 'Try to angle them. Like this, see?'

His face twisted. 'I'm doing it like that. You're hitting me too hard!'

'Both of you stop!' Aberym called as he trudged down the bank. His long, airy robes dragged a path through the sand.

He glanced at both ends of the river-canyon, as well as the cliffs above, probably to make sure no one was watching us. Then he gently patted Eno's shoulder. 'Go refill your bottle and take a swim.'

Eno exhaled and loosened his posture. He leant down to pick up his leather-covered canteen out of the sand, before traipsing down the embankment.

Now that Eno was out of earshot, Aberym shot a loathsome look at me. 'This is your fault. You lack control... restraint.'

I folded my arms and furrowed my brow. 'I'm sparring with him like you sparred against me when I was his age. He won't learn anything if I don't attack with intent. *You* taught me that.'

He gritted his teeth. 'If I say you're going too hard on him, then that's exactly what you're doing!'

I shook my head, rolled my eyes, and smirked, before following in Eno's tracks.

'And where do you think you're going?' he asked, and I stopped mid-stride. 'I didn't say you were finished.'

I glanced over my shoulder and gestured to the water where Eno had now jubilantly submerged himself. 'Can't I get a drink first?'

'No,' he replied, approaching me from behind. 'You're training isn't over. Close your eyes.'

I sighed loudly. 'Not this again, you know I can't open portals anymore.'

'Close them!'

I complied, standing in place. Aberym drew closer. The wind whistled along the canyon walls, and Eno splashed in the water behind me.

'I want you to remember what happened to Eno's parents,' Aberym began.

I peeked at him and sneered. 'They were my parents, too.'

'Enough!' He glanced back at Eno and made sure he wasn't paying attention before continuing, 'I want you to picture them in your mind. Where they died. *How...* they died.'

My lips trembled. 'This is a waste of time.'

'Hold out your hands,' he said. I shook my head. After a brief pause, he latched onto my wrist and yanked it up higher. 'You could have saved them if you had opened a portal.'

I shook my head. 'No, they ran off before I...'

Aberym began to slowly encircle me. ‘You knew how to make portals by then, you must have made at least five that day alone. But you froze in the moment it mattered most.’

‘You can’t put this on me,’ I replied.

‘Strain your wrists. Open a portal, now!’

I stood motionless and strained, but nothing came. I couldn’t even remember what it felt like to open a portal. ‘I can’t do it.’ A kick to the back of my knee forced me to kneel in the sand.

‘The necrolisks are coming,’ he said in my ear. ‘Get up and save them!’

I had enough. I shot up, opened my eyes, and gave a scathing glare. A single tear rolled down my cheek. I quickly wiped it away.

I brushed past him, knocking his shoulder, before stomping back up the embankment and into the cave where we were keeping our gear.

‘You can’t walk away every time you fail,’ Aberym called out, his words echoing through the canyon. ‘If you do, your failures will follow you to the ends of this world.’



‘Are you awake, Sas?’ I heard a faint whisper say.

I rolled on our fur rug to face Eno, who was sitting up. The midnight blue sky outlined his silhouette. The cave’s mouth sheltered us.

I looked over to Aberym to make sure he was still asleep. He wasn’t snoring, but his eyes were closed.

I sat up too, and watched the dark river outside the cave. ‘What’s the matter?’ I whispered back. ‘Can’t sleep again? Should we move our rug outside?’

Eno focused into the dark cave. He had always hated confined spaces ever since he was young, hence why we weren’t camped deeper in. He shook his head. ‘No, it’s not that. I don’t think Grandpa wanted to make you feel bad today. Whatever he said, I’m sure he’s just... trying to help.’

Help? All these cycles, Aberym had downright resented me for losing my abilities. But I didn’t want to make that Eno’s problem.

‘Don’t worry about it, okay? It’s going to be over soon. When we reach the forest, he’ll see how great everything is there, and... maybe we can just...’

Eno shrugged. ‘Live a normal life?’

I smiled back and nodded. ‘Yeah, a normal life.’

He yawned and laid back onto the rug. ‘I’d... like that.’ He quickly drifted off again.

I leant over and draped his sheet over him again.

Now awake and reminded of my woes, my mind continued to loop through my doubts and guilt. The dark river’s flow seemed to slow.



Outside the Teersau ruins

‘We’ve made it, look,’ Aberym said the next afternoon, pointing to the hazy vision on the bright horizon. ‘The ruins of Teersau. We have completed our great pilgrimage.’

I plodded up the next dune, pulling Eno up it by the hand. The ruins were flanked on all sides by craggy, dry hills. There was no green to be seen anywhere.

‘So that’s the promised land? Another endless stretch of desert? Where’s the lush trees, the wide rivers and lakes, and the “bountiful wildlife to feast on” you told us about?’

He shook his head. ‘The city is on the border of this land. We’re in Metus now, as promised. Beyond the hills is the *final* stretch, and then... a great forest, with a network of many rivers and lakes.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘How far is it?’

‘The next river is two days away.’

Eno moaned. ‘I don’t have enough in my canteen for that!’

Aberym pointed up at the sky. ‘Right there, another L line, see? We’re on the right track.’

In the distance was a line of white in the otherwise blue sky. It had a distinct curve about it. Seeing one was considered good luck, although I never understood why. Like a few others I had seen in my lifetime, it hung there, motionless, like a tear in the sky.

Aberym chuckled. ‘If your sister could open portals, we could make the trip by nightfall.’

I ignored him as I strode down the next dune. ‘And let me guess,’ I called back, ‘when we get to this paradise, we’re going to spend all our time searching for more settlements, right?’ I stopped and looked between them.

Aberym stopped too. ‘Sacet, your power, when you finally get it working again, will save this world.’

I exhaled. ‘*Uh-huh*, I thought you’d say that.’

Eno walked past him, avoiding eye contact. When he reached me, we both continued down the dune, focusing on where we stepped.

‘Kids,’ Aberym called, and we stopped once more. ‘When we find a good place to rest, a settlement with food, water and shade, how about we stay longer than usual? You both deserve a rest.’

Eno rolled his eyes. ‘Longer than usual, so what... two days instead of one?’

Aberym attempted a smile. ‘How about a week?’

I nodded slowly. ‘Okay, you promise?’

‘I promise,’ he replied as he reached us.

Eno looked positively ecstatic. ‘Maybe there’ll be other kids?’ He smiled at me. ‘Other kids!’

I smiled back. ‘Maybe some my age for once, too.’

Eno wore a mischievous smirk. ‘Yeah, I bet you’re hoping for all of them to be boys, huh?’

‘Shut it!’ I tried snatching at him but he ran down the dune ahead of me.

‘Well,’ Aberym began, pointing to the ruins in the distance, ‘let’s get there first.’

Eno led our trio with a spring in his step, reinvigorated by the potential of other kids to meet. Aberym and I trailed behind. When our eyes met, I didn’t feel my usual hate for him. Was he capable of inspiring me after all?