



Obscura  
Rhapsody

No 2



by Julio Angel Ortiz

“Castaways and Cutouts”

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## **Paths of Exile**

*A novel*

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Exiles

*(Obscura Rhapsody 1 to 5)*

### **Book Two**

Moonlight Scherzo

*(Obscura Rhapsody 6 to 10)*

### **Book Three**

Roué

*(Obscura Rhapsody 11 to 16)*

Khloe dreamed that she was adrift in a sea of ice and broken light.

She was enveloped in the comforting cold and weightlessness of a lake, and as she stared up through the streams of shattered light she could see a vague reflection of herself on the frozen surface. Beyond the icy heavens, Khloe could discern the faded blue and gray of the sky.

Khloe closed her eyes and relished the serenity in the soothing water and silence. Her thoughts drifted, reflecting in the streams of light. She lazily opened her eyes, and thought of the father from her youth, his visage painted to life on one of the rays of light. His reddish-brown hair glinting beneath the loving sun of a late spring day. As he towered over her minute frame, he would sometimes block out its radiance, a shadow giant stealing the light from the sky. And those giant hands would come down from the heavens and lift her up, swinging Khloe around to a song of laughter and bring her so close to the sky that for a moment she swore she could touch it, and frame the clouds as she willed.

As she was looking up through another stream of light she saw a woman floating, reclining as if on an invisible divan. Her bronze skin appeared soft, with long ebony hair that was pulled back. Khloe could make out the woman's exquisite eyes and parted lips, painted a deep burgundy. It took a moment for Khloe to realize that the woman was not a hazy memory reflected in the light, but rather an anomaly floating up near the surface of the lake. The woman turned towards Khloe, and a thin smile crept across her lips.

"You must be Khloe," she said.

Khloe did not expect to feel startled, but something about the woman's manner was unnatural. Khloe couldn't quite put her finger on it. Around her, the water began to feel colder, and the light began to fade into bubbles that quickly drifted away. Beyond the icy surface, the blue skies suffused to a full gray.

"Don't be startled, Khloe," the woman said. "Though I'm impressed you picked up on it so quickly."

Khloe's eyebrows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"That you picked up on the unnaturalness of my appearance. Even in something as precarious and deceptive as a dream, you sensed the... incongruity... of my presence."

Khloe just stared at her.

"My name is Akaja," the woman finally said.

It took a moment for the name to sink in. *Oh*, Khloe remembered, *Aedyn's friend*.

The one that could speak to him through her mind.

"Very good," Akaja said, favoring Khloe with a genuine smile. "Yes, I'm Aedyn's friend with whom he appeared to be having that nonsensical, solitary conversation."

"And now you're... here?" Khloe said.

"I figured that it was time I met you. I had to see the person that caused Aedyn to diverge from his plans."

"Plans?" Khloe asked. "He mentioned that he was going to rescue a friend. Is that what you're talking about?"

Akaja nodded. "That would be Allana."

"Allana?"

Akaja chuckled to herself, a laugh that contained a trace of derision. "Yes. She was one of us, an old dear friend of Aedyn and... well, she and I weren't always friends, but I always respected her. Even if she didn't think so."

"So you were a member of the Shadow Vanguard as well?"

Akaja's smile turned bittersweet. "Yes. I was once a member of that... mighty... band of adventurers. As you probably surmised by now, Aedyn was our leader."

Khloe thought back to Aedyn's determination and fierce will in facing the bandits in the forest. She had not considered it on a surface level, but here,

with Akaja in the dream realm, she could discern a certain aspect of Aedyn's nature that she hadn't been able to before.

"Good," Akaja said approvingly.

"Are you reading my mind?" Khloe said, suddenly feeling very self-conscious.

Akaja shrugged. "I can't help it. Okay, that's not entirely correct. I can help it. But with people that I'm more familiar with. Or people that are very strong willed, I can't break through their mental barriers unless they let their guards down. With you... well, I'm just trying to get to know you. Figure out how you work. Please, don't take offense to it. I really don't mean anything by it and I certainly don't judge."

"Stop it now!" Khloe said, more harshly than she intended.

"What? Afraid I'll discover that you find Aedyn somewhat attractive? Don't feel awkward about that. We've all felt that way about him. Even Allana, and that made it even more awkward considering he was her —"

"Stop!" Khloe repeated.

Akaja fell silent. After a beat, she said, "I'm sorry. I meant no offense."

Khloe relaxed at Akaja's contrition, and it was immediately followed up by shame at her reaction. For a moment the women stared at each other across the virtual chasm, until at last Khloe spoke up.

"So this is your Obscura talent?"

"Dream walking? Yeah, I guess you could say that. Although it's really more involved than that. Going into people's dreams isn't all that useful in battle, is it? Unless I'm putting them to sleep, but then I'd have to go sleep myself to do any damage to them. And that wouldn't be tactically sound on the battlefield, would it?"

Khloe, despite herself, laughed.

"No, I can also... cloud, I suppose you could say, people's minds. Summon short-term illusions, things like that. Nothing too complex during battle or

that lasts too long. But it has its uses."

Khloe sighed. "I'm not even sure how useful my Obscura talent is." She sounded full of self-pity, and Khloe regretted the words as soon as they had left her lips.

"Oh, no, I wouldn't say that." Akaja looked up at the faux sky. "I knew their previous master. He put them to quite good use."

"What was he like?"

"Jazen? He was..." Akaja's voice drifted for a moment, lost in reverie. "He was skilled, and kind, and was... well, he was the best of us." Akaja coughed. "Jazen tried to be the best of what he hoped to see in people."

Khloe saw the melancholy in Akaja's eyes, which quickly flickered and vanished, as Akaja's calm demeanor returned. "Anyhow, I've kept you too long. I am glad to have made your acquaintance. We'll meet again later."

"In Sharizen?"

"Possibly," Akaja said, everything fading to white, as if an unexpected snow drift had swept in. "Take care."

And then Khloe woke up.

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Aedyn was stoking the fires of their camp when Khloe awoke with a slight start. Aedyn saw Khloe groggily shift in her wraparound blanket, and then sit up. Aedyn couldn't help but smile, and glanced at the canopy of stars above. He was grateful that the weather had held up over the past few days of their journey. Although Khloe had stated that she was on her way to see her father, Aedyn did not get the impression that she was used to this type of sojourn. He shook his head at the memories of the countless times that he had slept out underneath either starry skies or torrential rain, and the occasional harsh winters of the Far North during his younger years campaigning against the Blood Wolves. An involuntary shiver gripped his body.

"Sleep well?" he asked, reaching into a sack and removing strips of smoked meat.

Khloe rubbed her eyes. "What time is it?"

"About two hours before dawn," he said.

Khloe sighed, and sitting up, scrunched up her knees to her chest. She laid her head down on her knees and looked off into the distance, her mind drifting. After a moment she said, "I met your friend."

It took a moment for Aedyn to catch her meaning. "Oh, Akaja."

"Mmm-hmm."

Aedyn chuckled. "Akaja can appear... aloof. But she's good people."

"I got that impression."

"Bullshit," Aedyn said with a smile. "You thought she was a snobby *shek'ta*."

"Okay, I admit it."

Aedyn laughed and offered Khloe a strip of smoked meat. Khloe thanked him and took it.

"But... she told me you're going after Allana."

Aedyn felt himself stiffen, reaching back into his satchel and removing some fruit. He took a bite and allowed a moment to pass before responding.

"Yes, Allana. That's the friend I told you about."

"Well," Khloe said, "you haven't really told me much of anything about her."

Aedyn gave Khloe a side glance. "What else is there that I'm supposed to tell you about her?"

Khloe took a bite, appearing to cycle through the next words in her mind. "You said she needed saving."

"I did."

"Why?"

Aedyn reached over to the large branch next to him and began to stoke the fires again, in a listless manner.

"What does it matter?" he said at length.

Khloe took another bite. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry..."

Aedyn raised a hand. "No, no. You're not prying. I offered for you to come with me, so I do owe you something of an explanation."

Khloe considered his words but said nothing.

"Allana is one of my oldest and dearest friends. We've adventured since we were kids... well, yeah. Kids. You're not supposed to bring down a local crime lord at age sixteen or curtail a small invasion force at seventeen. But Allana, and Esaul and a few others, with all of our daring and wasted youth thought we could take on the world. Right the wrongs." Aedyn closed his eyes. "How stupid of us."

Khloe sat up straight. "But... the Shadow Vanguard... I've heard some stories. Some of them are... fantastical. There's no way you could have done the things that you are reported to have done."

Aedyn ventured a slow, cynical laugh. "Sure, some of them are ridiculous. I've heard tales that we routed a band of cyclopes on the island of Gynme. That the seven of us defended the Wall of Tsorith from the Godsmiths of Mezelore. That we brought down the Last Titan on the Far North shores." Aedyn shook his head as he took out another strip of meat and began to chew on it.

"Are they true?" Khloe asked after a beat.

"Nonsense," Aedyn said. "It was the Wall of Zin'thai."

Khloe stared at him for a moment, and when he did not react she grunted in frustration and threw the remnants of her foodstuff at him. He half-heartedly dodged with a laugh.

"You're bloody useless," Khloe said, unable to contain her laughter.

"See, now you're starting to fit in."

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Sachin maneuvered the carriage through the muck and dust of the backwater roads, taking care not to crash while expediting his journey. He whipped again at the horses, which responded with an increase of speed. Sachin didn't care if he rode them into the ground, as long as they got to his destination first.

*The man is paying a pretty penny, so why should I care?* Sachin thought. The amount the holy man was willing to pay meant Sachin could easily get new horses and still have enough to spend the winter somewhere nice and warm if he so desired. Anywhere had to be better than spending it in Rezkentha Province, and if this impromptu job was going to be his ticket to some warmer weather, however temporary, and a couple of women's beds, who was he to argue?

*I probably shouldn't tell the holy man about the whores, though.*

Sachin's reverie was momentarily interrupted when a sharp curve caused the carriage to groan in recalcitrance. His heart threatened to punch through his chest as the carriage gave the barest of sways in tipping, then gravity quickly reasserted control and maintained the carriage's upright disposition.

"You know," came a voice from within the carriage, "I would rather reach the Priory unscathed if you wouldn't mind."

Sachin put on his best cheer. "Sorry, sir. Don't you worry, I will certainly get you to the Priory in one piece and unscathed."

"Please see that you do," came the calm but firm voice.

Sachin rolled his eyes as tightened his grip on the reins.

*Just keep thinking about winter.*

Sachin considered his luck. It was only last year that his wife Marie had run off with that younger man Edwin, a lout who may have been twelve years

his junior but clearly had neither the wit nor street smarts to back up his advantage in height and strength. It certainly helped little when Sachin slipped his dagger between the man's ribs while he was sleeping off a bit of excessive spirits at the tavern. He had considered doing Marie in as well, but he knew when not to push his luck with escaping the law's notice - what little of it existed these days in Kaz'in - and knew that her heartache would more than satiate his desire for revenge. To have seen her misery at Edwin's death, and at hearing of her fallen fortunes as a result, gave Sachin a deep, almost vulgar, satisfaction.

Since then, he had decided to lay low, taking odd jobs transporting wares between different settlements, even along roads that many considered dangerous. Sachin didn't care; he figured that there was very little that money, a dagger, or a rock to the head didn't solve in Kaz'in. He knew when to cut and run, and above all, held fast to his personal number one rule: don't be a hero. Because Kaz'in wasn't the place for heroes. Being one often meant you'd end up dead fast. And last Sachin had heard, being dead was rather detrimental to making money.

So when Sachin had been riding along, heading to Hadrim to transport a supply of Ghost Leeches back to Rezkentha, and saw a man in a silver cloak waving him down from the side of the road, his first instinct had been to stop. Not out of altruism, but to size up the man and see if he could best him out of his money and belongings. The closer Sachin rode, he saw that the man wore the emblem of the Holy Thiat of the Tai'Hiera, which meant he was most likely a priest or a bishop. It was then that Sachin contemplated just quickening his pace and simply leaving the man in the wind. Not because Sachin was particularly superstitious or had qualms about robbing a man of the White Order—he'd witnessed some "holy men" who made Sachin look like he could be the Holy Thiat himself—but rather because if certain elements of the Tai'Hiera took notice of you, one could find themselves face down in a ditch somewhere, breathing their last. The Tai'Hiera may have not cemented a strong power base in this region of Kaz'in, but their reach was long and their reputation for relentlessness was not one Sachin desired to test.

Seeing the holy man dragging a body behind him, however, did give Sachin some pause.

Sachin's survival instinct was drowned out by the utter confusion that swept over him. Had the holy man gotten into a fight, perhaps defending himself from a thug? And why would he be dragging them behind? Was the rake even still alive?

Sachin's curiosity had gotten the best of him, and he slowed to a stop. And instantly regretted it.

The holy man stepped forward, tall with close-cropped hair and neatly trimmed beard that was a deep amber. He had extended his arm, revealing silver armor with particular engravings that left no mystery as to what this man was.

"Modan," said the holy man, "of the Order of Saints. A pleasure to meet you, good sir. Now, by the authority of the Holy Thiat, I must insist that you take me and my... friend... to Merlock Priory at once."

After that, there was very little time for questions. Sachin, once conscripted, knew that he dare not run off and disobey an order of a Saint. The Order of Saints, the warriors of the Tai'Hiera, were as deadly as they were pious. Sachin had very quickly decided to play it safe and follow the Saint's orders.

At least he knew the Saint wouldn't stab him in the back.

*I think.*

But as they had continued this solitary journey for the past two days, Sachin had begun to wonder what a Saint was doing down here, why they were carrying a body through the woods, and why they were in such a hurry to reach the Priory.

It took two days but Sachin finally worked up the nerve to ask.

"So, why the rush?" Sachin said, doing his best to sound natural and conversational.

"What?" Modan said, his voice muffled by the drawn curtain in the front sliding window of Sachin's carriage, as well as the rapid beating of the hoofs against the rough road.

"Why the haste to the Priory?"

"I fail to see how that would be any of your concern."

"Just making conversation."

"I thought I was paying you to abstain from such niceties."

Sachin chuckled at that. He hoped that it did not sound as fake to Modan as it did to his own ears. "Well, you're the boss, I suppose."

After a moment, Modan asked, "How much longer?"

"I expect we'll arrive by nightfall." Sachin hazarded a look down through the glass, but saw nothing. "How's your friend?"

"He's not my friend," Modan said, and left it at that.

Sachin shrugged, almost pointing out that Modan had said quite another thing earlier. Did Saints lie? Sachin shook off the question. Instead, his thoughts turned once again to winter, and the warmth that awaited him in whores' beds, and focused on the road ahead.

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Modan closed the small sliding window at the front of the carriage and pulled the curtains shut. He couldn't help but shake his head at the rake driving the carriage, though he quietly rebuked himself afterward. What else could he expect from someone like this man Sachin? Modan had to keep in mind that not everyone thought as the Order did, and not all served the Tai'Hiera, or most importantly, believed as they did. Despite the empire's tacit acceptance of non-believers, especially in this lawless land where Modan had been stationed, the ultimate goal was full conversion... preferably, not by force.

But at the moment, it was of little importance. Modan returned to the figure laying on the floor of the carriage, motionless and by all appearances dead,

had it not been for Modan's intervention.

He extended his hand, fingers splayed, over the man's chest. Quietly, Modan prayed, and focused his energy. A faint, roiling white mist enveloped his arm, traveling down from his shoulders and over his fingers, drifting down onto the man. The man's breathing became more pronounced and ragged. A gurgling sound came from the man's throat, and Modan focused his energies further.

Whereas most of the Tai'Hiera's Order of Saints were adept at harnessing their talents in the form of combat, some were blessed with the ability to apply it to healing. By focusing the Aduro within his body, Modan could go further than many other healers. Most could mend wounds or speed up the recovery process for an injured person. Modan had the additional gift of being able to hold death at bay - not forever, not even for terribly long - but it had its uses, such as today. He needed to keep the man alive long enough to reach the Priory, where other specialists of the Order could extract the memories necessary to determine the veracity of what he had told Modan.

Modan considered the broken body of Daidren that lay before him, covered in deep wounds that could only have been the result of numerous daggers striking at once.

Had that been a reasonable assumption. And it certainly was not.

Modan disliked having to deal with Daidren and his vulgar servants. While he would never take joy in the deaths of another, whether as an enemy on the battlefield or as someone with questionable morality, Modan was not going to miss Daidren in what remained of this life, and certainly not the next if the Creator granted it. But Modan had been a liaison for Daidren and his men, not only for information but for weapons. The Tai'Hiera had a hand in bringing down the country of Kaz'in several years ago, but was finding making a stronghold in this land difficult. Modan found the idea of working with what amounted to little more than potential warlords disdainful, but a necessary evil that the Holy Thiat had ordered. So, when the Tai'Hiera made contact with Daidren and his men and an arms deal was struck, Modan had been assigned to handle Daidren and make the drop offs.

Except Daidren had been late that morning, and he was never late.

Their usual meeting spot was in a forest that provided enough privacy and was convenient for both parties to meet. When Daidren no-showed, Modan left, taking a shortcut through the forest that would take him back to the Priory.

And that was when he came across the bodies.

Modan was not particularly disgusted by the manner in which Daidren's men, Orlando and Valos, had died. But the techniques used in defeating them, as evidenced by the damage to the trees and blows the men had received, were not indicative of a normal combatant.

And when Modan saw the very particular wounds that Daidren had suffered, he knew.

It was an Obscura wielder. And this particular power was one he had seen years ago.

The thought greatly disturbed Modan. He knew that the man who had wielded the ability to generate a sphere of shadow daggers around him had died when Morcross, and by extension Kaz'in, fell several years ago. Subsequently, the band of adventurers who wielded the accursed Obscura talents, the Shadow Vanguard, had disbanded and went underground. In the years that followed, the Tai'Hiera had attempted to track them down and put an end to the empire's enemies and their heretical powers.

The thought of dealing with the Obscura wielders and their tainted power made bile rise up in Modan's throat. But the thought that someone else had inherited the late warrior's Obscura ability disturbed him. Modan had heard rumors that such a thing were possible, but he had dismissed them as unfounded rumors.

Until now.

Modan had been ready to report back to the Council when he caught the slightest amount of movement from Daidren's body. Leaping down off the horse, he swept over the fallen man and immediately began trying to sustain him with his Aduro talent, and he was surprised to find an extremely faint

heartbeat. He knew that Daidren was not long for the world, and while Modan harbored no illusions that the next life offered Daidren anything but damnation, he had to try to delay the inevitable until he could be sure of his theory regarding the attack. But doing so would require great concentration, not something he could do while riding a horse simultaneously. Dragging Daidren out to the nearby road, Modan pondered what to do next, until he saw Sachin riding down the road in his carriage...

A coughing fit brought Modan's thoughts to the present. Daidren's body spasmed, and blood dribbled out of the sides of his mouth. Modan increased his focus, expending more of his Aduro into Daidren to stabilize his body. Beads of sweat began to form on Modan's forehead, and he felt his body growing exhausted from the exertion. After a few moments, Daidren's body calmed, and returned to its ragged breathing.

Modan sighed. He hoped that Sachin could indeed deliver them to the Priory in time.

Somewhere out there were remnants of the Shadow Vanguard. And they needed to be hunted down.

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Khloe was not happy. At all.

As they rode on their horses down the dirt path, she reflected on the decision they had made—and by they she meant Aedyn—to travel through the Murin Reach as a shortcut. Khloe had recommended traveling to the city of Alcain, a river port city from which they could take a steamboat down to Ciriladen, but the journey would take an additional week than if they had simply cut through the Murin Reach.

The problem being, Khloe mused, that the Murin Reach was a particularly lawless stretch of land. If life was cheap in most of parts of Kaz'in these days, then it went for rock-bottom prices in the Murin Reach. Though she could not fault Aedyn for his logic, backed by his fighting skills, he seemed to be forgetting that he was still recovering from a couple of broken ribs. And Khloe, despite her newly-awakened powers, was still positively a

novice. Which meant that, in a fight, she was relegated to hoping she could get scared enough to kill someone accidentally. Again.

Khloe was considering raising the objection for the fourth time when they came within earshot of a frantic woman. Coming around the bend, they saw a woman and a small child with their backs to herself and Aedyn, standing before two armed men on horseback. One had a crossbow, the other a sword, and each was pointed at the woman, who was gripping her child and begging.

"Please, what do you want?" she cried. "I don't have much money!"

The man on the left, holding a crossbow and with a deep scar along both cheeks, favored her with a smile full of brown teeth. "We'll start with taking you," he said. Then he nodded at the motionless child. "And then we'll take him."

The mother extended her arm in terror. "No no no no no! Leave him alone, please!"

Khloe and Aedyn were still far enough back that they hadn't been noticed yet. She turned to Aedyn, whose eyes had grown dark with fury.

"Oh, what?" Khloe said. "You didn't expect to see this in the Reach?"

Aedyn favored her with a humorless smile. "Follow my lead. I'll take out the one with the crossbow and you ride your horse into the other one. Jump off and grab the child."

Khloe nodded, suddenly feeling her body shaking with the anticipation. She tried to steady herself, and was thinking the plan through her head again when Aedyn shot off like a bolt. Khloe unleashed a curse and followed suit.

Both men looked up at Khloe and Aedyn bearing down fast on them. The mother looked back at the two saviors, and took off running.

Leaving her child behind, right into Aedyn and Khloe's path.

*Idiot!* Khloe thought to herself. *You're supposed to use the distraction to get the hell out of the way with your child!* She turned and veered hard.

But out of the corner of her eye, the man with the crossbow raised his weapon.

At the child.

Khloe's horse was already fully committed to its new course, and even if Khloe jumped off of it, she would not make it in time to save the child.

"Aedyn!" was all Khloe could scream, pointing at the child.

And it was then that Khloe realized just what was so wrong with this entire scenario.

Aedyn, working on instinct, had already leapt into the air, off of his horse, towards the child. As time seemed to slow down, Khloe could see what Aedyn intended to do. He planned to tackle into the child, rolling both of them out of the arrow's way in time.

The problem was two-fold. One, Khloe didn't think that Aedyn would be able to make it.

Second was that there was no child.

From her angle, Khloe could see that it was a poorly matched makeshift scarecrow, made to a child's size with awkwardly hanging clothing. A scarecrow with a small barrel for a body.

Which the man was aiming the crossbow at.

Khloe screamed for Aedyn to stop, but it was already too late. He was in the air, reaching out to the makeshift child and hoping to save yet another life, when the thief unleashed the bolt from the crossbow. It struck dead center on the barrel, and Khloe could have sworn she saw a spark, right before the entire scarecrow exploded.

Khloe involuntarily shielded herself from the blast, but in doing so she lost her grip on the horse and tumbled off, landing hard on the ground, rolling and knocking the wind out of her. Wracked with pain, Khloe had enough wherewithal to look over to where Aedyn had been. She had seen him get

caught in the explosion, but he had not been quite on the supposed child quite yet. The blast must have caught him close but in mid-air...

And there she saw him. Aedyn had been blasted away, landing hard on the ground. His body was limp, but Khloe could see him breathing. Aedyn was alive, but unconscious.

Khloe barely had time register the gratitude when she turned and saw the "mother" of the child slam her boot into her temple.

And then Khloe tumbled headlong into darkness.

TO BE CONTINUED...