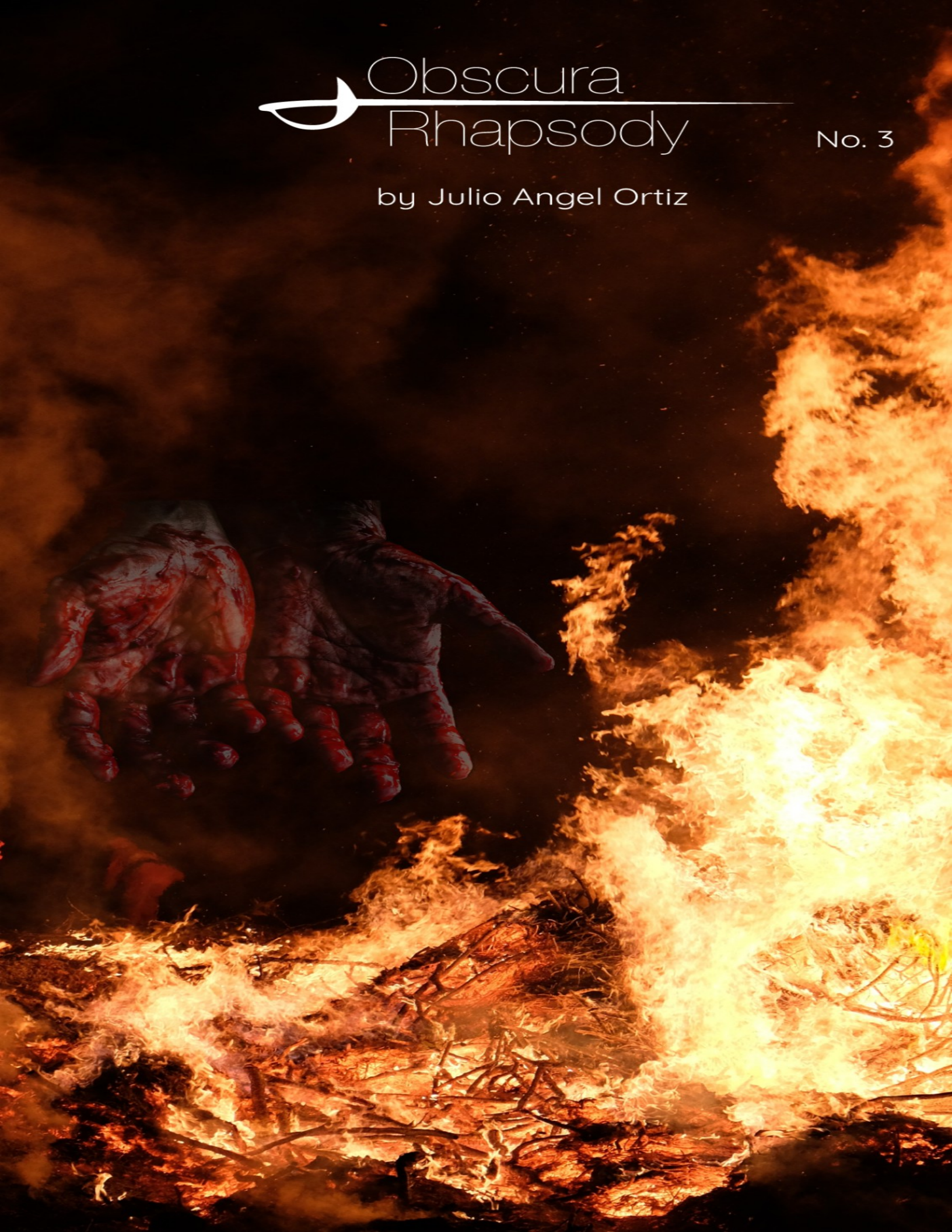




Obscura
Rhapsody

No. 3

by Julio Angel Ortiz



“Wounded”

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Paths of Exile

A novel

Book One

Exiles

(Obscura Rhapsody 1 to 5)

Book Two

Moonlight Scherzo

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Book Three

Roué

(Obscura Rhapsody 11 to 16)

Khloe awoke to a stiff neck and the sounds of water slowly dripping onto stone.

The room was poorly lit but had not been completely plunged into darkness. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, and she sat up. Khloe found herself on a raggedy bedroll, dirty and frayed, in a round stone room. A few torches sat in their nooks, providing the only light which allowed Khloe to survey the room. She involuntarily rubbed her neck, and then her head, feeling the hard, painful lump that had formed. Khloe's head was swimming, but after a few moments her vision once again normalized, and she noticed the figure laying motionless across the room.

Aedyn! she thought in a panic, and was soon at his side.

Khloe turned him over, and found his lips were pale, his face slack and covered with bruises and small burns from the trap the thieves had planted. Aedyn's breathing was slow and ragged, and though he shifted slightly, he gave no indication that he was going to awaken any time soon.

Khloe's hands moved from his chest down to his ribs. Her eyes narrowed in concern. Though Aedyn was clearly a skilled warrior and a master of the Obscura arts, the injuries he had sustained in the battle with Daidren and his men had worn him out. Khloe struggled to remember something he had said while traveling together after that battle, something about not having been battle ready. Or "out of shape," as he called it. Having maintained a low profile for the past couple of years, Aedyn had gotten rusty.

Or so he claimed.

Aedyn said he would have bested Daidren and his men more easily otherwise. Khloe wasn't so sure if Aedyn was just bragging or trying to cover his wounded pride, but seeing him now in this condition scared her. The blast had caught him unawares, and she was certain that somehow he used Obscura to protect himself from the full force of the explosion, but even still... Aedyn was badly hurt. Possibly dying. And he was her best chance out of this hellhole.

Just where are we anyway? Khloe thought.

The thieves must have taken them to some sort of hideout, with a makeshift prison cell. Judging by the smell and humidity, they could be in a cave system. Khloe had heard stories of thieves and other malcontents taking refuge in these types of locations, but she had little reason to believe it was true. Yet, here she was, trapped with Aedyn, and no hope of escape.

That was when she noticed the door. It was a wooden door with an iron handle, a sturdy frame around it that was built into the rocky surface. Slowly she approached the door, and glimpsed through the small barred opening. Khloe could see a hallway extending off, lined with torches, but she saw no guard posted. Reluctantly her hand slid down to the handle, and she pressed down on the latch to open it.

Locked.

Khloe sighed and cursed herself for hoping for anything as ridiculous as the door being left unlocked as a stroke of luck.

She looked back at Aedyn's motionless form, and then looked back at the door. She studied it for a moment. Then an idea came to her.

I have similar powers to Aedyn, right? she thought. Maybe I can use them to knock the door down?

She stifled a laugh at herself, realizing how ridiculous the idea was. Khloe had barely been aware of the full extent of her powers for a few days. Aedyn had been harnessing his talents for years, and he was able to stand toe-to-toe with three powerful warriors, knocking trees off their roots and slicing men in half with ease using his shadow-crafted blade.

So little Khloe Stormsgaard was going to break down this thick wooden door with the power of her fists?

"What the hell?" Khloe shrugged, and focusing her inner energy, pulled her fist back. She waited a moment, and thought of Aedyn in battle.

He could easily do this, she thought. Now it's my turn to help him.

Khloe unleashed the full fury of her might onto the cell door.

Which refused to budge.

Khloe's fist struck the door and nothing happened except two of her knuckles making loud popping sounds. She cried out in pain and quickly wrapped her other hand around her now-bleeding fist. She looked down and slowly extended her fingers, seeing the cracked skin and blood seeping out of splintered knuckles. Khloe let out a sob of frustration and pain, and looked back at Aedyn, who was still unconscious. She sank to her knees, lost and feeling despair grip her heart like an eternal winter.

"I'm sorry, Aedyn," she whispered, and stared at the stone ground, tears falling free.

"Why are you saying 'sorry'?" came a voice from within the room.

A familiar, smoky voice.

Startled, Khloe looked up. At the back of the room, she saw a figure emerge from the shadows.

It was Akaja.

Seated in the open garden area that formed the center of the Priory, Modan waited patiently. He sat in a meditation pose, breathing and focusing his energy on the calm and life around him. He allowed himself to dip into the well of Aduro that flowed within him, allowing the gifted energies to barely bubble to the surface, but rather sustain his serenity. It was a technique taught to all Saints, early on when they were conscripted at a young age.

A young age, Modan thought, allowing the thought to linger.

When the Seekers came to his parents' home, Modan had been terrified of what they wanted. The Tai'Hiera were feared throughout the region, and aside from collecting the monthly tithes they had little reason to visit unless there was criminal matter to attend to — and those tended to end poorly for the offender. So, when Modan answered the knock on that early morning and saw the three tall figures in their silver masks and cloaks, it took all of the young man's fortitude to not run screaming, believing that they were

going to take his family away to some gruesome punishment. It was what the kids whispered at school, and it seemed entirely plausible in the presence of these imposing figures.

But Modan's father, a bricklayer by trade, whose rough hands and impressive physique belied a quiet and contemplative nature, approached the visitors with a humility and reverence Modan had not ever witnessed before. In later years, Modan would reflect that this was probably a defense mechanism. His father offering false piety in order to protect his family from whatever calamity these holy ones sought to bring.

But Modan could only imagine the surprise when the Seekers pointed to him, and informed his father that his son had been Called. That he was one of the Bearers of Light as ordained by the Creator. Modan's father had begun to vigorously deny their claim, until one of the Seekers approached Modan. They stood like a giant over him, peering down through their ornate mask, inlaid with a design of an angelic face, eight eyes as slits surrounded by fire. But the figure reached up and with both hands removed the mask, revealing the most beautiful thing Modan had ever seen.

A woman stared back at him from the silver hood, her eyes a crystal blue, dark brown hair no longer concealed and draping over the cloak. Her lips were painted a deep burgundy, and when she smiled at Modan, he imagined a subtle radiance raining down onto him. She knelt down, and gently brushed aside his tunic at his collar, revealing a small marking that he had never noticed before. It was a silver tattoo, conforming to a tribal design that Modan had never recalled seeing, but at the same time was instantly familiar. He was at a loss for words, but the Seeker's smile never wavered.

"Do not be afraid, child," she said, her voice an ocean of serenity. "You are indeed one of us."

"Is it confirmed, Saint Eliza?" came the voice of one of the other Seekers, heavy and brusque under the mask.

Saint Eliza stood and returned the mask to her face. "It is. The child has been Called."

Modan's father began to raise an objection, but stopped when that brusque Seeker raised his hand.

"You understand the Holy Thiat's Grand Order?" the man said simply.

Modan's father looked back at him, the grief of a father barely hidden behind his hardened eyes.

"Yes," he said at last with a deep sigh.

"Your child has received the Gift. It is a great honor for you and your family for us to take him. You will be greatly compensated for your sacrifice."

The Seeker motioned to another, who reached into his cloak and produced a bag that clinked with coins as he moved it. The Seeker took it and offered it to his father.

"The Holy Thiat is not without sympathy for your sacrifice. We know honor is not sentimental, not without pain. We offer this to you openly and humbly."

Modan's father looked at the bag of gold, his eyes crestfallen. To refuse the honor meant more than merely excommunication or persecution by the Tai'Hiera. It meant death. Not only for his father, but for the entire family, and then Modan would be conscripted by force.

But something in Modan's father's eyes must have warned the Seeker holding out the bag. He leaned in, non-threatening, and with a stern but low voice said, "Don't even think about it. The three of us are veteran Saints of the Order. We would take you down before you got within reach of me, and then the rest of your family would follow." His voice softened. "I have no children, so I will not lie and tell you that I understand the sacrifice you must make. But please know, this is for the good of your people, and for the protection of us all. Perhaps it is not fair, but it is necessary."

Modan's father stood stone-still for what felt like an eternity, and at last nodded.

The Seeker returned the nod. "You have an hour to say your goodbyes and gather your things."

They turned and made for the door. Saint Eliza turned one last time towards Modan, and with a curt nod left with the others.

In a moment, Modan's world had utterly changed.

What followed was a whirlwind of activity. Modan's parents and siblings gathered around him at first, offering tears of joy and pride and sorrow. His mother dutifully gathered his clothes and personal items that she thought he might need. Modan's father sat down with him, and spoke to him in a way that Modan never had heard before. Softly but hurriedly, his father told Modan of the things to keep in mind, the lessons he knew he would never have the luxury of time to impart to his son. He spent the remainder of his time passing on condensed wisdom, trying to tell him of all the things that perhaps his own father had instructed him. For Modan, it was all dizzying and terrifying.

Yet, he felt a strange calm and an energy emanating from where his newly-acquired mark on his shoulder. In one moment, he looked at his family and saw not their physical forms, but white energy of varying brightness, each moving about and flickering. None shone brighter than his father, and a wave of euphoria overcame Modan.

Time ceased. It was his first taste of the strange energy the Saints summoned which was called Aduro, and one that threatened to engulf him and take him to the Creator itself.

His reverie was disrupted by an anchoring presence next to him, as a hand placed on his shoulder.

Modan looked up and saw Saint Eliza standing next to him.

He looked around, and there he was: holding a bag with his earthly possessions, saying his final goodbyes. Modan could scarcely comprehend how Life had skipped to that moment, but knew it was only the beginning of a journey to understand his new powers and his role in the Creator's design.

With a final round of hugs to his family— even for his father— Modan turned to see Saint Eliza offering her hand to him. Modan took it, and

walked out of the home he had grown up in. He turned around once to see his family there, by the door, waving tearful goodbyes. Modan framed the memory, archiving it away into the depths of his mind.

It was the last time he ever saw any of them.

"Not to sound ungrateful," Khloe said cautiously, "but what the hell are you doing here?"

Akaja let out a stiff laugh. "You're a charming one. No wonder Aedyn brought you along."

Khloe quickly moved towards Akaja and grabbed her by the arm. She could scarcely believe that Akaja was here with them. Maybe she had a way of escaping? And how did Akaja get in without Khloe noticing?

In fact, *none* of this made any sense.

"I know," Akaja said. "None of this makes any sense."

Khloe's eyebrows collapsed into disapproval.

Akaja put her hands up in a placating gesture. "Okay, look. I know this must be strange. You're still getting used to how, uh, our powers work, right?"

Khloe nodded.

"Right. So, here's the thing. My specialty— my power, if you will— involves the mind. Mostly dreams, because dreams are more powerful than you realize. And not in some sort of trite way poets and artists want you to believe. No, no. I mean that dreams allow me to do a host of things, some of which I haven't even had the chance to show you since I've had little time to prepare —"

Khloe blew through her lips in frustration. "Are you here or not? Am I dreaming again?"

Akaja shook her head. "No, you're not dreaming. I'm projecting a construct of myself to you. I'm meditating back at my room in Sharizen. I maintain a

connection with Aedyn, and when I lost contact with him I became concerned. So, I opted to connect with you and find out what was going on."

"How?"

Akaja favored Khloe with a look of *That should be obvious by now*, pointing at Khloe's Obscura mark. Khloe bit down the acerbic remark that was writhing within her, itching to escape from her mouth.

"It's our talent, you know. It allows us to be linked, in a manner of speaking."

Khloe looked down at her tattoo, and nodded dumbly. *This is going to take some getting used to*, she thought.

"So what's wrong with Aedyn? Is he dying?"

Akaja looked at Aedyn, and leaned down beside him. She hovered her hand over his chest, fingers splayed, and closed her eyes in concentration.

"No, he's not dying. He's in a meditation trance. It's one of the earliest techniques you learn — well, will learn. Hopefully. If you don't die in here."

"Hey!"

Akaja looked back at Khloe, putting a finger over lips. "Shh. You don't want to wake him!"

Khloe glowered at Akaja. "I already tried. It didn't work. Obviously."

Akaja looked back at Aedyn, ignoring Khloe's remark. "He is using Obscura to heal himself but it takes time. Ideally, he would be with another skilled Obscura wielder helping the process along, but since I'm not physically here there isn't much I can do, and you — well, you're still pretty raw, so you're not much help to anyone at the moment."

Khloe stomped her foot in irritation. She immediately felt childish and silly for doing it, but decided to press on anyway. "Now that's not..."

Akaja rose and quickly turned to Khloe. She extended her hand to Khloe's head.

"Sleep," Akaja said, vanishing.

"What do you think that —" Khloe began, but then found herself involuntarily crumpling to the ground, all sense of consciousness racing away.

Aedyn's eyes fluttered open, and he slowly and stiffly leaned up. He saw Khloe laying on the ground, unconscious.

"Things appear to be going well, then," he said weakly, then promptly passed out again.

Not for the first time, Zara wanted to kill Garvin and Nadu.

As they sat around the small wooden table, finishing up the afternoon meal and counting some of the gold they had pilfered from a few unfortunate souls they recently came across, Zara shook her head. She was tired of having this argument with them, and despite being the only woman in their merry little band of cutthroats, she sure as hell wasn't going to be treated like some wallflower.

Her ex-husband had treated her as such, and Zara still kept his skull among her belongings. *For good luck*, she thought, smirking.

"We need to get out of Kaz'in, simple as that," she said.

Garvin shook his head in annoyance. "Not this again."

"Zara," Nadu said, "why bring this up again?"

"Because it needs to be brought up. Look, I get it, okay? Kaz'in isn't exactly the place where the rule of law shines brightest, but there are other, larger gangs moving in and beginning to claim territory. How long before we come across one of them and get the short end of things, eh?"

"We've gotten by just fine in the past," Garvin said dismissively.

"Korbin didn't make it."

Nadu chuckled. "He was always a touch too slow. I told him that he should exercise more."

Garvin and Nadu shared a sardonic laugh, and Zara smacked the table with her hand.

"I'm serious! Things are changing around here and we need to make some contingencies before they catch up with us."

Garvin looked at her, his expression grave. "Okay, what do you suggest?"

Finally, Zara thought, perhaps some sense.

"We didn't get much from this lot," she said, extending an arm behind her, pointing towards the door that lead to their makeshift prison. "I say we cut and run. Kill them, so we have no one to identify us, and leave. Head north, maybe, or try our hand in the Tremiere Hegemony."

Nadu scoffed. "The Hegemony isn't going to welcome us with open arms, you know. A nice, cultured society like that doesn't take too kindly to the likes of us."

"The point," Zara said, speaking through gritted teeth, "is that we get the hell out of here. If you value your survival, then I don't see how it is up for discussion."

"But," Nadu began, before Garvin raised his hand.

"Enough. Zara, I think you're right. Especially if what I hear about Roué's lot gaining a foothold in this region is true. I'd rather not tangle with him again." Garvin sighed. "We'll go in the back, take care of these poor souls, and ride off with all due haste."

Zara nodded. "Thank you."

Nadu shrugged, then removed a dagger from his boot, contemplating for a moment his reflection in the varnished steel.

"Let's go say our goodbyes."

Khloe struck the ground harder than she expected. A moment ago, she was having a spirited conversation with Akaja, then Akaja said a word to her and she fell over onto —

Wait. Why is it so dark?

"Unstructured dream space," came Akaja's voice. Like a phantom, she bled from the darkness and stood before Khloe.

"'Unstructured'?" Khloe let the words sink in. "Oh, now I'm dreaming."

Akaja nodded.

"How did you do that?"

"For those with weaker wills —" Akaja's voice sped up for a moment. "— *or untrained in our Arts*, I can reach into their minds and trigger a simple cognitive collapse."

"Collapse?" Khloe said, skepticism strong in her voice.

"I put you to sleep. Simple as that." Akaja waved her hands. "But that's besides the point. I brought you here for a reason."

Khloe looked at the inky darkness around her. "And that would be?"

"To train you."

Khloe's lips collapsed into a frown. "Come again?"

"Again, you haven't been properly trained. In the old days, this wouldn't have been a problem, but... well, anyway. The point is that Dream Constructs are a viable way to pass along information. Since our minds are linked, you can absorb information more readily. It's one of the advantages that my power offers."

"Are you the only one with this gift?"

Khloe saw a shadow pass over Akaja's eyes. "Yes, I am now." Akaja then stepped past her. "Anyway, there's a lot you have to learn, and we don't have a lot of time. Here in the dream world, time passes much slower than in the real world, so I have this virtual time to show you things. Train you in combat, meditation techniques, and even some of our Obscura knowledge. I can help you gain more control over your abilities."

Khloe looked down at her feet, shuffling them as her thoughts drifted. "Yeah, right now I can only seem to use them when I'm in extreme danger."

Akaja looked back over her shoulder and favored Khloe with an empathetic smile. "That's actually common for new Obscura wielders." Akaja turned back and glided over to Khloe. "Aedyn knows that. That's why he wasn't pushing you. He knows you'd need time to train, to learn. He was going to bring you to me for the training, so we'd have the proper time to do this correctly. If he were in any shape other than 'beat to hell' I'd link him in and he'd train you as well."

Khloe offered Akaja a quizzical look. "You can have link more than one person in a Dream Construct?"

"I can link up to ten people by myself. You should see it. It can get pretty lively in here. We have wild parties. Great mixers."

Khloe rolled her eyes.

"Don't knock it unless you try it," Akaja said with a droll tone, arms crossed.

"So what can we do in here?" Khloe said, looking around at the dark.

Akaja raised her hand and the darkness dissolved into a windswept desert, the Virule mountains in the distance, piercing the clouds with their thin needle-like shape.

"I can reconstruct any location from my memories or dreams—or anyone whose mind I am able to tap into. Doing so allows for incredible flexibility in planning strategy. It's a literal theater I can share with anyone."

Khloe looked around in awe. The scene suddenly shifted to a tundra, wind biting her cheeks and snow rising up to her knees. The cold threatened to make her black out.

"What the hell?"

Akaja, calm and unphased by the elements, looked around.

"Quite the opposite, I would imagine."

"It's cold!"

"No, it's not. You just *think* it's cold."

"Oh, I'm sorry, let me rephrase. It's *fucking freezing!*"

"Again, all in your mind. Remember, we're dreaming. Your mind is creating the sensation. You have the power to stymie that sensation."

"So it's all in my head? That's what you're saying?"

"Well, not to state the obvious."

Akaja wasn't expecting the impromptu snowball that struck her in the face, causing her to fall back on her ass. When she regained her bearings, she heard laughter. Looking over, she found Khloe doubled over, body shaking. Her heaving, which at first looked like pain, were joyful wails escaping Khloe's mouth.

"Okay, you're a quick study," Akaja deadpanned.

Khloe held up her hands. "Right. Sorry, couldn't resist."

With a thought Akaja was standing once again, and the world around them dissolved to the interior of a wooden building. The walls were lined with sliding doors covered in a white, faintly translucent cloth. Strange markings were written along some of the walls. Racks full of weapons were strewn about.

Akaja let out a sigh.

"To be honest, I do wish Aedyn were here. I'm kind of shit at hand-to-hand combat."

"What?" Khloe yelled, eyes wide.

Akaja shrugged. "What, you think everyone one of us are expert martial artists? No. Not even a little bit. I'm good, don't get me wrong, but my strength lies in using illusions to help me with my combat. Something *you* can't do. But I can at least train you in the basics, and who knows? Maybe there's a death machine laying dormant inside of you."

"That's bloody unlikely."

"Don't count yourself out, Khloe. The trick is to take what I teach you and apply your own Obscura talents to find a style that suits you."

"And then what?" Khloe asked hesitantly.

"Then you'll be unstoppable."

Zara, Garvin, and Nadu looked each other, puzzled, as they stood at the entrance to the prison cell in which they had thrown Aedyn and Khloe. Seeing their two prisoners on the ground, unconscious, raised a giant flag in Zara's mind.

"It's a trap," Nadu said at length.

"Sure as hell seems like it," Garvin said, knife firmly in hand.

"It does, doesn't it?" Zara said slowly. She took a cautious step forward. "But lying completely prone on the ground hoping to catch us off-guard, while they are still outnumbered, seems like a shit plan, doesn't it?"

Nadu and Garvin offered half-hearted grunts in agreement.

Zara gave a swift kick to Aedyn's ribs. She was surprised to see him utterly fail to move.

"Is he even breathing?" Garvin asked.

"He is, but very shallow," Zara said. "He might be done for." She looked over at Khloe, and with lightning reflexes brought down her fist to Khloe's jaw.

Khloe did not move.

"Are we sure we didn't kill them by accident?" Garvin said, scratching his head.

"I'm sure," Zara said, considering Khloe's swelling chin. She reached down and drew her dagger.

"But not for much longer," she said, aiming at Khloe's chest. Zara then plunged the blade down.

TO BE CONTINUED...