



Obscura  
Rhapsody

No. 5

by Julio Angel Ortiz

“Allana”

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## **Paths of Exile**

*A novel*

### **Book One**

Exiles

*(Obscura Rhapsody 1 to 5)*

### **Book Two**

Moonlight Scherzo

*(Obscura Rhapsody 6 to 10)*

### **Book Three**

Roué

*(Obscura Rhapsody 11 to 16)*

Allana always lamented that Draxen had promised to kill her, but never followed through.

It was the same dreaded promise that hung over her head ever since Allana allowed herself to be captured several months ago. It frustrated her to no end.

Years ago, a tiresome rake such as Draxen would have posed no threat to Allana. Truth be told, he *still* didn't pose any sort of threat to her. Allana had kept herself in combat shape these past several years, ever since that horrible day where her world vanished with the materiality of a dream. Even now, Allana closed her eyes at the thought, the waves of despair and raw emotion too fresh to confront, too eager to wash over her and drown her. There had been so many ways that she wanted to escape. In a lifetime where she had always sought to be courageous first and lead others when called upon, Allana found herself unnerved. She wondered if she lacked the conviction to end the suffering that had crippled her emotional frame for the past five years.

And not for the first time, she wondered if it was indeed lack of courage, or perhaps too much?

“Look at blondie over here, looking all sad again,” came Draxen's languid voice, his northland drawl grating against Allana's mental fortitude.

Draxen's grimy face, mixed with yellowing teeth, scar etched along his right eye, and crooked nose that looked as though it saw the losing end of a warhammer, combined to remind Allana of the very annoying hell in which she found herself.

Draxen's condescending reference to her own blonde hair was just the sweetness that topped it all off.

“Look at ugly over there, looking all seedy and desperate again,” Allana said, voice even and lifeless.

Draxen's face stiffened at the retort, then convulsed into laughter.

“That's rich,” he said. “See, this is why I keep you around, lass. None of these other *shak'ta* dare respond like that. I miss this kind of banter.”

Allana looked over at him. “You know, if you stopped killing the ones that *did* talk to you like that, you might be more popular.”

Draxen leaned in on the bars that formed the entrance to Allana’s cell. His voice dropped to just above a whisper. “But that, my dear, would be bad for business.”

Allana sighed and looked down at her hands. Chains ran along the wall and sloped down onto her lap, where they spread out like tendrils to her wrist and ankles. The chains were black-brown, with a corrugated surface. Half-heartedly, she pulled on them, as she had dozens of times before, in a weak attempt to test their sturdiness. As always, they responded with defiance. Allana looked down at the lock on her chains and contemplated the price of her freedom.

“You know you can’t break them, so why keep testing them?” Draxen asked.

Allana sighed. “We have this conversation at *least* three times a week.”

“And yet you keep testing the chains.”

“Someone needs to maintain quality assurance in your prison system.”

Draxen chuckled and shook his head. “You’ll never escape from them. I told you about their origins. I was very careful in selecting my bonds for you.”

Allana knew this all too well.

“You’ll have to tell me who sold these to you.”

Draxen laughed. “I don’t think he’d want me to reveal his name to you. He sells to all kinds of undesirables like me.”

“You’ve told me his gender. That’s a start,” Allana said flatly.

The smile dissipated from Draxen’s face. “Not as though you’d ever escape to find out,” he said in a huff.

Allana raised her hands, making a show of displaying her chains to Draxen. “A guy who sells Obscura-dampening gear is not exactly a guy I’m going to want to befriend, let alone seek out.”

“So why ask who sold them?”

“So, I can send others to find and kill him.”

Draxen paused at this, and peered into the cell, observing Allana’s lithe form and searching her face.

“No, I don’t believe that for a moment,” he said at last.

“And why not?”

“Because you were with the Shadow Vanguard,” Draxen said. “You were heroes.”

“‘Were’ being the operative word there, Draxen.”

Draxen gave a derisive snort and waved her words away. “You can pretend all you want, but a hero never changes. I’ve been around enough men to see their hearts hardened by hatred or molded into resolve by love. Or for their country, or some other nonsense.”

“Your point?”

Draxen raised his hands, placing them before him in parallel to drive his point home. “The Vanguard stopped the Western Damnation Army, correct? At Zeost?”

Allana maintained eye contact, her voice flat. “That was a long time ago.”

“If the stories are true, only eight of you stopped an army of three thousand from razing a village to the ground.”

Allana said nothing.

“My point, *blondie*, is that the resolve and character it takes for someone to make that kind of stand does not change. Not overnight, not in five years, and not ever.”

Allana raised an eyebrow at Draxen. “Since when did you become a philosopher?”

Draxen shrugged. “I have other interests aside from being a syndicate boss, you know. I read and shit.”

“Charming. Amazing you haven’t swept me off my feet.”

Draxen let out a hearty laugh. “I have to kill you first, remember?”

“Today?”

Draxen turned to leave. “Not today. But tomorrow... *maybe* tomorrow.”

Draxen and his guard left, shutting the heavy door behind them. Allana heard the follow-up click of the lock.

She peered down at her chains and waited for the darkness to come again.

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Khloe felt the darkness encroaching around them. In the distance, she saw the walled encampment that she and Aedyn had spent a few days traveling to.

“So, that’s it?” she asked.

“That’s it,” Aedyn responded, putting away a pair of binoculars into his knapsack.

“How did you know? That Allana was there?”

Aedyn glanced over at Khloe. She saw something there, in his eyes. Guilt? Remorse?

“It took some... coercing. I spent time tracking down my fellow Vanguard. Which was tough, trying to be discreet at the same time. But she wasn’t terribly difficult to find. She let herself be captured.”

This took Khloe by surprise. “Why would she do that?”

“That’s a bit of a long story.”

“We’re not exactly short on time.”

Aedyn chuckled. “Maybe that’s a story for another time. Needless to say, we all lost a lot of things when Morcross fell. She lost more than most.”

“And this... Draxen, was it? Was he some former foe?” Khloe’s voice took a melodramatic tone. “Was he seeking revenge on the heroes that had foiled his plans? Is that why he took the great Allana captive? Maybe he’s always lusted over the warrior maiden?”

“That’s enough.”

Khloe was taken aback by the sudden sternness of Aedyn’s voice, and the flush of embarrassment at the chastisement was immediate.

Aedyn sighed. “I’m sorry. You wouldn’t know. I’m expecting you to come into this knowing the whole history and... yeah. I’m sorry.”

“No worries,” Khloe said, and a silence settled between them.

“You know, it was months before I ever got an apology out of Aedyn for *anything*. He’s getting soft in his old age,” came Akaja’s voice, and Khloe turned to find their comrade suddenly standing between both of them.

“This doesn’t ever start being normal, does it?” Khloe said. Sure, it was one thing to *know* that Akaja was merely projecting a construct of herself in their minds and that she was many miles away, but it was another to get used to it.

“In time,” Aedyn said nonchalantly.

“You can tell he’s getting old since he totally let that comment about this age go unanswered,” Akaja said with a mischievous wink.

“I don’t suppose you’re here to help us break Allana out of her prison?” Aedyn asked.

“Nope. Not much I could really do from here. I’m just your moral support.”

“Then we’re in trouble,” Khloe said instinctively, and regretted the jab the moment it left her mouth.

Akaja's eyes widened in mock surprise. "Look at the new girl, getting her digs in. *Nice*. I knew I'd like you," she said, her voice playful and sincere.

"Can you sense Allana?" Aedyn said, voice even.

Akaja, to her credit, transitioned her voice from jovial to military seamlessly. "I'm not sensing anything. That's the problem."

Aedyn looked back at her in concern. "You mean Allana's not here?"

Akaja shook her head. "Oh, she's here. But I can't reach her. It's like... there's this wall up, and my abilities can't pierce them. I can't connect to her mind, I can't appear to her. Nothing. She's walled off."

"What could be causing that?" Khloe asked.

"A highly skilled Obscura wielder could develop safeguards against telepathic interference. But that would be for antagonistic powers, invasive attacks, and so forth. Allana and I were..." Akaja coughed. "Well, we never were *always* close, but we respected each other, so I don't believe she'd willingly close me off."

"She hasn't been herself though," Aedyn said.

"Why's that?" Khloe asked.

Aedyn and Akaja shared an uncomfortable look.

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The sky was a marriage of fire and darkness.

Allana blinked as she stared up through the smoke and embers, through the hole in the roof that she had just fallen through.

*Fallen through?* Her head swam, her perception warping for a moment. Allana reached up and touched her forehead, slick with blood from a fresh gash. She winced as her fingers touched it, and Allana slowly sat up, and she saw the hefty mercenary next to her.

"Oh," she said dumbly, remembering now.

The city was under attack. The Tai'Hiera had made good on its threats and were attacking Morcross. They had hired mercenaries. They had hired *Blood Wolves*.

Allana looked back over the thick warrior, bearded with intricate tattoos along his face and neck. There was a pool of blood beneath the body, the puncture through his midsection leaving no question as to where it was emanating from.

She slowly stood up, every part of her body aching. Allana saw her sword on the floor next to her, and with great effort leaned forward to pick it up.

It all came back to her; battling on the rooftop, doing her best to keep the tribal mercenary off balance and avoiding his war axe from tearing her asunder.

It was a risky maneuver. She suspected the roof would not hold when she took him off guard, wrapped her legs around his head and flipped the mercenary over with Obscura-enhanced strength.

The roof buckled beneath the pressure, and as they fell, Allana was able to use her powers to her advantage, stabbing him with her sword in mid-air before landing *hard*. It must have knocked her out momentarily.

Despite her circumstances, she thought to herself, *How do I explain to Esaul about waking up next to a strange man?*

A curt laugh escaped, which reminded her of the bruised—or worse—ribs she had sustained in the fall. She looked for an exit and realized that she had fallen into some kind of storage facility.

*Just my luck, no wonder I fell so far.*

Allana slowly walked over to an exit, and not wanting to waste time, used her strength to shove the door open.

She emerged to chaos.

*Those damned fanatics!*

There was a greater number of Saints, the Tai'Hiera's warrior class who wielded their own unique power called Aduro, than of the Shadow Vanguard, but both were fierce combatants who had been unable to gain a decisive upper hand in the past.

The Tai'Hiera, with their ongoing crusade to convert people to their rabid beliefs, had finally broken the detente. And in doing so, had engaged the tribal Blood Wolves to assist them. The Tai'Hiera and Wolves had been enemies in the past— what could have changed that now? What could the Tai'Hiera have possibly offered them?

And yet, that was not the most troubling thought that came to Allana's mind.

*Who betrayed us?*

Someone had provided the Tai'Hiera with information regarding their defenses. While they were a small force, the Shadow Vanguard were well-prepared, and had ensured they had worked closely with Morcross' traditional army to leave the city-state well defended.

But a flaw was exposed. And it could only have been done from the inside.

There had been contingency plans to evacuate citizens if necessary. A few secret underground tunnels were accessible from within the city-state, only able to be opened from the inside for obvious security reasons.

Except someone had left one of them open and exposed all of them.

And now, Morcross was burning.

Allana made her way through smoke-filled streets, taking care to not be in the way of panicked civilians, and directing them to safety where possible. But even in her injured state, she moved with purpose. She headed towards a particular building.

*Home.*

A fear threatened to engulf her heart. And with it came a name.

*Tomen.*

“My son,” escaped her lips.

*“The flanks will not hold!”* came a frantic thought, which translated into a distinct voice in her mind. Its deep timbre was immediately familiar.

*“Vigo, listen,”* came Aedyn’s presence into her mind. *“Fall back. Esaul and Akaja are under heavy attack at the cath —”*

Allana’s heart jumped. She felt their presence fade in her mind, and she could no longer sense any of them. Which meant Akaja had been injured, or worse. And if so, what did that mean for Esaul?

From what she could gather, Esaul and Akaja were at the cathedral, and summoning Obscura to augment her strength and temper her wounds, Allana ran off.

But the world dissolved to fire and light and screams, and Allana awoke to the darkness.

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“I’d say this is embarrassing but it’s just stating the painfully obvious,” Khloe mused.

Aedyn favored her with an annoyed glance. “What?”

Khloe pointed. “This. I know you’ve been underground for a while, but this plan is just... I don’t know.”

“Go ahead and say it.”

“‘Stupid’ would be an insult to the very word.”

Aedyn resumed pounding on the gates. “My mentor once told me that sometimes the unexpected approach was best one.”

“Did they mean just walking right up to the enemy’s gates and knocking was such a plan?”

“Not in so many words.”

“Has this plan ever worked?”

“Never tried it.”

Khloe sighed, her head in hand. “You can’t possibly be this out of practice.”

“I’m not,” Aedyn mused.

“So why aren’t we either sneaking in or breaking down the doors?”

Aedyn turned towards her. “Well, Draxen has a decent number of mercenaries under his employ. Even if I were to tackle them head on, I’d have you to worry about. And, no offense, you’re still not ready.”

“Akaja has been training me!”

“Did she teach you the Five-Folded Phantom?”

“The *what?*”

Aedyn tutted. “See, she hasn’t taught you everything.”

“I don’t think that’s really a thing.”

Aedyn flashed her a roguish smile. “And you’d be right.”

Khloe shook her head.

A figure peered over the parapet, a gruff guard with a jug of ale in one hand. “Oy! What are you doing there?”

Aedyn gave his best smile and wave. “Is Draxen available?”

The guard took a drink. “What’s it to you?”

Khloe pointed at her face. “You’ve got it running down— oh never mind.”

The guard self-consciously wiped his nappy beard and dirty tunic.

“Draxen. We have some business to —”

“Go away, mate,” the guard said, turning around and disappearing from view.

Aedyn stared for a moment while Khloe broke out in laughter.

“Did he just,” Aedyn began.

“Yes. He completely blew you off.”

Khloe saw a very faint dark mist rising from Aedyn’s fists.

“Huh. That’s new.”

Aedyn raised an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“You getting mad like that. Are you going to break down this door? Are we going to straight-up declare war on them to save Allana?”

Aedyn shook his head. “That would be a bad idea.”

“Agreed.”

Aedyn sighed. “If I had Belmont here, maybe.”

Khloe feigned mock hurt. “You mean I wouldn’t be enough?”

Aedyn’s mouth collapsed into a thin line. “Can your ability create a nine-foot tall shadow rock armor for you to inhabit and wreak havoc with?”

“No, but I’m extremely jealous.”

Aedyn tilted his head in surprise. “Why’s that?”

“He gets a fantastic shadow super armor, you have shadow swords and crazy fighting ability, and Akaja can manipulate dreams and project herself.” Khloe paused. “I can just become a porcupine.”

Aedyn laughed. “No, Khloe. When you get mastery of your powers, you’ll be... quite something.”

A sardonic laugh escaped Khloe’s lips. “What makes you so sure?”

Aedyn smiled but said nothing for a moment. Then he looked behind them and began walking away from the entrance.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“Where?”

“To work out Plan C.”

“I’m pretty sure we’re onto Plan E, actually.”

“Quiet.”

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Allana pondered if she had missed her calling as a writer when she sat down for breakfast.

She was still in chains; Draxen was not foolish enough to believe that she could be trusted despite the dark mood that hovered over her, Allana figured. It was the smart move, but as she pulled the chair in closer to the table, Allana actually found herself missing that tiny bit of freedom.

Draxen, of course, was already seated with the feast set out between them. There were eggs, meats, flour cakes, jams, and various juices prepared. Allana had to admit to herself that it was impressive to see this much food prepared so easily. Times were hard, and if Draxen’s hope was to impress Allana with cuisine in excess, he would be disappointed. Again.

But he persisted, every day making sure she was well fed, even in captivity. Every day he had her brought for three meals a day to his chambers where he would broach a number of topics with her. Most days Allana did not reciprocate his interest, but sometimes to break the monotony she would indulge him. After all, it wasn’t often that she had the opportunity to discuss the socio-economic policies of ancient Northrift city-states.

*He did surprise me with that one,* Allana conceded.

She kept a running tally in her mind of the different topics they did discuss. From politics to warfare tactics, to their odd shared interest in rare books, Allana knew that there were worse types of captivity. She had been privy to them, on occasion. But it did not make her any more appreciative to Draxen. He was still a thug, more warlord than businessman no matter how he presented himself. He kept trying to win her trust, but she found it tiresome and patriarchal.

Still, she could probably write all their conversations down and sell them on the Reads market. *Breakfast with Draxen: A Tale in 50 Parts*.

She realized nobody would buy it and had to stifle a chuckle.

Draxen raised an eyebrow at this. “Everything alright?”

Allana raised a chained hand, the other coughing politely as she tried not to spit out a piece of biscuit. “Please, forgive me. I was just... lost in thought.”

Draxen considered her words for a moment, and with a curt nod went back to eating his food.

“What do you want to talk about today?” he asked.

Allana shrugged. “Couldn’t we just enjoy breakfast in silence?”

“That, my dear, is that we typically do.”

“So why break with tradition?”

Draxen sighed with impatience and slowly lowered his utensils. “Allana... I am *trying*.”

It was Allana’s turn to raise an eyebrow, as well as her hands, making a show of inspecting her chains.

“I’d hate to see what lack of effort looks like.”

“Damn it, woman,” he began.

“See, that right there is a terrible way to continue a conversation with a woman,” Allana said, maintaining an even voice. Then, cloyingly, “It sounds very condescending.”

Draxen looked less than impressed. “You’re toying with me.”

“Well,” Allana began, “I wouldn’t say ‘toying.’ I really do believe that’s a condescending voice.”

Draxen sighed. “Is there any way to win your heart?”

Allana’s thoughts went back to Esaul. A shadow passed over her face.

If Draxen noticed, he let it pass. “Think about the two of us, together. With my considerable resources and your combat skills, we could become quite a force in the region.”

Allana laughed at this. “*You* want to bring order to the region?”

“Is that so hard to believe?”

“Frankly, yes. For starters —”

But her thought was cut short by a disturbance. Allana could clearly hear some of the guards having heated words with someone. Allana looked at Draxen with a raised eyebrow.

“Pay them no mind,” he said absently, returning to buttering his toast. “Just some loon who keeps asking for me. Can you imagine the gall? Just walks right up and asks.”

“Have you gotten a look at him?” Allana asked at length.

“Just descriptions from the guard. Tall-ish man, dark hair, peppered beard. Looks strong enough but my men would make short work of him.”

*Aedyn*, she thought. While the description was vague, she knew it could only be him. *Only Aedyn would be brash enough to just knock on the enemy's front door.*

He must have somehow located her, and Allana was not sure what disturbed her most: her indifference that her old friend was here, or the uncertainty of whether she even wanted to be found.

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Khloe figured that by joining the Shadow Vanguard, she wasn't signing up for a life of leisure. In her heart of hearts, however idealistic, she felt that maybe she could make a difference. Save lives? Bring order back to Kaz'in? All silly dreams of a young girl, but the sort of thing that suddenly seemed possible when dealing with the amazing abilities she now possessed.

Skulking through sewers, however, was not on the list of things that she envisioned herself doing.

*How will I get the stains off of my boots?*

It wasn't even vanity. All Khloe could imagine in her new life as an adventurer was people everywhere she went asking of her first, *Is that shit on your shoes?*

*And how rich is Draxen that he got a sewer line put in?*

"We're almost there," Aedyn said.

"I didn't ask."

That brought Aedyn up short. "Odd. I thought you did."

"Nope."

"Regardless, we're almost there."

Khloe shook her head. "How many successful sneak attacks have you engaged from the sewers? Like, how did this even make it into your playbook?"

Aedyn smiled. "I'd love to tell you that it proved to be a pivotal turning point in an epic battle, but, eh... it's actually never worked."

Khloe stopped. "What?"

Aedyn shrugged his shoulders. "First of all, outside of major cities or towns, there usually aren't any sewer connections. For Draxen to even have this here means he paid a hell of a lot of money to Shorzwith," said, then more to himself, "which explains why they had a festival this year when they haven't in over a decade."

"How is any of this relevant?" Khloe asked, exasperated.

"It's not. All I'm saying is that if he paid enough money to have this built, there must be some sort of maintenance entrance underground and I can't see how they would usually guard that."

“Then this should have been the first place we went, instead of hitting up their front door,” Khloe said flatly.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because of the guards standing over there,” she said, pointing past him.

Aedyn turned and saw the same guard from the front gate, now accompanied by several comrades.

The guard favored Aedyn with a mocking wave. “I figured you were a persistent one. This seemed like the most obvious next step.”

“I hope Draxen is paying you enough,” Aedyn said, impressed despite himself.

“Move along now,” the guard said.

With a sigh, Aedyn turned and walked away. “Come on, Khloe.”

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Again, Allana tested the strength of her chains. They continued to prove stubborn.

It was surprising how empty she felt being cut off from her powers. Although Allana had maintained her conditioning in the years since Morcross fell, and knew she was more than a capable fighter without her special abilities, there was a comfort in knowing that she could do more. That somehow her powers made her special in a way that allowed for her to protect others. There was strange joy in that.

But then Morcross happened.

Her eyes closed, more from exhaustion, but soon the darkness gave way to fire and screams.

*I am running through the streets. Fires burning, people hurt and begging for help. I can do nothing for them. I need to get home, I need to find Tomen and get to Esaul.*

And there it was. The place that had been their home, where they began a family.

It was shattered.

The building was on fire, and the roof had partially collapsed. A hurt, so deep it threatened to splinter Allana, took root. She raced towards the building, and found the door had been smashed in. She rushed in, frantically looking around.

“Tomen!” she cried.

No response.

The smoke was thick, and Allana used her Obscura talents to slow her breathing. She moved into the side room but found the stairs had been smashed, and the upstairs engulfed in flames. Allana called for her son again, but still no response. She moved towards another room and that’s when found Brianne.

Brianne, her childhood friend, and the only woman she trusted enough to be Tomen’s nanny. She lay on the ground with a gaping wound in her side.

“Brianne!” she cried and rushed to her side. Lifting Brianne into her arms, she caressed her friend’s face, and barely cognizant eyes fluttered open.

“Lana,” she said.

“Where’s Tomen?”

“He... was upstairs. I told him to hide. The Saints... were so sudden.”

Fear encased Allana’s heart. “Did they take him?”

Tears welled up in Brianne’s eyes. “No. They... right before my eyes... I’m sorry... so sorry I couldn’t...”

And Brianne went silent.

There was a stillness in that moment. Where time forgot its course and the smoke and embers danced slowly and gracefully amid the crackling flames.

Nothing happened forever in that moment. Allana stared at her departed friend and pondered her final words.

The tears came harsh and rapid. The heaviness in her chest threatened to drag her down into the earth. Allana sat motionless.

Soon there was another voice. Another figure next to her, but the words were blurred, and time was distorted. Aedyn, grabbing her arm. Words such as “evacuate”, “Esaul”, “mortally” came to her. Nothing mattered.

Only embers and silence.

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Allana awoke with a start.

For a moment, she believed she could still smell the smoke from all those years ago. The grief welled up again.

*What am I still doing here?*

It was a question she had asked herself many times over the past several months.

But this time, there was something different.

Something hardened inside of her.

Allana waited for the morning routine to take place. She waited until she was seated across from Draxen, eating breakfast once again in silence.

But something was different this morning.

Allana looked at the knife in her hand that she used to spread jam on the biscuit she chose.

It was dull, but it didn't matter.

*I could jam this into my neck. I could finally do it and this would be over. I could see Tomen again. I could see Esaul. We'd be together finally.*

There was a fire brewing inside of her.

Something had changed.

Allana glanced over at Draxen. He was lost in thought as he cut up some sausage.

Something rose up within Allana. More than annoyance at Draxen's tiresome conversation. More than just anger.

*Rage.*

She didn't need her powers. She was tired. Of being passive. Of this life that had taken so much from her, when she had dedicated hers to giving all she had. Allana's eyes were stone and fire, her heart roiling in a way she had not felt in an eternity.

*Out there is the person who betrayed my family and caused the deaths of my loved ones. I could stay here and do nothing. Or...*

Draxen didn't realize what had happened until the knife was in his thigh.

Allana, chained and all, turned over the table between her and Draxen with such ferocity that the wood splintered and sent pieces flying.

In the same breath, she kept the knife in her hand and brought it down, *hard*, into Draxen's thigh. Before he could even scream, she flipped over and behind him, bringing her chained wrists around his throat. *Tightly.*

Guards stormed in and were at the ready but stopped short when they saw Allana holding Draxen captive.

"Unchain me, Draxen!" she cried.

"Are...you... mad?" he said, straining between breaths.

"Order your men to unlock my chains, or it ends here for *both* of us!"

Allana pressed the chain against his throat for emphasis.

The guards looked back and forth between Draxen and Allana. Finally, and desperately, he waved a frantic hand at them. One of the guards removed a set of keys and slowly moved towards them, but Allana pulled back.

“No! Throw them to him,” she said.

The guard reflexively threw the keys, and Draxen fumbled to catch them. Allana didn't budge, maintaining Draxen close. He drew his arms to his chest, gaining control of the keys, and frantically unlocked the chains on her wrist and, after motioning, her legs.

Power rushed back into Allana's being. She could sense the world again in a different light. It was exhilarating.

She reached out and sensed several things at once. First was a bewildered Akaja in the back of her mind, pouring in more emotion than words. Then it was that her initial assumption was correct: Aedyn *was* nearby.

As was a familiar power.

*No. He's dead.*

But the power was coming from someone unfamiliar. Another woman.

*Just what has been going on?*

“Okay, Draxen. I have to admit, I wasn't very fond of you in the beginning. I'm still not, but I've had worse hosts. So, this is how it's going to play out: you're going to order your men to stand down, and I'm going to walk out of here. You don't *ever* bother me again, understood? Otherwise, you all die here, today. Deal?”

Draxen muffled something.

She pulled harder on his neck. “I'm sorry?”

“Deal!” he screamed.

“Good,” she said simply, and let him go.

Draxen dropped to the ground, and Allana looked at the guards. She half-expected them to attack her immediately, but they deferred, stepping back to let her by. Allana nodded, and stepped over Draxen, and out through the door, never looking back.

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“Okay,” Aedyn began, “on my count, we’ll knock down the gate, rush the guards, and fight our way to Allana.”

“And why didn’t we do this first?” Khloe asked patiently.

“Hush.”

“I know you didn’t just hush me.”

“Look, I wanted to make sure Allana wasn’t placed in any additional danger. But now diplomacy has failed —”

“That was ‘diplomacy’?”

“So now we take a more aggressive approach.”

Akaja suddenly appeared between them. “‘Aggressive,’” she said sarcastically.

Aedyn favored her with an annoyed look, and she smiled sweetly before vanishing.

“Let’s just —”

The gates suddenly opened.

Allana stepped through and was surprised to find Aedyn and Khloe standing there.

“Hello,” she said plainly.

“Uh, hey Allana,” Aedyn said, confused.

Allana turned to Khloe, who gave a curt wave

“I’m Khloe. We’re... here to rescue you?”

“It was Aedyn’s plan, wasn’t it?” Allana deadpanned.

All Khloe could do was nod, her lips collapsed into a line.

Allana moved past them and began walking away.

“Allana?” Aedyn said.

“We have work to do, right?” she said.

“Yes?” he fumbled.

“Then let’s get to it,” Allana said, not turning around.

Aedyn and Khloe regarded each other with confused glances and ran to catch up.

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Allana welcomed the warmth on her skin, closing her eyes and raising her head briefly as she walked on.

Allana was keenly aware of Aedyn’s presence, and the familiar yet strange one accompanying him. She moved past, knowing they would catch up. It had been so long; Allana wanted to absorb everything around her.

There was the sun and life around her. She reached out with her Obscura, reconnecting to the world around her in a way her chains had made impossible. It was *glorious*. For the first time in forever, Allana felt alive. She felt understanding and purpose. It in no way diminished the void inside of her, but the feeling granted her a way to maneuver in and around that dreadful dark. She could sense Aedyn’s true purpose in reuniting them, and Allana welcomed it. And to achieve that purpose, they needed to move forward.

*Always forward.*

Together, they would divine the shape of this new world.

TO BE CONTINUED...