

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a forest. The trees are tall and thin, with a dense canopy. The ground is covered in ferns and fallen leaves. In the lower center, a silhouette of a person is captured in a dynamic, almost dancing pose. The overall mood is mysterious and ethereal.

Obscura  
Rhapsody

No. 1

by Julio Angel Ortiz

“Primary”

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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)*

Khloe's heart threatened to burst into a thousand smoldering pieces.

She trampled russet leaves, her pace reflected by the furious crunching beneath her feet. Arms frantically waved before her to ward off encroaching branches. Roots conspired against her, bubbling out of the earth with what she could only surmise was malicious intent, until Khloe's foot caught on one, nearly sending her tumbling to the ground.

"No, no, no," Khloe mumbled to herself, tasting the fear in her words. For a moment she imagined herself flailing in the dark, and had the situation not been so dire, Khloe would have laughed.

*I must look ridiculous.*

Khloe pushed away the thought. She ducked low and then cut to her right, hurrying alongside an outcropping and maneuvering down a small incline that - she hoped - would give her some distance from her attackers.

Again she almost slipped, and Khloe muttered a curse as she allowed herself to slide low, then fall to her knees. She skittered along the ground beside a fallen tree, its husk granting her a momentary reprieve.

Khloe laid there, imagining herself blending into the dark to escape her pursuers. She looked up at the sky, the unfettered stars staring back down in what Khloe could only imagine was pity.

*Or disapproval.*

Khloe attempted to control her breathing, not wanting her ragged breaths to draw attention. Blood pounded in her ears as she looked around, attempting to decipher the darkness. She heard no sounds of pursuit, no cries of intimidation like when they first came upon her.

Not for the first time, Khloe chastised herself. Had she been more patient, Khloe could have ridden with a group of merchants heading towards the Lurin Passage in the morning, and judging by the number of guards she had seen riding with them, Khloe was confident that she would have made it without issue. But Lurin was to the north, and while safer, it would have set Khloe back by about two weeks.

*I can't afford that, she thought bitterly. But I can't really afford dying either, can I?*

Instead, Khloe had decided to set out under cover of darkness through the Forest, hoping to shave off a few days from her journey. She understood the risks, but her goal was much too important.

That thought took hold of her, and she stood again, creeping down the slope. Once the terrain leveled out, Khloe broke off into a full run, maintaining the clip for longer than she had expected. The terror, she surmised, was actually doing her some good.

Khloe dared to look over her shoulder, but the night and trees betrayed nothing, and Khloe felt the uncertainty of whether her hunters were still behind her, or were now somehow ahead, a trap ready and waiting.

The splintering of wood by her head alleviated that concern.

The sudden and violent *crack!* startled Khloe, causing her to flinch, and in doing so, she slid on dead leaves into a large root, promptly sending her forward.

Khloe instinctively put her hand out to break her fall, but her momentum was too great, and Khloe's arm crumpled underneath her frame. She rolled awkwardly, and could swear the next cracking sound came from her wrist. The shooting pain that followed confirmed it, and her left hand immediately throbbed and tingled. Khloe slid to a stop, and in spite of the pain spreading across her body, struggled to quickly get back up. Khloe rose with all the grace of a drunk, then felt vertigo wash over her, causing her to stumble back to the ground. Cursing, Khloe closed her eyes and tried to focus enough to continue. She was clutching at her wrist, the contours swollen, heat suffusing the skin.

Khloe hazarded a look back and made out a shadowy, rotund specter. A small cry escaped her lips and all thought of her wrist fled. She stood again and continued to run.

She made it less than ten feet before cold metal wrapped around her ankle and yanked. *Hard.*

Khloe went airborne before slamming into the ground. The breath was knocked out of her, and Khloe struggled, curled up in a fetal position among the leaves. Khloe could hear the metal chain dragging along the ground, returning to its owner. She weakly turned to make another run for it, but her body rebelled against the thought.

"You're lucky, girl," came a hard voice. "I usually attach a small curved blade to the end of the chain for runners. Had I not been so... *generous*... you'd be doing a lot more than catching your breath."

Another voice arose from the darkness. This one was lighter, innocent in comparison. "Enough, Valos."

Khloe dug her fingers into the earth, determined to move forward, willing herself to escape.

"Orlando," came the first voice, the one with gravel in its throat. "I'm just adding a little bit of fun to the chase." A hardy shuffle drew closer to Khloe.

Every step she heard rumbled in the pit of her stomach, with the anticipation of an executioner's touch. "Oh, God," Khloe said in a choked whisper.

A sardonic laugh escaped into the dark. "Why do they always do that? They always reach out to some deity, right here at the end," said Orlando. "As if living in this accursed land wasn't enough to drive anyone to atheism."

"Tell that to the Tai'Hiera," Valos said, venom in his voice.

"My point exactly."

Slowly, Khloe stood, using a tree to steady herself. She turned towards Valos, slumping a little in the process. She hoped that her defiant pose and next words would have the desired effect.

"Okay, you son of a bitch," Khloe said, anger stamped onto every word. "I'm not rolling over for you or your friend over there. So if you want me, you're going to have to drag your disgusting ass over here and get me." She punctuated her words by spitting on Valos.

It hit the mark, and Valos slowly wiped away his cheek with a grunt.

"I like your spirit," he said. Valos let the chain go slack on the ground again, and favored her with a rotting smile.

Just then, a figure emerged, as if birthed by the dark. Khloe tried to jump to the side, but in an instant a hand was there, pushing her head down towards the earth. Her head struck hard, and she then felt someone stoop down next to her. A hand caressed her face, smooth and bare.

"I find her sense of self-preservation... refreshing," came the voice Khloe now recognized as Orlando. "That spark. I respect it."

"You actually had to blindside me?" she cried, her voice incredulous.

"What's the use in playing fair?" Orlando said in a half-whisper.

Khloe closed her eyes. *So this is how it ends?* She began to look for a way to scratch at Orlando or bite him. There had to be some escape, some way to get away from these scum.

"Fairness is 'overrated'? Hardly." The voice cut through the cool, dark air. "I've found that's usually the hallmark of a dim and rigid mind."

Orlando stood quickly, looking around. Khloe glanced back but her eyes failed to pierce the darkness.

"Who is that?" Orlando probed, his hand immediately reaching down to the hilt of his sword.

"That would hardly be *fair*, hmm?" came the interloper's voice.

Khloe's head was swimming, and she was finding it hard to concentrate. But this man's demeanor was taunting, filled with confidence. Khloe wished she could summon the same confidence about her chances of surviving, despite the man's bravado. And above all, she was unsure if she could really trust him.

"Cheeky," offered Orlando, slowly circling in place, continuing to scan the dark.

"Well, after all," continued the voice, "you still have another one of your friends still out here, hidden."

"What are you talking about?" bellowed Valos.

A loud *oomph* tripped into the dark, and and before it could register, the stout form of Valos fell forward, the full weight of his frame crushing the leaves underneath.

Khloe scrambled away, looking around frantically. She didn't see anyone nearby, and she couldn't see any kind of rope or weapon used to strike Valos. The darkness appeared to shift, as if shadows were moving in a slow dance, but Khloe shook the thought away. *I must be getting delirious.*

"I don't appreciate liars," the voice said.

Valos scrambled up, furiously rubbing the back of his head and looking around.

"Valos," Orlando said angrily, "what the hell happened?"

Valos growled. "He somehow got the drop on me!" He gripped his chain weapon and tightened the slack. "Show yourself!"

A quick rustling caught their attention, and Valos swung his chain up into the sea of leaves with startling speed. His mouth collapsed into a grim line once it returned without having struck flesh.

"Your other friend, however, continues to remain hidden," the voice said. "Tell him not to be shy."

Khloe silently chastised herself. She should be running. Whoever this man was, whatever game he was playing with her attackers, offered no guarantee that Khloe herself would not be the focus of his attentions - whatever they may be - after he was done with them.

Khloe took a step to run but was caught by the arm. She winced at the tight grip and looked up to see a man with graying hair and rough-hewn skin. His eyes were a well of ice, and he forced her back against the tree. Khloe could only reply with a loud grunt of pain.

"Daidren," Orlando said without turn around, "nice of you to join us."

"What the hell is going on?" he asked, bile coating every word.

"It would seem," Orlando continued, his voice soft and steady, "that we have a visitor."

Daidren offered Khloe a pitiless stare. "A friend of yours?" he asked.

When Khloe said nothing, Daidren gripped her face and forced her to meet his gaze. "Well?"

"Maybe," Khloe said at last. "I guess we'll see when he kicks your asses."

Daidren responded with a non-committal *hmm* and looked back at Orlando.

"We're wasting time," he said. "Why hasn't this *visitor* been dealt with yet? We're due to make the drop-off in the morning."

"He's proving rather... evasive," Orlando said.

"He's being an asshole!" Valos shouted into the dark.

"Enough!" Daidren said. He gripped Khloe's throat. "Show yourself or we'll kill the girl."

"Don't I have a say?" Khloe said in a constricted voice.

Daidren favored her with a quizzical look, then glanced over at Valos and Orlando, who simply shrugged.

"I have a counteroffer," came the voice. "Leave the girl be, and continue on your way. And then, I won't kill you."

Valos let out a hearty laugh. "Bold words for a man who hasn't even revealed himself."

"Last chance," came the voice, dead calm.

In a swift motion, Daidren removed a dagger from his belt, and made a cut across Khloe's cheek. Khloe found that she could only muster a gasp of shock, and had to fight the instinct to raise her hand to her cheek. Any sudden movement could push Daidren to act... rashly.



"No more warnings. Come out now," Daidren said, his grip tightening on Khloe's throat.

He had barely finished speaking before a tornado of shadows rushed out from the darkness and struck him square in the chest, sending Daidren flying back.

Khloe's jaw went slack as she saw another man take Daidren's place beside her in a mere blink.

She appraised him from the recess of her shock. He was tall, at least a foot taller than herself. He had dark hair, with a closely trimmed beard that was peppered with gray. He wore a dark tunic, his arms smooth and well-defined. A peculiar tattoo was on his upper bicep, in the form of a lion's head in mid-roar. What caught her attention the most was the shadowy mist that came off of him, which at first Khloe mistook for steam arising from exertion. However, the night air was not cool enough, and Khloe found herself at a loss.

"My name," the man said, "is Aedyn Locke. And I guess that you three are just going to have to die here."

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An ember of memory sparked within Khloe.

Snow had come early to Greenveil when she was about four years old. Through the distant fog of time, Khloe envisioned herself sitting by the fireplace, sparing a glance up at the window to see the thick flakes of ice pounding against the glass. She took her doll - *Missy*, Khloe recalled - and sat her across against the base of a chair. Khloe then took the wooden horse her father had gifted her some time before and made it gallop up to Missy, offering a ride through imaginary snow and off into woods to meet Daddy.

Khloe stopped and looked behind her, where her mother sat at a table. She could see her mother push back straw hair, the worry etched on her face as she stirred sugar into a hot drink. Khloe stood and moved to be beside her mother.

"Mama?" Khloe said uncertainly.

Khloe's mother glanced down at her, offering a frail smile. "What is it, honey?"

"Why do you look so sad?"

Khloe's mother looked away quickly as a coughing fit took hold. It was something her mother had been doing more of recently, and Khloe wondered why her mother hadn't gone to see the apothecary yet. Khloe recalled a stranger visiting both her parents some time ago, and the man had paid particular attention to her mother. Khloe assumed that he had been a doctor of some sort, but the hushed discussion and having been shooed away to her room had afforded her little opportunity to inquire further.

Her mother stopped coughing and turned towards Khloe. "I'm okay, honey. There's nothing to worry about."

"So why do you keep coughing?"

Her mother's smile waned a little. "Just this damned weather," she said with a laugh. She then reached down, picked Khloe up and placed her in her lap.

"There's so much snow, mama."

"Yes."

"But it's not even Last Harvest."

Khloe's mother shrugged lightly. "Sometimes that happens. Not often, though. The last time snow fell this early, I was about your age."

"Really?" Khloe's eyes went wide. "That long ago?"

Her mother let out a hearty laugh and she wrapped up Khloe in an embrace. "Oh, baby girl," she said, love lacing every word.

"Where's Daddy?" Khloe asked at length.

Khloe's mother looked back out the window, her gaze becoming lost in the snow. She lazily ran her hands through Khloe's hair. "He's out. He went to town to visit the apothecary."

"To get you medicine?"

"Something like that."

Khloe glanced back at the window, seeing the dark orange fade of the sky.  
"It's getting late."

"Yes."

"Isn't it dangerous to be out late?"

Khloe's mother allowed a long pause to fill the space between them. "It's... not entirely safe. But your dad can take care of himself."

"Could Emily's dad take care of himself?"

The smile on her mother's face collapsed into a thin line.

"Emily said her dad went out late and they found him the next morning. They said the bandits got him," Khloe said simply. "What does it mean when the bandits get him? Does he have to go away with them? Is that why Emily's dad isn't around anymore?"

Khloe's mother had opened her mouth to respond, when the door flew open.

With a gust of wind and snow, Khloe's father stepped through from the burgeoning darkness.

"Damn early winter!" her father said, turning towards the rack as he began to remove his thick coat.

"Daddy!" Khloe yelled, hopping down off her mother, who was releasing a huge sigh. She proceeded to run towards her father, who barely had enough time to turn around and greet her with a hug before being bowled over.

"There she is!" her father said, arms outstretched. Khloe jumped into his arms and he lifted her up.

"You're late, daddy!" Khloe chastised him.

He looked at his wife in mock surprise. "Oh, am I? I guess I'm going to be in trouble now," he said, favoring her with a wink. Khloe's mother smiled and shook her head.

"Well, you *are* late, Bren. I was starting to get a little worried."

Bren nodded. "Well, yeah. The roads were no good, so I decided to take a shortcut."

"A shortcut?"

"Don't look at me like that, Tera," Bren said, waving a dismissive hand.

"Daddy, what's a shortcut?"

"It's a way to get somewhere faster, baby."

Tera crossed her arms. "You took the forest?"

Bren kept his tone leveled. "Yes."

"Bren! You know there are bandits in those woods! You're lucky you didn't run into one!"

"Yeah!" Khloe chimed in. "Then you might have to go with them like Emily's dad."

Bren stared at Khloe for a moment before grimacing, and put her down. He favored Tera with a knowing look. "Now, Khloe, I wasn't going to go with any bandits. They don't want to take me with them."

"Okay, daddy."

"And," Bren said, standing up and reaching into his pocket. "The apothecary wanted me to give you this." He held out a wrapped container.

Tera looked at it, a hand reaching up to her throat. "Is that...?"

"Yes," Bren said.

Tera reached out a tentative hand and took it.

"She said we'll know in about two weeks if you start taking it today."

Tera simply nodded and turned back to the sink.

Khloe looked from her mother back to her father, and pulled on his sleeve. Bren looked back down at her.

"Yes, baby?"

"Daddy, what's so bad about traveling through the forest?"

Bren got down on his haunches. "I'll explain when you're a little older, honey. But the important thing to remember is this: don't use it to travel alone. Especially at night."

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Daidren had to admit, however grudgingly, that this newcomer might actually be a problem.

He reached up and rubbed his chest, then slowly sat up and looked at where he had once been standing. He looked over by the girl and at the man who had just sent him flying —

*Thirty yards?*

No, that couldn't be right. That was impossible.

Unless...

Daidren cleared his throat. He decided to play this very carefully.

He stood up with as much dignity as he could muster. In the background he could see the outline of his men standing at the ready, weapons out, looking on in shock and dismay at the new arrival.

Valos, as usual, was cursing up a storm.

"I have to admit," Daidren said, "that I'm impressed."

The man—*Aedyn*, Daidren reminded himself— favored him with a disinterested shrug.

"But that speed, and that strength... you're not just a common soldier, are you?"

Aedyn said nothing.

"Valos," Daidren said, "dispose of him."

The portly warrior rushed forward, his speed betraying his immense frame, and swung his chain, the barbed blade on the end closing in on the back of Aedyn's head. In a swift motion, and without turning around, Aedyn stepped aside, sticking his arm out and firmly but gently pushing Khloe down to the ground. The chain's blade flew past the now-empty space where Aedyn had once stood. He brought up his arm, grabbing the chain.

As Daidren watched, he saw Aedyn's body begin to effuse a faint shadowy mist as he moved. Aedyn pulled the chain taut, then swung up and over. Valos, to whose arm the chain was attached via thick wrist straps, was lifted up in a wide arc, and then slammed down. Leaves and branches flew all around in a miniature blast pattern of nature.

Valos was stunned, the wind knocked out of him. As he awkwardly scrambled to stand up, Aedyn was already upon him, landing a double-fisted punch to the stout man's chest. Daidren was impressed when Valos did not fly off his feet, but rather slid back in place for several yards. Daidren caught a glimpse of a smile cross Aedyn's face, before he followed up with a sliding kick to Valos' knees. Valos barely dodged in time, and grabbed Aedyn's tunic, lifting him up and throwing him to the side.

Aedyn used the momentum to roll through the air and land on the ground, sliding away from Valos in a crouched position, until he came to a stop by a tree. Valos wasted no time in following up with a dashing punch, which Aedyn barely blocked by crossing his arms in front of his chest. The force of the impact sent Aedyn back, slamming him hard into a tree. Aedyn allowed himself to slump to the ground, avoiding Valos' follow-up strike, which landed into the tree and cleanly uprooted and sent it flying off, landing with a loud *crack!* somewhere in the dark.

Aedyn lashed out at Valos with a roundhouse kick, but Valos caught his leg and attempted to flip him over. Aedyn brought his other leg up, kicking Valos in the face and then completing a backflip. As Valos staggered back, Aedyn rushed forward, connecting a flurry of blows to his midsection. Valos attempted to block them but was unable to, and Aedyn finished his attack with an uppercut that sent Valos spinning backwards and onto the ground.

What Daidren witnessed next was a surprise, but not entirely unexpected.

Aedyn brought his right arm forward in an arc, his hand apparently gripping nothing, until the air shimmered with a shadowy mist, which coalesced into the shape of a sword.

Which took Valos' head clean off.

Daidren heard Khloe utter a cry of disgust, as Valos' head rolled away, crunching into the dried leaves. Valos' body spasmed for a moment, and then went still.

"I thought as much," Daidren said flatly.

Aedyn met Daidren's gaze with quiet intensity.

"You're a wielder of Obscura," Daidren said, then gave a sardonic chuckle. "Damn, boy, now I understand why you said we'd have to die if you fought us."

Aedyn said nothing.

"You're no better than us. Hell, if the Tai'Hiera caught wind of you —"

"They won't."

"That remains to be seen," Daidren said, and rushed forward.

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"Behind you!" Khloe cried, not realizing she was screaming until the words had already escaped her mouth.

While the leader of the bandits spoke to Aedyn, she could see Orlando preparing to strike. Khloe saw the setup that Daidren was laying out, and at the moment he rushed towards Aedyn, Orlando moved towards Aedyn from out of his periphery.

Instead of running away, which was probably the most sensible option, something compelled her to warn the man who had put his life at risk to protect her.

Even if he had just brusquely shoved her to the ground.

*For your own good*, she reminded herself.

Khloe remained, watching on in equal parts fascination and dread as Aedyn contested with the two bandits.

Orlando made the first move, juking forward with his sword aloft, but Aedyn responded by taking a hop back and swirling in the process, his blade cutting through the space Orlando would have occupied had he not stopped himself. Daidren moved forward, unsheathing his sword in an upward arc that almost caught Aedyn in the torso had he not cartwheeled out of the way.

Khloe could see the shadowy mist rising off of Aedyn once again. Orlando followed up with a kick that caught Aedyn unawares, sending him careening backwards towards the roots of an upended tree. Daidren seized upon the moment, quickly removing a dagger and throwing it at Aedyn's prone body.

With a grunt, Aedyn brought up his shadow sword and batted the dagger away, and flipped onto his feet. Orlando leaped forward, sword outstretched, aiming to pierce Aedyn's heart. Aedyn raised his free hand, and a cyclone of leaves arose from the ground, enveloping Orlando. With a flick of his wrist, Aedyn sent the cyclone - and Orlando in tow - spinning off into the dark.

Aedyn turned his attention back to Daidren just in time to parry his blow, then another of a dagger that was gripped in Daidren's other hand. A flurry of blows followed, each man blocking the other's attack and attempting to capitalize on a mistake.

Neither could find one.

Daidren crouched and attempted a leg sweep, but Aedyn leaped back. Daidren spun and released his dagger, which caught Aedyn with a glancing blow off the side of his tunic. It was enough to stumble him, and Khloe saw blood as Aedyn fell. From the darkness, Orlando flew in with a diving kick,



catching Aedyn in the ribs. Khloe heard a *crack!* as Aedyn crumpled to the ground.

Orlando, sensing victory at the sight of his fallen foe, went in for the kill.

As Khloe soon realized, both Orlando and herself were fooled.

As quickly as Aedyn had crumpled, he allowed his momentum to carry him back and over, and in standing, brought up his blade, catching a stunned Orlando in mid-thrust, bisecting him from hip to shoulder.

Orlando's remains slid apart, landing in a slick clump. Daidren let out a cry of frustration.

"Damn you!" he screamed.

Aedyn faced Daidren, his voice radiating calm. "I warned you."

Daidren growled in frustration. "Your victory will be a hollow one."

And that's when Khloe saw Daidren spring towards her.

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For Aedyn, the past reemerged, a torrent sea threatening to crash all around him.

It was always there, in the darkest hours when sleep eluded him. It roiled beneath as he attempted to wash away his regrets in the bath, as the water cooled and eventually went still as he laid there.

It was never the dreams that tortured him. When he dreamed, and it was not often anymore, his memories were of happier times. Of days in the distant past when he and his companions were young and foolish and full of hope. Of later times, in Kaz'in, where they had made their home. He remembered his best friend, Esaul, and Allana and Veruk, among others.

But inevitably those memories would turn to fire and ash. Of the screams of those they had sworn to protect. Of a betrayal and a broken promise.

No matter what Aedyn did, or how hard he tried, the past was there to remind him of failure.

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*No!* Aedyn's thoughts were a blend of fury and dismay.

After having contended with Daidren, and having taken Orlando out of the equation, Aedyn believed that he would have a little more time to barter with before finishing this mess. But Daidren called Aedyn's bluff, and he knew that he could not stop Daidren in time.

Calling upon his Obscura talents, Aedyn sped forth, trying to catch Daidren, despite knowing it was impossible.

Aedyn cursed himself. Perhaps several years ago he would have caught Daidren without much effort, and would have put an end to these three bandits with greater ease than he had today. But the truth was twofold: not only was Aedyn simply older, now being in his early forties, but he was out of practice.

Aedyn chastised himself for his recent lack of training. In his effort to maintain as low a profile as possible, he had allowed himself to become rusty, and that rust would now cost this young woman her life. And that was not to mention the broken ribs he was now focusing energy on to minimize the pain.

*I told you that you shouldn't have slacked off in your training,* a voice said inside his mind.

*Shut up,* Aedyn responded.

Daidren was almost upon the woman, and Aedyn was still a couple of yards back. He wouldn't make it in time.

He had failed her.

Just as he had failed Esaul. And Laurana. And —

The woman's scream broke his reverie.

Fury swelled up within Aedyn, and he raised his shadow blade to strike down Daidren. If there was one thing that Aedyn owed the poor woman, it

was vengeance for having been murdered for his failure. Aedyn was almost upon Daidren —

And then came to a dead stop.

Before him was Daidren, but he was unmoving. His body was engulfed in weak spasms, and then Aedyn noticed it.

The blood.

Blood dripping to the ground and forming rivulets. In his confusion, Aedyn kept looking back at the ground, to Daidren, and finally the woman who was screaming.

Except she was unharmed. Her eyes were wide with shock, her breathing now ragged gasps.

Slowly, Daidren's body slumped to the ground. And then Aedyn saw the last thing he ever expected to witness again.

The woman was standing there, arrayed in somber mist, with shadowy blades protruding from all over her body, forming a macabre sphere of protection. She stood there in shock, staring at Aedyn as if she could explode with the slightest movement.

"What's your name?" Aedyn asked at length.

"K-Khloe."

Aedyn nodded. "Take a deep breath, Khloe. Release the tension from your body. He —" Aedyn looked down at Daidren's still body. "He won't be hurting you any more."

Khloe nodded slowly, her eyes glazing over momentarily as the shadowy blades dissipated into mist. Aedyn moved forward as Khloe swayed, and caught her by the arm. As he helped straightened her up, he slid up the sleeve of her shirt, revealing her bicep.

And the distinct tattoo that covered it.

"Where did you get this?" he asked, more sharply than intended.

"What?" Khloe said, her voice a mix of fear and defensiveness.

"This marking," he said, more evenly this time, "how did you get it?"

Khloe looked away. "I... I don't know."

"It just appeared, didn't it?"

Khloe's head spun back to face Aedyn. "Yes," she said at length.

"About five years ago?"

Khloe's mouth went agape. "Yes... how could you have possibly known that?"

Aedyn released Khloe's arm, and looked away. He took a few steps, then stopped.

But the words didn't come, and he continued walking.

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Khloe stared in disbelief as Aedyn walked away from her.

She hazarded a look down at the pooled blood at her feet, at the man whose body this same blood was once housed in, and over at the bisected remnants of Orlando and the corpulent, headless Valos.

Suddenly, the night of the forest seemed even more terrifying.

Khloe chased after Aedyn.

"You just can't leave me here!" she said, and instantly felt stupid for having said it. It was the sort of thing that helpless females said in the penny bloods her father would let her read as a teenager.

The same father who may already no longer be with her. A void threatened to open in her heart and consume her. Khloe crushed it down.

"I don't intend on leaving her," Aedyn said in a hushed whisper.

That brought Khloe to a halt. "Excuse me?"

Aedyn looked up at Khloe, and for a moment she thought he was looking through her, not even discerning that she was even communicating with him.

"I... I didn't —" he began.

"Don't say you didn't say anything. I'm not stupid. I heard you, and why were you talking about me in the third person?"

Aedyn looked down and rubbed his forehead, at a loss for words.

"And just what the hell was that with those blades sticking out of me? And you... you were able to do some crazy shit while covered in some dark mist. And I... I saw your tattoo and I have something similar, and we both have these weird..." Khloe struggled to find the right word. "Gifts?"

Khloe didn't expect what followed.

A smile broke out across Aedyn's face, and he shook his head.

"Gifts', huh? That's an interesting word," he said. He turned away and sighed. "I remember saying something similar years ago."

Khloe crossed her arms. The night air finally felt too cold and intrusive. Her bones ached.

"You didn't answer my question," she said.

Aedyn nodded. "You're right."

Khloe went to speak, arching her head back in frustration, but Aedyn lifted his hands in a placating gesture.

"Okay, okay," he said gently. "But don't you think we should be moving on?"

Khloe shook her head. "Not until you answer some of my questions."

Aedyn pursed his lips together. "Very well. Ask away."

"Just what the hell were those blades?" she asked, pointing at her body. "And are they related to this tattoo?"

"Yes, they're related. You, like me, have a talent to wield a power called Obscura."

"Obscura?" Khloe said beneath her breath.

Aedyn nodded.

"But I thought that was just a tale. A myth, something to scare armies that had to face the Shadow Vanguard."

Aedyn said nothing.

A realization dawned. "Were you in the Shadow Vanguard?"

Aedyn turned and began to walk. "We should get moving."

"Answer my question!"

Aedyn shook his head. "That was a lifetime ago."

"So is it true? What happened at Morcross?"

Aedyn stopped, and turned back to face Khloe. His expression was stern. He slowly stepped towards Khloe, and when within reach, touched the tattoo on her arm.

"Five years ago, at Morcross, I lost a good friend in battle. I knew that you received the marking five years ago because this," he said, tapping the tattoo, "was his mark, and his talent."

"But how did I —"

"Enough questions," Aedyn said, turning once more and marching off into the dark.

Khloe wasted no time in following.

"Okay, but, eh, how do I control this? I don't even know how I used it to kill that bandit back there."

Aedyn nodded. "Your body was in danger and it reacted accordingly. A defense mechanism, it activated your talent subconsciously. You need additional training to control it and allow your will to bend it."

"Can you teach me?"

"No, I can't."

"Can't, or won't?"

"I don't have the time to teach her and you know that!" he said angrily. "I have to find the others first."

Khloe looked around. "Okay, you're doing that crazy talking-to-yourself thing again."

Aedyn stopped, closing his eyes in frustration. "No, no. Look, I'm... I'm in touch with a friend of mine."

"A friend?" Skepticism dripped from every word. Khloe looked around. "Where are they?"

"She is in Sharizen, or so she says."

Khloe put up her hands. "Wait, is she another Obscura wielder?"

Aedyn nodded. "Yes, of course. I'm not really crazy you know." Then, as an aside, "Shut up, Akaja."

"Her name is Akaja?"

"Yes."

"Do you always name your imaginary friends?"

"Oh, a wise-ass. Well, we have no shortage of them, thanks." Aedyn kept walking.

"Wait, wait!" Khloe ran and got in front of Aedyn. "Look... I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry. This night," she said with a sardonic chuckle, "has not gone as I had planned. And I know I would have been... well, I don't know what those bandits would have done if it weren't for you, and I'm grateful, okay? *Thank you*. I just... I'm just scared, okay? I'm scared by what happened, I'm scared of this power that I didn't know anything about. And if the Tai'Hiera discover me, they'll... well, you know what they do to people like us. And I can't have that. At least not before I see my father."

"Your father?" Aedyn asked, his interest piqued.

"Yes." Khloe choked back a sob. "He's dying. Or at least, that's what I last got word of. I live in Rezkentha Province, trying to make a living ever since... well, since Morcross... Well, there just wasn't enough opportunity to make a living, not honest work, at least, for a lady you see, and my father sent me to Rezkentha. But I received a letter that he's been ill, and he's dying, and I'm trying to make it back home before he does." Khloe looked down at her feet. "I just want to say goodbye."

Aedyn nodded, then looked up at the stars and away into the darkness of the forest. "Yeah, I get that," he said, half-whispered. After a beat, he said, "Where does your father live?"

"Ciriladen."

Aedyn let out a whistle. "That's three hundred miles from here."

"I know. Even if —"

"I'll come with you."

Khloe thought she misheard him for a moment. "What?"

"I said I'll come with you. But first, we have to stop along the way and pick up a friend."

"Okay."

"Well, more like rescue a friend. Even if she doesn't want to be rescued. But I let her down a long time ago, and I need to make it up to her, even if she doesn't want me to."

Khloe let that sink in for a moment. "Now I'm confused."

"We'll talk about it along the way. Deal?" Aedyn extended his hand.

Khloe looked down at his hand, and despite herself, smiled. She gripped it.

"Deal."

TO BE CONTINUED...