



Obscura
Rhapsody

No. 4



by Julio Angel Ortiz

“Unbound”

Written by [Julio Angel Ortiz](#)

Copy Editing by M. Ali

Additional Editing by J. Burns

[Email](#) | [Web](#) | [Twitter](#)

Paths of Exile

A novel

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Exiles

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Khloe couldn't understand how she could be sweating so profusely in a dream.

She was certain that Akaja was deriving amusement from her attempt to ward off several guards, all armed with a variety of weapons. Whether they were spears, knives, or swords— Akaja was forcing Khloe to take down these phantoms in a complex dance of death.

Akaja had spent what felt like hours teaching Khloe techniques for not only combat but meditation, breathing, and basic strategies. By her own admission, Akaja was not the most gifted fighter, but had impressed Khloe with her knowledge, at least compared to what Khloe knew about tactics.

Which was next to nothing.

What amazed Khloe was how well she retained what Akaja taught her. In some instances, it felt like Akaja was speaking gibberish, yet the concepts arose in Khloe's mind in simple, clear strokes. Once what Akaja had termed as "the Lecture" was over, she twisted the world around them, tearing down the training facility with a thought and cycling through various combat scenarios. In the process, Akaja summoned various virtual warriors for Khloe to defend herself against. Some were simple scenarios. Others were, according to Akaja, based on incidents from the Shadow Vanguard's past.

The battles came at a breathtaking pace, and while Khloe did not find her energy flagging, she did find herself sweating. Which annoyed her to no end.

"It's all in your —" Akaja began.

"Shut it."

"Okay, okay," Akaja said, reclining on some invisible perch in the air above where Khloe fought off the imaginary Blood Wolves of the southern marshes.

A moment's distraction caused her to falter on an opponent's parry, which opened her up for another to bisect her stomach with its spear.

The pain was unexpected, and Khloe screamed, instinctively reaching for her stomach as she felt a sick, sticky liquid flowing through her fingers. Khloe collapsed to her knees, and awaited the deathblow from one of the other phantom warriors, but none came.

Khloe ran through some of the breathing exercises that Akaja had taught her, and to her relief she felt the pain drain away even if her entrails stubbornly refused to stitch back into her body.

"You can't die in this Dream Construct, you know," Akaja said. "In fact, I'm pretty certain you have enough 'know-how' to resist any kind of dream attack. It became standard procedure, you know, after a particularly nasty incident early on..."

Khloe was not in much of a mood to hear another story from the group's past. Not that she didn't find them interesting, but rather she was embarrassed for having screwed up. If this were real life, she'd be dead, her torso split open to the heavens as carrion. The thought infuriated her.

Khloe closed her eyes again and focused. Breathing a few more times, she reopened them and found her injuries had vanished.

"Good," Akaja said. "Just as I taught you."

"Thanks," Khloe said humorlessly. "Except I'd be dead otherwise."

"Nah," Akaja said with aplomb. "I purposely cheated there."

Khloe recoiled as if struck. "What?"

"I improved that one Blood Wolf's speed to be far faster than humanly possible, even if using an Obscura art."

"You purposely had me killed?"

"Something like that."

"Why the hell would you do that?" Khloe's anger exploded, even as part of her immediately regretted the outburst. Akaja remained as calm as ever.

"Death is a very real possibility for us. You have to understand that as Aedyn gathers our group back together, our old enemies are still out there, and new ones have arisen in the interim. They outnumber us, and even our Obscura skills will not always be enough to provide an advantage."

Akaja floated down and planted herself firmly before Khloe. For the first time, Khloe saw something roiling behind Akaja's eyes, a hurt that threatened to erupt in a miasma of pain and engulf the virtual space around them. Khloe stilled her thoughts. It took everything she could to not wince at Akaja's burning presence.

"I give everyone a taste of that failure, of the possibility of a final mistake, so that you never, *ever* forget that feeling, and allow it to drive you to never repeat it."

Akaja held Khloe's gaze a moment longer, then looked away.

Khloe went to speak when a sharp pain shot through her jaw, and she stumbled back. It took a moment for her to realize that the blow had not come from another warrior simulacrum, nor had it come from Akaja. Her jaw throbbed and though the techniques Akaja had taught her were dulling the pain, they were not eliminating it completely as they had with her faux fatal injury.

"Was that another test?" Khloe asked at length.

Akaja was looking up, a look of concern chiseled onto her face. "No, it certainly was not."

"So what was —"

"You need to wake up," Akaja said in a hurry.

Khloe shook her head in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Akaja took a few steps back. "We... okay, *you*... are not alone in the room. I guess your captors have returned."

"Damn."

"Which means you're going to have to wake up and defend yourself."

"For real?"

"Yes. In all seriousness, this isn't some kind of test. You really will be fighting for your life."

Khloe raised her hand to her forehead and then ran it through her hair.

"Okay, fine. I'm ready."

She looked over at Akaja, and their eyes locked for several moments.

"What?" Akaja eventually asked.

"Aren't you going to wake me up?"

"I don't have some technique for that. Just wake up."

Khloe suddenly felt silly. "Oh."

A shock of cold rode through her body and Khloe willed herself to awaken.

Zara's blade hit home.

Or so she thought. In a blink of an eye, Khloe had awoken and clasped her palms on both sides of her blade. She then twisted her wrists, disarming Zara and sending her blade flying across the room.

"You bitch!" Zara screamed, bringing down her fist into the side of Khloe's head. That blow *did* strike home, but a follow-up failed when Khloe grabbed Zara's arm and thrust, flipping Zara to the side.

Zara rolled through with the momentum, and by the time she stood to face Khloe, her enemy was already upon her, rushing and slamming her into the wall. Zara had enough time to catch sight of a surprised Nadu and Garvin observing them in shock.

"A little help, guys!" she screamed in frustration, which shook them from their daze. Their countenances soon became ones of rage, and they rushed towards Khloe.

Khloe took a quick breath and dipped into the well of energy that her Obscura art provided, attempting to remember the training Akaja had imparted to her in what felt like forever ago. With enhanced reflexes, Khloe dropped down, dragging Zara partway before flipping her over into the oncoming men. Garvin and Nadu were caught off-guard by the incoming projectile that was Zara, and only Garvin was speedy enough to spin away in time. Nadu was less fortunate and caught the full brunt of Zara's impact. She crashed into him hard, still the wrong way of vertical from being launched. Adding insult to injury, Zara's boot caught Nadu in the face. That resulted in a crunch, followed up by a spurt of blood traveling in an arc as Nadu's head was whipping back. Both crumpled into a heap.

Khloe then spun and used the momentum to flip herself back onto her feet, facing her would-be attackers. She barely caught sight of Garvin swiping his dagger at her throat before quickly leaning back to avoid the blow. Khloe turned this into a backward flip, taking care to not careen into a wall in the narrow space.

Garvin was relentless and kept on her. Khloe flipped back and then cartwheeled to the side, all the while avoiding Garvin's mad swipes. His jabs were wild and wide, and Khloe waited for an opening.

Then she saw it.

Garvin put too much thrust into one of his jabs, which moved him forward further than he planned and briefly stumbled. Khloe lunged forward, low, striking his abdomen with her shoulder and winding him. She then stretched her leg back to strike Garvin's face with a scorpion kick, leaning in and bringing her leg back and over in an arc.

And it promptly cramped up.

Khloe yelled in pain, feeling her leg stiffen in agony. Acting on instinct, she straightened it out, which brought a whole new set of pain. A little too late, Khloe realized that she had left herself open just as the blow came in. It formed a shockwave from its origin point in her temple and down through the rest of her body. Her body went slack and she collapsed to the ground, darkness creeping in at the edges of her vision. Suddenly, the Obscura

energy that had been sustaining her movements and actions felt severely lacking, and every inch of her hurt.

Laying like a ragdoll, she felt Garvin roughly turn her over, bringing his furious gaze into view. He lifted her up and rammed her against the wall. Khloe was certain she heard something crack, and wondered which of the five new pains along her back and sides was the source.

"Okay, you bitch," Garvin said, bringing his dagger back into view, "I think you've given us enough *pr-grk* —"

Khloe looked down at her free hand and saw the misty shadow blade extending out from her index and middle fingers, which were pressed together and pointing at his throat. Judging by the confused and wide-eyed horror on his face, in conjunction with the sopping crimson mess covering his chest like a grotesque tunic, Khloe's desperate move had proven effective.

Khloe saw Garvin's eyes search her own, as if still struggling to make out what had happened. She slowly retracted her hand, allowing the Obscura-formed blade to vanish in the process. A torrent of blood proceeded to escape Garvin's throat. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he loosened his grip on Khloe before collapsing to the ground.

Her relief was all too brief, as Zara unleashed a furious scream that raked the air. Khloe saw Zara raising her dagger, preparing to throw it, but was unable to will her body into motion. Every inch of her hurt and tapping into any of her newly found power proved difficult to escape an almost certain death, much less move.

That was when a figure suddenly appeared to Zara's right.

It was Akaja.

"I don't think this discourse is going over well at all," she deadpanned, and Zara took a quick sidestep away from her.

It was all the distraction Khloe needed.

Summoning her Obscura energy, she rapidly leaned down and grabbed Garvin's dagger. In a continuous motion, she moved her arm in an arc and launched it towards Zara.

And it struck true.

Zara had barely turned her head towards Khloe when the dagger embedded itself in her left eye. She collapsed to the ground, dead.

"Her eye?" Akaja said. "Don't you think that was a bit much?"

"My aim was off! I was trying to *watch out!*"

Akaja turned aside in time to watch Nadu run his sword through her chest, a sickening *shunk!* filling the air. She cried out in pain, and suddenly the air warbled as her body vanished into nothingness.

"What in the Vile Prince's name?" Nadu muttered, staring at the newly-empty space.

Now! Khloe thought to herself, and moved.

Khloe sprung towards Nadu, quickly clearing the space between them. But her body continued to rebel against her and even as she leapt, she knew it was awkward and ill-conceived.

Her notion, unfortunately, proved to be correct.

Nadu saw her coming and haphazardly swung his blade at her. Khloe was certain that she was dead when the blade connected.

Until she realized he had struck her, by chance, with the flat end of the blade. Which did little to help her, considering it still struck hard and made her lose balance and fall awkwardly. Khloe attempted to roll away but Nadu caught her shirt. He lifted her up and brought his blade towards her again, but Khloe, feeling the adrenaline guide her as much as her powers, grabbed his wrist and twisted. Nadu grunted and dropped the blade, and Khloe attempted to flip him over. But her strength was flagging badly, and her weakened back gave out. She dropped to one knee with a gasp of pain.

Nadu capitalized on this by grabbing her free arm and bending it back hard over his knee.

Khloe heard the *snap!* before the pain shot through her arm and shoulders, and the arm hung, useless, at her side as Nadu kicked her away.

Khloe laid face down in the dirt, eyes screwed shut in pain and exhaustion. She could hear Nadu's boots crunch the ground in slow steps as he picked his blade off the ground. Khloe wanted to move, to retaliate, but with her arm now broken and the rest of her body badly bruised and worn down, she simply laid there. Her body refused to cooperate, and she was hard-pressed to argue with it.

"You stupid, stupid girl," Nadu said, spitting at her. "We should have just," he began, then stopped. "What the hell does it matter now?" he muttered after a beat.

"We could just let bygones be bygones and I'll leave," Khloe said, her voice flat.

Nadu let out a dry chuckle. "You've got a helluva lot of spirit, I'll give you that."

She heard him step close and Khloe knew that this would be it. Inwardly she offered a silent prayer.

I'm sorry, Father, she thought. Her throat threatened to choke on bitter tears, but refused to let this thug see them.

At least my brief career as a Shadow Vanguard can end with —

And then Nadu fell dead next to her.

The sudden collapse of Nadu's body next to her startled her into opening her eyes. She came face-to-face with his face, eyes wide-open in surprise. Confused, Khloe looked up.

She saw Aedyn standing there, a misty shadow sword in hand.

"I let you out of my sight for a little bit and this is the trouble you get into?" he asked, favoring Khloe with an impish grin.

If she had had the energy, Khloe would have kicked him.

"Baby girl," came the frail man's fevered whisper.

Sarabelle felt the man's forehead, then leaned over and grabbed the cloth in the basin. Daintily, she wrung the cool cloth, folded it once, then placed it on his forehead. The man's head jerked slightly at the touch but his eyes remained shut and his body continued to shake gently. Sarabelle sat back down on the chair, and not for the first time wondered how long the man would hold on.

Sarabelle found something admirable in the man's desire to see his daughter again. She thought back to when one of the local ministers had requested a nurse to care for the ailing man, and Sarabelle herself had recently become jobless. A mirthless smile crossed her face, remembering that "becoming jobless" in her line of work usually meant that someone had to die first, and that had certainly been the case with her last caretaking assignment.

Mr. Solenz had contracted Degavra Fever and no one else had dared take care of the poor man. Sarabelle remembered Solenz from when she was child. He was the kindly shop owner who treated the children with free candy every Sabbath. He had never married but was always very active in his church and in the community, helping out where he could during good times and bad. When the Seven Sky Rifts had struck Rezkentha Province forty years ago, and laid waste to her home, it was Solenz who had found Sarabelle clutching the lifeless hand of her mother among the wreckage. With great sympathy in his eyes, he had taken a hold of the five-year-old Sarabelle and sought help, stopping along the way to assist others caught under debris and the crying children searching for loved ones. It had been his calm and resolve that made an impression on the young Sarabelle, and she even found herself drawing upon his serenity to comfort and calm the other children. It was this incident, and his concern for others, that subsequently inspired her to become a nurse.

It was due to this history that she took the assignment of caring for Solenz without hesitation. Though her friends told her she was foolish, Sarabelle

always responded that there was a debt that she owed and she intended to pay it. Solenz had been every bit as gracious and thankful as she had expected. It was unfortunate that the disease ravaged him more quickly than she had expected, but took small solace that he had slipped into a coma and passed away peacefully in very short order. That he did not have to suffer long was a miracle few were graced with these days.

Sarabelle sighed at the thought that she had never had a chance to tell Solenz of his influence on her.

The man's moans returned her thoughts to the present, and she leaned forward. He moved restlessly, then came to a stop. Sarabelle wondered if the man would indeed be able to see his daughter again. She had transcribed a letter for him then secured a courier that she trusted to deliver it. Sarabelle knew that it was not outside the realm of possibility that the letter never made it. The courier had a tour of letters to deliver and was not due back for another three weeks. Assuming he returned, the courier could confirm whether he successfully delivered the letter. But times were tough in Kaz'in and it was not uncommon for couriers to be robbed or murdered in the hopes of a malcontent making some quick money. The thought disgusted Sarabelle, but then again a lot of things did in the aftermath of Morcross.

If only the Shadow Vanguard were still around, she thought to herself, but then quickly dismissed the thought.

The Vanguard was broken and it was never coming back.

Why the hell is the Vanguard coming back? Khloe mused, not for the first time in the past hour since being patched up by Aedyn.

And "patched up" was most likely overstating it. After dispatching the final bandit, Aedyn had worked quickly to tend to Khloe's wounds. Using the dead bandits' clothing, he had fashioned a makeshift sling for her arm, and using their water supply had cleaned her wounds and bandaged up her shoulder and ribs.

"We're going to have to stay here for a day or two while you heal up," Aedyn said simply.

Khloe was still feeling numb from the fight, and nodded towards the bandits' bodies. "What about them?"

Aedyn casually looked over his shoulder. "The bodies? Don't worry, I'll dispose of them."

Khloe let out a sardonic laugh. "You say that so casually. 'I'll dispose of them,' like this is something you do on a regular basis." She looked at Aedyn's still face as he finished wrapping her wounds, waiting for a response. "Wait, is this something you do on a regular basis?"

"What?" Aedyn asked, his mind clearly elsewhere.

"Disposing bodies."

"Maybe. On occasion. It's probably best if you don't ask a lot of questions." Seeing the look on her face, Aedyn quickly followed up with, "That was a joke."

Khloe searched Aedyn's face for anything that may be askew. Satisfied that she had not been wrong about him and that he really was not some mass murderer, her body relaxed and her shoulders slumped. Her eyes scanned the room.

"Are you sure Akaja's okay?" she asked, not for the first time.

Aedyn cracked a patient smile. "Yes, for the last time."

"It's just weird to see her take a fatal blow like that and just vanish. Plus, we haven't heard from her."

Aedyn nodded. "You have to remember that her remote projection ability is taxing. She just can't keep it running all the time. And when it is disrupted violently like that, there is... feedback... that she receives. A shock to the system that requires time to recover from. But believe me, that's not the first time it's happened to her. She's fine, stop fretting."

"Okay," Khloe said weakly, feeling silly for having asked.

Khloe went to stand, but her head swam and her body strenuously objected. With a cry of pain, Khloe sat back down.

"You," Aedyn said sternly, "need to rest. You remember the healing meditations Akaja taught you?"

Khloe nodded, embarrassed at the chastisement.

"Good. Use them. Trust me, you'll be sleeping for the next day or two. And you'll want the rest. When you wake up you'll feel worlds better. I'll even assist while you rest."

Khloe's eyes narrowed in confusion. "How?"

Aedyn got down on his haunches. "We, as Obscura wielders... how do I explain it? We're *linked*. Akaja probably mentioned it. We give off Obscura like a candle gives off light. And when our energy fields intersect, it allows us to do some pretty interesting things. In this case, I can help your healing process along."

Khloe nodded. "That would be great."

"Okay then. So, get to resting."

Khloe closed her eyes. "What do we do then?"

Aedyn looked back at her. "What do you mean?"

"What's our next move? Are we going to see my father?"

Aedyn shook his head. "Not yet. We still need to make a stop."

"A stop?"

Aedyn picked up Nadu's body and placed him over his shoulder, then headed to the door.

"We need to rescue Allana," he said. "More from herself than anyone else."

Saint Judicar moved with purpose as he headed to the Archbishop's throne room.

The Archbishop's Priory was not foreign to Judicar. He would return once every six to eight weeks to give a report to Archbishop Valex regarding his activities throughout the remnants of Kaz'in.

In this particular instance, Judicar was returning from the border town of Briwald where a turf war between warlords threatened to disrupt the Tai'Hiera's interests in the region. Judicar had lead a contingent of eleven other Saints to quell the unrest, and had been grateful that it only took two weeks to round up and execute the malcontents on both sides.

What had piqued Judicar's curiosity was that he had only last met with Valex just prior to that. To be summoned back so early meant something curious was happening.

He dismissed the thoughts of promotion. Judicar had neither interest nor desire in joining the Lords' Council that oversaw the Saints in this territory. Standing at almost seven feet tall, with broad shoulders, braided sable hair, corded muscles and rich brown skin, Judicar's imposing presence was an asset on the battlefield, and while he sought to tamp down any feelings of pride, he allowed himself the conceit that he was not only a good warrior for the Holy Thiat, but that he enjoyed his position and did not see himself as a fit in any other role.

Which brought him to the question of why he was being summon back already.

He did not have to wait long to obtain the answer. As soon as Judicar strode into the throne room, he approached Valex with reverential respect, kneeling before the raised dais and crossing his arms so that his fists touched his shoulders, as was the custom.

"My lord, I have come as ordered," Judicar said briskly.

Valex smiled. The older man, whose face was a series of crags and sagging pale skin, reclined on his golden throne lazily. His head rested against his propped up arm, and he held his mahogany staff with his other hand.

"Punctual as always, Saint Judicar."

"The unexpected request led me to believe that there was an urgent matter that required my attention, my lord."

A grating chuckle rumbled in the Archbishop's throat. "Yes, indeed. A grave matter has been brought to my attention. This comes directly from the Holy Thiat."

Judicar blinked at that. Rarely did the Holy Thiat give direct orders that were to be carried out by Saints for missions. *For this to come directly from His Holy Office...*

And there it was again. A sense of pride that Judicar had been selected for this assignment. He grimaced and pushed the feeling into the depths of his mind. He needed to focus.

"What is His Will?" Judicar said at last.

Valex leaned forward. "Do you remember the Morcross incident?"

Judicar allowed a beat to pass before responding. "Yes, my lord. I led a legion of Saints to break the Shadow Vanguard's ranks when the city fell."

"Indeed. And that, along with the intel provided to us by Roué, was critical in defeating the heretic Vanguard, breaking them and their seat of power."

"Yes, my lord."

"A fellow Saint, Modan, made a critical discovery. An almost worthless bandit was found severely wounded. His suspicious wounds were enough to warrant further investigation. He was brought to another priory where some of our Saints were able to extract certain memories from him before he went off to damnation."

Judicar said nothing, but his curiosity flared even further. What did a lowly bandit have to do with his being summoned?

"Aedyn Locke still lives."

Judicar froze.

"As you know, we have been looking for evidence of any remnants of the Shadow Vanguard for years. This is our best lead that we have received in a long time. Aedyn Locke lives, and we have reason to believe he is traveling with a female companion. It is not far-fetched to believe that he is still in touch with any other surviving Vanguard members. The Thiat has requested that we send our best on this task. Brute force will not help us here— we need your skills, talents, and methodical approach, Saint Judicar. The Thiat requested the best: we're sending you."

"Sending, sir?" Judicar said.

"Yes, young one," Valex said, revealing yellow tombstones as he smiled.

"You are to find them... and kill them."

TO BE CONTINUED...