



Obscura
Rhapsody

No. 6



by Julio Angel Ortiz

“Avalace”

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Paths of Exile

A novel

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BOOK TWO | MOONLIGHT
SCHERZO

Khloe mused if this was what it was *really* like to have friends.

She sat at a round table in the corner of the tavern--*The Risky Reaver*, she thought it was called?--and glanced around the table at her companions. There was Aedyn, whom she had known the longest, indulging in a pint and deep into telling a story to their other two companions, Akaja and Allana. Akaja had arrived earlier in the day to meet them, having traveled several days but keeping them updated via her peculiar talent of just manifesting a projection of herself out of thin air.

Allana, the latest member of this odd tribe that Khloe met, was sitting with her back to the wall. Though Allana took care to appear invested in the story Aedyn was telling, Khloe could tell that her thoughts were elsewhere. There were shadows behind Allana's eyes, and even if she was adept at hiding them from her friends, Khloe could see them clear as day.

Khloe pondered their meaning, and ultimately, how they could affect the group.

Aedyn had been serious about reuniting the entire remnant of the Shadow Vanguard, and there was one more piece remaining. Though he had kept their future plans a mystery, Khloe respected his role as leader of this merry band, and deferred to his judgement for now.

But there was still the matter of her father.

Though Aedyn had initially promised to take her to see him, to say her goodbyes, they had been taking their sweet time. It had been over three weeks since Aedyn came into Khloe's life, and it had felt like a lifetime of experiences had passed since then. But Khloe's growing concern was that her window of opportunity to see her father was growing very short - if not having already passed.

Khloe felt a rising pang of pain and regret clash with a newfound sense of responsibility. Her induction into the Shadow Vanguard, even if not quite by choice, was a very real duty. The powers she now wielded - powers Aedyn had claimed she inherited from a deceased former Vanguard - were both a fascination and a horror. But with those conflicting emotions came an even greater sense of responsibility to use those abilities for something *more*.

Though she had recently seen the dark side of that responsibility - being caught in a trap by bandits under the guise of defenseless victims - Khloe found herself undeterred. There had to be a purpose for her having these powers. Khloe was determined to find out. But in doing so, would she be able to say goodbye to her father in time?

Amid those conflicting emotions, she was reminded of her companions. Aedyn and Akaja, who had taken Khloe under their wing and endeavored to protect and train her. Akaja had been nothing but sweet and encouraging. Aedyn fit the part of a bold and charismatic leader, but Khloe could see a brooding demeanor that peeked through. It concerned her, but Khloe kept that to herself for now.

Allana was still a wild card. It had been a week since their little trip to “save” Allana, and in the interim she had little to say as they traveled to the *Risky Reaver* in Duhlwain. Khloe, from what little Aedyn and Akaja would say, had gathered Allana suffered great loss. Khloe certainly didn’t want to pry, and allowed Allana a wide berth so as to not impinge.

But even so, here she sat at a table with people she knew would have her back no matter what. Who fight and struggle for each other, to make each other better people, to somehow make this world better.

Khloe imagined that was friendship. It was something she wasn’t used to.

She had to admit it felt pretty damned nice.

Khloe’s attention snapped back to the conversation, but it appeared that Aedyn had just wrapped up his tale, as he took a moment to take a drink, as did Akaja. Allana looked down at her chalice, having nursed the same drink since they arrived. Khloe noticed that Allana had barely drank any of it.

Khloe turned back to Aedyn and Akaja, who had just so happened to glance in her direction at the same time. She favored them with a half-smile and widened eyes, not sure how to continue the conversation. They sat for a moment in silence.

“So,” Allana said at last, “do we know when Belmont is arriving?”

Aedyn turned his head towards the tavern's entrance. "He was supposed to be here this morning. I guess he's running late."

"Or worse," Allana offered.

There it was, Khloe noticed. Something passing across Aedyn's face. Annoyance? Frustration?

"Now," Aedyn responded, weighing the initial word with some gravity, "we both know that Belmont can handle himself against most folks."

Allana shrugged. "I'm just saying it's odd that he's not here yet. He used to be so punctual."

Akaja took another sip. "Last I heard he had taken up farming."

Aedyn almost spat up his drink. "Belmont? A *farmer*?"

Akaja laughed. "Yeah. Why?"

"Do you remember how much he hated those couple of months we were stuck in Mozier and we had to work odd jobs to make some money? He was a farmer's hand. He hated it."

This elicited a small burst of laughter from Allana, which came as such a surprise Khloe found herself startled a little. She hoped no one noticed.

"And the farmer had a cousin that he fancied, remember? I think her name was Lucinda. And Belmont only stuck with the job even though he hated it. Then after a month he found out Lucinda had a wife. He was so mad he quit that same day!"

"Oh yeah," Aedyn said. "Then that lead to some drama that I had to smooth over since Belmont quit right in the middle of the harvest. *Shekta*."

Akaja raised an eyebrow. "Belmont always knew how to pick them."

Then, simultaneously, the three long-time friends said "Candace" and erupted in laughter.

Even though she didn't understand the reference, it warmed Khloe's heart to see them reminiscing and laughing, especially for Allana. For a moment, it

seemed like the darkness had lifted from her eyes. And however temporary, Khloe welcomed it.

This is friendship.

Belmont mused that the storm bellowed like two sky gods locked in fierce combat.

He entered the barn from the rain, leaving the door open. He moved quickly to the stalls, verifying that the various doors were properly secured. Belmont heard nervous movement throughout the wood structure, but was satisfied that none of the creatures were in danger of escaping into the tempestuous night. As he perused each stall he made mental notes for the rest of the week: what would need cleaning and mending. He considered the upcoming monthly market held in Avalace's town square, and what wares, if any, he was going to take for barter.

When did this become my life?

It was not the first time Belmont had asked himself this question, but it was one he asked himself with increasing bemusement. Farming, tending to animals, leading a quiet, solitary life. It stood in such stark contrast to what he once was.

“That was a long time ago,” he found himself whispering.

Belmont shook his head, and proceeded to grab a nearby pitchfork. Methodically, he took hay and placed some clumps in various stalls. The barn door swung back hard with a sudden gust and banged loudly against the wall. Belmont paid it no mind; it wasn't the first time he had gotten to work during a storm. As though it wasn't peaceful enough living on the outskirts of town on his small plot of land, there wasn't likely to be anyone roaming about in the middle of a bad thunderstorm.

They'd have to be crazy--

And then he sensed it.

Belmont turned back towards the barn entrance, the door now rocking back and forth in a *knock-knock* pattern against the barn wall. For a moment there had been *something*. A shadow? A light footfall? Belmont shook his head. *The wind, dummy*, he thought to himself. *It's only storming outside.*

Having lived a quiet life in Avalace for the past three years, Belmont wondered if he was beginning to get... soft? Paranoid? As though the tranquility were a well-crafted deception in which someone had trapped him? Belmont was uncertain, but something suddenly felt off.

He moved towards the door and looked outside. His cottage was barely visible from fifty yards away, thanks to a small light in the window. Rain and dark permeated everything around him save for the small lamp he had brought with him, its dull glow illuminating the barn interior.

Belmont stood there for a moment longer, daring the dark to send forth a champion for him to fight.

But none came.

Belmont pulled on the door and shut it tight, taking care to slide the latch into place so that it wouldn't haphazardly open again. He looked back towards the dull russet interior of the barn and pondered what chore to tackle next.

Outside the barn, a hulking figure moved silently, retreating into the dark beyond the hills, its guttural breathing lost among the wind and rain.

Xerxes sat what he hoped was a discreet distance from his marks, diagonally across and a few tables down. Enough to keep them within his peripheral vision but not enough to be of immediate interest.

He finished what drink was left in his mug, and then poured more from the flagon, emptying it and setting it aside. Having wanted to make as little movement as possible, and thus draw little attention to himself, he had been sure to order enough drink to keep him occupied for a while and for the

barkeep to not draw attention to Xerxes. The wine was a vintage Xerxes was unfamiliar with, but tasted adequate enough as a way to pass the time.

The group had been there for hours by now, and he was beginning to wonder if they were intent on staying well into the evening. That would prove problematic; the barkeep was already showing annoyance at the ratio of time-to-coin spent at the *Risky Reaver*, but Xerxes had been able to keep the impatient businessman at bay.

I have my ways, he thought to himself with a smile.

Do you now? A new voice, rising up in Xerxes' mind with a smugness Xerxes found both tiresome and obnoxious.

I don't know why they don't get me a new handler, Xerxes thought, not for the first or seventh time.

What was that? There it was again, the intrusive presence in his mind.

Xerxes knew better than to acknowledge the hint of derision his handler, Bryze, had caught. Although Bryze had talents in the way of telepathy, he lacked Xerxes' advanced skills. More to the point, Xerxes maintained better mental defenses - better than most in the Tribe - which allowed him a measure of privacy many did not have when dealing with mentalists. Although not a High Lord, Xerxes had not needed the rigorous training they underwent to help keep themselves and their secrets safe. Xerxes was gifted in that manner, and it suited him well.

Yet, somehow, he had still decided to go into field work.

Have you successfully tracked down the Vanguard remnants? Bryze asked.

Yes. The intel proved accurate.

Xerxes felt a silence across the abyss of thought that he interpreted as Bryze... being impressed? Xerxes found this curious, but let it pass.

The Council wants you to continue to observe. Though the Vanguard is of importance, they are not your primary objective.

Xerxes could sense Bryze attempting to impart urgency, but it was unnecessary and annoying, one of Bryze's faults that kept him at his current station. Xerxes already knew the mission and what his real objective was. Bryze's narcissistic condescension was thinly veiled and wearying.

Are we clear? came Bryze once again.

Of course, Xerxes offered.

In his mind, Xerxes imagined jettisoning Bryze back into the void of thought, casting him out like a creature of myth. He felt alone in his mind once more, and brought up his mental walls again.

Then something curious happened. One of the Vanguard - *Akaja*, he recalled - glanced around the room, her eyes narrowing as if hearing something unusual. Something only she could detect.

Xerxes did not allow himself to panic. *Akaja* was the Vanguard's prime telepath, he knew. Inwardly he cursed himself for not having considered the possibility that she would pick up on something, no matter how discreet. But he drowned his self-recrimination as well, and focused on making himself as innocuous as possible, a nobody in a room of nobodies that the Vanguard would need not concern themselves with. He slowly and deliberately drank from his mug and maintained an even posture, simply appearing as a man alone with his thoughts.

From his peripheral vision, he noticed that *Akaja* went back to focusing on her friends, and Xerxes maintained the same mental stillness.

There were too many things in motion right now to bring attention to himself or the Tribe. Discretion. Shadows. These were their ways.

Xerxes took another drink, a faint red mist suffusing his hand, only noticeable to him.

Belmont was tired of seeing death up close.

He looked over at Orden, down on his haunches as he surveyed the body. The constable was a man in his late 50's, red hair peppered with white. He was of stout stature, his best years clearly behind him. But despite appearances, Belmont had no doubt the constable was capable of defending himself. Based on stories he had heard, the sword sheathed at Orden's side was more than just for show.

I wonder what it would be like to retire full-time.

"Another one," Orden said, standing.

"You mean you had to get up close to the deep claw marks to verify?" Belmont said wryly.

Orden favored him with a look of disapproval, but Belmont knew better.

"I didn't realize you wanted to be constable. You're more than welcome to the job if you want, *outsider*."

Belmont feigned hurt. "Still calling me that? I thought that we had moved past that!"

"Not when you're criticizing my work."

"I'll make it up to you. Dinner?"

Orden chuckled. "No thanks. You have lousy tastes." Orden turned his attention back to the body. "His name was Haswald. Lived out on the other side of town. Farmer. Bit of a drunk, lived alone."

Belmont nodded. "He's the fourth one in the past year."

Orden sighed in frustration. "And still no damn closer to finding the truth."

"Orden, everyone knows that you've been as diligent as possible in finding out who is responsible."

Orden favored him with a glare. "Who or *what*, correct?"

Belmont looked back down at the body. "It's still a legitimate theory."

Orden scratched his head. “What did you call them? *Na’Ald*? Human-like wolf creatures? That *shekta* is the stuff of legends and fairy tales.”

Belmont looked at Orden. “I’ve shared my past with you. Who I *really* am. You know what I can do. Why would believing a Na’Ald is responsible be any more difficult?”

“Because I can *see* you. I know what you can do. I’ve seen evidence, of what you and those damned Saints can do. But you’re all an exception, a rarity in this world. I have trouble believing that there are more horrors out there that we have scarcely encountered.”

Belmont whistled. “You haven’t seen what I have.”

“I know. And I believe you, everything you’ve told me. But have you seen this Na’Ald?”

“No.”

“Then until we catch it in the act, we’re dealing with some madman or animal.”

Belmont nodded. “Understood, constable.”

Orden looked aside. “Now, we don’t need to be getting all formal with each other. I was just ribbing you a little with my ‘outsider’ comment. No need getting sensitive on me.”

Belmont laughed, and heard movement behind him. He turned and then stepped aside when he noticed some of the constable’s men approaching to remove the body. But then he sensed something, and looked beyond the men.

And he smiled more than he had in a long time.

“Excuse me, Constable,” Belmont said, walking past the men. He resisted the urge to run, mostly because he suddenly felt self-conscious.

I’m not that boy anymore, he reminded himself. I’m not the same plucky adventurer.

Did I really describe myself as “plucky?”

“It’s great to see you again, Belmont,” came Aedyn’s voice, firmly grasping his hand in a handshake that transformed into a hug.

Belmont warmly embraced his long-time friend, and then turned to the rest of the group. There was Akaja and Allana, and someone new.

Akaja had the same radiance in her eyes that she always carried, part of what made her easy to talk to. Allana stood no less prideful and lithe, but there was something deeper in her eyes. Some shadow dwelling there that Belmont found unfortunate but not unexpected.

She’s lost so much, he mused to himself.

And then there was a new face he had not seen in person, but Akaja had already filled him on the details. Khloe, newest member of the Vanguard and one who had somehow inherited Laurana’s powers.

A pang gripped Belmont’s heart, but he pushed it away.

Belmont greeted his old companions in kind, and welcomed Khloe with a handshake and bow of respect. He took a moment to take in the group.

There’s only five of us left.

“Where’s Veruk?” Belmont asked, the words escaping before he even knew it.

It was Aedyn’s turn to sigh. “Veruk decided not to join us.”

This caught Belmont by surprise. “What, is he too busy tinkering?”

Belmont saw a flicker of disappointment cross Aedyn’s face.

“He lives in the southern hills now. He said... he said he wanted to live a quiet life. That those days were behind him.”

Belmont nodded, and then noticed Khloe peering past him. He followed her gaze, and found that it lead to Orden.

Oh yeah. The body.

“You know,” Akaja chimed in, “when you gave me the message to meet you here instead, I thought maybe you had a more... conventional... welcome for us.”

Belmont chuckled awkwardly, rubbing his neck. “Yeah. Well, about that... we can’t leave quite yet.”

Aedyn maintained a calm demeanor, but his tone betrayed concern. “What’s going on?”

“There’s been a series of murders over the past year. This is the fourth one.”

“And you think they’re related?” Allana asked.

“They all have a... unique cause of death.” He took a breath. “Like an animal attack. Sharp, deep claw marks to neck and chest.”

“A Na’Ald?” Allana asked immediately.

Belmont laughed. “It’s my current theory, but I’m having trouble convincing the Constable.”

“Did you tell him about that time in the Skycrags and the race--” Akaja began, but Belmont waved her off.

“Yes, I did. Orden is an investigator through and through. He needs *evidence*.”

“Did you show him the scar?” Akaja asked.

“No!” Belmont said, a little more defensive than he intended.

“Scar?” Khloe asked.

Akaja smiled impishly. “Once, when we were exploring the Skycrags, Belmont got... close... to one of the natives. All puppy dog eyes and little gifts.” Akaja stifled a chuckle. “He used to be such a hopeless romantic, this guy. And, well, when she transformed--”

“Okay, okay, she doesn’t need to hear this story,” Belmont said quickly, then turned. “Come on, I’ll introduce you to Orden.” He walked off in a hurry.

Khloe looked back at Akaja. “You just can’t leave it at that.”

Akaja smiled, placing her arm around Khloe as they began to follow Belmont.

“Let’s start from the beginning...”

“I need to speak with you,” Khloe whispered to Aedyn.

Aedyn opened his mouth to respond, but the words failed to come. Instead, his mouth collapsed into a small frown and he nodded.

He turned to the others as they approached Belmont’s home. “Go on ahead. We’ll be in shortly.”

Allana favored them with a puzzled look, then nodded and the rest continued on inside.

When the rest were out of earshot, Khloe turned to Aedyn. “I’m happy to have met the rest of the gang, and I appreciate that helping solve murders is a part of my life now, but I need to remind you about my father.”

“I haven’t forgotten, Khloe,” Aedyn said, his voice a mixture of apology and weariness.

“Haven’t you?” she said, harsher than she intended. Khloe paused before continuing. “I don’t even know if it’s too late.”

“Akaja can reach out. She can likely get a sense of him... to know--”

“It’s not the same. I want to *see* him. I need to... tell him things.”

Aedyn gave a sympathetic look. “We don’t always get the closure we want.”

“So does that mean I just give up?”

“Not at all.”

“Then what do you want me to do?”

“Be patient. Trust that we will make it work.”

“I *have* been patient,” Khloe said. “And look... I’m grateful, okay? I’m very grateful that you saved me and have shown me this... this new path in my life. But I can’t commit to it fully with that hanging over me. I don’t... I don’t want to imagine if I’m not able to say goodbye.”

Khloe’s voice cracked a little as she bit back tears.

Aedyn nodded. “We’ll do everything we can. I promise.”

“And what if it’s not enough?” The words escaped Khloe before she realized, and inwardly she winced. *That’s unfair*, she told herself.

“That’s a fair question,” Aedyn said. “And I don’t know the answer. But we’ll try.”

Khloe nodded, and looked down before passing Aedyn and heading to the door to follow the others. Aedyn soon followed suit in equal silence.

Sarabelle sat by Bren’s bed, the candlelight casting soft shadows onto the table and papers. She dipped the pen in the inkwell and wrote a few more words in the letter Sarabelle was composing to her aunt, and then paused. She looked over at Bren’s gaunt face, his sunken cheeks looking even more sickly given the flickering candlelight.

Sarabelle sighed. The relief nurse had sent notice that she would be unable to arrive tonight, due the illness of her daughter. Sarabelle was unable to find someone else to cover, and rather than leave Bren alone for several hours – even if he was most likely going to just sleep – Sarabelle decided to stay the night.

Bren erupted in a coughing fit, and Sarabelle swiftly moved in with a cloth and some water, lifting Bren up and steadying him. Once it subsided, she lifted the glass to his lips, where he half-heartedly sipped and then weakly pushed the glass away. She laid him back down, and was relieved to hear his breathing fall into the tell-tale rhythm of sleep within a few minutes.

Sarabelle returned to writing her letter, telling her aunt of the recent if unexciting events of her life. Not that Sarabelle held any resentment. Though she had people who had been suitors and lovers in the past, she had never found someone she desired enough to commit a lifetime to. And Sarabelle had never held a desire to have children. She enjoyed watching and caring for various cousins and their children over the years, but the desire for motherhood eluded her, and it was a temperament she embraced long ago, much to the chagrin of her own mother and aunt. This had driven some of those lovers away from her over the years, and that was fine with Sarabelle. Her life was her own, and she would not sacrifice the joy of her limited existence for anyone.

Sarabelle turned back to Bren, whose face was a mask of calm in his slumber. Thoughts of mortality returned, and she wondered how long Bren had. She had given up hope that Khloe had received the letter she sent, and perhaps it was for the best. Bren's lucidity was suspect at best these days, and the doctor reckoned he had a few weeks at most.

A stray thought crawled across Sarabelle's mind: what if Khloe simply did not want to return to see her father?

As if feeling a physical sensation, she shook her head to cast it away.

Whatever the case may be, she hoped that, when Bren passed, Khloe would be able to make peace with it.

"You too, Allana?" Aedyn said, trying to keep his tone playful.

Allana had found Aedyn sitting alone at a table in a side room in Belmont's home. She pulled a chair out and sat with him, favoring him with a look Aedyn remembered well.

It meant she wanted to have a *talk*.

"You tired of me already?" Allana said with a thin smile. "I could go and see if Draxen will take me back."

"I thought you had enough of him for a lifetime."

“At least he wanted me around.”

Aedyn smirked and shook his head. “You know I’m overjoyed to have you back.”

Allana leaned back in the chair. “And yet, you seem troubled.”

Aedyn shook his head. “It’s not you. Khloe... we just had a conversation. She has valid concerns. I was addressing them. Or trying to.”

“And?”

Aedyn’s face collapsed into confusion. “And what?”

“Did you make her feel better?”

Aedyn laughed at that. “I don’t think so.”

Allana's voice assumed a faux-mocking tone. “You’re losing your edge, Aedyn. A long time ago you would have probably given a speech that would inspire her to slay giants. What happened to you over the past five years?”

“I might ask you the same question.”

Silence fell hard between them. Aedyn visibly winced.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have--”

Allana raised a hand. “No, it’s okay. It’s a fair question.”

Aedyn shook his head. “Not really. It was rather brusque considering... what happened.”

Allana leaned in. “My husband and son died at Morcross. I’ve had five years to make peace with that.”

“And have you?”

Allana allowed a beat to pass. “No. And I never will. But I’ve accepted that I cannot change it.”

Aedyn slowly nodded. “Is that why you allowed Draxen to keep you?”

“Well,” Allana began, “he did feed me regularly. It beat having to hunt for my own food.”

Aedyn’s eyes narrowed.

“What?” Allana said defensively. “Times really are tough.”

“I think you’re doing that thing you’ve done since we were kids. What did that alienist once call it? ‘Deflecting’?”

“She was a strange one and I never cared for her anyway.”

“Probably because she called your bullshit on why you didn’t want to marry Esaul at the time.”

“Like I said... *annoying*.”

They shared a light chuckle, then silence settled between them.

“Why have you brought us back together, Aedyn? What’s the *real* reason?”

Aedyn said nothing for a long moment. He broke the silence with a single word: “Roué.”

Allana didn’t know how to respond. “Are... you serious?”

Aedyn nodded.

“You’ve found him?”

Aedyn leaned in. “I spent a long time trying to find him, figure out his routines and where he travels. I was able to bribe someone on the inside. Not a powerful person inside his organization, but someone who could gather information unnoticed. They’ve proven quite reliable over the past two years. I know where he’ll be staying soon.”

“And then what?”

“We’re going to avenge what happened to Tomen and Esaul. And everyone else who died at Morcross because of Roué selling us out.” He paused.

“We’re going to kill him.”

Akaja found Khloe behind the house, alone and sitting on the steps leading down from the patio. She was tempted to reach out and touch Khloe's mind – their recent extensive training had bonded them slightly, and Akaja found it would be easier to do so than with some others.

But over the years Akaja had learnt that reading people involved more than peering into their minds and seeing their hidden fears and desires. She didn't need anything other than her eyes to know that Khloe wanted to be alone.

So naturally, I'm going to ignore that.

Akaja moved over to Khloe, who never turned towards her. Rather, Khloe kept looking up at the stars, arms folded on her hunched-up knees.

Akaja waited a moment. "Hey there," was all she offered.

Khloe nodded, barely perceptible in the moonlit night.

"You're going to make me pry it out of you?" Akaja said with a smile.

"Can't you just read my mind?"

Akaja joined Khloe in looking up at the stars. "I wouldn't do that. Not to friends."

"We haven't known each other very long."

"So now there's a qualifier on how long we have to know each other before we're friends?"

Khloe let out a terse laugh, and shook her head. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm not much for company."

Akaja placed her arm on Khloe's shoulder. "I can tell something's on your mind. I just wanted to offer an ear if you were willing."

Khloe leaned her head down to the side, resting it on Akaja's hand. "Thank you. I'm... just thinking about my father."

Akaja nodded. "You have concerns we won't reach him in time?"

Another nod from Khloe.

They said nothing for a long time. Khloe didn't move her head, and Akaja kept her hand in place. She felt the waves of loneliness and fear radiating from Khloe, and in kind attempted to subtly use her skills send soothing thoughts and energy.

“It's okay. There might be--”

Then the night collapsed into chaos.

In an instant, there was the rushing sound, feet crashing through the brush and leaves. Akaja's heightened senses? barely had time to register the movement before a roar shattered the night. Khloe stood quickly, and Akaja's mind had difficulty processing the next few moments. Khloe was there, and then sent careening into the dark. In her place was a massive creature, all matted and wild fur and drool caressing razor teeth, arm outstretched where it had struck Khloe.

A Na'Ald.

But something seemed different about it.

Akaja's training immediately took over. She got low, sweeping her leg at the Na'Ald, but she might as well have struck a tree trunk. The creature did not budge, and balled its fist and punched down. Akaja barely rolled out of the way in time before the creature made contact, sending wood and dirt flying. Akaja moved back quickly, drawing on her Obscura power, but the creature was just as quick. It swiped at Akaja, its blade-like claws tearing at her tunic and barely grazing flesh. It brought its other arm forward in an arc that almost caught Akaja in the chest, but she brought her arms forward in a flowing motion, diverting the attack away from her. Akaja allowed her momentum to turn her around, rolling against the creature's body and winding up behind it. Akaja kicked the back of the creature's knee, then followed up with another kick to the lower back, but the creature barely budged.

It swung back around and caught Akaja with a fist to the chest, sending her onto her back. The creature swiftly moved, towering over Akaja and

reaching down to grab her.

Before Akaja could react, a knee came flying in, striking the creature from her left. Akaja's eyes shifted and saw Khloe completing her attack, following up with an elbow to the creature's head.

That stunned the Na'Ald for a moment, and Akaja took advantage. She swung her legs up, and summoning Obscura, propelled herself forward into a corkscrew kick, striking the creature in the chest. The Na'Ald stumbled back, and Khloe followed up with a series of blows to the creature's face and chest.

Akaja focused and reached out, feeling the others' presence nearby. Reaching into them through their link, she sent a brief message, a thought of the creature and needing help.

But the creature had other ideas.

It roared, and Akaja found her thoughts scattering, as if a mist had suffused in her mind. It was disorienting, and Akaja stumbled to the side. From her peripheral vision she saw Khloe react in the same manner.

It was all the creature needed.

It grabbed Akaja's head and slammed it down into the ground with greater speed than Akaja could have imagined.

The world swam in darkness and light. Akaja found herself unable to move, and her vision became a stutter step of images.

Khloe missing a blow to the creature.

The creature grabbing Khloe.

A blow to Khloe's neck.

The creature lifting up Khloe, and escaping into the dark.

Akaja tried to scream out to Khloe, to try and move after them, but soon the dark took her as well.

TO BE CONTINUED...