

“Before Shadows”

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Paths of Exile

A novel

Book One

Exiles

(*Obscura Rhapsody* 1 to 5)

Book Two

Moonlight Scherzo

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Roué

(*Obscura Rhapsody* 11 to 16)

Allana studied Aedyn's face, and realized that she was looking at a stranger.

She had known Aedyn for a long time, but at this moment, in this room lit by candles and with shadows dancing between them, he seemed like a different man. He appeared, for the first time in a long time, like a man who was *lost*.

Was I really so different not too long ago?

"I've never heard you talk like this before," Allana said, struggling to keep her tone even.

"Does it surprise you?"

"Frankly, it does."

Aedyn's face became a mask of confusion. "Did you hear what I just said?"

She nodded, slow and deliberate. "I did."

"We're talking about the man who provided intel to our enemies. Who sold them information..."

"I'm well aware, Aedyn."

He narrowed his eyes, studying her in kind. "Did Draxen drug you or something while in captivity?"

Allana allowed steel to creep into her voice. "He didn't."

"Then why are you being so casual about this? Are you actually suggesting we show leniency to the man who was responsible for the deaths of your family?"

Allana drew a sharp breath. "You sure as hell know better than to ask me a question like that."

"Then why are you not on board with the plan?"

"I didn't say I wasn't. But I can see it in your eyes. You're raw with anger."

"And you aren't?" Aedyn bellowed.

Allana stood quickly, peering down at Aedyn with cerulean blades. “I spent a long time in my own hell, Aedyn. I locked myself away there with my despair and self-loathing, and I stewed in it for a long, *long* time. So you have no right to question how I feel about what happened to *my* family, and you sure as hell do not get to raise your voice to me!”

Aedyn opened his mouth to respond, but just as quickly shut it, a dumb expression etched onto his face. He sat silent for a moment.

“You’re right,” he said softly, nodding his head slowly.

Allana sighed, and sat down again. She looked at Aedyn and pierced the veil of memory and familiarity that had been built between them over the decades. And she saw just how tired he looked. Allana saw the new lines around his eyes and cheeks. She saw the gray hair slowly peppering his temples and chin.

“We don’t arbitrarily kill, Aedyn. We never have. We’ve done it in self-defense, or hunting down wanted criminals if necessary. We’ve done some dirty jobs in our time, but murder has never been our way.”

Aedyn looked at her. “So we let him go free?”

Allana shook her head and reached across the table. Her lithe fingers interlocked his, and she met his gaze. “No, old friend. We are going to hunt him down and bring him to justice.”

“But to whom? The Saints want us dead as much as anyone. There is no government left in the Reach.”

“I learned a thing or two during my time with Draxen, you know,” Allana said with a wan smile. “He may be a fool, but he’s a well-connected one. And Roué may be a powerful man, but he’s not without his enemies. Or those envious of his prestige.”

Aedyn raised an eyebrow. “And so what did you find out?”

“There’s a —”

A rumbling shook through the house, and the sound of wood breaking cut through the air. Aedyn and Allana stood quickly, and looked at each other with concern.

“Behind the house!” Aedyd said, already exiting the room. Allana was not far behind.

Akaja’s consciousness felt a strange ache, as if it had decided to eject from her physical body.

She was aware but felt no sensations. Akaja was no stranger to dreams, and in fact prided herself on the ability to continue to accomplish tasks while in a lucid dream state, but this was something different.

First were the translucent waves of light that were crashing all around her, colliding and merging. It was a beatific spectacle, and Akaja felt entranced. This in turn gave rise to sensations of power and delight and even euphoria. Akaja felt something within her swell, as though she had become a sea suddenly unable to restrain its waters. There was a power and joy here that Akaja had never felt before, and something...

Akaja stopped and opened her mind’s eye.

She struggled against the pull of energy and dizzying euphoria. *This is wrong somehow*, she thought, and attempted to withdraw from the cacophony of light.

But she could not.

That’s not right at all, she allowed herself.

This felt like the domain of dreams, something Akaja had mastered long ago, but it was something altogether different. Something encompassing and greater. It was both a revelation and terrifying.

Orient yourself in the Thoughtspace, she told herself, more mantra than consolation. It was a mental exercise she taught herself long ago, in the early days of gaining her Obscura talents, when she young and terrified of the dark corners of her mind. Because manifesting those things at will was not the first lesson she needed to teach herself—it was banishing the things that had manifested *on their own*.

That was a long time ago. I am no longer that child, Akaja reminded herself.

But she felt like a child in this strange space.

The unfamiliarity did not bother her. Akaja always found a deep satisfaction in considering herself an explorer of the mind, of the hidden possibilities of existence. But being able to reach out to others and join with their Thoughtspaces, to talk and train and share at great distances – even manifest as illusion to others – was a greater mystery she did not fully comprehend yet.

And yet here she was, in this strange land within her mind... *or was it?* She felt far from all things familiar. Was this place something beyond the Thoughtspace she knew? Did this place harbor clues to the abilities she held?

And yet as she peered into the lights and colors, she saw circles shifting. And it soon became apparent the circles were in fact transparent moons, emerging and disappearing into the sea of lights and colors. They moved and shifted at a great speed, and Akaja struggled to keep track of them.

And then a particular light cut through the rest, shining down from what Akaja considered “above.”

It was a deep maroon color, and it engulfed her. And with it came a strange sound, crackling and noisy, like a million small sounds being uttered at the same time. The sound assailed Akaja’s senses, unable to understand it. But buried in the wasteland of sound was something.

A voice!

Akaja could do little to understand what was being said, but as the tides of light and broken sound washed over her, she began to discern a pattern. Weak at first, but soon Akaja realized it was a series of words, repeating over and over. She could not make out most of them, but she believed she made out two words.

..Adon...

...Engine...

The maroon light grew brighter and deeper, becoming a sun directing the entirety of its light towards her, and the sounds became piercing screams in her ear. Akaja struggled, she screamed, she wanted to escape but could not, until her entire being was nothing, and all that remained was the indignant alien sun and a sea of incomprehensible roars.

My head is killing me, Khloe thought as she awoke in darkness.

The pain was pulsating from behind her eyes, and radiated out to her temples and the back of her neck. Khloe breathed deeply, attempting to subdue the pain somewhat through techniques that Akaja had taught her, but they were doing very little to help.

Khloe's eyes began adjusting to the dark, and she could make out her rustic surroundings.

She was in a room of a wooden structure of some sort – *a shack*, she thought – and upon shifting her body to get up, a pain down her leg reminded her of another problem she had.

There was a wooden splint on her left leg, and any pressure placed on it was rebuffed with searing pain.

The creature, Khloe thought. *Must have injured my leg during the fight. But why would they —*

The door to her room opened without preamble. Khloe's body stiffened. Although she didn't know how much she could fight with a possibly broken leg, she prepared to fight...

...the older woman who entered?

"Hello," the woman offered.

Her voice was gravelly, sounding far older than her face betrayed. The woman was of a narrow and thin build, the frame of her body slightly bent forward. The woman's face and hands appeared rough-hewn from sun and work, and her outfit was a simple worn tunic with dirt at the fringes.

Khloe simply nodded.

“Not one for conversation, eh?” the woman said. “Suit yourself.”

The woman’s voice contained an accent that Khloe couldn’t place. It strongly reminded her of the people of the Bailen region in the Tremiere Hegemony, but there was just something... off about it.

“But you had a rather nasty injury to your leg. I didn’t think it would be right hospitable to leave you like that.”

“Are you the creature?” Khloe asked plainly, her voice flat, without accusation.

The woman raised an eyebrow. “So now you talk.”

“Well?”

The woman crossed the room, taking some blankets off of a table and laying them out beside Khloe. “In case you get cold,” was all she offered.

“I’m going to take that as a yes.”

“I’m not some creature,” the woman said, as if biting back a stronger response. “I didn’t bring you here either, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Then who did?”

The woman turned to leave. “Are you hungry?”

Khloe let out a sharp breath of frustration. “Are you just going to ignore all of my questions?”

“Not all of them,” the woman replied.

“Just most of them?”

“Well, *are* you hungry?”

Khloe gave it a thought. She hated to admit that she was in fact rather famished.

“No,” Khloe said. “Being a prisoner tends to dampen my appetite.”

The woman turned back to Khloe, now with an amused smirk. “Ah, so you’re no stranger to being a prisoner?”

Despite her circumstances, Khloe laughed. “Lady, you have no idea what the past month has been like.”

“Tresa.”

“Excuse me?”

“My name is Tresa. I figured it was better than you calling me ‘lady.’”

Khloe nodded. “Tresa. Very well. My name is Khloe.”

“We’re becoming fast friends now.”

Khloe extended a hand. “I wouldn’t get crazy, now. I’m still a prisoner.”

“I prefer ‘unintentional guest.’”

“Bullshit.”

“That was a joke,” Tresa said.

Khloe decided to try a different tactic. “You’re far from Bailen and the Hegemony, aren’t you?”

Tresa appeared confused by this statement. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but you’re right, I am far from home.”

Khloe saw a shift in Tresa’s demeanor as she responded. Something in her eyes shifted, a flicker of sadness or disappointment. Her voice sounded tired, the playful mischievousness draining from her voice for a moment.

“Why are you holding me here?” Khloe said at length.

Tresa’s gaze locked onto Khloe’s. “You have a talent, Khloe. We... know. Can sense it.”

“Somebody’s been talking about my special card trick?” Khloe tilted her head in mock disappointment. “Because I’m not sharing my secret.”

Tresa shook her head. “Deflect all you want, but we know of your special... talents. And we require them.”

It was Khloe’s turn to be confused. “*We?* And why do you need them?”

But Tresa said nothing else and left, closing the door behind her.

Khloe went to scream but thought better of it. For now, she would have to be content with drowning out the pain, biding her time, and being patient.

It was a skill Khloe still found herself lacking, and she merely sighed.

Akaja found herself fighting back mild embarrassment as her friends tended to her.

She was inside of Belmont’s home, in the sitting room laying on a sofa. Belmont was fussing over her with a wet cloth to her head and neck, while Aedyn and Allana did what they did best – look very, very concerned.

“I’m fine, honest,” she said, not for the first time.

“I can get you more water if you’d like,” Belmont offered.

Akaja quickly shook her head but smiled weakly.

Allana spoke up. “Can you reach out to Khloe?”

Akaja closed her eyes, and after a moment shook her head. “I can’t.”

Concern filled Aedyn’s voice. “Because she’s dead?”

Akaja’s eyes widened. “No!” She then screwed her eyes shut in frustration, her head still a morass of pain and grogginess. “I can get a faint sense of Khloe, of her being out there somewhere, but it’s shrouded. Like seeing her through heavy mist.”

Belmont's lips curved into a small frown. "That's unusual for you."

Akaja nodded, feeling frustration flooding her again. "It is. Almost like something is interfering. But that wouldn't make any sense." She looked over at Belmont and found him lost in thought, his jaw squarely locked into a frown.

"What is it, Belmont?" she asked.

Belmont folded his arms. "I don't understand – and please, don't take this the wrong way – why the Na'Ald didn't kill you."

"Oh, sure, no offense taken," Akaja said dryly.

"Well, Akaja can be annoying, so there's that? Maybe he was fended off by her indifference?" Allana offered.

Akaja cast a mock frown towards her. "'So now's the time for dry humor? I'm glad to see you haven't changed a bit.'"

"What do you mean?" Aedyn said, cutting through the distraction as he directed the question to Belmont.

"Well, these murders. Every murder has been the result of a violent attack as if by some beast. In each instance, there were no witnesses, no one left alive who encountered the creature. But it didn't kill Khloe or Akaja."

"All joking aside, both of them are capable fighters," Allana said. "Have any of the victims been known to be adept at combat?"

Belmont slowly shook his head. "Not particularly. Some were fit, to be sure, but none were fighters of particular note."

"It could be that once Khloe and Akaja fought back, it was caught off guard. It knew it wasn't going to make quick work of them."

"That still doesn't explain why it abducted Khloe," Aedyn said. "There was *intent* there. Taking Khloe doesn't sound like a 'change of plans.'"

“But why?” Akaja asked.

“And was it specifically targeting Khloe? Or did it want either one and Khloe was just more convenient?” Belmont offered.

“We won’t find answers here,” Aedyn said. “Do we know which direction they were headed?”

“Well,” Akaja said, sighing, “last I saw the creature was taking Khloe westward, but that means very little.”

“It gives us something to start with,” Aedyn said. He turned to Allana. “Let’s go.”

Belmont stood. “I’m coming with you.”

“Well, don’t think I’m just going to stay behind,” Akaja said.

Allana raised a hand. “You’re injured and—”

“And you know better than to argue with me, Allana.” Akaja softened the rebuke with a wry smile.

Allana rolled her eyes. “Haven’t changed a bit.”

“There’s fluid in his lungs now,” Doctor Tresken said, returning items to his bag for the journey home.

Sarabelle nodded slowly. It was not surprising news, but she had remained vaguely hopeful that somehow, the inevitable would be held off for just a little bit longer.

“Nothing to be done?” she asked hesitantly.

Tresken turned his head to her, shaking his head slowly. “No, not really. Has his daughter been contacted?”

“I can’t say for certain but I have not received any response.”

Tresken closed his bag and walked to the door. “Unfortunate, then. Bren won’t last more than a week. Maybe less.”

Sarabelle fell in step, and placed her hand on the doorknob as Tresken opened it and crossed its threshold. “Keep doing what you’re doing. Keep him comfortable, apply the herbs if his malaise worsens. With any luck, he won’t come to and he’ll just pass away in peace.” With that, Tresken nodded and departed.

Sarabelle closed the door and stood there for a moment, contemplating the doctor’s words. His demeanor was detached, which she appreciated was common among his peers, but it bothered her no less. She walked back to Bren’s room, following the trail of slow, ragged breaths.

Not for the first time, she sighed. Bren’s fate was inevitable. She had known this, but the confirmation was no less painful. Sarabelle returned to the next room, and sat down to write a letter.

She then began to make a mental list of things to do in preparation for Bren’s passing and her departure from the home.

Though Modan would never admit it, he found a particular satisfaction in traversing the Thoughtspace of others. It was a shame that this particular one was of a dying, wretched man.

Modan hung in a pale void. Around him he could see fragments, as if from a shattered mirror, hanging in the stillness. Each fragment was filled a unique series of moving images, each one slightly shrouded or distorted.

Modan focused his  Aduro, imagining his will as a series of long roots spreading out from a tree. Each root dug into the Thoughtspace, centering Modan in it and providing an anchor for the consciousness of the rake whose mind Modan was barely keeping afloat.

Daidren.

The longer Modan maintained an active presence in Daidren's failing consciousness, the more he decided the man deserved to die.

No one is going to miss this man, Modan thought, his hands before him in the Thoughtspace, drawing various fragments to him and dismissing them like a skillful curator. From what Modan had gathered, Daidren had done very little with his whole life that wasn't in service to his self-interests or vices. Even as a child, there was very little to find of redeeming value.

It frustrated Modan that he even had to expend energy to keep Daidren alive. But the order from the Holy Thiat had been explicit. While his fellow Saint, Judicar, had been sent to hunt down the heretical Shadow Vanguard, it was Modan's duty to extract as much useful information as he could and  communicate it to his colleague. Modan had every intention of living up to his duty to the best of his abilities.

There.

He held the fragment before him in the Thoughtspace: an image of a young woman in a forest. Daidren and his companions had cornered her, and from the aura surrounding the fragment he ascertained a grim, perverse satisfaction that made Modan wince. Modan lifted his hand, drawing his finger right to left along the fragment, forcing the memory to proceed as Daidren had experienced it. After a few moments, he saw the witnessed events play out, including the man who arrived and fought Daidren, subsequently taking the man's life.

Modan lifted his finger from the memory fragment, causing the image to stop, hanging in the Thoughtspace like a dream painting. It was frozen on Daidren's last foe. *Aedyn*, Modan thought.

Modan extended his hand in the Thoughtspace, drawing another fragment to him, this one centered on the memory of the woman. He then reached out, through the connection he shared with many of his fellow Saints, until he found the one he was looking for.

"Judicar," he said.

In his mind, he felt a door open.

“Yes, Modan?” came a familiar, ethereal voice, suffusing the Thoughtspace.

“Are you in a position to focus your intent?” Modan asked.

“Yes.”

“I am sending you something. Stand by.”

Modan’s body began to swirl with a white mist, something that Modan found odd. It was as if his powers manifested in the Thoughtspace as some by-product of his will. It was curious and no less exhilarating. Modan focused on the images in front of him and willed them towards Judicar’s mind.

“I see them,” came Judicar’s response.

“The man is Aedyn Locke. He is the leader of the Shadow Vanguard, presumed dead five years ago.”

“And the woman?”

“Unknown. From what I could gather, Aedyn and her did not know each other, but I imagine she is traveling with him.”

Through the Thoughtspace, Modan felt Judicar’s eyebrow raise in curiosity. He smiled.

“What makes you so sure?” Judicar asked.

“Here,” Modan said, and he projected the memory of Daidren’s final moments.

There was a perceptible pause, which Modan found unusual, even in the Thoughtspace.

“Oh,” Judicar said at last.

“Yes,” Modan said. “The heretical power has found a new host.”

“Understood. Thank you for the information, Modan.”

“Always a pleasure, Judicar.”

“As He wills it,” Judicar said, reciting one of their most common mantras.

“As He wills it,” Modan said in kind, and felt the door close between him and Judicar.

Modan hung a moment in the Thoughtspace, then waved his hand, sending the fragments flying off and dissolving. He began to retract the tendrils of Aduro that he had placed in Daidren’s consciousness. He could sense Daidren’s consciousness dimming, its last light fading fast.

Modan contemplated the darkening space around him. It may have been possible, he mused, to save Daidren. To somehow keep him alive and call in the Apothecaries to save his life. But this was the Fate of all things, and the life Modan had witnessed was one that poorly served the Holy Thiat’s will or the order of things.

Somewhere in the distance of the Thoughtspace, Modan thought he heard something. A faint cry? A pleading of some primal instinct to survive?

Modan sighed. He learned long ago that mercy is a gift that cannot be granted so freely. Daidren walked his path, and now it was over.

Modan closed his eyes and extracted his consciousness from Daidren’s.

Not for the first time, Khloe wondered why she hadn’t been able to reach out to Akaja.

It was maddening. Khloe was starting to get used to Akaja’s interjections into her thoughts, maybe even conjuring some sort of dream-like construct in which to talk or train. It made Khloe feel less alone, though she would never openly admit it.

But now, when Khloe was – yet again – in a bind, Akaja was strangely absent.

Khloe focused her mind, attempting to reach out. Akaja wasn’t completely absent – she could get a sense of her friend, but it was like trying to stare into a forest in deepest night. Khloe could not latch onto anything, and any attempt to gain purchase was deflected.

Khloe sighed. *I’ll never get anywhere at this rate.*

She decided to try something different.

“Tresa!” she called.

Momentarily, her host walked through the door. Tresa’s calm demeanor was grating on Khloe.

“Yes?” Tresa asked.

“How long do you plan to keep me here?”

Tresa shook her head. “We’ve already been over this,” she said.

“And I’m not satisfied with the answer.”

“You’re in no position to demand anything, dear.”

Khloe quickly moved, standing on her good leg, but momentarily shifting to her splinted one out of muscle memory, before biting her lip in pain. Drawing on her well of Obscura energy, she suppressed the pain as best she could and pounced forward.

Tresa was caught unawares, slamming into the wall without any defense. Khloe, grabbing on tightly to Tresa’s tunic, pivoted on her good leg and turned, throwing Tresa towards the opposite wall in the process. Tresa crashed unceremoniously into it, crumpling to the ground.

“I do appreciate the hospitality,” Khloe said, “but I need to go.” She turned towards the doorway.

And found herself face to face with the beast that brought her here.

It roared in her face, heat and slobber accosting her in short order. Khloe’s instant fear turned into anger, and she responded with a blow to the creature’s face, followed up with an open palm strike to its chest. The beast did not budge, but responded with its own punch to her chest, sending Khloe flying back against the wall, where she landed next Tresa.

Khloe was about to stand back up when a curious laughter held her in place. Looking aside, she saw Tresa chuckling to herself.

“Really? Laughter? *Right now?*”

Tresa sat up slowly and looked over at the beast. Khloe allowed herself to follow Tresa's gaze and noticed that the beast had not moved from the doorway.

"You're really bad at accepting hospitality, aren't you?" Teresa said.

"What do you mean?" Khloe asked, incredulous.

Tresa extended a hand towards the beast.

"Is that any way to treat my husband?"

TO BE CONTINUED