

“Transfigurations 1”

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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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Book Three

Roué

(Obscura Rhapsody 11 to 16)

“Your *husband*?” Khloe blurted out, and almost immediately felt silly.

The creature stood over her, peering with its deep amber eyes, its intent equally unknown and terrifying. Khloe maintained her composure, a hand balled into a fist and ready to strike. Despite the beast being all muscle and (*Oh shek'ta, the smell*) teeth, and she being at a distinct disadvantage due to her busted leg, Khloe was feeling oddly good about her chances.

Is... is that self-confidence? Dad would be proud.

Her heart sank for a beat.

“Yes,” came Tresa’s voice, “my husband.”

Khloe never took her eyes off the beast. “You know, uh... I’m pretty open-minded, but isn’t this kind of illegal? Or at least frowned upon?”

Tresa’s eyebrows bunched together so closely they threatened to fuse permanently.

“What?!”

“This animal...” Khloe said cautiously.

The beast then did something Khloe did not expect.

It made what sounded like a *scoff* and casually moved passed her towards Tresa.

Khloe was rooted in surprise, and took an extra moment to turn. When she did, she saw the creature, its back turned, *transforming*. Its flesh was shifting, as if made of a viscous sand that made the creature shrink to normal size. As the creature knelt down to face Tresa, Khloe could see it assume the appearance of an older man with rough-hewn features and a scar running down its cheek.

“That’s a nice trick,” Khloe said at length.

The creature – *man*, Khloe noted – let out a humorless chuckle.

“Thanks, girl.” His voice was soaked in gravel. “I don’t care that you’re impressed.”

Khloe let the condescending tone pass. “Oh, a jester I see. You know, if you had approached us with this same humor at first we may been able to avoid all this mess.”

“My jokes are terrible,” he replied dryly.

“I appreciate the blunt honesty.”

It took a moment to realize the man was bleeding from his side.

He had a deep wound that was beginning to bleed profusely. Tresa quickly moved to a nearby table, picking up cloths and water and moving back to his side.

“Nejal!” Tresa said, placing the cloths on the wound and pressing. “What happened?”

Nejal shook his head. “I was attacked by one of them,” he said, jerking his head towards Khloe. “The one in the town. Their law enforcer.”

“Out committing more murders?” Khloe said, judgement coating every word.

Nejal shot her a look of disgust, then said nothing. He turned back to his wife, placing his hand on hers.

It was Tresa who broke the silence. “We are not murderers.”

Khloe whistled in surprise. “I’m finding that real difficult to believe.”

Nejal bit down hard in pain as Tresa adjusted the cloth, continuing to apply pressure.

“See,” he said, “they are no different here.”

Khloe remained calm and raised a hand as she spoke. “Hold on. You are some kind of shapeshifting man-wolf *Na’Ald* who attacked my friend and I in a town where some horrible murders have already occurred. Oh, and let me remind you, the murders appear bestial in nature. But I’m somehow ‘no different’ for making some – if I may be so bold – reasonable assumptions?”

“She also talks too much,” Nejal said.

Tresa shushed him. “Please, forgive my husband.” She rinsed the cloth in the water and reached for a poultice in a bowl and began to apply it. Nejal stiffened as she did so, but said nothing. “He’s not one to easily trust.”

“So I’ve gathered,” Khloe said.

“But,” Tresa said, “we are not responsible for any murders.”

Khloe opened her mouth to berate Tresa for the lie, but then stopped.

Am I certain she’s lying?

She wasn’t so sure.

“Okay, suppose for a moment that I believed you,” Khloe said. “You *do* understand why it would be difficult to, right?”

“Because of what we are?” Nejal offered.

“Na’Ald?” Khloe said.

Tresa and Nejal looked at each other, eyes locked - Khloe wasn’t certain. Something passed between the couple, an unsaid truth or reservation that Khloe found herself frustratingly unable to decipher.

“We keep hearing this term,” Nejal said, “but we do not understand it. Is this some mythical creature you think we resemble? Or that we are these very beasts?”

“That’s the running consensus.”

Nejal shook his head. “No, we are not.”

Khloe sighed. “Again, that all seems well and good, except I have no evidence to the contrary.”

“So we must be presumed guilty instead?” Tresa asked.

“No!” Khloe said, placing her arms up defensively. “No, I’m not trying to say that.”

“But you are,” Nejal said.

“Look, I’m still pretty new to all of this,” Khloe said. “Just give me a second to gather my thoughts.”

“New?” Nejal said.

Khloe looked at Tresa. “Your wife... she said you both could tell that I was... special. How did you word it? That I had... a ‘talent.’ And she’s right. But this talent is new to me. I didn’t *know* that I had it until recently.”

“Interesting,” Nejal said. Khloe suspected he really found it anything but.

“But,” she pressed on, “this talent has me... traveling with a new group of friends. They all have... *talents*... and they seem used to a different life. One that involves getting up to, uh, all kinds of things. My point is, we’re here to help these people and the murders look like they were performed by beasts. Claws and messiness and everything. Now, sure... you may not be the culprits, but I don’t have anything else to go on. Can you offer any additional insight?”

“We are not from here,” Nejal said flatly.

“Your wife already told me that,” Khloe said.

“No,” Tresa said. “You misunderstand. We are not from this *time*...”

Akaja could sense Aedyn’s frustration was beginning to grow into fear.

“Stop it,” he said, not looking back at her as they walked through the woods. Akaja had kept close to Aedyn, while Belmont and Allana were a hundred or so yards away. They were still visible through the trees, but day was quickly giving way to dusk.

How long will we be able to remain out here searching?

“Stop what?” she responded at last, maintaining a light tone.

Aedyn did not turn around. “I know what you’re doing. I sensed you. At the edge of my mind.”

Akaja feigned shock and dismay. “Me?”

Aedyn did turn around at this, just enough to glance at her with skepticism, and kept moving. “Playing stupid doesn’t really suit you. It never has.”

“I like to think I’ve fooled one or two people in my time.”

“You mean like Esaul? When he told you he and Allana were on... what was the term he used? ‘Break?’”

Before she even realized it, Akaja stepped close to Aedyn and pushed him on his shoulder, harder than she had wanted to. Akaja made a shushing sound as she did so. “Keep it down!” she said, feeling silly as she looked towards Allana, who was still well out of earshot.

Aedyn smiled. “Oh, you never told her?”

“First of all,” Akaja said in rushed, low tones, “that was a *hell* of a long time ago. Second of all, they weren’t even married yet. And third, they *had* broken up. I never once made a move while they were together.”

Aedyn favored Akaja with a skeptical look. Akaja’s blood hit the boiling point.

“What is wrong with you?” she said, barely suppressing it as a yell. “Why would you bring that up? And how did you even know?”

“Esaul told me.”

“When?!”

“His stag party.”

“Well,” Akaja said, “you had better take that with you to the grave.”

Aedyn stopped and turned back to Akaja, favoring her with a smug smile.

“It’s really annoying to have people pry into your personal life, isn’t it?”

Akaja’s eyes could have transformed into fiery blades.

“That’s not—” she began, but was cut off by Aedyn.

“It *is*. I know it’s been a long time since we’ve been around each other, but don’t forget that I have a responsibility to all of you. And especially to Khloe, who is new to all of this. And I am concerned for her safety and, quite frankly, feeling a bit guilty about it.” He allowed a beat to pass. “I’m your *commander*, and it is critical that my thoughts and concerns remain exactly that: *mine*.”

Akaja straightened and met Aedyn's glare. "A long time ago you were our *commander*. I thought we had long since become *friends*. Did that change while we were apart?"

That took Aedyn by surprise, and Akaja saw something soften in his eyes.

Aedyn let out a sigh. "Damn it. I'm sorry."

Akaja found the tension in her back receding. "Thank you for apologizing." And then, with playful menace, said, "I *will* kill you if you ever tell Allana though."

"Oy!" came Allana's voice from the distance.

In nervous unison, Aedyn and Akaja turned to face her. Though darkness was descending, they could still make out the concern etched onto her face.

"You two okay?" Allana asked.

Akaja lit up in a smile, and as she noticed Aedyn did the same. They found themselves lazily waving at Allana.

"We're good!" Aedyn said.

Akaja nodded in kind.

"To the grave," Aedyn whispered through his facsimile of a smile.

Akaja nodded again.

Allana's face betrayed justified skepticism.

"Those two..." Allana said beneath her breath.

Belmont looked towards Allana. "What was that?"

Allana shook her head. "Nothing."

Belmont approached Allana while still surveying the forest around them. "Damn. It's getting late. I don't know how effective we'll be in finding them after dark."

"I know," Allana said, and began walking towards Aedyn and Akaja. She heard Belmont fall into step behind her.

Just like old times, she mused.

They approached Aedyn and Akaja, and she couldn't help but notice something pass between them. Embarrassment? Awkwardness? Allana couldn't quite place it, and found herself annoyed. She couldn't pin down why, but it was nagging at her.

"Any clues?" Aedyn said without preamble.

Allana considered inquiring about Aedyn and Akaja's earlier banter, but Aedyn's demeanor left little room for continued discussion.

I'll let it pass, for now.

"Nothing," Belmont said after a half-beat, deciding to take the initiative. "And with night descending..." He let the thought hang between them.

Aedyn turned towards Akaja. "Still can't get anything on Khloe?"

Akaja closed her eyes and turned her head to the side. Allana noticed the very faint shadowy mist coming off of her body as her friend tapped into her talents.

"Hmm," Akaja said at length.

"That's it?" Allana said.

Akaja shook her head. "Khloe *is* alive. I can sense her. But any time I try to approach her through the Thoughtspace, there's this... veil, for lack of a better word. Something scatters her presence as I approach it."

Aedyn grimaced. "But she's definitely alive?"

"There is no question."

Allana scratched her head in thought. "If she's still alive, then we can safely assume she's not in any danger in the short-term."

Aedyn stiffened. "How can you be so sure?"

"She was taken. There was purpose there. Intent. She's either doing her best to survive or she is not in immediate danger."

"Maybe both?" Belmont offered.

The three of them looked at him.

"What?" he said self-consciously.

Allana nodded her head. "Behind you."

Belmont turned, and saw a figure approaching them. It took Allana a moment for her eyes to adjust and see it was the constable. *Orden, was it?*

Belmont walked over to Orden, meeting the man before he could arrive at their group proper. Allana could faintly hear their dialogue but couldn't make out the words. She looked over in time to catch the sun setting and stood mesmerized as the sun began to meld into the horizon.

Time slowed down.

The world was awash in dark gold light, the trees casting inky shadows that stretched at unnatural angles. Two birds above Allana were suspended mid-flight. The wind slowed down into a melancholic dirge, and Allana looked aside to her friends. They, too, were suspended – frozen in an unending blink.

She stepped forward, the air around her taking on the semblance of a dream, not too unlike when Akaja would draw Allana into the Thoughtspace for them to spar or talk privately. But something was different. Allana knew that she had not suddenly fallen asleep or been drawn into some construct of the mind. But there was a heaviness in the air, a pressure on her chest that was sudden and resolute.

She took slow steps, as if her boots were weighted, held down by a million hands grabbing at her. But Allana pressed on. Something was drawing her, step by step, further into the forest.

That was when a figure stepped out from behind a tree, the utter alien nature of its presence stopping Allana. The short figure walked perpendicular to where Allana stood, either ignoring or not noticing her presence.

And when it turned to face her, Allana's blood froze.

Tomen!

It was her son.

Allana felt the breath leave her body, and the world spun around her. The figure moved slowly, as if trying to escape someone, almost gliding across the forest floor, weaving slowly between trees. Allana wanted to run towards it, to take hold of the image of her son and wish – no, *make* it real. The heaviness and weight around her did not diffuse, and Allana remained rooted.

It looked so much like Tomen, and most startling was that it looked like an older version of him – one that had aged the five years since she last seen him on that terrible night in Morcross.

And then the figure turned and looked right at her.

Their eyes met, and Allana felt a wave of energy go through her, as though she had spent a large burst of her Obscura talent in exertion. Allana's knees buckled, and it took all of her strength to remain standing.

The figure looked at her, and slowly raised a finger to its lips, motioning to Allana to remain quiet.

And then the figure suddenly shattered like glass into a million fragments of light, and Allana fell back.

Time seemed to skip. The next thing Allana knew, she was on the ground, hearing a voice cutting through the pounding of her own blood in her ears.

“— ana?” came a voice, frantic with concern.

Allana’s eyes lazily focused on the figure above her, and it coalesced into Belmont.

“Allana, can you hear me?” he said loudly.

Allana nodded, and it felt slow and awkward. Looking aside, she realized that Aedyn and Akaja had knelt down beside her as well. Orden was nearby, standing off to the side and looking on with concern.

“What happened?” Allana asked.

Allana saw Akaja scrutinize her. “One moment we were talking and the next you let out a gasp and fell down.”

Akaja reached out her hand to touch Allana’s head. Allana’s hand quickly intercepted it, gripping it with an intensity that she soon softened, and transitioned into a warm, friendly grip.

Allana knew Akaja meant well and was intending to read her mind by making physical contact, to try and understand what happened. But Allana herself didn’t understand what just happened. She wanted time to process it, and everything within her yearned to be alone to do so.

“I’m okay, Akaja,” Allana said, squeezing her hand. “I just... I don’t know.”

“I sensed... something,” Akaja said. “As though you used a massive amount of your talent in a moment. It was a little disorienting for *me*. I can’t imagine how it was for you.”

Allana uttered an authentic laugh. “It was definitely something.” She got up, accepting Belmont’s help in the process.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Belmont asked, but Allana waved him off.

“I’m fine. I don’t know, maybe it was just an episode. I’m already feeling better. We should head back.”

Her eyes met Aedyn’s, who held her gaze for a moment before nodding.

“We’re not going to find Khloe tonight,” he said. “And it seems like we could all use some rest and regrouping. Especially after what Orden told us.”

Allana looked at the constable. “What happened?”

Belmont and Orden looked at each other. It was the former who spoke up first.

“There’s been another murder.”

“What do you mean, ‘not from this time?’” Khloe said, probably for the third time.

Tresa and Nejal looked at each other, and not for the first time Khloe could sense their dismay. Something about their unease was different. There was almost a fear rooted in something... unnatural. And that made Khloe nervous.

“As we said,” Nejal began, but Khloe cut him off.

“What you’re saying doesn’t make any sense.”

Tresa let out an exasperated sigh and stood. She stepped over to Khloe and knelt down next to her. She took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts.

“Let me use different words,” Tresa began. “We come from far away, which we told you. But where we come from, you cannot walk to.”

“You have to take a ship?” Khloe asked.

Despite her serious demeanor, Tresa laughed at this. “Ah, no,” she said.

“This is pointless,” Nejal said. “Stop wasting your time. She will not understand.”

“She can if we just give her an opportunity.”

Nejal grunted and waved Tresa off.

“Where you come from, are you short on marriage partners?” Khloe asked.

Nejal shot her a withering look, but Khloe did not balk. Tresa simply waved away the comment.

“We come from a different *now*,” Tresa said.

“That still doesn’t make sense.”

“Imagine,” Tresa said, “a forest. In the forest there are many trees, right?”

Khloe nodded.

“Would you say that, for the most part, one tree is vastly different from another?”

Khloe shook her head. “No, not really.”

Tresa continued, “Now, imagine birds living on these trees. Do you follow?”

“Yes.”

“Your world, Khloe, and our world are different trees in this forest. Nejal and I come from a different tree, much like yours. We come from a different *now*.”

Khloe stared at Tresa, her mouth agape. Her mind was a spiral of questions and incongruities, and it was dizzying.

“That’s impossible,” Khloe said at last.

“Is it so unbelievable? As much as that we can change shapes? Or that you have a special talent?”

“But you’re talking about... about something utterly fantastical! Another world? Like when we look up at the moon? Are you saying there are Na’Ald on the moon?”

“We have a moon, too. Remember, similar trees in a forest?” Tresa said. “Our world is very similar. Same mountains and rivers, just minor differences. Except for people and towns and cities. Those are different. Our history is different.”

Khloe held up a hand. “Okay, so wait... let’s say I believe you. How did you come here? How did you, uh, jump to a different tree in the forest?”

Nejal finally spoke up. “Something... came to our world. Something began to attack it. In doing so, the very nature of the world began to rebel and fracture.”

“Fracture?” Khloe asked.

“A hole, a pathway between our worlds cracked open,” Tresa said. “And in our desperation, we escaped. But when we did, the path closed behind us.”

“So you’ve been trapped here?”

Tresa nodded sadly. “Yes. But our nature does not align to this world’s. Each tree in the forest has its own nature and laws. Ours violates this world’s nature, and as such our powers grow... unstable.”

“Unstable how?”

“We weaken,” Nejal said. “We are unable to control our transformations as well. When we do, our minds begin to become more bestial. We fear that, if we stay long enough, we will lose our minds and become these Na’Ald you fear.”

“But you haven’t reached that point yet?” Khloe asked.

“No,” Tresa said. “Not even for a moment. But we can feel it. We can feel our nature breaking. We... do not wish to let that happen.”

Khloe shifted uncomfortably. “So, is this why you kidnapped me?”

“In our world,” Tresa continued, “there were stories of the Old Magics. Of talents so extraordinary that an empire was built around it.”

Khloe saw the shift in Tresa’s eyes. There was a longing there that Khloe recognized, a desire for home that reminded her of the ache in her heart.

“The stories told us that the Old Magics even allowed traversing between the worlds of the Great Forest.”

“This would allow you to return to your own, uh, world?”

“Yes. But these magics required a catalyst. In the old language, it was called ‘Shadow/Light.’”

Khloe looked over at Nejal, who had been staring at her with intent. When she turned towards him, he lowered his eyes and turned away. Khloe looked back at Tresa and saw something new in her eyes: pity.

“Wait,” Khloe blurted out, “that’s why you need me?”

Tresa nodded. “Yes. We know you have the talent. We can sense it in you and your friends.”

“But we would have helped you! You didn’t need to attack us. We would have been more than willing to help. You just needed to ask!”

Tresa shook her head. “That would have been impossible, child.”

“Why?”

Nejal spoke. When he did, his voice was flat, emotionless. “Because the ritual is fatal.”

TO BE CONTINUED