

Obscura Rhapsody No. 9

“Crimson Rooms”

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Paths of Exile

A novel

Book One

Exiles

(Obscura Rhapsody 1 to 5)

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Akaja never thought it would be possible to envy the dead.

But as she stared at the murder victim, a righteous anger gripping her heart, Akaja was grateful that the victim was no longer feeling pain, no longer in a world that suffered this evil.

The victim – a male, Orden advised them – was splayed across two beams crossed in an “X” shape. Nails had been driven through his wrists into the wood, hard enough that bone and flesh fractured in an inhuman, visceral display. His head had been tied back, so much so that the angle was unnatural and certainly not one the poor soul would have survived. His chest had been bisected; his ribcage pulled open to expose the lungs. The heart had been pulled out and was nowhere to be found, though the small burnt ashes on the ground before the body offered a clue.

The man had been found in his barn by his poor wife. She had not seen him since the night before and had fallen asleep waiting for her husband to return. The widow was with one of Orden’s men, in such a state of profound shock that Akaja wondered if even she could assist.

“This is different from the others,” Belmont said at length.

Allana, who had been kneeling next to the body conducting her own analysis, didn’t turn back as she asked, “How so?”

“The previous murders were nothing like this,” Orden interjected. “Yes, it was like an animal had attacked them. The attacks were certainly vicious, but this... This is an entirely different level.”

“This was ritualistic,” Aedyn said.

Akaja nodded. “We’ve encountered some cults and... ‘unrefined’ cultures in our day, but this... this is unlike anything we’ve ever seen before. This wasn’t just a murder.”

“It’s pure savagery!” Orden said, his face red with anger. “Who the hell would do something like this, here in Avalace? It doesn’t make any sense. This is a small town. Very little goes on here. These people live, for the most part, peaceful lives.” Orden ended with a frustrated blow of air escaping his lips, and then reached into his pocket and pulled out his pipe. In short order he lit it up and was furiously puffing away.

Belmont held up a conciliatory hand. “Orden, I know. I know you’re frustrated as hell—”

“You’re goddamn right I am!”

“But my promise still stands. I’m going to help you find out what’s going on.”

“*We’re* going to help you find out what’s going on,” Aedyn said. “You’re not in this alone. And with Khloe missing, it may actually be our best clue to get to the bottom of this.”

“The Na’Ald?” Orden said, a flicker of doubt in his voice.

“I was there, constable,” Akaja said. “I fought this thing. It’s very real and it’s our best lead.”

Orden sighed heavily. “I know, and I appreciate what all of you are doing to help. Frankly, I wouldn’t have been able to even get this far without you.” He motioned at the body. “I grew up with Leon. I was at his wedding... I remember his kids growing up here.” Orden shook his head. “This one hits a little too close.”

Aedyn placed his hand on Orden’s shoulder. “I promise, Orden. His death will not go unpunished.”

“Oh, hell no!” Khloe screamed.

“Please,” Tresa began, but Khloe cut her off.

“You have to be out of your *bloody* mind if you think I would be willing to go along with this ritual!”

“It’s nothing personal,” Nejal said.

“Is that what the spider said to the fly?” Khloe spat at them. “Your words are meaningless. You would end me and I’m supposed to say, ‘Well you know what? I’ve had a good run, no need to keep going at this life.’ Well, no thank you, I’ll pass on that opportunity.”

“We don’t *want* to do this!” Tresa said, her voice thick with pleading and regret.

“Then let me go!”

“We can’t!” Nejal bellowed. “If we had more time, maybe we could. But not only are we weakening in this world, there’s... something else. Something knows that we’re here. Something – or someone – that knows our true natures.”

That brought Khloe up short. “Wait, what?”

“It’s true,” Tresa said. “Whatever it is, it has a power of its own. It’s tried to hunt us. It’s not one of the townsfolk. This one felt... different. Something... like you.”

“Impossible. It couldn’t be one of us. We just recently arrived.”

“All of you?” Nejal asked.

“Well,” Khloe began, “one of our... members... had been living here in Avalace for a while. But he doesn’t strike me as someone who would do what you’re suggesting.”

“How well do you know him?” Tresa asked.

“Not at all,” Khloe admitted, and her voice sounded flat. She only had an impression of Belmont from her brief interactions with him and some of the stories Aedyn told her. Khloe admitted to herself that it wasn’t a lot to go on. She really *didn’t* know Belmont, but she found it difficult to believe regardless. “I may not know Belmont, but I know his long-time friends. If they’ve vouched for him, then I will too.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Nejal said. “Whoever is hunting us is getting close. We have no more time. I am sorry, but we will—”

Khloe struck fast.

All during the discussion, Khloe had been focusing as much as she could on healing her leg. She was not a prodigy at the technique, and Akaja had previously warned her that not everyone is even very good at it, but at least it was *helpful*. Khloe did not have enough time to tell if she was able to heal her leg enough using her *Obscura*, but given how the conversation was going, she knew she didn’t have enough time to find out.

Without preamble, Khloe propelled herself toward Nejal, and her knee struck true, striking Nejal’s wound with precision. Khloe hoped that Nejal was somehow more susceptible to damage in his human form, and she heard a satisfying *crack* as she connected. Nejal cried out in pain, and Khloe followed up her kick with an open palm strike to Nejal’s chin, lifting him off the ground and sending him flying back against the wall.

Khloe was forced to pivot on her bad leg, and to her dismay the pain was enough to cause her to wince, delaying her by a fraction of a second.

It was enough for Tresa.

The woman leaped forward, already in mid-transformation. Khloe was still taken aback by the shapeshifter’s change, and the brief waver of concentration was costly. Too late, Khloe tried to block Tresa’s bestial blow, but it caught her in the ribs. Tresa’s massive claws swiped at Khloe’s side, which she was able to mostly escape from. But the glancing blow still put Khloe off-balance, and Tresa placed a claw around Khloe’s throat. Summoning her *Obscura*, Khloe formed a shadowy dagger in her hand, stabbing into Tresa’s hand. Tresa yelped and let Khloe go, quickly stepping back. Khloe, sensing a potential advantage, began to step forward...

... only to be struck *hard* from the side. Khloe was flung through a chair and struck the opposing wall. She stumbled up and saw Nejal, now in his beast form, approaching her with Tresa.

“Now that’s hardly fair,” was all Khloe said, weakly, before both of them struck her in the face, delivering her into quiet darkness.

Belmont sat alone in the *Risky Reaver*, enjoying his ale and waiting for his food to come. He had grudgingly left Akaja and the rest to work on locating Khloe. Akaja had felt sure she would be able to pinpoint a more accurate location if given enough time, but for that she needed to be alone and fiercely concentrate. Belmont, despite his desire to the contrary, gave her the space she needed, and decided to lose himself in a good meal, if only for a little while.

Belmont finished off his ale, and was looking for someone to provide him a refill when he noticed a man standing across the table, his eyes clearly focused on him. The man appeared harmless, but something in the eyes gave Belmont pause, and he sat up just a bit straighter.

“Good day,” the man said politely, maintaining his smile. “May I sit?”

Belmont stared at him for a moment before motioning to the chair.

“Thank you,” the man said, again in the same polite tone as he sat down. As he did, he motioned for one of the tavern’s servants to come over. “An ale, please. And a refill for my friend here.”

The servant nodded and stepped away, and the man turned back towards Belmont.

“Thank you, erm...” Belmont said.

“Ah, my apologies. My name is Xerxes.”

Belmont nodded. “My name is Belmont. Uh, what can I do for you, Xerxes?”

The servant returned and set down their drinks. Xerxes placed some coins on the table, then picked up the mug and began to drink. Belmont noticed Xerxes’ very deliberate movements, measured and calm, while maintaining a disarming smile. Belmont found himself instantly distrustful of the man.

“Did you know Avalace was built over the ruins of an old city?” Xerxes said.

“No.”

“I’m a bit of a student of... well, everything. But history is one of my preferred subjects.” *Another drink.* “About three hundred years ago there was a city-state that occupied this region. Lothien, I believe. A center of trade between here and Lumina, along the old empirical borders. It was said that the people of Lothien dealt in all manners of trade, some of an even more... arcane nature.”

“Nothing we haven’t learned in school,” Belmont said, his tone even if somewhat disinterested.

“No, I would imagine not. These archeological investigations into Lothien were stopped about 60 years ago. Outlawed, if very quietly. Some people don’t want to dig through the past, afraid of what monsters may resurface.”

This caught Belmont’s attention.

“Rituals and sacrifice were said to have been part of the Lothien culture. Not *human* sacrifice, mind you. Nothing like the ancient Xetozl tribes. But animals, and binding themselves to the earth, to *nature*, as a way to gain deeper insight into existence.” *Another drink.*

“You’re talking about magic?”

Xerxes smiled. This one was different, Belmont noted. Not like the mask that Xerxes was trying to maintain. This was honest, something sardonic peeking through his veil. “Not quite, but I suppose one could believe it to be magic.” Xerxes reached into his tunic, and pulled out cards. “Do you believe in the Augur?”

Belmont shook his head as he took a drink. “Not at all.”

This amused Xerxes. “Why not?”

Belmont allowed a hint of annoyance to crawl across his face and voice. “Because I don’t believe a deck of cards can tell my future. It’s bullshit.”

Xerxes chuckled. Again, it was different, Belmont noticed. *Dare I say, authentic?*

“Truth be told,” Xerxes said, “neither do I.”

He then proceeded to lay down a few cards on the table, facing Belmont. Belmont remained impassive, allowing whatever game Xerxes was playing to unfold. Belmont wondered if Xerxes was trying to bait him, but he did not provide any hint of impatience. *Besides, my food isn’t here yet.*

Belmont looked at the cards Xerxes placed on the table: a knight, cutting its own throat; a warrior maiden, off to the side, furthest from all of the other cards; and a burning eye above the two, looking down in what Belmont could only assume was hatred. He also noticed both the knight and the maiden were dressed in red armor.

“These don’t look like any cards I’ve ever seen,” Belmont said.

“No, I would imagine not,” he said. And then he laid down one final card, a crimson wolf looking up at the eye.

Belmont leaned forward, his voice betraying concern. “What the hell is this?”

“I think we both know what this is.”

Belmont placed his mug on the table, and folded his hands together. Belmont considered reaching across and grabbing Xerxes, but restrained himself.

“What do you know about the murders?” Belmont asked through gritted teeth.

“We have been tracking the same killer,” Xerxes said. “And no, it’s not me. You’re looking for a woman named Almudaline.”

“She’s the one responsible for the murders?”

Xerxes nodded. “Yes.”

“And how do you know?”

“I know Almudaline. Let’s say, we grew up in the same tribe. She was once a very sensible, brave warrior. But something has twisted her. She has been enslaved, mind and spirit, to something beyond her understanding. She has to be stopped.”

“That’s a very difficult story to believe.”

“You don’t have to blindly believe me. But I’m giving you the best lead you’ve got, and if you follow it, then you will find Almudaline. And you’ll stop the murders.”

Belmont’s eyebrows furrowed. “Why don’t you stop her, then?”

“That was my original mission, but things are moving faster than I originally anticipated. You have greater resources and manpower than I do to stop her.”

“So why don’t you join us? Help us bring her down if you know her so well.”

“Believe me, I’d love to. But I am being recalled.”

“By whom? Who do you work for?”

Xerxes smiled. “I’ve already said too much, very likely on purpose. Please, find Almudaline. And when you do, please show her some pity when you end her life.”

This caught Belmont off-guard. “How do you know we won’t take her alive?”

Xerxes raised a card to Belmont. “Because that is not *our* way.”

Belmont was confused, and looked at the card, but felt unable to focus on it. The more he tried, the more he felt his mind spiral and twist, unable to grasp the image he was looking at.

And then the card was gone. As was Xerxes.

Belmont moved back in a startle, and did not realize that a tavern servant was next to him, giving him a quizzical look.

He also realized that Xerxes was gone.

“Sir,” said the servant, “do you still want your food?”

Belmont dumbly looked down, and saw his meal sitting, untouched.

“I’m sorry... what?” he mumbled.

“It’s been sitting there for 15 minutes. If there’s something wrong with it, I can take it back.”

Belmont felt like the world tilted on its axis. He looked down at the table, and saw four cards in front of him. He picked each one up, and looked at them, flipping them over repeatedly.

Each side was blank.

Belmont, his head heavy with confusion, looked back at the servant. “Leave the food here, thanks.”

The servant nodded, then left Belmont alone.

It would be several minutes before Belmont would even look at his meal, as he contemplated the blank cards in his hands, barely noticing the faint red mist that bled off of them.

“I’m afraid I’m not a very patient man, Draxen,” Judicar said, holding the portly man at arm’s length out of the window.

Judicar reasoned the drop was about three stories. For a man of Draxen’s build, it would most likely be fatal, but still had a high chance of being very painful.

The man was sweating profusely, his voice shrill as he pleaded. “Please, Saint Judicar. We can be reasonable about this! I’m sure you’re a reasonable man! I know I am!”

“Remember,” Judicar said, “I’m not *patient*.”

“But I told you, I don’t know where Allana got to. They wandered off, I wasn’t keeping track of them!”

“Now that,” Judicar said, “is a lie.”

Judicar loosened grip on Draxen, just slightly, so that the man felt himself slip just enough in his grasp. This was followed by a screech that Judicar found grating.

I could let him drop, I suppose, but just as quickly Judicar chided himself. No. That’s not our way.

“Please!” Draxen cried.

“I understand you’re something of an information broker, correct? A bit player in this region?”

“I don’t know about that,” Draxen began, and when Judicar let him slip just a little more, the man’s body and arms convulsed. “Wait, wait! Okay, I’m not much of anybody, but I pay enough people. I have enough clout to get some information.”

“And someone,” Judicar said, “in your position surely wouldn’t let someone like Allana the Stormbreaker go so easily without someone to keep tabs on her.”

“How did you know her —”

“Her reputation precedes her. Unlike yours, if I’m being truthful. I still can’t understand how you were even able to keep her captive.”

Draxen laughed uncomfortably at that. “Well, you see, I do have a way with the ladies.”

“You are impotent and have been for several years.”

“How would you know that?!” Draxen’s fear melted away into horrified embarrassment.

“I have been very thorough in my investigation. I have been speaking with some of your exes.”

“Those women are lying! Just bitter because I didn’t make them my wife.”

“Roxy was pretty adamant.”

“Well she’s —”

“And Trista.”

“Now we only dated for a month.”

“And Rebekah. And Sara. And Vera. And...”

“Okay, I get it, please stop.” Draxen hazarded a look down. Then, beneath his breath, said, “Maybe you can drop me after all.”

Judicar gritted his teeth. “Did. You. Have. Her. Followed?”

“Yes! My man lost sight of them as they headed to Avalace, okay?”

“You’re certain?”

“Yes! Yes, I am!”

Then Judicar let go of Draxen, and turned. By the time he got to the door he heard a loud *thud* from outside.

He did ask me to drop him, after all, Judicar mused to himself.

Khloe awoke to the smell of a strange incense, and found herself tied to a tree. Taking in her surroundings, she noted that it was dusk, and that her arms and legs were bound in addition to her being tied to the tree.

I guess they don't want to take any chances.

Nejal and Tresa were nearby, in their human form. They had placed a series of pale stones in a circle around the tree and had marked several runes in the dirt. They were chanting, a dirge-like sound that disturbed Khloe. She tested the bindings on her hands but found them to be very tight. She wondered even if she did use her talents to cut her way out, how much time she would really have to escape, given Tresa and Nejal's proximity.

"Tresa, please. You don't have to do this."

Tresa ignored Khloe and proceeded with her chanting.

Khloe looked over at Nejal.

"Nejal... nah, I won't even try. You're definitely determined to sacrifice me."

Nejal favored her with a look of annoyance and disgust.

"Help!" Khloe screamed, using her talents to project her voice. She had never done it before but it was surprisingly effective, at least enough so to have caused an echo in the forest. "Help!"

"Stop that, child!" Nejal said.

"What, you think I just *want* to die?"

"No, but at least you could die with some dignity."

"Says the guy who is going to sacrifice someone so *they* won't die in this world. The hypocrisy is astonishing!"

Nejal punched the ground in frustration and let out a low roar. Tresa, to her credit, never missed a beat.

And then, they stopped. The forest became dead silent, only the wind being audible between the leaves.

Nothing happened.

"Ha!" Khloe said. "It looks like your little incantation was as useless as my last relationship!"

Then the earth trembled.

"Oh," Khloe said, before seeing a dark mist slowly leaving her body.

She recognized the mist as being a side effect of when she used her powers, but this appeared different. It was as if the shadowy mist was being drawn out of her, like water slowly being wrung from a towel. Khloe felt a curious sensation of tiny pinpricks all across her body, but they soon gave way to feeling like burning pikes being stabbed all over her.

Khloe screamed, as the mist began to bubble all around her, and she felt herself becoming weaker, as though every part of her was burning in a black flame and all that would remain would be cinder. There was no relief, and she was unable to summon any techniques to attempt to quell the pain. All rational thought gave way to the hope that her death would be swift, and a single word crashed through her being.

“Father!” she cried, as her consciousness began to ebb and fade.

Khloe remained conscious long enough to see Nejal skittering across the ground at an odd angle. Her eyes lazily moved towards Tresa, who frantically looked back and forth between Nejal and... something. Whatever it was, it caused Tresa to transform into her beast form, and Khloe found herself feeling less pain.

This is it. This is where I go. I can't even feel anything anymore.

And then Khloe noticed that the shadow mist was receding, and her body no longer felt like it was aflame.

The incantation has been broken, she realized.

This brought a renewed energy, and she looked to where Tresa was facing.

Standing there, with short-cropped hair and in a dirty red tunic, was a woman. In one hand, she held a polearm, and her other hand was outstretched towards Tresa.

And her hand was surrounded by a faint crimson mist.

“What the hell?” Khloe tried to yell, but it came out slurred.

“You!” Tresa said.

The new arrival nodded. “My name is Almudaline. A pleasure to finally make your acquaintance.”

“You have no right to interfere with our ritual!” Tresa screamed.

“On the contrary,” the woman said, “my master would rather you not waste the girl’s precious energies. He has... other plans for them.”

Tresa growled. “What master?”

But Almudaline said nothing. In a blinding flash, she was before Tresa, a faint red mist leaving an impossible trail from where she had been standing to the unsuspecting woman. Almudaline raised her polearm, smashing against Tresa's chin, then sweeping it down and around from behind her legs. Tresa was thrown off-balance, and Almudaline took advantage by swinging her leg around and catching Tresa in her mid-section, sending her flying back.

Khloe was trying to make sense of what was going on, but her sense of self-preservation kicked in, and she attempted to use her talents to form a shadow dagger in each hand. But Khloe found the effort excruciatingly difficult. Attempting to do so returned some of the soul-burning sensation she felt earlier. Khloe also felt overcome with a terrible, deep exhaustion.

This is might be my only chance!

She focused her intent, and saw the tell-tale shadowy mist slowly emitting from her hands. Khloe pushed, past the burning in her lungs and arms, past the headache threatening to split her skull. She fought to form the only chance at salvation she may have had.

And suddenly, they were there in her hands.

Khloe furiously cut at her bindings, and in short order had freed herself. She looked over in time to see Nejal joining the fray, attacking Almudaline alongside Tresa.

I should just really turn and run —

And then the bladed end of the polearm crashed into the dirt before her, and Khloe turned to see Almudaline staring back, her eyes defiant, arm outstretched from the throw.

“Well, thanks for the weapon,” Khloe said, and reached for the polearm...

... only to see it pull out of the dirt, fly through the air and return to Almudaline's hands.

“Oh, come on! That's a *thing*?!” Khloe cried.

But Almudaline had returned to fighting the two beasts, a strange dance of blood and mist. Khloe could see that Nejal was fading fast. His wound had not only re-opened but worsened, and soon Almudaline struck him across the chest with her weapon, sending him back into a tree. Nejal struck it hard, and then slumped over.

Tresa was striking at Almudaline with furious blows, but the latter was deftly blocking or redirecting them. Khloe was surprised by the newcomer's skill, but clearly she had an advantage over Tresa. The red mist gave Khloe pause; was this something akin to her own Obscura talent? And if so, why hadn't Aedyn or the others mentioned something like this before? She knew of

the Saints' Aduro abilities, a counterpoint to their own Obscura talents, but what was this crimson ability? And was Almudaline alone in wielding it?

Those answers will have to wait, Khloe mused, and turned to run.

But Almudaline had other ideas.

As Khloe took her first few steps, something hard crashed into her feet, causing her to tumble along the ground. Looking at where her feet had been, she saw Almudaline's cursed polearm on the ground, and looked up to yell at the woman when Khloe realized she was airborne *right above her*.

Khloe was a hair late in rolling out of the way, as Almudaline struck down with her knee, landing on Khloe's ribs. Reflexively Khloe kicked out at Almudaline, and the raw speed caught the latter unawares. She flipped over and away in the air, landing with little grace about fifteen yards away.

Khloe stood and quickly looked for Tresa, who was approaching from Almudaline's blind side. Khloe gathered her strength and proceeded towards Almudaline at a run, just as Tresa was closing in. But Almudaline took her polearm just as both were about to reach her, and slammed it into the ground. A powerful shockwave spread out along the ground, sending Khloe and Tresa careening back.

Khloe landed hard, the breath knocked out of her. She fought through the pain and tried to stand. Khloe did so just in time to witness Almudaline raise her polearm and spike it through Tresa's side.

The woman unleashed a hideous howl, as the weapon pinned her to the ground, and Tresa struggled to remove it. The weapon and her hands were caked with blood, and soon Tresa's howls subsided to a whimper.

Khloe's body hurt all over, and she wanted to escape, even if it meant crawling all the way back to Aedyn and the others.

I'm not going anywhere, though. My best chance now is to stand and fight.

Something in Almudaline's smile as she approached Khloe told her that the crimson bitch felt the same way.

"You're not thinking of running out on me, are you?" Almudaline said, her playful tone betrayed by menace.

Khloe spat out blood. “Well, you know. I was hoping we could talk, maybe get to know each other. After all, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, right?”

To Khloe’s surprise, Almudaline sighed, and it sounded genuine.

“I’m sorry, girl. I wish I could, but my master won’t permit it.”

“Who is this master,” Khloe began, before Almudaline reached out and grabbed her by the throat. Almudaline’s grip, accompanied by the tell-tale red mist, was unshakeable. Khloe responded by using both hands to pry Almudaline off, but could not.

And then soul-burning returned, and her own shadowy mist became a vortex around them, swirling furiously until it formed a funnel straight above them. The funnel warped the sky above them, a mix of black and red and white seeping into a lightning pattern that ripped away the very heavens. And soon, the pattern ripped a hole through the sky, and Khloe could see something beyond it. She wondered if the pain had driven her mad, as she swore she could see another sky, another world through that hole, the ruins of cities and mountains and ash. And then she saw something else.

A massive, terrible eye that looked down from the dreaded heavens, surveying the ruins and desolation.

And then it looked right at Khloe, and she screamed again.

TO BE CONTINUED...