

“Presage”

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Paths of Exile

A novel

Book One

Exiles

(Obscura Rhapsody 1 to 5)

Book Two

Moonlight Scherzo

(Obscura Rhapsody 6 to 10)

Book Three

(Obscura Rhapsody 11 to 16)

“Khloe?!” Bren cried out, startling Sarabelle.

She had been sitting next him, writing notes on his chart for the next shift caregiver, when he awoke suddenly from a dead sleep. Sarabelle yelped in surprise, her pen flying out of her hand and onto the floor.

“Bren?” she said, leaning closer. “Bren, can you hear me?”

“Khloe, is that you?” he asked.

Sarabelle noticed his eyes were unfocused, staring past and around but never settling on her. She raised her hand to his head and felt his feverish skin.

“Khloe?” he asked again.

Sarabelle sighed. Maybe it was better this way. Maybe she could provide him some false comfort. A pang of guilt struck at Sarabelle, but she dismissed it.

“It’s me,” she said, tentative.

“You’re not Khloe,” he said, his voice thick with disappointment.

Sarabelle cursed inwardly, but maintained her composure. “Don’t you know who I am?”

“Sarabelle?” he said.

“Yes!” Her excitement was genuine; she had not expected Bren to remember her. Sarabelle reached over and drew a washcloth, dipping it in the cool water and wringing it out before dabbing his forehead.

“Where’s Khloe?” he asked.

“She’s coming. She’s a little delayed, but she’s coming.”

“Good, good,” he said, his voice drifting.

His breathing slowed. Sarabelle found herself holding her breath. *Is this it?*

He took another labored breath, and it returned to a semi-normal rhythm.

He’s okay, for now, she mused.

Sarabelle gave the washcloth another dunk and rinse before returning it to Bren’s forehead.

She failed to see the shadow on the wall behind her. Sarabelle took no notice before it was upon her, and a hand reached and touched her shoulder.

And then Sarabelle turned and screamed.

Khloe's terror was borne of something utterly unnatural, and it sent cracks through every portion of her soul.

She stared at the impossible eye above her, its abyssal pupil incalculably old, drawing out every ounce of strength Khloe contained. It was the burning sensation of crippling weakness that made her want to die; it was the sheer hopelessness in the face of this cosmic horror.

Khloe, came a voice, extremely distant.

There was only pain here, drowning out everything.

Khloe! came the voice again, more distinct, a buoy in her mind.

Khloe struggled to focus on the voice. And suddenly, everything was dark.

The darkness gave way to Khloe sitting on a small boat, and she found herself at sea. She looked down and saw she was wearing her favorite dress as a young girl, when she would go with her father to church services and then the market in the halcyon days of her youth.

Before so much happened.

Waves were lashing at the boat, which rocked against the unsteady waters. Above, she saw the clouds swirling in an unnatural pattern, and a fear gripped her. Khloe kept looking for a funnel to form, but the sky maintained as though something had pierced heaven, lightning crashing down onto the waters in brilliant streaks.

A light caught Khloe's attention, and she looked aside. Far ahead, on the shore, was a lighthouse, and it was active. The spotlight was shining out onto the turbulent waves, looking for something.

Looking for me.

Khloe!

It was Akaja's voice.

"I'm here!" Khloe cried out, but she could barely hear herself over the wind and waves.

Khloe, there you are!

"Akaja, where am I?"

That's what I was hoping you could tell me.

"I'm on a boat on the sea..."

There isn't an ocean for hundreds of miles! How the hell did you get there?

Khloe was dumbstruck. "Wait... I was just in a forest, and now I'm here. Aren't you doing this to me? Isn't this another Thoughtspace?"

There was a tangible pause. *Khloe, I don't know what you're talking about.*

Khloe's mind reeled.

Listen, Khloe. I can barely sense you. You're not far from us, relatively speaking. But something has been blocking you. I need you to somehow let me know where you are. I need you to increase your Obscura presence.

"I'm on a boat off the shore."

I don't think you really are. I don't know what that is, but you're definitely not at sea. Wait, is that a lighthouse?

"You can see it?"

Yes. Are you having some sort of psychotic breakdown? I can't be stuck inside the mind of an insane person again.

"No!" Khloe threw out her arms in a placating gesture, then folded her arms when she remembered no one was there with her. "Look, I don't know what's going on. There were these people who can shapeshift into what look like Na'Ald, but they're not, and then they tried sacrificing me in some ritual, and suddenly the sky opened up with this giant horrible eye staring down at me!"

The absence of Akaja in her mind felt like an eternity. Khloe wondered if she was even imagining her friend to begin with.

Uhm... I can't explain what's going on, but I think I can draw you back. But you have to listen, okay?

"Technically you're not even 'speaking' to me right now."

Is now really the time?

"Sorry."

Think about something. Something tangible and real. Something that keeps you anchored in this world. Can you do that? It has to be something very important to you—

"Father!" Khloe cried, and imagined him, in his home, dying alone and lost and that she would never see him again.

The storm overhead raged with a renewed force, but Khloe stood, facing it with renewed defiance as she raised her arms.

"Father!" she cried again.

And everything became enveloped in white.

“There!” Akaja yelled, pointing deeper into the forest. “She’s there!”

“Are you certain?” Aedyn asked.

“Would I be yelling if I weren’t?!”

The Vanguard rushed off without another word.

Orden, witnessing the four proceed at a pace he knew was both unnatural and impossible for him, sighed.

“I’ll just wait here,” he said.

Khloe found herself back beneath the wretched eye, but a renewed surge of energy came over her. She looked across and saw Almudaline, still staring up at her master.

Distracted.

In a rapid motion, Khloe summoned two shadow daggers into her hand and threw them at Almudaline. The latter noticed the movement and looked at Khloe, but too late. The twin daggers caught her directly in the chest, sending Almudaline crashing back onto the ground.

From her periphery, she saw that Nejal had crawled to Tresa, furiously trying to pull the polearm from his impaled wife. He finally succeeded, leaning down and placing his hand over her wound, speaking to her as he did. Khloe was unable to hear them over the tempestuous wind around them, and she turned to move away from beneath the horrible eye.

Khloe only got a few feet before she was tackled onto the ground. She let out a grunt of frustration as she tried to elbow whatever was behind her, but as she twisted her body she saw Almudaline had narrowly dodged her attack. Khloe brought her leg around, trying to kick the woman, but Almudaline rolled out of the way. Khloe allowed her momentum to carry her forward and tackled Almudaline.

Both of them tumbled along the ground, and Almudaline grabbed Khloe by her tunic and headbutted her, catching Khloe on the bridge of her nose. Khloe gritted her teeth through the pain, using her talent to dull some of it. She retaliated with a headbutt of her own, then a punch to Almudaline’s stomach. The latter twisted and flipped Khloe off of her, but Khloe landed on her feet and came right back at Almudaline with a leaping kick that caught her in the jaw.

The kick sent Almudaline flying for several yards. She sat up, and though subtle, Khloe caught a flicker in Almudaline’s eyes.

She's looking for her weapon, Khloe thought, and an idea came to mind.

Khloe broke off at a sprint, racing in an arc pattern away from Almudaline but placing herself between the warrior and where her polearm lay. She then turned towards Almudaline and ran at full speed.

Then Khloe saw what she had anticipated.

Almudaline was clever, trying to be subtle as she subtly motioned with her hand, but Khloe was onto her. In her mind, Khloe did some quick mathematics, and continued running towards Almudaline. The woman had stood up, as if bracing herself for Khloe to ram into her. Khloe was almost upon her—

— and leaped into the air over Almudaline.

In mid-leap, she saw the polearm was closing in fast behind her, blade forward, and Khloe had barely jumped in time. The polearm, whose return velocity, Khloe reasoned, was enough to have impaled to her – as she imagined was Almudaline's intention.

But instead, it was now flying towards Almudaline.

Khloe landed just behind Almudaline, in time for the polearm to reach her. And without effort, Almudaline caught the polearm, her hands gripping the weapon safely just past the blade.

Just as Khloe had wanted.

Summoning all of her strength, Khloe kicked Almudaline in the back – and impaled her onto the polearm.

Almudaline screamed, which gave way to a gurgled choke, and the sound of blood splashing onto the earth. She lurched forward, then fell to the ground.

Khloe stood stock-still, half-expecting to see Almudaline stand and continue fighting. But she lay on the ground, with only ragged breaths to provide any sign that she was still alive.

Suddenly, Almudaline sat up. Her hand reached toward the broken sky, a shrill scream escaping her lips. "Master!"

Khloe was grateful no one saw her jump with a startle, and sheepishly looked around before looking up at the sky.

The eye had turned its attention to Almudaline, and Khloe heard a guttural, twisted speech come from the eye.

Is it speaking to her?

But suddenly the eye emitted a light, shining down onto Almudaline. After a few moments, Almudaline began to shake, then scream, as the light began to consume her. Her flesh slowly turned into dust motes that fluttered and floated, spiraling upwards to the eye in horrific majesty.

Khloe watched on in horror, and before she knew it, she rushed to Almudaline's side. Khloe stepped into the light and immediately felt the same soul-burning sensation she experienced earlier, but Khloe's sense of self remained firm, and she raised her arms to the heavens.

"No!" she cried, and summoned her Obscura talent, swirling it around her like a tempest shield, willing it to become tangible, and then pushing it against the destructive light. Khloe felt a strange sensation as her dark mist took form and pushed against the light. She saw the motes in the air slowing, the sleeves of her tunic no longer flapping violently. It was as if every moment was being slowly frozen into individual frames. With this came a strange sound, a howling like wind and screams slowly emerging from the light and shadow, growing louder and louder until it exploded all around Khloe.

For a moment, nothing existed except Khloe. And she saw a series of images, as though in a dream where she was experiencing a different life.

She saw Allana, dressed in an ceremonial military garb, staring pensively out a window.

She saw a young girl, in a red dress, staring menacingly at her.

Khloe witnessed a metallic creature whose heights reached almost to the heavens, with a hundred eyes and wings of fire.

There was Aedyn, smiling at her proudly, sinking into light.

A child laughing.

Khloe locked into sword combat with a young man, anguish in both their eyes, as they exchanged blows.

A horrible light, burning at the end of all things.

Footsteps on a distant shore.

A voice: "This is where it begins."

Everything exploded into cacophony and broken light.

Khloe was staring at the eye again, its light cracking against her shadow shield. Khloe stared back at the eye, fierce and unyielding in her resolve.

And there it was. Khloe saw it in the eye.

Curiosity.

The light erupted, shattering against her shadows and engulfing everything around Khloe in thunder and wind.

And after the light faded, it was gone.

The heavens had closed off. The clouds had receded. The air was still, though heavy. Khloe fell to her knees, a sudden exhaustion bleeding through every bone and sinew. She gasped for air and sat for a moment.

She looked aside and found Almudaline was nowhere to be found, as was her weapon. Khloe slowly stood, exerting great effort in the process, and stumbled several feet.

Nejal and Tresa were gone as well.

“What the hell?” she whispered, walking over to the place where the two had been laying. There was still blood on the ground, and the hole where Tresa had been impaled. But they had vanished, much like Almudaline.

But how?

A wave of dizziness overcame Khloe, and after a few steps she slumped against a tree.

“Khloe!”

Akaja.

Khloe looked to where the voice came from, and she saw her friends quickly approaching. Soon, they surrounded her, and Akaja was kneeling down at her side, a hand on her shoulder.

“Stay still,” Akaja said.

Khloe could feel Akaja’s *Obscura* passing over her body like a salve and relaxed. Although every part of her ached, Akaja’s healing was already proving to be an oasis.

“What happened?” Aedyn asked.

Khloe looked up, and saw the concern on all of their faces, even Belmont.

Her eyes welled up.

This really is my family now.

“Well,” Khloe said, “it’s a long story.”

“I didn’t think it was that long,” Belmont said.

If Khloe had had the energy, she would have thrown something at him.

She was lying in a bed in one of Belmont’s spare rooms. The others had gathered around to hear to her story and listened with rapt interest. Akaja sat on the bed with her, still suffusing Khloe with healing energy and comfort, something she was extremely grateful for.

“And did you believe them?” Aedyn asked.

“About what?”

“About being from another... from a different now?”

Khloe frowned. “I’m... I’m not sure. It sounded so fantastical, but then later, I saw the eye, and the skies seemed to open to somewhere else entirely.”

Allana regarded Khloe with curiosity. “But then again, at one point you thought you were on a boat at sea? In the middle of all of that?”

“I don’t know what that was about.”

From the corner of her eye, Khloe noticed Akaja steal a glance at her, then look back down at Khloe’s side. Khloe was certain something flickered across Akaja’s eyes.

What does she know?

“I’m just sorry I couldn’t witness any of this. It sounded amazing,” Belmont said.

“You mean absolutely terrifying,” Akaja said with a light-hearted laugh.

“Was there anything else?” Aedyn asked, cutting through the banter.

Khloe looked at him, and her thoughts drifted.

Allana in a uniform. Aedyn in light. The child in the red dress. What was all of that?

“Khloe?” Akaja said, offering a quizzical look. “You okay?”

Khloe smiled. “Yes, of course. No, Aedyn, nothing else that I can think of.”

That seemed to satisfy Aedyn, who nodded. “Alright then. Well, get some rest, Khloe. It’s late and I can’t imagine the day you’ve had.”

Khloe laughed, despite the pain in her chest and back. “You really couldn’t.”

She had waited until nightfall, long after their voices had faded into night, and when the comfort of darkness granted her clemency.

She remembered the advice of what her old Tribe master had told her. To hide in plain sight, that deception and theatricality often went hand-in-hand.

Almudaline had been abandoned by her master. She was certain of that, as certain as the abyss it left in her mind. There was no longer any voice, any guiding strength to fulfill her master's great plan. She was meant to be its herald had she succeeded, but Almudaline had failed, and that failure filled the abyss with utter rage.

That her master had turned and tried to siphon her strength and body to open the gateway was of no consequence. She held no grudge, found no fault in her master's ways. Who was she to argue the will of a god? No, she had failed, and it had attempted to salvage something from her pathetic failure. Had it been her body and soul, then so be it.

But she had survived. Fate had decreed a new path for her.

It took all of her remaining strength to leap upwards into the upper reaches of the tree while the girl had been distracted and everything went white. Almudaline had held on in the branches, cloaking herself in the shadows and leaves, using her *Vermiculo* to hide her presence. It had been daunting and exhausting, but Almudaline's will would not bend. Not while Fate still found a use for her.

Once night descended, long after she was alone, Almudaline slowly crawled down to the ground, and using her polearm for support, began heading off away into the forest. She felt the scarring on her body and face, but it did not matter. She had never been a vain person, unlike many in the Tribe. The scars would be a stark reminder of her failure. She accepted that. She *embraced* that.

Almudaline slowly moved across the forest ground, disappearing into the darkness that had taken her long ago.

Khloe was grateful that Belmont had decided to travel with them. The man was one hell of a cook.

It had been a week since the events in the forest, and Khloe was grateful to be feeling as good as she did. Though she had been bored during recovery, Akaja had proven to be a delightful companion. Together they read, and Khloe heard stories about the group's past and some misadventures. Allana would stop in and check on her, and although Khloe still had not gotten to know the woman as well as she would have liked yet, Khloe felt like she was at least

warming up to her. And Belmont was generous in keeping her well-fed during her stay, something Khloe welcomed after who-knows-how-long of not having a decent home-cooked meal.

Belmont had met with Orden and they decided the case was closed. The murders had stopped, and though it was still ambiguous as to who was really responsible, the constable opted to float the story out there that the beast had been killed and that Avalace was no longer in any danger. The story was met with skepticism at first by the townsfolk, but their continued safety set a tone of reassurance that was unlikely to be quelled any time soon.

Belmont found a young local man, Irwin, to tend to the house while he was gone. The man was of good repute and was a hardy type that Belmont trusted would keep things well maintained in exchange for free room and board. It had not taken long for Belmont to gather his belongings and be ready to leave. He also acquired fresh horses for everyone with a fraction of the money he saved and earned while living in Avalace.

They met as agreed to at the edge of Belmont's property. Khloe noticed Belmont staring back at his home with a wistful look.

"Miss it already?" she asked.

He chuckled. "I suppose I got used to the idea that I was going to live here the rest of my life."

"It's not too late to turn around, you know," Allana said teasingly.

Belmont shook his head. "Not when the rest of you need someone to keep you out of trouble."

Akaja held a hand to her chest. In a mocking tone she said, "Who, *us*? Get into trouble? Where did you ever get that idea?"

They shared a laugh, and before long they began to ride out, Aedyn taking the lead with Allana by his side, and soon the five of them were riding in close formation.

"So, what now?" Allana asked. "You've done it. We're all back together at last." She let the words hang in the air a moment. "Do you still intend to go through with it?"

Aedyn remained silent, looking ahead as they rode.

Belmont grew concerned. "What do you mean? Go through with what?"

Akaja looked over at Aedyn, then ahead uncomfortably.

When Aedyn spoke at last, it was with a steely determination. "We're going to get Roué."

Nejal came to with a start. His body jerked involuntarily, and he struggled to move at first. He coughed and felt some blood trickling from his mouth. He wiped it away and struggled to sit up. After some effort, Nejal was upright, but his thoughts remained clouded.

He took in his surroundings. He was on a slope, which lead down to a sparse forest and some mountains in the distance. He rubbed his head, struggling to get his bearings and remember what happened.

Tresa!

He frantically looked around and found her lying twenty yards away. Forgetting his pain and injuries, Nejal clambered over to Tresa, and without hesitation scooped her into his arms.

She was still breathing, if labored and slow. He remembered trying to help her with her wounds, but he not been able to do much. He needed supplies, but where would he—

A realization dawned. He looked around.

He was *home*.

The air, the layout of these hills... all looked and felt just subtly different enough but there was no denying it. They were home.

But how?

He thought back. The girl – Khloe – had been fighting ... *it*.

Oh no.

“Nejal,” came Tresa’s weak voice.

“Yes, love. It’s me.”

“We’re home, aren’t we?”

He nodded slowly, his face grim.

“We did it,” she said with a faded smile.

Nejal went to speak, but stopped.

Instead, he carried Tresa, walking up the slope to the crest of the hill.

“My love,” she said weakly.

“Shhh, no more, Tresa,” Nejal said. “Save your energy.”

With a laborious stride, Nejal reached the summit of the hill. If he was correct, they were near their city of Vesta.

Nejal looked down to find the ruins of his home.

The buildings were blackened cinders, little more than ashen husks. Large swaths of the city had been leveled, as though some hulking mass had crashed through and flattened the buildings. Scorch marks dotted the landscape in all directions, swirling slashes of flame that eviscerated the earth.

And as Nejal looked across the landscape, gazing off into the horizon, he found similar flames and destruction in the other cities and villages that dotted the land.

It has found our world, too.

“Nejal?” Tresa said.

“I’m so sorry, my love,” he said, his voice emotionless and broken.

Tresa slowly turned and beheld the destruction at hand. To his surprise, she did not utter a cry of despair. Tresa simply looked on.

“There was nothing we could do,” she said flatly, and it was her utter acceptance of the end that sundered whatever remained of Nejal’s heart.

And then he looked up and saw the wretched eye watching from above, a terrible god judging this world unworthy. From its abyssal eye, a crimson fury swirled, ready to be unleashed.

Nejal gripped Tresa, holding her tightly as he knelt down. He continued to hold her close, quickly telling her of the deep things in his heart and kissing her gently, even as unforgiving judgment rained down and banished them to oblivion.

TO BE CONTINUED...