

# Aolani Be

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Lore

# Part 1

It is a stormy night in the forest of the Dravanian forelands, rain washes the blood and grime from a trio of Miqote on the outside of a makeshift arena. The sound of tears and wincing of pain are muffled by the harsh rainfall and thundering clouds. There is the largest of the trio, cradling an older woman in his arm, the other seemingly cut off at the shoulder. The woman had been deeply pierced through the chest, and the large man had an almost identical wound going through his abdomen, and beside them was an elderly Miqote leaning against a massive broken bell and club. An Auri woman steps into frame, dropping her belongings after scanning the trio. The rain hides the tears she sheds as she shifts her gaze to a cloaked Miqote man across from her in the arena. A bloodied gunblade rests upon his shoulders, his eyes appearing an ashy grey surrounding a pair of red pupils, his magenta hair mirroring that of the wounded couple. "The Lowain I knew would never lay a finger on his own mother..." the Auri cries, the Miqote emotionlessly digs his heels deeper into the mud and takes a stance. She draws her javelin and stoops into a jumping position. They clash weapons until they break and shatter, switching to another weapon, a different form of fighting; spells and enchants collide with one another, the two look evenly matched. The Auri girl flourished a rapier into view and quickly advanced onto the man, who unsheathed a heavily decorated katana. Aether seemed to fume from the scabbard of the blade, as the miqote began raining down grinding strikes imbued with elements of wind and ice. The Auri girl was forced to get distance between them and collect herself. She focused on her childhood, her memories of the man accompanying her blurring, and all she can remember is one word, an enchant, a spell.

(edited)

The two readied for a final clash, and seared the air with the sound of their steel grating against one another. Their eyes met, and the miqote shuffled his arm from his sleeve, revealing a sleeve of runic writing as the words began to glow. A fire began forming at his fingertips as he aimed his free hand toward the girl. She responded quickly jamming her rapier into the ground and placing her focus into the gem on the hilt, it glowed brightly as she whispered the word "Esunaga..." The ground around man seemed to release a smoky haze, and the miqote's eyes whipped from the dark grey into a milky white. He gasped as if his breath was stolen from him, but it was more like he had regained consciousness. "Atta girl" he coughed, his insides seemingly turning to ash. The girl, realizing what she had started, choked on her words, only finding tears. "I'm sorry I couldn't show you home," he coughed violently, "but you can still find it..." His hand shakily pointing toward a green tinted star in the sky. He placed a tattered piece of parchment in the girl's hand, then weakly pulled her to him and kissed her on the forehead, his lips already crackling and ashing away. The girl looked up to the now clear night view, and all but one star was invisible to her, she tended to the injured trio and quickly set off to follow the emerald star.

## Part 2

A raging storm crashes a small boat on to the craggy shore, spilling a pair of people onto the ground. The smaller of the pair is an elderly Miqote man, he's adorned in a tattered coat with numerous trinkets and charms, and carries a large bell and club upon his back. The taller figure is an Auri woman, a hood covers the majority of her sandy blonde hair, and her jade eyes glow brightly in the rainfall. She hurriedly grabs a roll of parchment that had been tossed along the shore, and unravels a small journal buried inside. She checks the notes and compares the description of her surroundings to the book before turning to the man and silently nodding. After walking miles of beachfront, the land around appears scorched and ashen peppered with bright white tents and magitek cases scattered about. There are numerous people in lab coats scurrying about, examining everything. Some of which seem to be studying scorched corpses, many of which are poised as statues of what they would have been in their final moments. Along with the busy researchers, were Garlean soldiers, their armor very dirty and worn, and their movement being very off putting and inhumane. The girl recognized these movements, the Garlean soldiers were undead, revived from Traders Spurn. The duo gather their things to move but are flanked by two of the undead Garleans. The soldiers brutally grab the elder by his coat and toss him into the open, the girl quickly springs to his side. A duskwight elezen slowly walks into their view, scribbling notes into a journal of his own. He looks at the old man, examining the bell on his back and the tears in his coat and scars along his skin. "Magenta hair must run in the family..." he remarks, "...pitiful that I still have to deal with him and his even in death." The miqote collects himself and gets to his feet, only replying with a tired grunt. He side eyes the Auri woman almost with a look of disgust before sighing and adjusting his clothes. "Just like that angry glare must run in your family..." "I don't know you, and I'm sure you don't know me." The girl stands up and stands in front of the old miqote man. The elezen waves his hand in dismissal. "No girl, I know you very well. You were born to these lands but given a different name, Aolani Be." The elezen walks around comparing the notes of his researchers. "They gave you that name to trick those that would target your mother's offspring... and it worked." "Speak plainly boy" the old man snarls. "There was once a nomadic tribe of stargazers that housed a bloodline of aetherically blessed individuals, the Versi. That clan was wiped out by the savages that once inhabited this area, but they housed what appeared to be the last remaining Versi that had said blessing." The old miqote turned to Aolani, the elezen clapped his journal shut. "You can only imagine my surprise

to find she'd had two children, one of which bearing the gift. In which the Garlean army made a deal on my behalf, to perfect my research I needed to utilize that power. We would give the tribe resources to expand in exchange for the gifted child." A soft scowl grew upon the elezen's face, the memories of his plan causing him pain. "Of course there was an unexpected third party that took it upon himself to ruin that, he mixed up the description of the children. And in the end we had taken the child of the savages, Armina Versi." The elezen's footsteps grew heavy, aether gathering at his feet. He waved the researchers back, leaving all but five of them standing separately from the crowd. The researchers are flanked by a line of undead Garleans, and with another wave of the elezen's hand, the researchers are struck down. Their bodies began to faded and crumble into dust

and sift into the ground. Two mounds of dirt began to shift and churn taking form as legs. "What is this?" The elder shouts, even more of the body beginning to form. "Ask the girl, she should be well versed having stolen from me after all," the elezen sighed as he began placing his journals into one of the magitek crates, "she grew up surrounded by the forbidden... necromancy." Aolani leaps forward readying the spell she'd used days before, but as she slams her hand against the ground, the body continues to form. "What outdated methods did Bheewan teach you? I should have you know..." the elezen reaches his hand forward and clenches his fist, "the only way to undo perfect necromancy is by taking out the host..." And with a tug, the elezen seemingly disappeared. The mass of earth had fully formed into a large Auri man, his skin was a sun touched bronze and his hair a familiar sandy blonde. His hands adorned with jewelry made of gold and bone, a large weapon began to form at his side, it was a massive sword attached to a large iron ball. A pair of sharp golden eyes took shape, and the now fully formed face had grown into a sharp and stoic glower. "Ah, I see his intent now," the old man laughs, slugging the bell onto his back, "this is his attempt to scare you off. Bheewan's cleansing was only the beginning of your papa problems..."

# Part 3

I'm nervous... Why am I so nervous...? A fight like this is exciting, Lowain, Grampa, and the old man never made me feel like this. I'm watching the old man tell me something, but I just hear ringing and white noise, his lips read "Papa." This familiarity, it's what I'd yearned for... but not like this. I can't ask you anything... I can only sit in wait until your aether is spent and then you're just a puppet. You can't tell me about Mama or Gabbie or why you only have one horn or why everyone only told me scary stories about you. —I see the scowl now... He's saying something to the old man, but my ears are still ringing. I look to him for anything, and the old man has a nervous smirk on his face. The dull ringing in my ears is drowned out by a question: "You woman, what is your name?" My eyes shoot up to meet his, my nerves all firing off before cooling down as I open my mouth to answer: "Aola—, A-Armina... Versi" I choke on my answer and watch and wait for this man's response. His frown softens, and his stance becomes lax... was that the right thing to say? I look over to the old man and he's readying his bell to cast a spell. The man flips his weapon slamming the massive iron ball into the ground, lifting a large slab of earth from the ground before kicking it towards us... huh? He kicked it? The old man tugs me behind him and bangs his club against the bell, summoning a bolt of lightning that splits the rock in two before it reaches us. Before the dust even settles, I hear a loud bang against the bell, followed by the sound of metal bending and crumbling. The old man is sent flying aside, knocked unconscious from a single blow. I turn to look forward and a pair of golden eyes peer at me through the cloud of smoke and debris... I see a flash of gold move through the smoke and bring my weapon up to block. A massive fist adorned in jewelry crashes into my blade, carrying me off of my feet and knocking my weapon into the air. Before I even land, the man stomps forward for another strike, I redirect his punch towards the ground. "You fight like him..." the Auri man grumbles, "—I only hope your trickery is good enough." All I can do is dodge and parry this man's kicks and punches; I feel bruises form every time I try to block. I have to fight back... I scoop a handful of dirt into my fist and try for an uppercut, he casually leans back to dodge and I open my hand dumping the dirt in his eyes. He shoves me back on purely instinct, but I sprint back towards him to get my first punches in. I nearly smashed my fingers punching his dead skin, he didn't respond to me at all and simply continued swinging back at me. Fatigue quickly set in as we barraged one another with punches, his fist slowly losing their weight. I let out a loud scream as I forged on for what seemed like an hour of hitting this wall of stony flesh, the man finally reeling back and falling to his knees laughing. He murmurs something. "What did you write?..." he struggles to get back to his feet, his limbs seeming to give out randomly, "you wrote something into your skin... that man did something akin to that, skipping the incantations for spells?" He slumps back into a sitting position. I lift my sleeves showing him the ancient runic writing on my wrist. Cleanse, dispel, around oneself, the words cut into my skin, the basic writings for esunaga. "I can't lift the control over you... why?" The spell was supposed to cleanse his aether from the body if he was truly undead. The man stretches and relaxes his shoulders, his bones and joints crack and loosen as he stands back up with renewed vigor. "I'm not under control child," he clenches his fist and wrings out his wrists, "I'm tempered, under the influence of another, you simply cleansed the layer of aether that suppressed the strength bestowed upon me." The yellow rings around his eyes flicker whips of amber and orange,

and the air around us gets warmer as he grabs his weapon. A low growl builds up in his chest as he screams at me, the image of a cloak of fire resting upon his back. The gold and brass jewelry glowing white hot, his weapon turning a bright red as he laughs, and he begins twirling the iron ball on his weapon around. "APOLDYON!!!"

# Part 4

The sound in my ears is gone, replaced by a deep humming sound, and a heavy feeling weighing down on my back and shoulders. I pull Grampa's broken sword from the ground beside me, it's so heavy even now, I can't imagine how heavy it was as its whole. I look over to the old man, still unconscious on the floor, and I begin inching towards Papa. I think of the memories of you that Gabriella shared with me, you seemed so... mean and uptight. Uncle Mont told me you were always grumpy and dissatisfied, Serenity told me you only loved Mama and what uses you could have for others, but why do you seem so content now, joyful even? I run in for the first exchange of blows, he's laughing as the sparks from our clashing swords scar and sear at our skin. I leap into the air and slam my blade down with all my strength, the weight of the weapon feeling like it could bury me into the ground. Papa initially tries to block my strike with one hand but pants with excitement as he's finally being pushed back. The humming returns, followed by a low rumbling coming from within; I look up to my father's eyes and there's now an image of a demonic mask covering his face. "Moooooorrrrrreeee..." the mask speaks, and the smile on Papa's face grows wider. He kicks the iron ball into my stomach and I feel it singe my skin, knocking me back to the ground. I look down at my stomach, there's no burn, but the mask on my father's face is still growling at me. The sound echoes and reverberates inside my head, "Accept me." A heat cramps and burns my insides, I feel as though I could just vomit, but a force drags me to pick up my weapon. My vision blurs and sharpens and a warm yellow hue covers my vision, my body loosens up and I instinctively lunge forward with weapon in hand. The affront my father's face is now gone, revealing a wide grin that sat beneath. Sparks splash against our skin as our weapons clash against each other, blades now burning white. After swinging back and forth for what feels like forever, my body suddenly stops moving on its own, my hearing flowing back to normal as the winds blow at the dried out, burnt grass. I look at my hands and they're shaking, my eyes trail from my wrist, down my blade until I see trails of ash falling from Papa's chest. He's still smiling, but now softly chuckling instead of cackling maniacally. "A child of mine born with the flame... our flame" Papa stutters forward, dropping to a knee. I'm confused, I thought the cleansing didn't work. I open my mouth to speak, nothing but a soft gasp leaves my lips. "The tempering kept my soul incorruptible, but when children of Apoldyon battle, the defeated loses their favor with the beast." Papa loosens up and sits down, parts of his shoulder and chin beginning to ash away. "Miltifan, your mother, comforted me as your elder sister was born..." a puff of ash falls from his mouth as he forcibly coughs out what he has to say, I clasp at the cracklings of ash falling from his face trying to keep him all together. "...she favored your mother so heavily I could not tell if I had helped bore a child or been a bystander, and she was so..." his voice trembles and his eyes dart to the ground as if he'd remembered something terrible. He lifts his remaining hand to his horn, gently cracking it off and placing it in my hand. He places his arm around my shoulder, his arm felt dense and weighty but grew lighter as more of his body ashed away. "We bore you and saw the fire in your eyes and I was finally content, but the man I was then saw a fate not fit for who you would become..." his other leg began falling apart, his face growing into a smile. "Armina, was a name intended for a warrior bride, I'd intended for you to rise to the top of the tribe and one of the brightest children of Apoldyon's flame. Your sister's body was weak, but her soul was unable to be tempered, even

forming a negative affinity to its influence.” His remaining arm goes limp, his shoulder and hand eroding away. “All ended as Miltifan intended... except...” his eyes darted to mines, flickering between gold and grey, “Where is the elezen that accompanied Lowain!?” Panic flashed across what remained of Papa’s body. Elezen... from Lowain? I explain as there was a duskwight before he’d been revived, and Papa’s crumbling face sagged into a scowl. “Where is he?” he grumbles attempting to get back to his feet, his remaining leg finally withers away and he falls to the ground. “Mont is a fake...” Mont? Uncle Mont? He’s been dead for years... Papa lifts his head, eyes finally flush with the familiar milky grey. He fights to move his mouth to speak, but even with me holding him together, he crumbles between my fingers. The world goes silent, all I can hear is my heartbeat echoing inside my body; I look at the shattered horn in one hand, and the ashen remains of my Papa in my other hand. A white loafer takes a step into my view, dispersing some of Papa’s remains; I shoot to my feet, look forward, and there he stands, the elezen from before...

# Part 5

My face is flushed by a wave of heat and rage, my answers... my childish answers, turned to dust. And now my time to grieve, cut short by the man responsible. I bottle up my frustration and ask the man before me a simple question:

“Why?”

A troubled expression stretches across the elezen man’s face, and he kneels down to look me in the eyes before chuckling.

“Usually when someone comes to me with a ‘why’ it’s in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding... but sometimes it’s just for comfort.”

I feel the anger start to pull at my brow, and I continue to try and recover my strength and keep this man talking. My eyes drop to the floor as I look at the ashes of Papa spread across the ground.

“You know the answer to your question,” the elezen replies, “you just don’t like the answer you’ve already known.”

He takes a cloth from his coat and wipes my face before placing it over the horn in my hand.

“I warned you and Eldeve when you started meddling in my research, and neither of you heeded my words. So you forced my hand to take action.”

“I’ll cut to the short of things, Eldeve is gone, I sent her on a detour at sea.”

My eyes widen, I’m trying to process what this man just said to me.

“Your fathers are gone, not even allowed their aether to return to said sea.”

My face goes numb, and I feel the adrenaline surging and bouncing through my veins.

“Your mother made an... unexpected exit. But dear Gabriella has shown much more potential for her namesake.”

My fists are clenched so tightly my nails began carving into my skin.

“—she’s even bore such interesting children!”

I lunge at the elezen without a second thought, but my fist collide with something hard. The dust slowly clears revealing magenta hair, golden eyes, and a pair of shaggy Viera ears; the man

flourishes an obsidian gunblade from the dust, lightly grunting as the blade rests upon his shoulder.

“Amida, named after a Hingan folktale, meaning ‘eater of dreams and nightmares.’” The elezen man scoffs as he adjust his collar, “I began my exploration of the unknown with a few dozen children, falling upon necromancy was the train of thought that stuck... but passing knowledge onto the future under ancient teachings was not the way...” he sifted his hand through Papa’s ashes pulling a golden ring and placing it on the viera man’s finger.

“The best way is... implanting them into the future generations, whether it be through absorbing a soul crystal or absorbing their aether directly,” he playfully flicks the ashes around while standing firmly behind the viera, “that is the only explanation for the unfortunate fate of those resurrected. The barring from the aetherial sea truly serves this purpose.”

I charge toward the viera man, but he effortlessly parries all of my strikes. His expression doesn’t change, only offering a sigh of disappointment.

“Dozens of children, fed numerous souls in hopes of proving my theory. And in this one child, I’ve made a perfect warrior, all he needs is some creativity...”

I fight back harder, switching between styles, and weapons, and magic; the viera becomes visibly annoyed, slamming his gunblade into the ground creating a cloud of dust and debris. I feel a hand grab my shirt, and then see a faint cloak of fire, and then my vision blurs. I look around and then down at my feet, I’ve been slashed and burned down my abdomen. I stammer and stifle the blood pooling in my mouth, I leap back taking another swing. He redirects my strike and I lose my balance, but before I can take a breath I’m struck with another barrage of blows. My body crumbles to the floor, too weak to hold up my head, but I see a glow before me, flames forming in the viera’s fingers... a rune scribbled across his wrist in blood.

My vision continues to blur, and the sound of a bell being struck rings in my head and another cloud of dust and ash kicks up into a frenzy. I feel a different arm wrap around me as the heat from the missed spell crackles past me. I grip Papa’s last remaining horn to my chest as I fade into unconsciousness.

Lore

# Boy with the Black Blade

The... girl... not dead.

Man in black said needs be dead to...

My head. Hurt in head. I see... girls... sisters.

“A—da”

Man in black needs sister baby.

Silver hair, stream walker. Demon love sister.

“-Mida-“

Hurt in head. HOT! ANGRY MANS IN HEAD!

“AMIDA!”

Man in black put rings on hand, voices stop.

Calm.

“Interesting, their soul crystals are melted into jewelry...”

Man in black pats hair, nice scratching.

“You have most of the soul crystals now, their aether should stabilize soon. We will see how you adjust before the next phase of the process.”

Man in black says long words. Makes me calm. Makes dreams go away.

I dream two Amida. One runs away.

Calm, head still hurting.

I dream angry fire men now...

# Beginning Again

Bubbling... bubbling...bubbling! My heart is beating in my head, and all I can remember is my own blood covering my eyes and filling my mouth... there was a man I was trying to save... what was his name? —did I save him!?

I can hear my heartbeat clearly, and I remember there was a girl who killed me. We were surrounded by people did no one intervene? Why did they have smiles on their faces? I saw two men behind me... I don't remember them but I know the looks they had on their faces was a rare sight... there was only one who fought for me, just like the last time. I just don't remember her face... was it red or grey?

What happened?! This bubbling in my chest, this numbness in my lips, the sharp stinging in my fingers as I remember digging into the aether that was me alive... Pain is the only certainty in my memory, a constant retelling of a tale of chanting and stabbing, or restricting me to a lab chair and needling my skin. I want to be stronger than this life, and I don't want anyone else to have to relive this pain. I don't want him to die.

I can only remember a village burning when I was younger, and a girl my age fought for me then. And then this pain that sent me here today, the woman who murdered me sadistically smiling and breathing on me as she tore through my body, I want to be stronger than her... I don't want her to kill anyone else like she did to me. I don't want anyone else to die. Wait... there she is...

A viera and an au ra lock eyes as they both float in an abyss of pitch black, their bodies being the only thing visible. They have matching wounds along their chest that don't bleed, but seemingly tether to one another as the skin of the wounds begin to close and mend themselves back together. The viera smiles and drops a sigh of relief as the wound disappears, the Au ri smiles back sympathetically. The viera's skin slowly loses its color, as dark circles splotch around his eyelids and his irises roll into the back of his head and come back a glowing shade of red.

The endless abyss begins to expand and fill with a sense of dread and hopelessness. The girl's skin curdles and boils from a pale grey into a sanguineous crimson, and a figure, somehow darker than the abyss around them, climbs into their view. With his features, sharp and pointed, a twisted smile of jagged teeth and a pair of bright yellow eyes, he spread his clawed wings and froze the pair in place.

"Live... Feed..." a voice whispers from the void below.

A massive reflection of the creature's jagged face painted the abyss around them. As black, coiled tendrils rose from the pitch black and pulled them away, and back into consciousness.

Star juttled up from a medical examination table, Armina and Soren were looking at the cluster of monitors connected to the equipment plugged in the viera's arms. His eyes darted around, first noting the various tubes pushing blood and a black liquid into his veins, then to Armina seemingly tampering with one of the vats of black liquid. His vision blurred and sharpened, and then the urge to give in to his impulse grew. He launched himself onto Armina, knocking away the knife she grabbed from the table, and taking hold of her neck. The Au ri girl was tackled to the ground, as Soren carefully shuffled over to the pair in protest.

"Control yourself boy!" The elezen proclaimed, flicking his wrist and launching a duo of undead towards Star. The undead Garlean soldiers struggled to force him to the ground, until another pair of soldiers were summoned. Armina grabbed the knife and cut into her palm, then proceeded to squeeze her hand over the vat of black liquid. Soren would fill a syringe with this solution and inject it into Star's temple, quickly calming him into an almost unresponsive state.

The viera opened his mouth to speak to Soren, only coughing and wheezing in place of actual words. His eyes confusedly opened wide as he continued wheezing in the elezen's direction. Soren places a hand on Star's shoulder.

"You've been pronounced dead for the better part of a moon cycle... your mind and body will need to relearn what you did before..." the elezen has a somber expression on his face as he continues explaining, "Rowan gave you an inhuman amount of blood transfusions to keep you alive, and with them you're now afflicted with her illnesses."

Star nodded, looking to Armina with a doubtful glare.

"She's assisting me with your supervision, as reconcile for her attempting to end your life."

Armina looks back at Star, noting the massive scar covering his chest, tosses the medical utensils she had onto the counter and walks to the door. Star softens his expression and forces a smile towards Armina, and it's met with a disgusted scowl as she turns to leave the room. Lowain, Gabriella, and Rowan are at the door, and the former shoos Armina back into the room as they walk in.

Rowan and Star's eyes light up at the sight of one another, but it is immediately overshadowed by the sibling animosity building directly beside them. Soren and Lowain roll their eyes at them before the miqote claps his hands loudly to get everyone's attention.

"Now that Remy is no longer deceased, the merger is complete..." Lowain exclaims, "now we can all be friends —err friendly..." He looks to Armina who's trying to distance herself from the group by standing near the door again.

"To commemorate this occasion, we're swapping students." Soren interjects.

"Gabbie and Rowan will be with me..." Lowain laughs, getting a similarly disappointed reaction from both Armina and Star, "and Soren will take you two."

“Bu— w—“ Star chokes out before beginning to wheeze again, Soren watches his movements carefully.

“Well... we agreed to split the sisters and the infected, being you and Rowan. And the way we've established training groups has always been a role based system, frontline/backline to simplify.” Lowain lectures, “Forcing one of our mages to play vanguard for the other will stunt their growth, as will allowing you and Gabriella to charge into tasks with reckless abandon. There's flaws in all of you and the merger was to show us those flaws firsthand.”

Gabriella raises her hand, and Lowain excitedly points to her.

“We didn't really fight much in the merger, how do you know what our weaknesses are?” she says motioning to herself and Rowan beside her.

“Rowan and Remy both definitely lack decisiveness...” the miqote chuckles “...their interactions with a particular Versi sister and numerous training regiments have made that quite apparent.”

“The two Versi sisters let their emotions get the better of them when a situation reaches its climax...” Soren interrupts, drawing opposite but negative responses from both Armina and Gabriella. “This was our reasoning for the pairings; Ms Armina will force Amara to keep pace and defend her when she makes a mistake, and Rowan will be forced to support Ms Gabriella and her lack of communication.”

Gabriella scoffs at the elezen, as he and Lowain at the sound of beeping coming from the PA system overhead.

Rowan shyly places a hand on Gabbie's shoulder, and gets no reaction, as the group seemingly scoff at one another and leave the room as well.

# Crusade (Current Timeline)

It's a quiet night on a small beachfront villa, the far east seas whispered and flowed just loud enough to be heard by those inside. A small brigade of lightly armed men gently open the gate to the front yard of the villa and knock on the heavy wooden door. A shorter elezen with an uneven shave and unkempt hair stepped to the front of the pack. He lights a small pipe and leans against the frame of the door until someone answers, a pale Miqote woman with crimson streaks in her raven black hair. She nervously covers herself with her robe and politely nods to the men. "C-can I help you?" she awkwardly yawns. The grungy man in front blows a cloud of smoke over her head into the house and pulls a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket, it is a silver haired Au Ra with heterochromatic eyes. "We're looking for this woman, she's contracted an aetherial disease, and may have given refuge to voidlings of some kind. Have you seen her?" he inquires. "It's n—... I haven't seen her around here." she replies as she shuffles into the yard. She locks the door behind her and steps into the pathway outside the villa. "Where have you seen her?" The woman looks out for any patrols, but the area is oddly unguarded. Men from the group chuckle and murmur amongst one another as the rugged man begins inspecting the miqote. He moves a lock of hair from her face as she tries to look down at the ground. "Pale skin, dark circles around the eyes, skin cold to the touch... and red irises?" he chuckles, and the men in the yard immediately stop their banter, "you didn't get scared when I showed you the picture of the woman—even though she does live here with you— but when I spout off what she was accused of, you go looking for the authorities. Or no..." He blows another cloud of smoke in her direction and she backs away. The men adjust their armor and check their weapons and slowly inch towards the girl. And she finally tosses her robe into the largest group of guards and strikes them with a lightning spell. The rugged man spins behind the gate as the rest of the other men get struck down. "I know the other spawn are in here too, it'd be pretty good idea to pay them a visit when I'm done here. Nip the problem before it starts and all that..." The miqote snaps around and burst back through the gate of the yard, stepping over the fallen men. She lunges at the rugged man and claws off some of his armor, he narrowly dodges and buries a small knife into her stomach. She scoffs and quickly overpowers the man, slamming him into the ground and nearly knocking him unconscious. The man weakly chuckles as he uses the last of his energy to motion more men into the yard. The miqote bounds over the fence back onto the pathway outside the villa as a chorus of armored footsteps sound off behind her. Her blood splatters across the sun bleached sand along the hingan beach. The miqote woman sprawls along the ground until she reaches one of the torches spread across the beachfront. She casts a quick healing spell on her wounds, but they coagulate and convulse as if rejecting the spell. A barrage of arrows scream past her, plunging into the sand. The girl noted a faint trail of faintly green liquid on the tips of the arrows before scrambling to the gazebo at the other end of the beach. A duet of assailants emerged from beneath the furniture with daggers dipped in the same fluid. She loses her balance upon dodging the flurry of slashes and she falls to the ground. Her fingers go numb as she flings blasts of aether at the melee assailants and rolls on her back. The bowmen finally reach the gazebo and draw more poison soaked blades. The miqote sighs in resignation as a sword descends upon her, but plunges into the tatami beside her. She looks up to see a viera digging a set of extended canines into the neck of one of the attackers. He

violently rips a chunk of his flesh before tossing him towards the other ambushers. “Star, what are you doing here!?” the miqote coughs. The viera drags her behind another set of furniture, he tries to cast a healing spell and like the miqote’s last attempt, her body seemingly rejects it. He dispatches another duet of men as they crash into the furniture around them, then the other assailants disperse. “W-what happened?!” Star stammers, making another futile attempt to heal the woman’s wound, “Rowan, tell me how to fix this!” She nods. “I don’t know...” she smears some of the liquid from her wound on her fingertips. “I’ll go get Gabbie!” Rowan grabs the viera’s wrist in protest and holds out her bloodied hand. “What does this smell like?!” Star confusedly sniffs the liquid and frowns. “I-I can’t smell it, actually, I can’t smell anything...” They both clutch at their head as if waking up from a bad hangover. “Then we need someone who can...”

Lore

# Crusade P2 (Current Timeline)

The duo finally stumble onto the pier of a small town in La Noscea and another girl is already waiting on them. Star dips his head down and looks away as he begins to make out her grumpy expression. She reaches out her hand and takes Rowan into her arms, making sure to dig a thumb into her wound.

“Nice to see you too —ouch!” Rowan tries to force out a giggle but winces in pain, “Did I come to the wrong doctor!?”

“Yes you did, your doctor in question happens to share parents with me and a love life with you...” the girl replies.

“Please don’t tell Gabriella about this cutie Be... they said something about going after the children, I need to get to the bottom of this before...” she strains, slumping over in pain.

Star scoffs and scoops Rowan off of her feet and up towards an apartment building at the top of the hill, the girl stomping closely behind him.

“Ummm m-ma’am, are you okay!?” the attendant panics seeing the trio enter the building, “d-do you need me to inform the Maelstrom guard on patrol!?”

“I’m treating her, I don’t know why you’re acting like this is the weirdest thing I’ve brought home Marianne...” the girl snaps, guiding her guest to her room.

“Is it something i-illegal again, Ms Aolani?”

“...I’ll tell you if it is.”

The girl mutters to herself as she anxiously sorts through the paperwork sprawled across the front desk, and the trio head up to the apartments.

Aolani and Star rest Rowan on a sofa in the corner, and Aolani swipes a swathe of blood from the wound with her hand and places it into a small bowl filled with white powder. The blood bubbles and separates slowly from the bright green liquid and both substances slowly separate into a collage of colors before sizzling into smoke. Aolani frowns, and turns to Rowan as she sits up.

“Take your shirt off.” she says.

“Why, you wanna see me naked you know you can just ask?” Rowan jokes, Aolani gives a blank expression and waves her hands at her until she complies. She examines her ribs and pokes deeply into her skin around the wound and along her chest.

“You have aetherial sickness... and the stuff in your wounds... is a very potent ether potion... but it shouldn’t be affecting your ability to process aether or heal yourself” Aolani says with a confused chuckle, “do you have a cold or something?”

Rowan nods her head in disapproval. Aolani looks around the room and looks to the stairs leading to the second floor of the room.

“Skyrr... are you... free?” Aolani asks, seemingly speaking to a ghost. Star and Rowan confusedly look at one another, until a rumble from beneath a set of stairs preceded an oily cloud swirling to her side. A skeletal voidsent formed behind her with a cold breath and placed a hand upon her shoulder. Star prepared to ready his gunblade and stood between the voidsent and Rowan, who simply shrunk into the couch holding her wound.

“He’s harmless,” Aolani echoed from behind her bar, “—he’s under contract so he can’t harm anyone I don’t.”

“I thought you said interactions with the void were too dangerous...?” Rowan coughed, with a troubled look on her face. Aolani placed a dusty tome on the top of the bar as well as a handful of white auricite crystals.

“Did I say that?... No... I think I said interactions with the void without research. I researched it, formed the contract, and then found the voidsent I knew I could trust —walking contradiction I know...”

“I pray you didn’t call on me to scare some of your guest?” The voidsent spoke in an eloquent tone, Aolani nodded in disagreement.

“I called you to ask a favor. I need you to siphon the aether from my friend so I can heal her.”

The voidsent fluttered around Aolani’s guests, phasing through Star’s body to get to Rowan.

“H-How much is he draining?” Star asks.

“Mmm... all of it?” Aolani says tilting her head.

“All of it.” Skyrr sighs.

He hovered over Rowan’s head and examined her from head to toe before reeling back. He swirled around Star once again before reeling back to Aolani’s side.

“You should have opened with the fact they were voidsent... or better yet, who they serve.”

“I don’t serve him!” Rowan snapped, “And Star is my childe, he doesn’t serve him either.”

“Too scared to mention his name? Really proves my point.” Skyrr taunts them as he swirls around the room again, stopping to examine the wound. He extends a claw, dipping it into the wound and examining the fluid. “I would absorb a thrall of Diabolos anytime, but this one, I cannot.”

“What’s the hold up?” Aolani sighs.

“The potion is too pure, I cannot devour it without bringing myself harm. It’s as close as one could get to absorbing aether directly from the sea.”

“Voidsent are constantly hungry, why does the purity have that effect?”

“Aether, in itself, is corrupted when outside of the aetherial sea. The process of consuming aether is one of assimilation, the more like the aetheric makeup, the greater the probability of assimilation.”

Rowan calms her nerves at the sound of Skyrr’s protest.

“That means we’re going with a less... insane plan now right?” Rowan says nodding to Star, who mirrors her expression. Aolani snorts, grabbing the auricite and eyeing Rowan’s skin as she pokes and prods it with the sharp end of the crystal.

“Same plan, different method.” she says, finally stabbing her with the crystal. It plunges into her chest and through her heart, but no blood flows from the wound, Star looks on with a panicked confusion. Aolani impales her with two more crystals before gently cradling Rowan’s head and pecking her on the forehead before impaling one last auricite into her skull, allowing her to finally take a breath of relief.

“Uhhh... Be?! You’ve lost me...” Star stammers, “Did you kill her!?”

“Of course, my original plan was for Skyrr to devour all but her head or her heart so she could still be revived...” she flourishes a large paintbrush and paints a golden hammer in the air, “he won’t do it, so I’ll just get creative... there’s only one spell I know that drains aether directly...”

Skyrr’s milky white eyes widen as he realizes what his contractor has done. He chuckles before slithering back to the spot from beneath the stairs once again. Aolani looks back at Rowan and pulls the auricite from her head, and her eyes slowly open. She brandishes the hammer and smiles.

“I realize I don’t need this part to bring you back, so this is for leaving my hermana so uninformed...” Aolani says, bringing the first strike down. The hammer grew as she lifted it back up, causing Rowan’s skin began to fade, she brought the hammer down again. Rowan tried to speak, only sputtering out a raspy murmur.

“D-on’t... tell... h-er any— thing... yet...” Rowan coughs, her skin growing faintly transparent. Aolani raises the hammer once more as it continues to grow in her hand.

“What’s the magic word?” she replies, but before Rowan can move her lips to respond, Aolani brings the hammer down one last time.

After calming down, Star creeps closer to the table where Rowan’s remains should be, but the only thing remaining is her torso addled with white auricite. He looks to Aolani as the hammer gurgles and melts back into a swirl of paint and aether in her hand.

“How are you gonna bring her back now?” Star asks.

“She just has to feed.”

“Without a head?”

“When’s the last time you fed?”

“I think we should be worrying about Rowan—”

Aolani grabs his chin, examining his face. The dark circles around his eyes are darker and more sunken than usual, his lips are scarred and his teeth are chipped. All indicators of an all familiar hunger. Star begins to redden as she lines her thumb along his lips.

“Both of you were weakened, Rowan’s playing house with Gabriella so her issue could be sleep deprivation, helping the babies feed, anything; what’s your excuse?”

He anxiously grabs at his neck.

“Just busy I guess...”

Aolani hooks her thumb along his fangs and opens a small cut, she smiles at him when he gulps loudly at the taste of fresh blood. He takes his fill and gently holds her hand to his chest.

“T-thank you...” he mumbles, wiping the blood from his chin “...now onto Rowan—”

“—oh, I had a reserve of blood packs hidden in case of emergencies, I was just gonna give her a few of those.” Aolani laughs, skipping behind the bar.

“Then why’d you feed me... I-like that!?” Star turns back to the table to hide the flood of red spreading along his face. Then Aolani begins opening a couple of blood packs, and gently removes the auricite one at a time, pouring blood into each hole left behind. Rowan’s skin bubbled and stretched as the fluid curdled into the wounds like water going down a drain, and slowly her limbs began to form. Her body slowly stopped regenerating as fast as it began.

“Woah... my ratios aren’t off, she’s really malnourished...” Aolani says, downing an ether potion of her own. She draws more blood from her finger and adds it to each of the packs as she continues pouring them onto Rowan’s body. Slowly, her body begins to fully form again, popping and plumping back into place. She coughs up a pool of blood as she regains consciousness, and frantically surveys the room.

“Hey you.” Aolani says, fondling Rowan’s freshly grown hair.

“H-Hey...” Rowan coughs, clearing the last bit of excess blood from her throat. She looks to Star, who is bashfully standing back in the corner. “What happened?”

“Nothing—“ he exclaims.

“You’re gonna hafta give your body a few hours to remember how to use your limbs... Star’ll carry you back to bed.” Aolani interrupts, lifting her from the couch and placing her on Star’s back. He turns to say something, but changes his mind, lightly nodding instead.

“Good night Be.” he smirks as he carries Rowan out of the door.

Lore

# Crusade 2.5

It's a few hours before sunrise near Rowan's home, Aolani and a pair of miqote men inspect the area leading to the front yard of the beach house.

"As much as I love answering your requests on a moments notice, would you mind telling us what we're actually looking for?" the smaller of the two men asks, he is an elderly man with swirls of gray and magenta in his hair. He surveys the steps, examining the stampede of footprints leading to the gate. A small insignia is cut into the center of each print, a cluster of three armaments over a shield. The larger of the two men looms over the old man's shoulder and grunts when he realizes neither of them are familiar with the symbol. They look back to Aolani, who is scooping the blood stained sand into a bag, walking back towards them.

"I don't know what I'm looking for yet, gramps." she says, venturing into the yard. She notices a number of cigar remains and a broken smoke pipe along the fence leading to the front door of the house. After smelling the contents of the pipe, she hands it to the larger miqote man, who brings it up to his nose and immediately winces.

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's t-too strong!" he violently coughs before stumbling to the bath on the side of the house and throwing water on his face.

"Is it not just mistletoe?"

"It's so... concentrated." he groans, handing the pipe to the old man who inhales it deeply.

"I don't smell any earth in these leaves, they must've grown it in a lab or tampered with it somehow." The old man mutters, lighting the pipe and beginning to smoke its contents.

Aolani ventures back to the gate and stumbles upon a small oil-slicked blade with the same green fluid dripping from the tip of the blade down to the hilt. She licks the liquid from the handle and frowns, tossing the blade to the side.

"It's just more ether potion... What are we missing?" she gripes.

"Nothing..." the old man scoffs, "the voidsent said the ether potion was too pure, our ingredients here are unnaturally rich. Only other question we can answer is if you know what this symbol represents?"

She looked at the footprints leading to the front door, then up to the stars.

“These aren’t swords, they’re spears... this is a mark for Halone?...”

“Meaning the mistletoe is probably Dravanian.”

“So that only cuts the suspects down to the numerous Halone worshippers across all of Ishgard... very specific.” the larger miqote sighs, rejoining them.

Aolani gathers their findings and throws them all into her bag while the two miqote cover the footprints in the yard. The larger miqote and Aolani stop in their tracks when a small yawn sounds before the light creaking of the front door.

A pale woman with silvery hair stands in the doorway, her skin glows with an ethereal sheen in the moonlight. She is holding a baby with red striped hair similar to Rowan’s, but skin resembling hers, all cradled in crimson-tinted ivory scales. The older man glances at the woman in the door and continues cleaning the evidence in the yard.

“G-Gabbie! I mean— I’d say the early bird gets the worm, but there’s no worms up this early...” Aolani stammers, discreetly closing her bag and slinging it over her shoulder, “did little Mina wake you?”

“No, I just felt like there was a cutie snooping in my yard...” Gabbie looked down around the yard ignoring Aolani and the larger guest for a moment to examine the older man, who is still paying her no mind, “it’s good to see you again too... old man.”

“Cute kid.” the old man grumbles, finishing his cleaning. He looks to the larger miqote, “We’re done here, we should get back home.”

The larger miqote nods in agreement and playfully ruffles Aolani’s hair, before the duo stumble from the yard, leaving the sisters alone.

“Did you two get into it or something?” Aolani asks, watching the old man being mocked by his partner as they left.

“I gave him a piece of my mind after realizing he was to blame for you performing a blood ritual on yourself...” she frowned, recalling a painful memory. “What’s in the bag?”

“Stuff for an ether potion.” Aolani shrugs, fumbling around in her bag.

“Rowan comes home in the middle of the night and is soundly asleep...at night, and then my sister arrives with two strange guests a few hours later... for ingredients? Pretty roundabout logic for something so easy for you...” Gabbie grows closer, “is there something you’re not telling me?”

Aolani places a hand upon Mina’s head, gently stroking her hair until the child sleepily grabs her hand and brings it to her face. The baby sniffs Aolani’s fingers curiously, and then tries to bite into her aunt with her budding fangs. She quickly tires herself out before fading back to sleep, and the sisters tenderly smile at each other. Aolani’s expression dulls, she tightens her belongings around her shoulder, and shuffles outside of the gate.

“Just tell Rowan to come find me when she wakes up. I don’t wanna keep you up and risk waking up the other little ones...”

Gabriella nods, smiling at her sister until she departs. She looks down at Mina’s face, noting a faint scent of mistletoe before heading back inside.

Lore

# Crusade 3

The sun rises on a small Dravanian village hidden in the trees as a band of worn men slug into a tavern. The rugged man in charge of the group slams a handful of gil on the bar, and the barkeep quickly snatches all the money and waves one of the servers back to the kitchen.

“Where don’t you have ashkin stationed, old man?” the rugged man sighs, leaning back on the barstool, “I thought you’d have more important matters to attend to than riding my ass for updates.”

The barkeep’s eyes glossed over into a milky grey hue, and a sophisticated accent coughed from his throat.

“Just making sure I get a return on my investment.”

The server returns with food for the group of men, but quickly turns timid upon seeing the barkeep’s condition and hurrying back to the kitchen. The rugged man and a couple of soldiers quickly down the drinks in their mugs.

“You said we just had to clear the household; a couple of dampir women and children and that’s it. Right?”

“That was the gist of it.”

“Well there was a viera male dampir there as well... and one of the scouts said a couple of miqote guys were snooping around after we cleared out!”

“A viera male you say? I’ll deal with him, the miqote men you’ll have to handle on your own if need be.”

The barkeep’s eyes deglaze and return to normal as he sluggishly returns to counting his gil.

Aolani and Rowan wander onto the grounds of a small house in the residential district of Ishgard. The former gently knocks on the door, and Star sleepily answers.

“H-Hey!” he exclaims, trying to tighten his robe, “What’d you figure out?”

Aolani shoves the pipe from her bag towards his nose. His nose shrivels up slightly upon smelling its contents, but otherwise is unfazed.

“Even yours is too diluted?” Aolani scoffs. She pulls a dagger from the bag and knicks Star’s finger, the wound bubbles for a few moments but eventually begins to heal on its own.

“You gonna take me to dinner before poisoning me?!”

“—If that’s your way of asking.” Aolani jokes. Star instantly regrets his comment and blushes.

“Very forthcoming you two, I’m so proud.” Rowan chimes in, Aolani immediately matches Star’s shade of red.

“—anyways, your blood is less voidsent than Rowan’s, so you and the kids are safe for the most part.”

“Great! But how do you know the kids are safe too?” Star inquires; Rowan rolls her eyes and crosses her arms at the question. And Aolani shrinks as she clears her throat to answer.

“I... fed... Mina some...” she whispered.

“—huh? Well, I’m glad we figured out the kids are safe!” he beams optimistically, “Now we just hafta make sure Rowan has some defense against it.”

Aolani turns red again and Rowan calms her frustration after hearing Star’s positive outlook on the situation and then they head inside.

They discuss the possibility of the larger Halone groups making such a direct attempt to hunt a voidsent, but can’t find any evidence that would make sense. Eventually, Rowan shoots up from her seat, anxiously scratching at her skin enough to draw blood. Star meets her at the corner of the room and comforts her, but the frustration has reached Aolani as well.

“I can’t just wait for them to attack us— attack me again.” Rowan sighs.

“I can start looking now...” Aolani says, looking at the map of Coerthas sprawled across the table, “Bun, you’ll just have to stick close to Rowan and Gabriella, in hopes they do get targeted again.”

“We’re not agreeing to let you look for a cult alone... again.” Rowan protests, Star nodding in support, “This time, we’re doing this together.”

A low growl and rubbery rip sounds as an inky tear in the space between them opens. A murky cloud oozes from the hole and swirls up Aolani’s leg and hovers over her shoulder.

“Still no plans of telling your spouse this time?” Skyrri taunts. Rowan frowns, but quickly loosens her look and tries to ignore his comments.

"I take it you have an idea of where to look?" she sighs as a sharp grin cuts across the voidsent's face.

"A question for a question... you first."

"She'll know as a last resort, we should be fine now that I'm healed." Rowan nods.

"You're the one in the most danger, should the weapons of your hunters find you... mmmm... there are some planted here in the residential areas, sprinkled throughout the city guard. And I believe they've formed a small supply camp in the frozen corners of Coerthas." Skyrr swirls around and settles next to Rowan, "That is assuming that we can trust that old man's senses."

"Oddly cautious for a voidsent, you're not like any I've encountered...most wouldn't voice any concern and would just let us walk into all forms of danger." Star inquires, "What's the long game for you?"

The voidsent smiles, making an X over his mouth with two of his claws.

"My lady has sworn me to an oath of secrecy whenever our agreement is a topic of conversation."

Aolani taps along one of Skyrr's claws, then he begins pulling open a tear in front of him and motions the group inside. The former casually disappears into the void, followed by Star who looks back to Rowan, and they nod to each other before anxiously inching inside.

At the same time, back in the Dravanian town, one of Rowan's assailants is violently slammed through some of the furnishings of the tavern. A pale skinned Viera with maroon hair came into view, urging the man on the ground to try and crawl for safety. His expression was that of true terror as he scanned the room to see a pair of his comrades eviscerated along the walls and floor of the bar. The rugged man nervously grabbed at his neck, and looked into his mug to avoid making eye contact with anyone else. The viera slowly plodded forward, brutalizing the man on the floor spawning a shower of blood and a chorus of screams. As the room grew silent, a well-dressed elezen man sauntered to the bar alongside the rugged man; the barkeep mindlessly slid a fresh cup of tea to him and shuffled from the room.

"I just came by to make sure we have this understanding..." the man says sipping his tea, "...what I'm busy with is truly none of your business."

He firmly places his hand on the back of the rugged man's neck, and the man nods.

"We have this u-understanding, tell me what our orders are..." his humbly sighs, collecting his things.

“I’ve changed my mind. We’re going to work together instead of trying to divide and conquer; we’ll take them out all at once.” the elezen snapped his finger and the viera stood at attention.  
“...Amida will deal with his brother, and we’ll take care of the voidsent, the diver, and their spawn.”

“And of the girl and the two miqote?”

“They’ll join the slaughter of their own accord...”