

An otherwise ordinary weekday was shattered by sirens. Years ago, once it was decided that the Endbringers wouldn't stop attacking, there was an international initiative to outfit every city of sufficient size with old-fashioned air raid sirens. Every now and again, and always after a public announcement of such, a test was performed and the sirens would run to ensure they were functional.

This wasn't one of those cases. The sirens ran for several seconds, cut off, and then blared again. Every single person held their breath and prayed. One continuous blast was a test. Two was an Endbringer attack. Three meant that it was coming to your home. The siren ran past five seconds without cutting out again. Endbringer attack, but at least it wasn't coming to Brockton Bay's shores.

As many people went home from their shopping or social visits, preparing to bunker down in case anyone decided to break the truce, Sophia Hess headed to the Rig. She lacked permission to travel and fight, but at least she could get marching orders to patrol and make sure everyone was working above-board.

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The Rig was abuzz with activity, a manic energy suffusing everyone present. One of the auditoria normally reserved for speeches to troopers had been repurposed as the deployment station for Brockton Bay's capes. All hands were on deck, every last Protectorate hero. Armsmaster, Assault, Battery, Miss Militia, Dauntless and Velocity were all equipped and ready. Lady Photon, Laserdream and Manpower from New Wave were present, as were the majority of Empire 88. Whether due to genuine misguided belief that they were in the right or simply a dedication to PR, the neo-nazi organization always showed up in force to every Endbringer battle. Fenja, Menja, Hookwolf, Victor, Othala and Kaiser were all present. A few more independent heroes and villains had showed up to add what little power they could offer: Chubster's bulbous form stood out the most, the overweight and armored Brute standing tall in his protective purple bodysuit and garish orange plating. As was expected, neither Squealer nor either of the ABB's capes had volunteered to join the battle.

In the background, troopers jogged around to ferry equipment and herd personnel, and the occasional Ward in some level of costume could be seen being jostled somewhere or other. Conversations buzzed back and forth, heroes and villains taking the opportunity to banter with people they'd otherwise be obligated to fight. All conversation died out when Armsmaster stepped forward to speak, and then one more figure slunk into the open hall that was serving as staging ground.

Tall and lithe, clad in familiar yet markedly different garb, the figure wore a well-used top hat and a pale cloth face covering that was decorated with several chains, unfamiliar charms and precious gems dangling from the delicate links. The enormous and ragged coat had been exchanged for something more sleek, still a durable leather overcoat but with less extraneous mass. A pair of silvery spun-wire spectacles framed hazel eyes shaped like an octopus'. On her back was an enormous sword, beneath that at the small of her back was a compact cannon. At her left hip hung her trademark pistol and a sheathed, curved blade.

Bloodmoon had arrived. The killer cape went to speak, then cleared her throat. A deep, authoritative and feminine voice rose from behind the face covering. "I trust there's still time to sign up for the fight?"

Hookwolf was the first to respond, his tone both incredulous and disparaging. He had to be the one to speak up: his reputation as a brute in every sense of the word afforded him a bit more social leeway,

and one of the Empire would have to question the woman's presence so soon after her murder of Crusader. "You're here to deal with the feathery bitch? What assurance do we have you won't just turn around and start killing the rest of us?"

Those unnatural eyes locked onto his through his mask and Bradley Meadows, Hookwolf, felt something he'd not felt in a long time. This woman, Bloodmoon as the PRT called her, would kill him without hesitation. But she wasn't striking. She did not fear him, did not see him even as any real threat. If she was staying her hand, she had a reason. Despite the pang of fear, he relaxed. This was a killer with an agenda, and he wasn't on her list today.

"You aren't my prey today," she replied simply. "Don't bare your teeth and I won't strike you down."

There was no way to quickly, concisely and privately share what he had learned, so Hookwolf could only hope that his dismissive shrug and statement of, "Good enough for me" would pre-empt any further posturing.

"We have no more time to talk," Armsmaster declared, his voice loud and sharp to cut off any further conversation or posturing. "Our advance-warning system, thankfully, is best at noticing the Simurgh's movements. She is descending toward Australia, likely the city of Canberra. We have more time to act than normal, as Rocketman's 'SSM' arsenal is currently targeting her. Dragon estimates that her arrival time will be delayed by at least a minute, possibly more. Strider is picking up cadres of parahumans for deployment. Take an armband-" He gestured to the troopers passing out the bands, "and keep in mind that you need to keep exposure to a minimum. If you've been within her scream's aura for too long, you are most likely a Simurgh bomb."

Bloodmoon sidled over to Assault and Battery. "How do I activate this thing?" she asked, securing the band around her arm with nary a protest or question." Assault showed her, which led to the oddly amusing reaction of "Wait, you're calling me Bloodmoon?" Still, the woman shrugged her shoulders and soldiered on.

There was no preamble when Strider appeared aboard the Rig. He strode, businesslike, to the center of the gathering point. "Everyone get close and I'll take us to Canberra. No stragglers, no dragging your feet. Here, now, we're leaving in five seconds."

With the Simurgh's descent delayed by any amount due to Rocketman's Surface-to-Simurgh missile launchers, there was even more hurry than normal: there was a chance, however slim, that they could defeat the evil angel before she could infect the people's minds. In every veteran's heart burned a new flame of hope: maybe this time, they wouldn't have to quarantine an entire city.

Strider shuddered at Bloodmoon's proximity, something about the killer cape rubbing him the wrong way in a manner more fundamental than just distaste for a murderer. Despite that, the teleportation was one of the smoothest that day. Strider prided himself on his power, being likely the most powerful and helpful teleporter in history, but it still took a toll on him. This jump, from Brockton Bay to the staging ground outside Canberra, felt like stepping calmly through cold mist.

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The group's ears were assaulted by the clamor of explosions and a seamless flow of profanity. In the sky above them, the Simurgh continued to descend, juking around numerous missiles that looped back

around to chase her. She had long since given up redirecting them, as to counter the strange repulsion fields that caused her telekinesis to go haywire would be ratcheting up too much. So instead she ran, dodging as she drew ever closer to her goal. Clever maneuvering brought the missiles to impact each other, but even then the explosions left her blown off-course from the sheer yield of the detonations. On the ground, a parahuman dressed very much like a rocket – complete with angled air fins – continued a rant about what he would do with the Simurgh’s mother, a Tasmanian devil, and a half-tub of Crisco.

Brockton Bay’s parahuman reinforcements spread out to begin planning. Bloodmoon trotted off by herself, crouching down and seeming to fondle at something nobody else could see.

In the distance, reality warped as Monorail’s VW van appeared. Capes piled out like from a clown car. Other foreign parahumans filtered in through Locomotor’s teleportation portal. The Spanish Tinker charged an arm and a leg for the technology and its maintenance, but it was well worth it for instantaneous delivery of defenders even if the energy cost was nearly prohibitive.

Legend’s recognizable voice came through clearly on everyone’s armbands. “Normally I’d give an inspirational speech and tell you to steel yourselves for what’s to come. But this time we have the time advantage. So I’ll keep this short: let’s not lose a city! Let this be the turn of the tide, as we beat back the apocalypse!”

As veteran capes began to give orders, the Simurgh finally reached her target above the Australian Academy of Science. The roof of the main building sheared off and was hurled above to intercept the last of Rocketman’s missiles.

Rapidly crossing the gap between the heroes and the Endbringer was a single figure. Bloodmoon drew the greatsword from her back, running a hand across the flat of the matte blade. Before, the weapon was a depressingly dark gray that appeared crudely carved from a single hunk of metal, sculpted rather than forged. Now, as her hand passed over it, the tarnished blade broadened into a beautifully-forged greatsword: the cutting edge glowed an unearthly green. She swung horizontally, well before any real distance had been closed, and a massive crescent of energy lashed out. The Simurgh was forced to juke back skyward and let the arc pass beneath her.

Then Bloodmoon leapt.

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Legend was talking. One of the world’s greatest heroes, with the kind of presence that the best orators and actors dream of having, and I didn’t hear a word of it. My eyes were locked on my enemy, my target, my prey. Everything else was just noise to my ears, the braying of bestial Yharnamites for as much as I paid attention. The moment the evil angel went into a proper dive, once I was sure of her target, I was moving. Thankfully I’d managed to find a lantern, or the little ones had cheated and brought one with, so I could fight with impunity.

I drew the sword, remembering how we had danced. “Ludwig, lend me your conviction. Mom... Mother... Be my guiding moonlight today. I’ll make you proud.”

Perhaps it was that my power had grown, perhaps it was that I’d earned some esoteric approval. Either way, a massive arc of light left the sword as I swung. I could feel the raw power sizzle in the air, and

apparently the Simurgh did as well, as she launched herself upward to dodge the crescent. I could feel her discordant song in the back of my mind. I bludgeoned it with my own memories of the winter lanterns' tuneless singing. *I have suffered far worse madness, monster. You will find my mind no playground.*

The ground cratered as I kicked off with all of my force. I hurtled through the air at the Simurgh, who casually waved a hand to catch me in her telekinesis. This was where my theory would be put to the test. I felt her etheric grip on me, then it slid off like I was coated in teflon! With all of my souvenirs from Yharnam, the alien blood running through my veins, I barely counted as being of this world. So temporal a method of control couldn't touch me.

The Simurgh was infamous for perpetually wearing that neutral expression, floating like an untouchable archangel. So I was particularly gratified when her brows furrowed in consternation, just before I swung the Holy Moonlight. I brought it down in an overhead slice, the blade carving into the outermost layer of the Simurgh's armor before the arc of energy followed up, exploding into her and flinging us both away.

Every bestial instinct told me to capitalize on the reeling monster, leap up and continue the assault. But I'd only have so long before she took me seriously and I needed to make use of the time I had. Landing on the science building's roof, I sheathed my sword and moved my hands to my sides, palms facing forward. "We call the watchers to turn their gaze upon us..." My arms smoothly both rose like a jumping-jack. "Feel our sorrow," I crossed my wrists, clenching my fists and my teeth. "And weep with us!"

Five stars, angry and sorrowful eyes of some forgotten deity, materialized before me and went streaking into the Simurgh. She tore up another chunk of building to block them. The first star impacted, and the debris she was using became nothing but dust. She twisted to dodge another, which would arc to detonate somewhere in the distance, bringing down a city block. I hoped nobody was still in there. The remaining three found their mark, briefly creating the effect of a colossal flashbulb and knocking the Simurgh from the sky. She hit the ground hard, already moving, but I was on her.

The Holy Moonlight came down again and again, each strike punctuated by a blast of energy, each one knocking us apart only for me to close the distance. I knew I didn't have long. I'd gambled this far on being functionally an outsider, something not part of the angel's precognitive predictions. Thus far that was holding, but this was still a world-killing monster. It wouldn't just take the beating, and I could imagine that every hit was feeding into some psychic algorithm the monster was building to model me.

I leapt again, bringing the greatsword down in another catastrophic arc, when the weapon halted in midair. My hunter's stoicism actually broke as a shocked "What-?" escaped my lips. The Simurgh favored me with a cruel smile as she clearly held the Holy Moonlight in place via her telekinesis – something I had believed impossible due to her inability to grab me earlier! I hung in the air, gripping the handle, watching the blade crack under the pressure of her psychic grip.

One-handing the sword, I grabbed my cannon from the small of my back and unloaded a surprise shot into the Simurgh's face. At the very least it wiped off her smile.

The Holy Moonlight shattered. The shards spun in the air and then drove into me, forcing me earthward even more quickly than through gravity itself, as they ripped me apart. I took one more potshot with the cannon.

*Bloodmoon deceased, GO-7.*

*Bloodmoon active, HO-4,* my armband spoke in Dragon's pleasant tone as I stepped back into reality beside the lantern.

"Alright then," I said flatly, fingering the hilt of the Chikage.