

## Interlude 7.b: Blood of the Crusade

No matter who you were, it was something that had to stick with you.

There was no way you could forget it after having seen it. No way the memory could fade into obscurity, no way it could ever be less vivid than it was the first time you saw it. It was simply that memorable.

Even a week later, she could still picture it as clear as day. Whenever she closed her eyes, that scene played back, moment for moment, beat for beat, like it was seared onto the back of her eyelids or the surface of her brain. As though it were some sort of snapshot, captured in ink and memorialized in stone, every detail remained in sharp relief.

She could remember the feel of her cloak about her shoulders, soaked and five pounds heavier than it was when she put it on.

She could remember how her clothes had clung to her, wet with the rain and with the salty seawater of Leviathan's waves, sticking to her chest and her thighs and her arms.

She could remember her hair, glued to her face, her mask, clogged with a thin layer of water that made it shift and chafe against her skin.

She could remember the throbbing of her foot, from where she'd landed on it wrong and twisted her ankle during the fighting.

And it all paled in comparison to the memory of that brilliant golden light that stretched towards the sky and pierced the heavens, of the beautiful sword that the newbie hero, Apocrypha, had held in her hands and lifted upwards like a promise, like an oath, like a vow —

*I am the guardian that protects this city. I am the bulwark against which evil crashes and fails. I am the light that shines out in the dark and dares to shout my defiance.*

*I am Hope.*

*And I cast you out.*

Hope. Except... What even *was* hope?

She thought she'd known before. Hope — a belief in a world where she and her kind didn't have to bow and scrape for everything, a world where the niggers and the chinks and spics knew their places and the Jews weren't constantly sabotaging them. A world where the white man was on top, as she'd been taught all her life he should be.

But... was that hope? A world where she and the rest of the Empire had carved out a slice that was less bad than the rest? A world where all the other races and all the other people could suffer as badly as possible, as long as the whites suffered less?

She'd thought it was. She'd been raised to believe it was.

And it was all a lie.

Her parents hadn't been raising a visionary to take on the injustices of the world, to *hope* for a better future, they'd raised a *warrior*, a soldier in the Empire's army. What they'd birthed her into wasn't *hope*, it was *rage*. The impotent rage of the working white, feeling trod upon and persecuted, told that the things standing between her and a world where she could be all she could ever want to be were the blacks and the Jews and all the trash that was taking power and prosperity from her and her kind.

No, she'd come to realize. She'd never known what hope was. She'd never experienced something so pure and beautiful. She'd never believed in a better future, where people could be decent to each other, where everyone could live happily, where there were no Endbringers, no wars, no villains, no inequality, no injustice, a future where there was no *need* for crusaders like her and the rest of the Empire.

It wasn't that she'd lost hope. It was that she'd never had it to begin with, because she'd never actually known what it was. She'd been too steeped in rage for her entire life, and when her parents had tried to pull her out of it, she'd stewed in it for too long to just go along with it. That was why she'd run away — she'd thought that her parents had forgotten the future they'd been teaching her to fight for.

And then she saw that light.

She had felt so small, witnessing it the first time. Unimportant. Alienated, like she didn't belong. For a single instant, she'd been back in juvie, completely and utterly alone, staring that bitch in the face and realizing that there was no way out, no one to pull her from the fire, no one to support her, no one who thought like her and believed the things she did —

For a second, her mind had blanked and her legs had gone out and she'd fallen to her knees, helpless and small and powerless.

And she suddenly understood: this was hope. Yeah, it had to be, couldn't have been anything else. Hope of a better future. Hope that a world could be built where things weren't just less bad, but actually *good*. Hope for a world that could have been, but for all the injustices and the evils that plagued it now.

Hope. Ah, how wonderful it was, to have a vision to strive for, rather than just things to fight against. So, this was what hope tasted like.

It was so beautiful.

Then, the shame had come. Shame and guilt and understanding.

Because that light, that beautiful, golden light, was the light of salvation, the light of *hope*. Not in the religious sense, like those nuts from Haven and the crazies who thought their powers came from God with a capital G, but in the heroic sense.

Salvation, for everyone. A light that glorified justice and righteousness, of sacrificing yourself for the greater good, of fighting the good fight.

And Rune could no longer think she was.

That golden light had stripped her bare of her excuses and justifications. It had seared away all of the rationalizations she'd used — that she'd been *taught* from as early as she could remember — for why the Empire was good and the PRT and Protectorate were traitors to the cause of protecting good, white Americans from the niggers and the chinks and the spics.

It was all a lie. Every bit of it. Her parents had lied to her, her family had lied to her, the Empire had lied to her, and she'd let them, she'd believed them. They weren't heroes, doing what the Protectorate wouldn't. They weren't the protectors of the white Americans, who were disenfranchised and down on their luck because of the race traitor Jews running the government and the niggers running drugs and the chinks kidnapping innocent women for their brothels. They weren't good guys.

They were villains, just like everyone else said.

They *weren't* any better than the ABB or the Merchants. They were just another flavor of bad, another kind of evil. Maybe the Empire wasn't quite as horrible as the other gangs, but that didn't make them less villainous. It just made them another brand of evil.

Because heroism didn't see color. It didn't see greater people or lesser people. It didn't choose to protect people or save people or whether or not people *deserved* to be saved. It saved everyone. White, black, yellow, brown — everyone, no matter whether they were worthy of being saved or not.

She wasn't. She realized that keenly, now, with the precision and sharpness of a razor biting into her flesh. She and the Empire, they weren't worthy of being saved. They were trash, fit only to be disposed of.

Just like the ABB, with their protection rackets, their casinos, and their brothels filled with kidnapped girls stolen from off the streets.

Just like the Merchants, with their drugs, their general vileness, and their preying on the downtrodden and unfortunate.

The Empire, with their racism, their supremacy, and their casual murder of everything that wasn't lily white, was no cleaner and no purer. They were equally as vile, equally as dirty, only they hid it by claiming it was in service to a higher calling.

She didn't know how she hadn't seen it before. How toxic and twisted the rhetoric was. How it degraded both the people who bought into it and the people it was spoken against. How it could make you believe in things that didn't make any sense when held up to the light.

Heroism didn't see color. It didn't see race or creed or gender or even sexuality. Everyone was equally deserving of salvation.

In other words, no one was.

But the gangs, they were the least deserving of all.

Those thoughts stayed with her for the week following Leviathan's defeat. No, calling it a *death* was better. Those thoughts stayed with her for the week following Leviathan's *death*. She watched from the sidelines the first few days of celebration, and then the slog of work as reality came back to Brockton Bay and the people who had survived, who had *weathered the storm*, began the arduous task of rebuilding.

She didn't understand how all of it worked, but the majority of the people had been forced into tents in vacant lots and on the outskirts of the city while they waited for the flooding to subside. She didn't think there was too much damage otherwise — Leviathan hadn't managed to do much more than superficial damage, even to the buildings he *had* hit — but what did she know? She wasn't a fucking architect or whatever.

It rankled, the waiting. There was an energy in her now, a fire burning in her gut that urged her to *move*, to *act*, to stop thinking about what needed to be done and actually *do* it.

But the utilities were mostly down, so there wasn't any internet to search for what she needed. Her cellphone was waterlogged — useless, in other words — and somehow or another, she'd wound up in a separate camp from the rest of the Empire.

She couldn't do anything but wait. For...what? For an opportunity, a chance to act, a moment to put plans into action.

Three days in, she got impatient and wandered off, giving the PRT troopers helping to run the shelter the slip and thinking to find the others at one of Hookwolf's dog pits. It was a longshot, but it was the best idea she had.

She never even got through the front door.

Being chased away by a pair of dogs the size of Volkswagens was a pretty fucking clear message about who was running the place now. Maybe later, she'd go back and rip them apart, take down the Undersiders and their pet dogs, but she had bigger fish to fry before she started going after the small-timers.

Days more passed. Every day, whenever she got the chance and saw an opening, she slipped out under the noses of the guys in charge and went looking. She tried looking at all of the usual haunts, all of the places where they used to have rallies, all of Hookwolf's fighting rings, and even Victor and Othala's apartment.

But there was nothing. All of the dogs that had been left behind had gotten out, somehow — probably been let out by Bitch or Hellhound or whatever the hell her name was — and the places were trashed. More than usual, anyway. The places where they had rallies — old civic centers that had been closed down and warehouses that no one used anymore — were equally abandoned and waterlogged, without any sign of the Empire's presence.

Even Victor and Othala's apartment looked like no one had been there for days. Probably not since Leviathan had come, in fact.

She could freely admit it made her antsy. Impatient. Every day that she went looking and found nothing felt like a waste of time, like she was just spinning her fucking wheels.

When she got back to the shelter, though, a week to the day after Leviathan had been killed, and slipped back inside, there was someone new waiting, standing on the outskirts and apart from everyone else. He wore a jacket, with a tattoo peeking out from under his collar and the edges of his sleeves, and his short-cropped hair had been bleached blond. He took slow drags from a cigarette, eyes sliding back and forth through the crowd.

She recognized him.

A surge of fire pooled in her belly and her heart started to pound. Heat flooded her head, gathering in her cheeks and behind her ears, and a kind of giddy excitement tried to pull her lips upwards into a grin, but she managed to push it down into a tiny smirk.

Because he was Empire.

Fucking A.

All of that searching, all of that time spent trying to find the Empire by searching out all of their usual places, and now here they were, coming directly to her. Rune didn't really believe in God, but if this was supposed to be a sign or something, then it didn't get clearer than this.

Rune approached him surreptitiously, making sure to maneuver on the edges of the shelter's main camp. She was careful not to draw attention, to stop and start so it looked natural as she stalked her way over. Didn't want to spook him or anything, after all. Make it *too* obvious to whoever might be watching.

When she was close enough, she gave him a quiet, "Hey."

He took a puff of his cigarette and glanced at her. "Hey."

"Billy, right?" she asked, struggling to keep her smile down.

"Yeah." He took another slow drag, blew out a cloud of smoke. If she wasn't so used to it from Hookwolf and his addiction to cigars, she might have been disgusted by the acrid smell. "Katrina, right? Katrina Herren?"

She swallowed against the sudden sour taste in her mouth. God, how she hated that name.

"Yeah, that's me."

He nodded, then switched his cigarette to his other hand and offered it to shake. She realized the ploy an instant later and reached out to take it. They performed a lazy, half-hearted handshake, nothing more than a couple of languid jerks.

"Good to see you," he said, pulling his hand back. Rune did the same, slipping the folded piece of paper into her pocket.

"Yeah. You, too."

He took another drag of his cigarette, probably trying to look casual so no one suspected. Every couple of seconds, he glanced over her shoulder — probably at the PRT troopers patrolling and organizing everything. It took every ounce of her self-control not to look back whenever he did.

“Mutual friend of ours sent me to find you,” he told her casually. “Tell you about the meeting, wanted to make sure you could attend.”

She licked her lips. Jackpot.

“Meeting?”

His nod was a single downward jerk of his head. “Everyone we’ve got left is supposed to be there.”

Meaning the entirety of the gang, except for Krieg and his group. Well, probably. Who knew — Krieg and the others might have decided to rejoin after Leviathan had finished trying to knock everybody’s shit in. One of the twins had died, after all.

“Who’s setting everything up?”

“The boss.” He curved one of his fingers in the shape of a hook and swung it with a roll of his wrist.

Hookwolf, he meant. So Krieg probably *wasn’t* going to be there. Krieg, Night, Fog, and Crusader. She’d have to go out and find them on her own time, in that case. *That* was going to be a pain in the ass.

Still. The bulk of the Empire was going to be in one place, and it was gonna put her back into the loop. That was a decent first step. If she had to track down Krieg and his group later on, then she’d just figure things out then.

“And everyone’s gonna be there?” she asked. “The doc?” Othala? “Teach?” Victor?

“Everyone,” Billy confirmed.

This time, she let herself grin. “Awesome.”

“Yeah.” He smothered his cigarette against the outside of a nearby trash can, then dropped the crumpled butt inside of it. “Listen, I gotta head out. Got a few other places to be, gotta report back to the guys up top. You’re in, right? I can tell them you’ll be there?”

“Of course I am.”

She’d have to be an idiot to pass up a chance like this.

He nodded again. “Alright. We’ll meet up at the place I told you about,” and here, he vaguely mimed the handshake they’d had earlier, “and then we’ll head out to meet up with the rest of the group.”

“Sure.”

She tried to keep the excitement out of her voice, but, well, if he heard it anyway, then it didn't matter too much, did it? He'd just think she was excited about getting back together with the rest of the Empire. It was even true, in a way.

"Tomorrow night, midnight. You gonna have any trouble sneaking out?"

She snorted. "Fuck, no. The security around this camp has more holes than Swiss cheese. I've been sneaking in and out of this place for *days*."

His lips twitched into a brief grin and he gave her another nod. "Don't be late," he warned.

"I won't," she promised.

She wouldn't miss this for the world.

Billy flashed her a smile, and then he turned and left, slipping out of the camp. She watched him go, heart pounding excitedly in her chest.

The next day, in the morning, when security was at its most lax, she snuck out of the camp and into town.

It looked like shit.

Most of the flood waters had receded, but enough remained that her shoes were waterlogged almost immediately. There were marks on every building that showed exactly how deep underwater each of them had been, and on some of the buildings, especially those closer to the Docks, those marks even reached above her head.

On top of that, there were several prominent office buildings that had shattered windows all throughout, and several more that were missing huge chunks from where Leviathan had carved it away just by bumping into it. Further out, there were some buildings that had actually collapsed outright, swept away by Leviathan's waves, even though he hadn't had the chance to bring all that many in.

That was fine, Rune decided as she passed them. At least now the city actually looked on the outside what it was in reality: a festering pit, broken and dying. The facade of respectability, the veneer of righteousness, had been stripped away.

She made it to her hidey hole without trouble and retrieved the costume she'd hidden there. It'd had plenty of time to dry out since Leviathan, but when she sniffed it, it still smelled — of salt and brine and seawater, with an underlying tinge of something altogether more disgusting, along with the wet scent of mildew.

That was fine, too, she thought. She was going to have to clean it later anyway, so it was probably better that it was already in need of one. No point in getting it scrubbed and washed when it was just going to be dirty later on today.

It was missing something now, though. Something that represented the change in her, the change in her understanding of herself and the Empire. She wasn't Rune anymore, or at least, she wasn't the *same* Rune she'd been when she had last put this costume on.

On the way back, she snuck into an arts and crafts store and stole a ream of golden fabric. The actual change would have to wait until later, when she had the time to cut out a pattern and sew it into her cloak, but she stuffed the sheet of silk into her backpack and took it with her.

Later that night, when it had gotten dark and the guard shifts were in the middle of changing, she snuck out again and found an abandoned alleyway to change into her costume. When she was done, she levitated her backpack up and hid it on the roof, out of the way, where she could come back for it later on.

Then, she went to the meeting place, and in the shadow of the collapsed Medhall building, she found a group of people waiting for her. Billy was there, smoking a cigarette again, and although some of the others startled when they saw her and realized who she was, he didn't look at all surprised to see her.

Hookwolf or whoever had sent him to find her had probably told him who she was. Not that it really mattered, in the end.

"You ready?" Billy asked.

She smiled beneath her mask.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm ready."