

Things had been quiet recently. Well, not in general, but definitely quieter than usual for the Archer's Bridge Merchants. With that new cape hitting both the Empire and ABB, the other gangs were scrambling to balance their plans. E88 had lost a significant source of weaponry (and it sent a little shiver down Joaquin's spine just what they'd been planning to do with so many Aks) while the ABB had lost a handoff point for their ranches along with at least one still-living girl, at least if PHO was to be believed.

And this was why Joaquin was standing guard duty at a street corner, trying to pretend that he didn't have a kludged-together automatic carbine hidden in his puffy jacket, rather than hiding deeper inside the alleys near where the product was being distributed. Skidmark wanted as much advance warning as he could get if "Chopper" showed up to go three for three on Bay gangs. People had tried to tell him that the PRT were already billing the lethal vigilante as Bloodmoon, but Skids either didn't care or was too busy to pay attention. Skidmark was an exceptional multitasker but paid little attention to whatever his brain considered extraneous information, and something as simple as a name through which they could have a common identifier of a mass-murdering parahuman wasn't something Skids considered overly important.

Inside the warehouse deeper in the district, various drugs – mostly meth and heroin, but also significant amounts of cocaine and weed – were being divvied up for distribution on some of Squealer's newest experiments. From what Joaquin had heard higher-ups saying, this was another step on her quest to make a completely invisible car: the vans each had some sort of device that didn't make them invisible so much as made observers either not care or forget about their presence. The exact specifications eluded him as much as it did the lieutenants (and privately, he suspected they escaped Squealer just as much), but they didn't have much battery so the drivers were expected to drive as quickly and carefully as possible once the switch was flipped. It was one of the most organized operations the Merchants had undertaken in recent memory, and Joaquin wasn't certain if this was a good thing or a bad thing.

On Skidmark's orders they were distributing to more boltholes and keeping a smaller stash at each one just in case "Chopper" came knocking. He couldn't do nearly as much damage if there were only a handful of people and a few thousand dollars of product at any given location. Of course that necessitated this one big operation to move everything, when more Merchants were in one place than had been in almost a year.

Joaquin was a Merchant not out of any real loyalty but because he was another drugged-up washout who dropped out of school and decided life would be easier if he just hurt people to get what he wanted. Of course, in Brockton Bay, if you weren't white or Asian (and even if you were, if you weren't a supremacist bigot) then you were pretty SOL in terms of gangs. Joaquin had no real love for the Merchants and while some of the ground-level people he considered friends he had no such connections to even the lieutenants let alone the capes running the show.

So when the screaming and explosions started, he called the PRT to report a cape attack and went home rather than risk his life for drugs and people who didn't care about him and vice versa.

(BREAK)

"Alright cumstains, get this powder mobile! I want these vans loaded faster 'n it takes me to fuck your grandma!" Skidmark always did have a way with words. This was the big move, distributing the vast majority of their product before they began setting up proper small-scale distribution channels. Until the killer-cape situation was resolved, any large gathering of gang members ran the risk of drawing his

attention and losing their product. He spared no thought for the people who would lose their lives as well: they didn't matter.

The Merchants behaved in a manner as if they were almost proud of their sleaziness. They reveled in debauchery and monstrosity that made both sex slavers and neo-Nazis recoil and cringe. Whether it was in forcibly addicting children from middle-class or well-to-do families, or even just kids with a reputation for being well-behaved and trying to work their way out of the ghetto; taking their own sex slaves that they took their turns abusing between renting them out to johns; or arranging hobo fights to the death and charging for entry, the Merchants seemed to understand that their existence was tied to the Bay doing poorly. And so, like any parasite, they worked to keep the Bay in decline and strife whether knowingly or acting purely on instinct.

A strange noise came from the warehouse's sliding door at the front. It was locked from the outside, a massive padlock on the hasp to be easily seen from a distance and trick the casual onlooker into believing nobody was home. Skidmark's head whipped around and he jerkily snapped several times in quick succession, cutting his thumb on his jagged fingernails. "Somebody check that shit out. I'm fuckin' busy."

Shotgun at the ready, one of the Merchants grabbed the handle and gave a sharp tug. The door didn't budge. He shrugged, turning back. Whatever it was, the door was still locked so it was probably best not to draw attention by going out and looking around.

Then the door slid open, Bloodmoon dropping the mangled padlock from her hand as the slim cape stepped inside. She reared back and planted a forceful kick on the small of the man's back, folding him like a jackknife and sending him flying inward to crash into several of his compatriots. The confused and frightened shouting gave her time to advance. Moving with alacrity to match or exceed the greatest natural sprinters, she closed the distance and drew her weapons.

The Merchants were a known entity. They occasionally had more than three capes, but their current leadership had been in place for several years now and all three survived where others died or were captured. Squealer was a Tinker who built shoddy, massive devices that could vaguely be called cars: typically focused on size and durability, they often broke down but were terrifyingly effective when functional. Skidmark was a Shaker whose power was initially weak, the ability to lay down a directional field that acted almost like a treadmill, gently pushing whatever was in the field. However, he could layer the zones atop each other until he had a stationary railgun. In enclosed spaces or chokepoints he was a nightmare if given time to prepare. Mush was a Brute, and there was some debate on what his other classification should be: the man drew trash and debris to himself, encasing his body and building golem-like armor. If they were ever to fight in a landfill, Mush might actually be more frightening than Lung. But overall he was mostly an inconvenience, difficult to keep down as his actual body took little to no damage while he recycled the detritus that was broken off his form.

Their hunter had taken this information into account.

She leapt into the air, drawing a wrought-iron hammer from the hanging holsters at her sides, as well as what resembled a giant airbrush. While airborne, she slapped the back of the hammer and a flame began to crackle within the cage-like head.

Mush was lucky that he saw the hit coming. He had begun collecting debris as soon as the yelling started, and quickly shifted it to interpose between him and that hammer.

## SCHKROOM!

The sound alone was like being hit with a body blow, causing everyone within the warehouse – Bloodmoon excepted – to stagger from the sheer echoing *noise*. Mush was launched backward, impacting the wall and slumping over. Bloodmoon spun the hammer in her hand and moved to finish him off, then was forced to undulate her body like a liquid to avoid the majority of gunfire sent her way. Bullets caught her in the side and arm, pitting her body and causing her to weep thick blood, but she didn't slow in the least.

Another lunge brought her amidst one of the larger collections of Merchant gunners, and she slammed the hammer into the ground. The explosion, the sonic force, and the concrete shards kicked up caused all of them to flinch, and Bloodmoon capitalized on this with a single rotation, finger depressing the trigger of her flamesprayer. The men were wreathed in licking flames, screaming in panic and agony as they attempted to divest themselves of their burning clothes.

She ducked under a folding table, rather limply launched from Skidmark's hastily-erected fields, and leapt once again. This time she hurtled to the wall and kicked off, leaving footprints chiseled into the metal, before hurtling in to decapitate the Merchants' leader with that brutal blunt object. Bloodmoon genuinely hadn't anticipated that the Merchants would be able to plan tactically in chaos like this, due to their poor performance in gang fights. So when Squealer popped up from behind Skidmark wielding some abomination of a shotgun, the airborne young woman couldn't effectively dodge out of the way. She shifted her weight as best she could so that the blast only took off the top of her skull rather than her entire head, but a good portion of her brain was now missing as well as one eye, her hat and goggles gone.

The gang couple didn't even swear when Bloodmoon landed on her feet and kept moving. They let out stifled squeaks of horror and began to retreat. The cape's hair had come loose from its tie, spilling out as she moved like shadowy tendrils that undulated through the air. She juke backward from another shot, this one a desperate hail-Mary from Squealer as the Tinker ran for one of the bulky vans. Bloodmoon made a detour to grab one of the Merchant gunners, holstering her weapons briefly to grab him by the collarbone and hip. In one motion, only a little jerky from the organic resistance, she ripped the man in half and held his body above her, pouring his blood and viscera onto her mutilated head.

The entire battle paused at this. Only those in the corner who were still burning were otherwise preoccupied, their panicked shrieks providing the perfect background sound for the otherwise silent scene as Bloodmoon anointed herself in the lifeblood of a man, her head rebuilding itself by the second.

In that moment, Adam Mustain remembered when his grandmother had dragged him to church as a child, beating him when he was belligerent and didn't want to spend five boring hours sitting in a pew. "Holy Mary, mother of God," he muttered under his breath, trying to remember the words to any prayer he could. Because the thing before him, inky tendrils of night swirling around its head as its eyes glowed like yellow moonlight, was something out of hell itself. "The Lord is with me and I shall f-fear no evil..."

Instead of taking the van on the run, Squealer gunned the engine and did a burnout to spin the vehicle around. Her tooling with the engine made it able to go from 0 to 60 in under a second with some amount of reliability, and she launched her armored vehicle directly at the murderous cape.

Bloodmoon dove into a roll to one side, carrying farther than any normal person possibly could, then pivoted smoothly and leapt up to bounce off the massive crossbar rafters. A second forceful launch planted her firmly on Squealer's roof, driving the fingers of her left hand into the plating as best she could to balance herself. She'd come prepared for Squealer as well, swapping to her other melee weapon. The hammer was replaced with a crude piston system that mounted to most of Bloodmoon's arm, a broad spade-like head at the end of the piston. She squeezed the grip in her hand and twisted, causing the piston to pull back and lock into place. A punch downward was punctuated with the piston driving forward, a blade-tipped pile bunker. The force of Bloodmoon's punch, combined with the kinetic energy of the strange weapon, punctured straight through the van's armored roof. Bloodmoon then drew back her punching hand and gripped the roof with it, withdrawing her flame weapon and letting it belch into the hole she'd made.

Squealer screamed and leapt out of the still-moving van, hitting the concrete floor and tumbling over and over, scraping and bruising and shearing off sections of skin while the van smashed into and through the wall. Bloodmoon smoothly stepped off the van before it impacted, approaching Squealer who was trying to continue with Stop, Drop and Roll. Her spade locked into its deployed state, becoming an arm-mounted blade.

Once again she had underestimated her opponents, presuming that they would be nowhere near as canny or tenacious as those she'd fought in the Nightmares. As a massive and stinking facsimile of a hand engulfed her, Bloodmoon realized that Mush had not been knocked unconscious – or had recovered quickly – and had been gathering armor the entire time. Mush hurled her through the hole the van had made, giving chase to confront her in a less confined area. By the time he got outside, Bloodmoon was already standing and wielding that hammer again, her moon-glowing eyes piercing through his armor and straight into his soul.

“What do you want with us?” Mush bellowed through his golem. “How did you even find us?” He continued to advance, moving as swiftly as his trash form would allow. He didn't really expect a proper answer, but most capes couldn't resist some bit of banter or taunt as the fight went on. Bloodmoon continued to be utterly silent, not so much as crying out once this entire encounter.

She met his charge with her own, slapping the primer on the back of the hammer to once again ignite it. Not going for center mass, she instead leapt and ran up his golem's arm, bringing the burning, explosive hammer to the artificial joint.

**SCHKROOM!**

Mush staggered to the side, the impact sending him reeling even with all of his armor. Then the cape opened up with that fire weapon again, igniting every flammable bit in the side of his armor. Mush had to spend precious seconds micromanaging his golem to redirect the flammables to the exterior so he didn't catch fire himself. His assailant was not idle.

**SCHKROOM!**

His leg was gone at the knee, toppling the golem. Mush began to rearrange again, pushing himself toward what would be the 'head' in order to make an escape route for himself. He hurled all of the trash at once at the cape, hoping to at the very least slow Bloodmoon while he launched himself in the opposite direction.

Mush's attacker tore through the rubbish with her bare hands, once again revealing those luminous eyes as she watched him scramble away. Then, as if by some preternatural sense, she exploded into motion, a high-arching backflip to avoid a full dumpster that Skidmark had fired at her. The projectile hit Mush's trash bulwark and began tumbling end over end, Mush only barely scrambling out of the impact zone.

At the apex of her jump, seeming to hang upside-down in midair for the briefest of moments, Bloodmoon drew a long pistol inlaid with elegant filigree and pulled the trigger. A bullet flashed, silver against the dim light of city night, before Skidmark's head blossomed with crimson. The shot came from high enough that his fields didn't affect it, the large-caliber round removing most of his skull. Landing in a crouch, Bloodmoon hit the primer on her hammer and this time threw it. It whirled almost as elegantly as a thrown knife and, while its aerodynamics left something to be desired, landed close enough to Mush that the resulting explosion and concussive force left him laid out with severe internal bleeding. Mist rose up around the hammer and it sank into the ground, disappearing.

The few Merchants who hadn't fled or died assembled into a firing line at the hole in the warehouse, shooting wildly with pistols, shotguns and even some automatic rifles. Bloodmoon responded to the assault with several pirouettes and sideways flips, elegantly weaving through the majority of shots while she drew her handheld flamethrower and let it expel its deadly contents, like a dragon breathing its fire into a knight's fort.

Before Bloodmoon could approach further, a distinct *paff* sounded as a containment-foam grenade exploded against her feet. The foam began expanding to engulf her body and, for the first time, the cape showed some semblance of humanity as she appeared to roll her eyes, extracting something from her belt before she disappeared in the yellowy off-white of the rapidly solidifying foam.

Miss Militia and Dauntless had been nearest to respond, while Armsmaster and Velocity were across the city at the time of the call and still on their way. With the amount of explosions and fire, many people had suspected Lung to be in the area but the dragon-transforming head of the ABB had been confirmed to still be within his territory that night.

"Nice shot, Militia," Dauntless said as he floated down. "So this is Bloodmoon?" he jerked a thumb at the ball of foam. He looked around at the corpses strewn about the area. "Jesus. Sure looks like his work."

Miss Militia wasn't listening. Hannah Roosevelt had survived a war and had seen far more than her share of atrocities. She could pick up the cries of a broken soul at this point, and amid the pained shouts and pitiable moans of the burned survivors she caught the sound of such sobbing. She stepped over charred bodies, making mental note that Skidmark was among the losses. Miss Militia wasn't foolish enough to go unarmed, keeping a low-gauge shotgun in her hands.

There, partly burned, missing most of her hair, and covered in shredded skin from road rash, Squealer hugged her knees and rocked back and forth, crying her eyes out. When Miss Militia approached to secure and handcuff her, Squealer instead leaned into the taller woman, wailing harder. "They're dead," she blubbered. "He killed them!" She continued to hiccup half-coherent statements like this as Militia found herself in the awkward position of holding a crying supervillain.

The high-pitched roar of Armsmaster's motorcycle announced his arrival, and Velocity only briefly returned to normal speed in order to greet his compatriots before he got to work cuffing the survivors.

Armsmaster approached the foam pile to confirm that Bloodmoon was still alive in there, due to the utter silence. A quick scan gave him a result he didn't like, and he prepared a second foam grenade while he began cutting into the hardened foam.

Within the foam was an empty person-shaped hole.

Armsmaster bit his lip in consternation. "We need to update the Director. This is far more of a problem than we'd anticipated."