

*Overall*, Ethan Lis mused, *life as a cape isn't worth it*. Oh sure, there were cool powers and flashy fights and all the attention and adulation. All that was nice. But the powers came from the worst day of your life. The fights were all too often vicious beatdowns wherein one side had to pull punches while the other tried their best to deal lethal blows. And the attention was even worse than your average celebrity, because you had to be perfect at all times while maintaining a secret identity. But then he would see Alice, his kicked puppy. Just Puppy, nowadays. And she'd smile at him. And it was all worth it.

Alice, in her hero identity as Battery, juked through a hail of gunfire and upended a sedan to provide some cover while she built up another charge. Coil's mercenaries unloaded some rounds into the vehicle but were hesitant to use the underslung cutting lasers on their rifles, likely due to not knowing what else they'd cut through – Ethan would love to imagine the hesitancy was born from some secret heart of gold, but most likely it was fear of proportionate retribution should their laser bisect a child.

Ethan leapt into the path of a flying parking meter, the projectile losing all momentum the moment it connected with him. Assault absorbed the kinetic energy, storing it for future release while ensuring that one-half of the Empire's air corps didn't splatter her targeted mercenary across the asphalt.

It wasn't at all clear what had started this fight, but Rune and Crusader were engaged in a running firefight with at least a half-dozen of Coil's well-equipped faceless goons. The spear-wielding ghosts descended once again – excepting the pair that served as Crusader's floating palanquin – and made strafing runs at the mercenaries, who were forced to scatter before returning automatic fire and haphazard upward laser shots. Assault could only hope those shots would dissipate before going far enough to hit a plane or a satellite...or worse, clip the Simurgh and wake her up grumpier than usual.

The not-a-theme team of Assault and Battery were decidedly not the right group to handle this kind of ranged firepower, but they were the only heroes in the area at the time. While Assault bounded around after Rune and did his best to avoid Crusader's ghosts, Battery had managed to subdue two mercenaries thus far: one whose zipcuffs had been cut by his fellows, and one whose broken arm and leg took him out of the fight. It was difficult gauging just how hard you could hit a person wearing body armor and not deal lethal damage. She needed to go for breaks but not compound fractures. From the corner of his eye, Ethan could see Alice gritting her teeth. It always tore at his heart, the way her power caused her pain the higher she built her charge.

Almost too fast to track, Alice pushed off the ground (leaving a divot in the asphalt) and launched herself around the side of the car, grabbing the bumper to help her swing her weight and redirect her momentum. With her enhanced senses and the functional effect of time dilation, she could plot her path to the nearest soldier. She came in low, pushing up with her thighs and bringing her fist in for a gut punch to shatter his body armor, knock the wind out of him, and bleed off some of her charge until she felt herself safely in the nonlethal range. Instead of buckling like she'd anticipated, the man tried to tough it out. Wonderful, a glory hound or some other idiot who thought he could walk off a blow like that. By not folding around her fist, he instead forced his ribcage to start breaking from the parallel pressure, and the intense pain made him clutch his weapon more tightly. The underbarrel laser went off, punching through the sedan and straight into the driver of a delivery truck who'd just rounded the corner and was in the process of realizing what a shit show into which he'd stumbled.

The beam impacted the driver in the chest: it took his brain a few seconds to catch up to the realization that he was dead. In that time, his body spasmed and locked up, going into an aggressive form of

shock. His joints straightened as best they could, pressing down hard on the gas, before he finally slumped and the truck careened out of control.

Without enough of a charge to take on a multi-ton truck, Battery was forced to leap aside. The mercenaries likewise scattered, and Alice didn't exactly feel guilty that the man she'd wined was unable to get out of the way: the truck impacted the sedan, which toppled and landed on the mercenary who'd inadvertently shot the truck driver. The truck slowly listed rightward, tilting toward a corner cafe where the patrons huddled behind tables and countertops. They'd been too afraid to head out the back and risk getting nabbed by E88 gangers or more of Coil's goons.

Assault cursed and slammed his foot into a concrete column, expending all of his stored kinetic force to fire himself horizontally. Arm outstretched, he managed to make contact with one rear tire and bring it to a momentary dead stop for the time his fingertips brushed it...and then the other three tires and the vehicle's sheer bulk dragged it out of his reach as he slammed into the ground, expending what energy he'd absorbed in order to arrest his own momentum and keep from road rash. He scrambled after it but it was already too far away. There was nothing he could do: that truck would hit the wide glass window and barrel through, shredding and crushing everyone inside.

There was an almighty crash, but no excessive shattering of glass. The truck lurched forward onto its two frontmost wheels, then slammed back down with enough force that its undercarriage fell out. A worrying form pried itself out from the truck's grille, wrenching her arms free from where they'd sunk through and quite literally throttled the engine. Bloodmoon spared a glance over her shoulder to ensure the civilians were safe, allowed herself one brief stiff nod of acknowledgement and self-approval, and then charged into battle.

The mercenaries scattered yet again, only just having started to reform their ranks, and one had his head blown open like an overripe fruit. His advanced helmet was barely a hindrance to Bloodmoon's powerful pistol. The weapon's elegant filigree glimmered in the sunlight. In her other hand she carried a sword, some bizarre hybrid of katana and cavalry saber.

In the aftermath of the driver's death, even as the truck had barreled down the street, Crusader had been lining up another charge. Apparently Bloodmoon resolved to teach him the error of that particular course of action. Her left arm snapped up, wrist whipping the weapon into place, and the pistol let out another bellowing report. At this point Crusader had this kind of thing down to reflex: his ghosts were all but invulnerable while he most definitely was not, so the cluster broke off from their charge to interpose.

The ghost that took the hit *burst*, shattering apart like some bizarre glass balloon. Crystalline residue floated through the air before dissolving into nothingness. The silvery bullet fell straight down to hit the ground with a soft clink, before disappearing in a tiny cloud of mist.

Bloodmoon cataloged this information, only slowing her advance for a moment, drifting leftward. She holstered her weapons and reached out to grab the sedan that had crushed the mercenary's lower half, fingers digging into the chassis. She stepped, right heel leading while the foot pointed backward, and spun to hurl the car at Crusader.

A sedan is a small car but still not a small object, and it was thrown with considerable force. Crusader tried to drop beneath it but didn't like his odds, so all of his remaining ghosts (other than the two

carrying him) threw themselves in the way and the car impacted. Immediately afterward, something impacted the car.

The moment the car left her hands, Bloodmoon was running. She drew the pistol again, slamming some grayish powder down the barrel, and leapt through the air to bring her feet crashing into the sedan she'd thrown. She leaned over the car and pointed the gun at Crusader's head. To his credit, he managed to lean to the side and once again interpose a ghost between him and the gun. Bloodmoon fired, and crimson sprayed through the air. Propelled by the bone-marrow ash of Hemwick, the bullet punched clean through Crusader's ghost and kept going. It embedded into a nearby building and soon vanished as well. Crusader's ghosts dissolved and the sedan plummeted to earth, Bloodmoon riding it like a surfboard.

Assault leapt at Rune again, not just to try to capture her but to chase her off. He didn't want a kid, who probably had time to turn her life around, to have that life ended because she picked a fight with a mass-murderer. The girl took one potshot at Bloodmoon, who casually slapped the concrete out of the air, before fleeing with her tail between her legs.

Gunfire rang out again as the mercenaries tried to rescue their legless companion. Well, most likely they didn't expect him to survive but didn't want his identity being uncovered: it might lead to more of them being found and possibly providing links in the chain toward unmasking Coil. The mercenaries had Battery pinned down in an alley. Still completely silent, Bloodmoon began closing the distance.

A few of the gunmen let out arrhythmic shouts of alarm and began to open fire, with predictably negligible results. Until one of them activated his laser. The pink beam seared across the street, carving into a storefront, and Bloodmoon's left arm fell steaming to the ground. Immediately a torrent of mist rose up around it and the arm sank into the street.

Assault felt the world lurch around him as he witnessed this. He no longer got any kind of motion or pressure sickness, but he remembered being seasick as a child. The sensation was like that, but centered behind his eyes instead of in his gut. He staggered, eyes rolling in their sockets, and that asynchronous input pushed him over the edge. He clutched his stomach and began vomiting onto the sidewalk. Across the street, Battery let out a keening wail, the kind that could crack glass, as she clutched her head and spasmed on the ground. The gunmen weren't much better off. Some were already beginning to shake it off, but none were combat-ready.

Bloodmoon's posture shifted. From stalking with back bent, she now stood tall and proud with shoulders squared. An elegant cane emerged from the ground and she clutched it, smacking the tip into the asphalt once. It broke apart into a segmented whip. She lashed it forward and the tip embedded in the legless body, ensuring his demise. Almost matching Battery in raw speed, Bloodmoon darted between the soldiers, body-checking one or two to get them in formation. She whirled around and between them, a blur of gray, before coming to a stop just long enough for them to understand what had happened. With a violent tug, she drew the thin wire cable and bladed segments tight until they severed body parts. As if choreographed, she slammed the tip into the ground again and locked the whip back into cane form at the exact time body parts began to fall meatily to the ground.

The killer cape sheathed the cane into the loose ties at her hip and reached into her voluminous ragged coat, retrieving what looked to be an old-time syringe. She stabbed it into her leg and carelessly cast it aside. Assault looked away from the syringe the moment mist began to rise around it, then wished he'd stuck with watching the injector. From Bloodmoon's severed arm, a torrent of blood rushed out. It

crawled over itself, extending longer and longer, a gangly sinewy limb like undercooked steak badly cut by a blunt knife. The limb terminated in six or seven twitchy appendages that briefly looked like massive scything claws, then the whole thing turned into a black mass of tentacles (or at least that's what Assault would swear he saw) before it collapsed back into an arm – a fully-clothed arm, the sleeve of her coat unblemished. A flicker of metal and she was holding that exact same pistol again.

A man's desperate cry cut through the air at the same time as an explosion. "Help! Help me! My wife and daughter are still inside! I- I couldn't get to them!" The storefront that the laser had pierced... Brockton Bay didn't exactly have zoning and so many stores had veritable apartment complexes above them. The laser must have hit a gas pipe "W-we're on the fourth floor!" he gasped, looking helplessly at Assault.

Assault glanced over at Battery, who was still groaning and clutching her head. Whatever'd happened to Alice, she was in no condition to help. Almost unable to believe himself, he looked to Bloodmoon. The cape's black goggles bored into his eyes, then Bloodmoon nodded sharply. She bounded over to the building and spun at the last moment, slamming back-first into the edifice and making a stirrup with her hands.

Ethan couldn't hold back the happy laugh as he charged ahead, planting his foot in Bloodmoon's hands and letting her hurl him to the fourth floor. She then leapt up after him, feet balancing on the barest of brick seams and windowsills. He was holding his nose and coughing when she sprang in beside him. "Shit, there's already a lot of smoke. You good to-?" His eyes widened at the sight of Bloodmoon tugging down her face cover. The jaw revealed was very young, easily high-school age. Wide mouth and thin lips. Bloodmoon dropped to the floor and began sniffing noisily, like a dog. The cape scuttled along on all fours, moving about as fast as Assault could on two. "Uh, okay then..."

Once the pair got closer, they found an open door and heard a dog barking from inside. A distressed Pomeranian bounced in place, barking frantically at the rubble of a bedroom door. When the pipes ruptured it must have brought down some of the beams: no wonder the man couldn't help his wife and daughter. The dog yelped when it saw Bloodmoon and nearly leapt into the fire to get away. Replacing her face cover, the cape pointed at Assault and then at the dog. He nodded and plucked the little critter into his arms.

Bloodmoon easily wrenched the beams aside and was hit in the face with a gout of flame. The beams had been almost stoppering the blazing leak in the ceiling. A single violent beat to the face and hat banished the clinging fire. "Go," the cape shouted, in a deep and guttural booming voice that did not at all match the narrow and wiry body. "I've got this."

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This was the first thing I was doing that could actually be called heroic. Fighting the gangs was a good thing, unequivocally, but I was doing so with a lot of bloodshed and using fear as a weapon. I relaxed my vocal chords, no longer needing my approximation of Ludwig's booming timbre. "Hello? You can come out. I'm here to help," I called in a voice just a bit deeper and older than my normal tone.

The master bathroom opened, a frightened mother and daughter staring out at me. They were soaked with water, clearly having hidden in the shower in the hope that the water would help them. "W-we were trapped. Please, can you get us out?" the mom begged.

I shucked my coat and nodded. “Grab onto me.” With them both holding onto my front as best they could, I wrapped the coat over them – especially over the top. One hand beneath their rumps to hold them up, the other around the upper part of the coat to keep it in place. I charged through the flames, barely noticing how they licked at my hair and face. I turned right, heading down the hall to a window on the opposite side from where Assault and I had made our entrance. My ears picked up the hiss of more gas: unblocked, it was likely about to blow. I turned with my back to the window and pushed off, crashing through the glass and frame. Before my eyes a fireball rushed out of the apartment and toward me, propelling me further outward. It blew my hat off and burned away most of my hair, but my coat was undamaged – as was the cargo beneath it.

We plummeted some forty feet and I took the impact in my legs, grunting a bit but otherwise unharmed. “You alright?” I asked softly as I set them down to don my coat once more.

“Yes,” the mother said through a watery half-smile. Her family had lost much, if not everything, but they were all still alive. “Thank you so much.”

With my face covered I couldn’t really offer a smile, but I swept my arm to direct them out of the alleyway. I spotted where my hat had fallen and with a thought I directed the little ones to retrieve it. I’d collected a fair number of echoes, especially from Crusader, and didn’t want to give them up. With no lantern nearby as yet, I’d have to expend another Bold Mark. It was alright: I had enough that this one wasn’t a major expenditure. I placed the Mark to my head and spiraled in on myself, appearing at the warehouse.

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The man almost broke down when his wife and daughter emerged from the alleyway, and Assault got to personally deliver the dog to the man’s daughter. “Who was that, who helped us?” the wife asked.

“Yeah, he deserves his own action figure!” the girl giggled, still riding the adrenaline high.

“I think she was a girl, sweetie,” her mother gently corrected.

“Well, he or she hasn’t given us an official name for the record yet. I’m just glad they were here to help us out,” Assault replied with his near-patented Heroic Smile. He led them over to the PRT van that had rolled up in the interim, while the family waited for the fire department. Meanwhile Assault made his way over to his partner and wife. “How’s your head, Puppy?”

“I’m not sure,” Alice whispered, hunched in on herself. She hadn’t looked so haunted since the time he almost killed her during his time as Madcap. “I saw things, Ethan. Things I know man was never meant to see. It was only snippets, but still... Whatever Bloodmoon is, I think it’s a lot worse than we figured.”

“Yeah,” he said, picking her up in a classic princess carry, “we’ll have a few new things to add to the dossier.”