

Vending Business

Cast in the glowing neon lights of the vending machine, Montreal kneeled in front of the contraption and peered into the chilled glass. Each row was filled front to back with chips, pretzels, sodas and mineral waters – snacks of every kind in great magnitude. Compared to the pitiful selection that above-ground vending machines had – it was clear that Mag Mell wanted to send a statement. A city so affluent, that multitudes of products could be delivered simply and easily through vending machines.

And she had made it in time after the automated restock.

The rat-like woman looked around, reaching into the satchel bag that was secured firmly to her waist.

With a flick of the wrist, the bag opened, revealing glittering plastic.

Identification Cards, each bearing the faces of people she knew from the Edge Town – home. She retrieved the first from the stack, glancing at it.

“Montreal Weaver”, it read – a woman with dull blonde hair and a nonplussed expression that carved itself into her face’s contours.

The face of a woman who no longer was quite the same, she thought – running her gloved fingers through her scratchy, dark-grey fur.

Her card was pitiful in comparison; its weekly paycheck was far less than the others she had been entrusted with.

She held her breath. This was a matter of life and death, for both her and the people back at home. Still, as she pressed the card up to the dust-covered reader on the front of the machine and heard the reassuring thud of multiple cans of soda and packets of chips fall to the bottom of the machine, she was satisfied. Placing the goods in her backpack, her ID card was returned to its place at the back of the satchel.

She brought the next card out, swiped and slid it to the back of the stack. It was a simple routine. After you swipe, all you had to do was select an item on the interface, up to the amount you wanted. Or in her case, clearing out the entire row.

With each passing moment, Montreal could feel her breath catch on the back of her throat. The monsters that prowled the city knew how it worked – those who carried the cards would inevitably be carrying food.

More disturbingly – some of them knew when the machines would restock, using their primitive intelligence to press scavenged cards up to the interfaces. Just like she was doing right now.

But were they smart enough to wait until she had swiped all of her cards?

She was familiar with the routes to run. Just gotta shimmy up the wall on the corner of that block, sprint through the hollowed out buildings and cross the roofs until you’re home free. After all, she had played a part in forming the routes in the first place.

A bottle of water sat in her hand. If there was one ration that the runners were allowed, it was the water. She unscrewed the cap, ready to sip the chilled water before she saw a shadow in the corner of her vision.

“Oi. Rat-runner. You’re in our territory.”

Montreal looked up, a hand reaching for her flamethrower. She turned, coming face to face with a large, hooded man. A mutant - a Keystinger, just like her. Like it wasn’t obvious enough from the bestial jawline under that hood of his, or the wrinkled leather that clung to his excessive muscle. The dim artificial lights of the sector cast shadows across the pavement, and she saw the distinct “FP” patch on the front of his overcoat – Fog Plaza. A fellow Edge Town – and competitor. And characteristic of that Edge Town – she could see the metallic sheen of the KEY syringes on his belt, ready for use at a given moment.

“The hell are you on about? This route’s been part of ours for ages!”

Months of muscle memory couldn’t be wrong. She knew exactly what buildings she had passed through – there was no way she had gone down the wrong place. Her bottle left on the ground beside her, she shooed the man away. If a runner was trying to scam her... the weight of the weapon against her hip reminded her that she was still in control. Despite that – he continued.

“You spittin’ on the treatise we’ve got going with your town? Was decided on a week ago. Had diplomats ‘n everything.”

She grimaced, still stuffing bags of dried food into her satchel.

“You gonna keep talking and draw the monsters’ attention to us? Lostflow informs its runners about *any* changes. If you’re trying to pull something, I’m not buying it.”

The bulkier man grunted, moving closer. A distinct stench of sweat and travel clung to him like an infected wound, a man who was a long way from home. She couldn’t make out his face or even what species he was under the cloth mask he had on – but one look at his dark, animalistic eyes quickly revealed the absence of his former humanity.

“Listen ‘ere, rat. We can do this the easy way. You hand over what you’ve got, and I’ll let you slink on away. What do you think you’ll get if you fight? This machine’s way closer to your town.”

He smacked his lips. “Can’t say that it’ll be intact when we’re done scufflin’.”

Montreal gritted her teeth, jaw tighter than she could normally manage. So there was no mistake – it was a robbery.

“So. What’ll it be? You get to keep your bags of chips and soda, and the machine goes all up in flames... or you give us a little *tribute*. A little something for the treatise. Then we’ll go our separate ways.”

Echoes of the people back at home came to mind. “Remember – your life, and information is worth more than food.”

Her fists clenched.

But *why*? Why should the people in her town get bullied into submission by the others? She was *capable*.

The man inched closer, his frame casting a long shadow in the glowing light of the vending machine. Montreal's mind raced with the possibilities; could she take this in a fight? Sure she could. The question is, how willing was she to make those kinds of sacrifices?

Montreal spoke fast, reaching out for the possibility presented to her.

"Tell you what... How about you and I, we cut a deal on this instead? A... tribute, as you said. But not only for the people of Fog Plaza. But for *you*, specifically."

The hooded man nods, drawling out his next words. "...What're you offering?"

She brought out the same piece of plastic she was holding before, a remnant of her past life.

"How's this? ID card, unbound. You take it with you, use it to buy some additional wares for yourself. You can take half of what I've got, but not all of it. Keep it for yourself, though I'd just swiped it a few moments ago."

He scoffed, steel-tipped boots kicking up dust on the pavement. "You think you can buy me out with that little thing? I could break your arms and just take the whole damn bag."

Montreal shook her head.

"And you think your bosses would let you have any of these cards? If you cut a deal with me, then they won't search you. If you bring home the whole set, they'll definitely be looking to see if you're hiding anything. You take a small-profile card? That's more for yourself."

The two of them faced each other, the ambient echoes of the city surrounding them. Neither of them had to state the fact that the values on the cards were counted, nothing would escape the higher-ups.

Unless one were to sneak a card for themselves, outside of the official list.

She glanced past the man's broad shoulders, trying to spot any reinforcement or stray mutants that could be sneaking up. The man shifted his stance as if to imply that she was wasting her time.

"And what's stoppin' you from just pointing that weapon of yours towards me when I go for the trade?"

The shining flamethrower at her hip caught the lamplight.

"You think I can use this thing at point-blank? That stuff gets everywhere, and I'm not so willing to give you a demonstration of what a match looks like in action."

She tapped the end of her snout, resisting the urge to flinch. Even now, the sensation of her fingers brushing against her whiskers was foreign.

"We exchange it in, hand to hand. No pointing of weapons towards each other."

"Alright then, deal. Hand it over."

The two runners closed the gap, inch by inch, neither fully trusting in the other's actions. Montreal placed her card on the ground, kicking it over the dusty pavement.

"And half the food too, like you said."

Montreal grimaced, sorting through her backpack. The man stepped closer, eager to escape with the goods as soon as he could. She stood up. It was this or nothing. Or....

“Alright then,” she began, holding up the half-filled backpack with one hand. “Come on, get it!”

As the man drew close, she picked up the uncapped bottle of water in her free hand, concealing it behind her. Then, with a deft motion, she splashed the liquid towards the man’s eyes.

“You son of a-“

Momentarily blinded by the freezing water, she unhooked the flamethrower from her belt, clubbing the side of his head with the chassis. Dazed but not down, the man swings wildly towards Montreal.

Montreal ducked under the man’s fist, countering with an uppercut to his elbow, the impact of her fist against his steely flesh sending shocks through her arm. The man yelled, his other hand reaching for his belt.

They grunted, Montreal pushing forwards with the combined weight of her weapon and self, barely moving the mountain of a mutant that she was grappling against.

Then, a flash of steel.

Montreal heard the irritating grind of metal against metal, as the man brought a machete down against the frame of her flamethrower. A small trickle of fuel began to leak out, the scent of gasoline assaulting Montreal’s heightened senses. For a moment, they stood, weapons locked against each other.

“It’s almost close enough,” she thought, trying to inch the nozzle closer to the man’s centre of mass.

With a tug, the weapon hooked onto her flame thrower jerked it to the side, right when she pulled the trigger.

There was a click. For a moment, Montreal’s world was dyed in brilliant hues of orange as the pilot light set the fuel ablaze. Crackle, hiss, the fire spat as it seeped into the asphalt. Montreal was unable to release the trigger, the man’s weight pressing down on her finger.

She gritted her teeth, gradually tilting the flamethrower towards her opponent, prompting a roar of pain as the searing jet clung to the man’s cloak.

Panting, Montreal backpedalled and released the trigger, her finger aching from the pressure. The air was scorching, with each breath feeling like she was inhaling glass. She stumbled back from the blaze, quickly flicking her flamethrower off, a hasty strip of tape applied where the leak had sprung before the fire caught up to her.

She scanned the blazing field for her opponent – and there he was.

The man stood, hunched over in pain, the lingering flames on his cloak seemingly not bothering him. Though she couldn’t see his face, the slate-grey skin underneath reminded her of the thick hide of a rhinoceros.

“Fog Plaza will remember this, rat. Good luck explaining this to your employers.”

The man slunk off into the darkness, embers fading off into the distance.

Montreal couldn't scramble closer to the burning wreck of the vending machine – but there, glinting in the firelight was something familiar. She peered closer, picking it up from the ground. Her ID card! The other scavenger had dropped it in the encounter!

But, as she looked towards the heat-cracked glass of the ruined vending machine, the small victory was completely eclipsed.

The scent of burning electronics and food filled the air. The metal slag that pooled around the machine perverted the aroma of the crisps, the chocolate, the biscuits, all of the scents congealing into a foul miasma.

There, Montreal sat in the glow of the obliterated vending machine.

She raised her ID card up to the flickering fire, staring at the human who she had used to be.

One less machine in her town's route. Less food for the people. She'd failed her duty as a runner, for the sake of her own vanity.

Was it worth it? She didn't really know.

With a half-hearted glance back at the machine, she pulled her backpack and satchel tight, the singed card added to the stack once more. A little bit more beaten than she had been previously, she set off for the next machine in her route, as all good runners do.