

Midsummer days sometimes were slow.

Those sorts of evenings where it seemed like the world ran behind the endless chirping of the crickets. Warm, heavy, and humid. Sounds consumed by the weight of the world and energy just sapped away. Like a thick blanket burying the world in dull fluff, there was nothing to do. Even the delinquent students, having taken their summer vacations a few nights early, were avoiding wandering in this exhausting haze. The strain of a day spent active, outside or in, left them utterly bereft of the urge to run or hide or commit crimes.

"I hate summer." Stormwave muttered, looking down from her perch atop a long abandoned mall.

Her eyes scanned the skyline of Horizon as she sat still.

The overwhelming deluge of light and sound was a lot quieter when there was some distance, but it didn't help that much. Not when she still had to crane her neck to see the towering displays of corporate power or lean forward to watch the few people walking past. The whole of a city as thriving as the one she called 'home' was never going to be easy to comprehend. Times like this, she felt like little more than a tiny speck, a broken shard fallen from an already shattered mirror. The world might reflect off, but the vigilant vixen was never truly part of what she could be.

Zyla, the girl, always tried to stop herself from thinking. To keep moving, running, and fighting. Delivering packages, skipping her homework, and even just bothering the others that she called friends. Those were all just part of her daily habits, the things she did to keep her mind moving. The storm in her head was never calmed for long, but she could do a little bit of activity to chase those clouds away, even if just for a bit. Every single day, every hour, was filled with something in some vain effort to just never stop.

"You know." She spoke to no one in particular, her eyes still watching the always changing display before her. "It's been a long time since I... really talked to anyone."

No one answered, of course.

That's why she was here in the first place. The Brightland Mall. A place that had been built halfway up before its financiers ran out of money and ran off. Parts of the roof had never even been finished before some financial crash left other companies without the ability to pick up the slack. With the internal structure exposed to the elements, it had degraded so far as to be impossible to fix. Building around the broken areas meant replacing millions of dollars of superstructure, tearing it down meant millions of demolition and removal. A building that dragged the land's own value into the negatives.

A skeleton of an age past, never alive but never truly dead.

"And I guess... it's been a lot, lately." Zyla ran her fingers across the rough cement, catching the claws on some exposed stone. A momentary distraction from speaking to herself.

Her eyes closed for a moment as she just let the quietness overwhelm her.

And this was something no one else knew; nowhere was 'quiet' to the fox. Not when there was so much power to ignore, so many endless volts and watts running through every wall. People carried boxes of charges, their cars produced more power than she could ignore. Even if she wasn't in a fight, the nerves that ran the world called to her every day. It was a body made with form and design, a product

that made life easier yet kept her focus. Even if just a little bit. A fly in her ear that never left, an annoyance that couldn't be shaken. Lights and sounds that were always, always around.

Everywhere but here. The wiring was unfinished and the power turned off years ago. Here, and only here, was the world really silent.

"Been back in town a few months. After I left. Bet half the city thought I was dead or something. Kinda surprised I wasn't." the fox chuckled a little as she clicked her claw over that same rock, stubbornly trying to dislodge it. The tiny bit of wiggle gave her hope that it might pop out eventually. "And I figured... well, today's the first quiet time in weeks."

Which was true. Everything seemed to ramp up to the extreme once she was back in. It was like Horizon had waited for its errant hero to come home before the city tried to rip itself apart. The fighting had grown more intense, but her allies had gotten stronger. Sure, she might be busy halfway killing herself beating up a couple of the newbie heroes, but they had the same spirit they all needed. The same kind of people who got up and ran into danger so they could knock its teeth out. Day in, day out, they kept going.

Then why did she still feel so alone?

"And that's... well..." she sighed a little bit, shaking her head. The rock was more loose, she was sure of it. "I hate doing this. Hate hate hate it. Hate talking to myself, hate the quiet days. This weather, this stupid ledge..."

And there was a pause as the rock popped free once she put too much strength into it. Her little game ended as the pebble dropped into the darkness below.

"Hate me."

Speaking those words had her hand grip itself tighter. Even past the new and tougher gloves, she could still feel her claws dig just enough into her palm to draw out some pain. It didn't matter since she couldn't really 'feel' it, not when her mind was too focused on the indistinct spots beneath. It was like she was trying to find an excuse to get off her ass and hop down. Any little sign of a monster in the dark that she could beat the hell out of. That would be so much better than just...

This.

"And they just don't get it." the girl, not the hero, slammed her fist against the ground. A few more pebbles, ones she'd knocked out weeks ago, scattered to the parking lot below. Pain lanced up her arm but paled in comparison to her own anger. Fear? What was it she was feeling?

"What it's like to be... me. I mean." She had to breathe. Ragged, slow. Measured. "I just... they see *her*. Not me. No one really cares about what's under the mask. Who they're dealing with, or why. Just that... stupid hero. The thing Caitlin would talk about from her endless comic stuff. That's what they expect and want. Even the others."

And she paused again, trying to formulate her own thoughts. The encroaching night did nothing to speak back and tried its best to leave her to her own devices. The world, devoid of life, took her rage and pain without question. It left her with nothing, but it asked nothing in return.

"I... miss you." she eventually said, minutes after her outburst. One hand went to her eyes, brushing away something.

“Haven’t talked to you in a long time. Visited you. Or really just... anything. I’m never out that way. If you’d been from Horizon, I’d be there weekly. But...” Zyla sighed and shook her head, green and black cascading around her eyes like her thoughts. Both untamed, both lost in the night.

“What did you... want from me? What does anyone want from me?” the girl just felt so small now, swallowed up in the uncaring darkness. Like she was drowning in an ocean that had no bottom, no edge. Nothing to help herself get away from herself.

“I mean, what am I supposed to do? They’re all watching me. Like... come on, kid! Come and give us what you *can’t give yourself*. I mean... they don’t know anything. Anything I go through. Who I am. What I... what I don’t have.”

She had to pause as she would have started ranting. She could just feel that bubbling up beneath the surface, trying to get free. The anger, the rage, the unbelievable and unfathomable emptiness. The pit in her heart that had never been filled in the years she’d been on her own. The knotted-twisted-painful core that just felt like it grew every single day. Worse and worse, even after she vanished.

Even when she felt the tears hit her cheeks, she still felt it.

When all of the anger and sadness faded to embers, there was still the emptiness. Still the void. Still the remains of that scared kid who ran away from home. The person she had been, the one she had never grown past. Someone she hated but couldn’t escape. The villain she couldn’t knock down.

“Did you... what did you want?” she asked the memories of a dead man, getting the exact response she deserved. “Did you want me to be you? To be a hero? When do I get to be... me?”

The world didn’t answer. It didn’t care. The dead didn’t speak, not in the way she begged for.

Zyla just sighed, putting her head in her hands. The rough textured gloves caught at her fur as she rubbed at some of the stress, trying to chase away the thoughts. Pushing into the right places like that could crush the bugs buzzing around her mind. Not that it ever really helped. They came back stronger.

But it did let her hide the tears from an audience of none.

“Am I even doing it right? Playing the hero? I just...” she pulled her fingers away, staring down at the ground. Then her feet. Nice, new, properly crafted shoes. “I just want to stop.”

The night was silent for a time as she thought about everything and nothing at all. All of the stuff, the last years. Just too much stuff to even try and sift through, no matter how many times she tried. It just kept pulling her back under, dragging her into the depths.

“Guess I am just stupid. Dumb, dumb wanna-be hero.” and she chuckled, shaking her head once more. It just had to be funny when there was nothing else. “Gotta quit whining. Bringing me down. Who cares if I’m breaking up. I don’t. I don’t give a damn. I gotta...”

Bravado wasn’t strong in the face of no one.

“I gotta keep going. For you, right? And everyone else. Gotta...”

Zyla had to stop talking as her phone crackled to life. A picture of some villain, something far below her usual paygrade, showed itself. Financial district, 12th Avenue. Only a few blocks away from where she was sitting. Hell, she could point out the building they were trying to bust up. So close she couldn’t ignore it.

"I never got to... thank you." Stormwave muttered as she stood up, running one hand through her hair. The first drops of a summer rain splashed onto her face, washing away a few tears. A terrible night but the perfect day for rain. "For giving up your life, that day. It's... been a long time. And you did what you thought was right. Let me go. And that's.. all I have left."

Her shoulders rolled as she got limber. Sitting for ten minutes left her stiff. A body like hers, trained and energized, was meant to be running. Jumping.

Fighting.

"But I'll have to figure it out. I'll get there. Eventually." and she paused, looking down at the ground. Her phone was grabbed and slipped into its proper pocket. "Just gotta remind them."

Stormwave leaned down and threw herself into the void. The darkness itself moved away as that tiny speck of light fell through. Fog lifted as she started to run, shoulders hitting the ground before feet. The energy she needed, the rush and force to keep going, started to come alive. The hero found herself awakened again, pushing down the doubts and fears.

She had a job to do, after all.

"They're not alone."