

Zyla woke up with a start before the morning sun even reached her bed.

“Ah... fuck...” she muttered, head falling back against the pillow. Her eyes closed tightly as she felt the telltale wetness against her cheek. “Again.”

The same night, the same dreams. Chasing people she could never see, memories entwined with fantasies and doubts. She could never really remember much of it, only that strange weight settling in the very depths of her stomach. Like a weird tightness knotting her up inside, something which she couldn't understand. So many things swirled in her mind when the darkness took over, shadows and regrets and fears blending into uneasy sleep and fitful dreams. Vague recollections of voices and words echoed in the background of her noisy mind, fighting for dominance against a dozen thoughts and a thousand feelings. A dream of running, fighting, and never finding.

Again and again.

“Sigh.” she said aloud, eyes closing once more. The beating of her heart told her she wouldn't pass out again, not for hours. It never was that easy.

Zyla truly couldn't remember the last time she'd had a good sleep or a day when she felt rested. She had been running so long, chasing these dreams and days of empty sleep. It was one of those trials she'd heard about from old mythology but lost the name of, pushing a boulder up hill all day. She knew it wouldn't last, that there would be no peace at the end of her journey, but she had to continue anyway. Fighting against an unending battle. Fist against crime, foot to the pavement, tears to her eyes. A struggle to even get through the day, barely able to imagine the monumental weight it would take to just peel herself from under the covers. Tie her shoes. Go to class. Do it all again.

6:45 her phone said, screen brightly lit in stark contrast to her already soured mood. She'd only slept at 2 to begin with. A bit longer than usual but not enough.

The rest of the morning was a blur, as always. Feet on the ground, hit the showers. Brush teeth while staring into the water for ten minutes so it could wash away some of the mood. Throw her hair about so it ended up in total mess because honestly who cared. Remind herself that she'd need to repair half of her clothes before she could wear them while accepting she wouldn't. Toss on the same outfit she'd worn a few days ago and just cleaned, athletic gear that looked too boyish for most. Grab a bowl of cereal and lace up her shoes. Wish the world would just stop for one day.

And that's what she did, every day. So routine she wondered what it was for others, how they kept going. What she did that was so wrong that she had to fight to do that which others found so easy. How did her professors, her allies, all of them, do it? How was she supposed to just... go? Maybe one day she'd figure it out.

But until then, she had to keep running. Shoes to the ground, bag over her shoulder.

Deliveries were the best time to work on her running, at least the local ones.

She'd been doing the job for a couple of years now and was the expert at everything in this part of Horizon. The fox's body remembered the number of steps it took to go from 12<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup>, the distance she had to jump to get from one roof to another. The feeling of her body straining as she carried the smaller packages on foot was routine at this point but in a better way than waking up. She could focus

only on the route and pace, losing herself in the moment to moment thrill of running. Others went for a wake up jog or talked about their day on social media.

But Zyla, when she found the edge between ground and perilous sky, she flew.

And it was in those moments, fleeting and ephemeral, that she truly felt alive and herself. Seconds where she hung in the frozen frames of the world above the city streets and just *was*. Those minute moments when she could feel every part of her body yelling about fear and energy and all the things she was evolved to not want at all, that was it. That was the single brief moment when she burned brightest, exploded like a falling star come to ground. She could look down, catch the glimpse of those earthbound passers-by and their shocked expressions as the green tipped girl vanished from sight once more. She always wondered if they knew her, remembered this day as some hidden memory for when they'd watch the news and see a hero just to say 'I saw her'.

They rarely knew her name, if ever, but she hoped someone did.

"Time." she panted as she stopped after six blocks and five rooftops.

"One minute eight seconds." her phone eventually responded, probably missing a couple seconds before it registered.

"Damn." the fox muttered, having missed her personal best. She'd done this route too many times. "Better get down."

The biggest part of her deliveries were the letters and smaller packages. People often asked if she brought in more money with big boxes, or they would if anyone talked to her normally. Her imaginary discussions would bring up the rather tenuous logistics of how much she could deliver and how letters were usually valuable compared to boxes of socks or whatever. Unless those contained drugs. Those were worth a lot more money and she totally would never do that. Drugs were illegal and she 100% followed the law. Except trespassing. But the letters were still her best service, one she could bring faster than the post office if it was in town.

"Got... four of them, Mr. Peterson." the fox put on her best service smile past the heavy breathing. He'd questioned it the first time she showed up but had since gotten used to the lithe girl's constant breathlessness. "Guess it's a popular day."

"Heh, guess so." the badger just took the letters, flicking through them to check the addresses. They weren't perfectly formatted since they weren't through the post office but it did have names. "Well, I got your pay set up for tomorrow."

"Thanks." the fox nodded once more, running fingers through her hair. She'd already delivered a few others. Letters were every day, packages every couple. "Glad you took that option. See you later!"

The option was something she'd offered people who got way too much local mail; subscriptions. It wasn't like she lost money running here so it worked out.

A quick wave over her shoulder and the fox was off, vanishing into another part of her monotonous life. Nine thirty, she had class soon.

"So, homework." the huge mare folded her arms as the class let out, clearly not patient for this.

"Homework..." Zyla muttered, glancing aside. "I mean, I meant to do it."

That wasn't a lie, at least. She had honestly meant to do her homework last night.

But time got away from her.

Her thoughts quickly returned to the night before, flashing gunfire and heated impacts of knuckles on chins. They were as vague as the lost remnants of her dreams, fleeting and inconsistent, but she knew that it had happened. A dozen armed men trying to knock over some mom and pop store down the road from where she lived. She did question why so many people had decided to go after one local place but put that aside as she got into the fight. The beat of the fight had been enough to wash away those questions. What was there to think about when there were shots fired and knives slashed at her? Only that moment had mattered, the hour where she had put herself on the line.

Life was so simple when she was on the razor's edge of life and death.

"Look, Stormy," Kathryn paused as she felt the eyes glare at her faintly, unaware of why but unwilling to ask.

"Zy," she corrected, continuing on, "I know... stuff comes up. But I can't just keep pushing your homework back. I'm pretty sure Izzy's done more than you did this term. Not that it was *good* work, mind you, but still..."

"Hey, if Belle can keep it up, I can catch up, right?" Zyla had to add in, smiling faintly. It was the first time she'd looked happy since class had started, otherwise just looking tired. Not that she was ever the most talkative in class, rarely drawing attention to herself or anything. If the unicorn didn't know that this was the same girl from the streets she would have never believed it. She just felt so... *small*. "I got it, okay?"

"Well, as motivation, think about it. Would you want to fail a class she might actually pass?"

The two laughed a little bit before Zy's phone went off, necessitating a quick glance. Crime alert, not a job, down at the nearest mall. She'd been there a few times but nothing too recently. There were usually too many guards or cops for anyone to risk attacking it. Not today, though.

"Man, wish she was here now." the fox referred to the missing unbreakable bunny who she sometimes teamed up with. "Business calling, could use a blunt object."

The hidden hero Purity gave a chuckle at that, though Zyla was still lost in herself.

All she could do was a small smile that covered up the emptiness inside. Her hand squeezed into itself faintly as she chuckled, claws digging into the palm to give her a bit of pain just so she could feel anything. Any harder and it might draw blood but she wanted that stimulation, that impetus to keep playing at being someone worth talking to. Even as she felt the mask start to bubble from the turmoil locked within herself, the name of a hero she dreaded to even say, she wanted that moment of being herself. Trying to remember who she was supposed to be when all was said and done.

Just be Zyla, whoever that is.

"I'll try to work tonight." Stormwave turned around to begin her way out, flexing her fingers as they unclenched. "See you later."

Malls were awesome, shame they were dying out.

That's what Stormwave thought as she came through the skylight, again.

The same moment of clarity from Zyla's workouts came as she fell through the cloud of diamond slivers towards the small cluster of would-be thieves. This feeling of weightlessness consumed her mind as she rocketed through the air while her mind went overdrive. Thousands of angles and a dozen attacks flashed before her eyes as a few pieces of glass bounced from her goggles. Excitement, the sort which she felt so rarely during her down times, exploded like a million stars in her heart. So much happening all at once that the world felt like it was moving in slow motion, a loading screen or splash page for the heroic violence she was ready to unleash.

And then, all at once, it started up.

"Stormwave!" one shouted as she hit the ground in a roll. "It's--"

There wasn't time for him to talk as she let the force coil down her shoulder and back. It hurt just a little bit in the ways she had long ago gotten used to but never forgot. Impact like this wouldn't last long during the fight, not when adrenaline and distraction reigned, but she would probably feel it tonight. A bit of soreness as compensation for the moment her inertia hit her hips before the legs, caught in her paws as she sprang from the ground and into the doberman's chest with a single motion. Even her smaller frame could hit like a cement truck when she moved so fast, sending a powerful shudder up her legs even as he toppled over.

The added electricity helped keep him down.

"Yeah." she laughed aloud as she jumped from him the moment he hit the ground. "Me."

Headphones at full blast, the fox finally felt alive as she weaved between the frantic enemies. One slammed his fist at the back of her head and she just felt it, a current in the wind only she could read. Lean forward, let it go, and twist. A kick snapped up and caught him in the wrist, a follow up in the jaw. One hand on the ground as she cartwheeled away, hands barely leaving the ground before two pistol rounds left craters where she'd been. Those were just loud enough to be heard over her musical seclusion, resounding cracks of thunder and death. A quick count to tell her there were two armed men, one out cold, and the one behind her.

A quick twirl, a jump, and a kick made the conscious to ass-kicke ratio even.

"Click click, boom boom." the hero laughed again, bouncing on her heels like a boxer ready to go. First her right fist and then the left snapped down as if to reload a gun. Two small crackling noises filled the air as she did as electricity pilfered from the mall arched between the knuckles.

They seemed to figure out she had good odds of dodging a gunshot.

It was so much more exciting when they tried. That's what she was thinking while dodging between the bullets, slipping around their aim to get closer. One shot, two shots, all the attempts on her life that failed to land. Even the ones that glanced against her twisting and sliding form were hitting the durable latex composite, bouncing harmlessly except for the 'holy shit' level pain she'd feel later. It reminded her that one good shot might be enough to knock her on the ground. Or worse. There was always that option, but she tried to not think about it. Only the fact that it hurt now, irritated her now.

*It's not fun if I can't lose.* Stormwave thought at once as her fist slammed to the side of one gunner's face as her feet left the ground. A taser blow to knock his ass out. *Only if it's a challenge.*

"One left." she muttered, touching down before taking off again.

"And I guess that's what I've been doing." Zyla said, eyes staring at the few stars she could see. "Get up, go to class. Fight crime. Homework."

She frowned faintly as she thought about it.

Not the homework, she actually did that. Just the way she was having, the day she always had. What she did this day, what happened yesterday. The same thing she remembered the last weeks, months. Days and time just all blended together as she struggled to parse how long it had been since she'd rested. When was the last time that the world had let the wayward student just rest? It was the same feeling as the morning but with new bruises from fights and a headache from criminology class. An endless treadmill she could never step away from.

"... talk to heroes, never be seen." she added, taking a breath. Deep, slow, let it out. "Come here. Talk to you. Guess that's what I do every day."

Here was the skeleton of the mall she so often visited in these twilight hours. A place made of plans long dead that rested in that state between dismantled and active, too far gone to fix yet not worth it to destroy. A full decade of exposure to the elements left the exposed cement the vixen sat on pockmarked and weak. Small rocks came free whenever she visited and fell into the inky black abyss below. The way she sat today left one arm on a jutting piece of re-bar and her back against coarse stone. It didn't look comfortable but was way better than leaving her back against nothing for long periods of time, especially when she was looking into the empty night's sky.

"Go to bed. Dream of... I dunno. You, probably."

"Been waiting long?" she heard from behind, turning her eyes away from the eternal haze of light pollution. "Dad wouldn't let me out."

"Huh?" Zyla seemed surprised before realizing it was Friday. One hand went up and wiped a few tears from her eyes. "Oh, uh. Nope. Just got here."

It was a lie, and a bad one, but she still played it up for the cat.

"Great." Jessica rolled her one shoulder, the other still locked in a cast from their first action adventure day a few weeks ago. "Dad said my arm gets out in a couple days. Can't wait, gotta hit Jake in the face..."

Zyla just smiled as the only person she considered a friend started to rant about school.

It was nice to have the cat come by, even if only for a little bit a week. It made her feel a little bit grounded, like she had done something that actually mattered. All the running, all the fighting and laughing and pretending, it meant something here. Jessica needed her. Not Stormwave, not Purity, not even that stupid French rabbit. At the end of the day, it was just the two of them.

Just Zyla.

"Sick." the fox finished after listening to about half of the schoolyard politics. High school was a minefield of social violence, worse than any villain she'd yet seen. "Get that stupid thing off quick as you can. You and I have some lessons to start."

The younger cat gave a quizzical look in response. One that had a little pout mixed into the tilting of her head and a slightly set jaw to show displeasure.

"I've *seen* you punch. You're gonna kick some ass like that? *Belle* can throw a better punch!"

“Oh, now you think you’re so tough? I can take you on with one arm, *puta!*” Jessica got riled up easily, already getting back up to her feet only moments after sitting down.

Just to get her hood grabbed and pulled over her eyes.

“Hey, I don’t *speak* Spanish but I know that one!” Zyla rolled her eyes again and chuckled. An honest, real one this time. “Pick a god and thank ‘em there’s no one else to talk Spanish around me. You two wouldn’t tell me crap.”

And the two went into playful bickering, laughing and trespassing and all those other things real people did.

*Guess that’s what I’m doing these days.* She thought to herself, once more, as the houses nearby went dark and night came in full.